



PRIORITIES

Meadow Murphy



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Meadow Murphy

Dedication

Brianna and Brandon, I love you more than you love me, no talk backs!

1

“That’s him, he’s over there! Isn’t he dreamy?” Rita flutters in a little over a whisper. She’s a hot mess when it comes to athletes, it’s always been her weakness.

I give the new guy a critical once over. He isn’t really hard on the eyes at all, different then most of the guys in our school, I can’t put my finger on why. Rita downright gawks at him, but I’m more subtle, taking an extra long peek before telling her criticisms that are hardly noticeable just so she doesn’t think I’m into him. Once she knows I’m attracted, she’s like a dog with a bone, talking nonstop until I’m turned off of him just from hearing about him all the time. “His nose is too big and he’s too tall. What’s with you and jocks anyway,” I gripe, “aren’t normal guys good enough for you?”

“Sporty guys are more buff and have the potential to become cash cows! Mom said I should set my sights high, there’s a reason I’m magnetically drawn to them,” she shrugs. I notice his friend, he appears so familiar to me, it’s driving me crazy, I know I’ve seen him before I just can’t place it. Rita and I have not missed any sporting events in the last two years with the exception of dodge ball, tennis, badminton, and figure skating. Rita swears we’ll find great boyfriends if it’s the last thing we do. She says this year will be different, epic even.

I sign up for the sports writer position in the school newspaper so I won’t die of boredom being dragged to all the events. I’ll write the blurbs to go with Rita’s pictures, we’ll be inseparable! I close my locker, its stiff and I have to shove it. The metal on metal is loud and a few people around us look over, being nosy. My eyes flick up to dreamboat and his friend who still looks so so familiar. I want to stare at him for five minutes until I can place his face but that would be super strange. Both of them are looking in our direction, more at Rita than me I’m guessing. Her eyes jet down to the ground, she’s playing shy. She can re-site all the rules on how to get a guy backwards. I lock my arm in hers and start dragging her to homeroom. We made sure we picked all the same electives so we have the majority of our classes together with the exception of math. I chose finite since I’m math stupid. Rita on the other hand loves math and the more challenging ones at that, all the power to her, I’m happy with a B.

I drag her to homeroom. Rita glances back at handsome and handsomer, “Not too subtle,” I ooze sarcasm, she honestly brings it out in me. Oh My God! “Reminding you, relationships 101, guys like the thrill of the chase, and your impression right now is all

they'd have to do is whistle." She's utterly the most embarrassing but funnest friend I have, a small price to pay.

"When they're as cute as that, you can't laze around on your duff and wait for them to hopefully notice you, it will be far too late, other desperate needy girls like Melissa will take them with open arms by the time the first dance rolls around, you'll be left sitting in loser alley with flawed boys that can't as much as dribble a basketball pick and choose whether they should dance with you," Rita says grimly, "remember last year after you broke up with Alex, all the good ones were gone."

"I wasn't about to stay with Alex after I caught him kissing my friend! Not that she's my friend anymore, scank!"

"You should have stayed with him and let him explain himself, then beat the crap out of her. Alex is worth two or three chances, gods gifts, exceptions to the rules."

"What's your angle?" I ask suspiciously. "You will tolerate infidelity if they are the pick of the crop, whereas last year you said yourself if a guy cheats on you, he's out on his ass!"

"Alex kissed another girl big deal, we are getting older, it's not cheating unless he sleeps with her."

"Again your angle?" I say confused. Rita doesn't care unless it affects her most of the time.

Rita looks at me with doubt, "You realize the one standing next to the new guy IS ALEX, please tell me you recognized him? You should get back with him so I can have a shot at the New Guy!"

"THAT's Alex?"

Rita giggles, "Bet you wish you didn't break up with him now!"

They saunter in like they own the class. I distract myself looking down to avoid eye contact. I can sense where they are in proximity to me and when I feel it's safe to look up, I do, getting a better look at New Guy's friend. Holy! It is Alex! He does look better, way better. Figures, I release him back into the wild after catching him cheating on me and he does a total turn around. Alex turns into buff personified over the summer and I'm alone again. "Wow!" I say shocked to Rita.

"Right! You might want to give him a second chance?" she suggests.

"He's not asking for one," I respond to her and then I'm saved, class begins and a boomer (our slang for baby boomer) teacher walks in.

~~

After school the newspaper team meets up in the lunchroom for our first meeting. We introduce ourselves, there are five others plus us. We aren't familiar with the others but suffice it to say they don't hang with the popular crowds, a slightly more pathetic bunch you would expect from one of those nerd movies on television.

Will the editor and chief says this year's plan is to cover all the school events with emphasis on sports. Minor hockey league scouts will be coming to our school to watch specifically two hopefuls during the play-off games, that is, only if our teams make it. Rumour has it, the first is the new kid, his reputation proceeds him from his last school and the obvious other person from our school is Alex, both having a slight chance in professional hockey.

Alex is always the MVP so the news isn't really a surprise to me or the school for that matter. The big surprise Alex gave ME was when I realized he left his wallet in his car, so I kindly fetch it for him and then venture to the teams locker room to give it to him even though the stench from there can KILL you. I push the door open and hear slobbery kissing noises. I freeze fearful another player and his girlfriend might be in the locker room with Alex. I never suspect the sounds are from him until I tip toe closer and see with my own two eyes. Rounding the corner, I'm struck with the sight of Alex pinning Melissa to the wall. He isn't naked but he might as well been. I gasp, and they spot me, I ran like hell. There was no closure since the incident. He didn't explain or apologize and I haven't spoken to Melissa since.

I never suspected he would cheat on me, just like he never suspected I would go into the boys locker room after a game when I so inadvertently complained about the smell of it all the time.

Rita nudges me in the gut and I startle back to reality, "His name is John!" She whispers, "The new guy is John. Get used to hearing that!"

I try to shake off my feelings of hurt and anger but it's not easily done. "Aren't you asking me to jump the gun a bit?" I ask her. It's only been five months since it happened. Obviously, I haven't moved on." I wonder if he has. He looks completely different now, maybe he locked himself in a gym or something during those five months. Maybe he missed me too and he's still single?

"Carrie, Are you okay?" Rita asks. She's exaggerating concern and now everyone's looking at me.

“Yes, of course.” I tell her. Will our editor-in-chief tells us when he expects us back and our first assignment is a football game a few days from now.

2

It is a home game and the stands are surprisingly full, our school is playing one of it's biggest rivals: the Eskimos. I turn to Rita, "Just listen to me and take the picture when I tell you to. Football is like math to Rita, she just doesn't get it. Is that Melissa?" I squint looking at the cheerleaders.

"Ya, her mom is the cheerleading coach, that's the only reason she's on the team. Look at her fat ass!"

"It's a perfect ass, everything about her is perfect, just shoot me now!"

"Forget about her, just enjoy the game." Rita says.

I take Rita's advice and focus on the plays. The crowd is entertained, it's a close game. Rita focuses on action shots, athletes mid-air and mid-tackle. During the third quarter I strike gold, one of our players doesn't get up, he's injured, taken off the field via stretcher. Paramedics unsnap his helmet a few seconds before walking by us, I get Rita to capture his priceless expressions of pain and foreboding that this could possibly be the injury that ends his career, because with the pain is fear, that is written all over his face. "Did you get it?" I ask eagerly.

"Ya, the poor guy, that was Landon, how long do you think it will take him to get back on the field?" Rita feels bad for him.

I look at her like she's crazy, "He won't be back today."

"No," she corrects me, "how long do you think it will be before he plays again?"

I shrug and then I'm hit with an epiphany. I would love to be that person that helps players get back on the field. I want to be that girl that works ridiculously hard to save that person's career. It's a calling, I have to do that.

I decide I have enough to write and leave Rita in the stands to continue photographing the game. I picture myself working as a physiotherapist in the hospital, no I'd rather work for a club, like an Major hockey league or Major league football team, the freedom of it all! A few minutes later I'm heading back to the stands when I spot Alex. I didn't know he watches football, but I'm sure it's him. I tense up as our eyes lock. I want to change directions but at this point it will be too obvious so I stand there frozen like a complete idiot. I frantically remember the image of myself in the ladies room, I

was satisfied with it. I'm willing him to ignore this chance encounter and pretend he doesn't know me, but he does know me and he won't ignore it, "Hi." he says casually.

"Hi," I breathe. Where are my words? I want to ask how Melissa is out of spite? I don't want him to know I forgot or don't care. I'm tempted to ask him was she worth breaking us up for? Is he till seeing her, is he here now because she's cheerleading this game? He doesn't deserve my attention, he shouldn't know I care. I give him a casual smile, the kind I give to acquaintances I see on the street and I force one foot in front of the other until my ass is planted firmly next to Rita's again, "Alex is here."

"Oh! Did you talk to him?" She asks, her eyes never leaving the field.

"Sure did, he apologized and then he asked how I was doing acting all concerned and when I said I was fine he said he wants to see me again."

"Are you serious?" She distracts herself from the game long enough to look at me, I caught her attention.

"Hell no! It was weird, we froze, just managed to say hi to each other and then I walked passed him back to you."

"You should have talked to him!" Rita mis-advises.

"You are my friend, how can you suggest that after everything he did? You're telling me to talk to him so you have a chance with that John guy, I'm not doing that for you. Alex hurt my feelings If the roles were reversed you wouldn't do it for me!" I feel my voice waiver, my eyes fill with tears, damn it, I hate feeling weak.

"Yes he did, and you need closure," she says sounding sincere. "You need to get past what he did and either forgive him or at least move on."

"Are him and Melissa?"

"No," she says sounding sure.

"How do you know?" I ask suspiciously. I would die of horrification if I knew she was talking to HIM about ME.

Rita smiles mischievously, "I stalked his FB and Instagram accounts, only because I knew you wouldn't, and I was pissed off at him for what he did" she explains.

"I would NEVER do that, so what did you see? Tell me everything" my curiosity is getting the better of me.

"I didn't want to bring it up now because I knew you were upset, but I literally saw nothing. He never even changed his status back to single. No new pictures of anyone, just of him in the gym with I guess, John."

I shouldn't care but what Rita said made me feel better. I released my breath that I didn't know I was holding. "Are you okay?" she asks concerned.

"Ya, thanks," I feel better now. Rita's attention returns to the game but I remain distant remembering the good times with Alex and how I felt catching him with Melissa. I glance down at the back of her head and wish I had a stone to throw, a small rock that would bonk her enough to get revenge but not cause lasting damage.

I push Alex from my thoughts when the game ends and think of poor Landon. Maybe we should do a follow-up story, find out what's going on at the hospital, "You want to follow-up and see how Landon is doing? We can post on the school website. I'm sure everybody wants to know."

"You're into him," Rita accuses me.

"He is cute, but no, I'm a good reporter and the story doesn't stop with the player gets hurt, that's the beginning of the story. I think I want to work with injured players, help them get back to their potential."

"You want to go into HEALTHCARE?" she asks like it's prostitution or something. "Have heard about what's happening on the other side of the world?"

I smile, "Ya, I think so. It was the look on Landon's face, fear of the unknown, the chance he might never play again. I think I want to help people get back to their best. It might make a difference." I tell her talking myself more into it than ever before. "Let's go see how he's doing, he's probably still in the Emergency department."

We arrive at our local hospital. It's busy but not as busy but not ridiculous. Rita is touching up her makeup in the bathroom in case she bumps into a gorgeous doctor. She's always on the ball when it comes to chance encounters, she's created them.

I ask the nurse at the emergency reception—for Landon and she looks at me expectantly, "I'm his sister," I answer her unasked question. Rita would have made me smile, so it was lucky she was busy beautifying herself. The nurse directs me to his location but I wait for Rita to come back first. She returns looking great, "I know where he is, let's go."

We walk through the double doors and look for curtain #15. I feel butterflies but ignore them and slowly slide the curtain over peeking into Landon's space.

"Landon?" I ask shyly.

"Carrie?" He says surprised.

"And Rita," I add. "Can we come in?"

"Sure," he says sounding pleased to see us, "What are you guys doing here?"

His eyes are magnetic. I kind of lose myself in them. It takes me a second longer to put words together and I think crap, he must think I like him because I'm sure as heck acting that way. "We were covering your game for the yearbook and I saw you get hurt, I had to know you're okay. I hope you don't mind?" I ask sheepishly. I feel my cheeks flush and it's obvious to us both that I might like him. I wish invisibility, avoidance, to hide in a small dark hole and pretend I didn't drag us here but it's too late.

"No, no, not at all," he stammers.

He's stock, towering well over six feet and sturdy strong. His face is not without it's faults: namely a scar over his left eye. His eyes though, you can drown in, with a chiseled complexion which is the icing on the cake. His eyes are what really snare me. "How's your knee?" I ask concerned remembering how he grabbed it after going down.

"It hurts real bad, the nurse just gave me something for the pain. She said they'll call me down for an x-ray, but it hasn't happened yet."

Rita starts doing something on her phone.

"Don't post anything," I warn her.

"I don't care," he says kindly, "post whatever you like."

Rita looks up, "It's just my mom. Carrie, she wants to know if you want to come for dinner."

"Sure," I all but dismiss her. "Can we get you anything?" I offer him (*Like myself?*).

"Na, I'm good," he says. The pain medicine kind of upset my stomach.

Rita sits on the chair and I take the edge of his bed. "Did you call your parents?" she asks.

"Ya, I have to call them when I'm done, they said they'll pick me up."

"We'll drive you home!" I blurt (*It gives me a few more minutes with you*). Rita gives me the evil eye because I volunteered her services without asking first.

"Ya, sure, you don't need to have them drive you, we're already here," she says logically.

I smile a stupid huge grin. I go from barely knowing him, to feeling concerned to wow, I think this guy could be for me in all of sixty minutes or so. Weird how things work out. The nurse comes in and wheels Landon away in a wheelchair to x-ray leaving me alone with Rita.

"You like him don't you!" she asks.

"Yes," I smile at her. I just noticed him at the game but I felt something for him when he was wheeled passed me on a stretcher. I need to know he's going to be okay. "He's definitely handsome."

"I give him that," she agrees.

We wait and we wait. Landon finally gets wheeled back to us, and hobbles back to his stretcher where we continue to wait. The nurse peeks into the curtain, "The doctor will be with you shortly he's reviewing your x-ray."

His fingers touch mine and then I weave my hand into his. A minute later the doctor walks in. I don't read anything into it except that I'm giving him moral support. The doctor looks at us awkwardly (*It suddenly occurs to me that I told them I'm his sister*) but then faces Landon, "Hi Landon, I'm Dr. Mann. I reviewed your x-ray and you have a torn ACL. The good news is it didn't rupture, but the bad news is you will need surgery and extensive physiotherapy. You'll be off at least nine months."

Dr. Mann took the sail from his ship and I could hear the wind leaving Landon's lungs, "Off but not out," I encourage. "You work hard and you'll be back on the field before you know it." I want to stand by him in his darkest hour and encourage him not to let go of his dreams. He squeezes my hand. "My office will be in touch with you to give you an O.R. date. You'll be given a package with instructions."

"Thanks," Landon says deflated.

"It could have been worse," he reassures us before leaving.

"I'll get a wheelchair," Rita offers.

The nurse comes in and eyeballs Landon and then leaves again. She returns a few minutes later with a prescription, paperwork, and crutches, "These have to be returned to the hospital by year end or your family will be billed for them."

"Sure," he says. The nurse leaves as Rita returns with a wheelchair.

We help him ease into it and then we silently steer him towards the exit. Rita and I walk together to get the car, "He looks pretty devastated," she comments.

"You can't blame the poor guy."

"Ya," she agrees. "You were getting pretty chummy with him," she teases.

"I was giving him support," I correct.

"You could have at least hooked up with a hockey player instead of a football player, this isn't going to help me one iota in landing John."

"You have your looks for that," I grin at her, "besides I tried the whole hockey player thing and it backfired on me when Alex cheated, why risk it with another one."

"They aren't all like that," she defends.

"Just the vast majority," I say bitterly.

"You need to have it out with him," she drones repeatedly. "He obviously hurt you way more than you're willing to admit even to yourself."

"Not necessary, I'm Landin on my feet with Landon," I kidded.

Rita chuckles, "That's so lame, I didn't hear that."

We pull up to the patient discharge doors and Landon is sitting in the wheelchair waiting, his crutches leaning against the wall. I get out of the car and open the backdoor for him. He hobbles very wobbly towards the car with the crutches and then gets in. He tells Rita where he lives directing her turns but is otherwise silent. I can feel his penetrating stare. We pull up the driveway and he gets out of the car but not before thanking us for coming. He doesn't ask for my number, and now I'm disappointed, I might have been imagining things, he probably doesn't like me.

3

My back is turned to the hallway so I miss Landon's grand entrance back to school.

"He's here!" Rita clips.

"Alex" I ask? I don't want to turn around if it's him.

"No it's Landon," she corrects.

I spin around to see Landon on his crutches surrounded by a few of his friends. "That's great!" I smile. I close my locker with a firm shove before spinning the dial on the lock and then walking up to him leaving Rita behind to watch, "Hi! Glad to see your back!" I say happily.

I get a broad smile from him in return, "I can't say its good to be back here, but it's nice to see you," he says charmingly.

The bell rings and everyone disperses to their next class but us, in slow motion our gazes lock onto each, time has stopped and I no longer doubt I like him or he likes me.

"Did the doctor's office give you a date for surgery?" I ask wanting to spend a few more seconds with him.

He shakes his head indicating he hasn't heard from him, "Not yet."

"Landon!" We both turn around, it's his coach coming out of his office, "Do you have a minute?"

He looks back at me, "I'll see you later?" He asks. Exactly what I wanted to hear coming from those gorgeous lips of his, I nod shyly. He starts crutch swinging away. There's something very attractive about him, he's strong, silent, and injured (*yum!*).

Coach and Landon disappear and I stare off into the distance not really rushing by any means, to go to class when I feel him before seeing him, "He's gone," Alex's voice is sharp and I feel his breath against my ear. I turn slowly to face him because I know he's that close, "Pardon me?"

He takes a step back, "He's a player," he warns me. "I saw you with Landon."

"If that's not the pot.." I smile at the irony.

"I think Melissa went that way," I point away from us hoping he'll follow her even though I'm lying and haven't seen you nor do I care to.

"We need to talk," he responds.

"I don't think we do, it's been five months and you haven't tried all this time."

“I wanted to give you a chance to cool down. I’ll pick you up at seven, I won’t take no for an answer.” He walks away, that’s it. He just expects me to be home waiting for him after school. I forget him for now, the pain, the hurt, I just force myself to go to class, what else can I do.

4

His car pulls up in our driveway and turns off. Mom's at work and dad left us when I was three, so I'm alone. The doorbell rings and I answer it. He's wearing the same clothes he wore to school, but he smells nice, the way I remember him. My resolve weakens, ever so slightly. He's a full head taller than me and muscular, you can see it in his neck, it's wide. His jugular is a finger width thick. I remember feeling it with my tongue during those very intimate moments we had. I would run my tongue up and down his thick beautiful neck, before it continuing onwards.

He cheated, a bitter pill to swallow. I remind myself and suddenly my spine returns and my arteries stiffen. My shattered heart turns to plexiglass, indestructible now.

"Hi," I greet.

He walks passed me to my living room and motions for me to follow him. He sits on our sofa and pats the seat next to him motioning for me to join.

"I'll stand," I say stubbornly.

"Sit," he orders.

I listen, his presence is so commanding, I can't help it.

I don't bring myself to mention her, if I hear it, I think I'll be sick, so we sit in silence. His dark eyes, hooded. He's so handsome it floors me but I'm brittle. He doesn't try to explain, he says nothing. He reaches for me and I don't pull away. It's my first sign of weakness. His hand glides up the back of my neck until his fingers are knotted in my hair and then he pulls my face to his, my lips stiffen. It's the only rejection I can muster. Why did you do that to me, but the words don't come out and he kisses me even though I don't return the gesture. He repeats again, and then again. This time I respond. He doesn't even say sorry. I shut my eyes and I feel his thumb wipe the tear he doesn't deserve. Fuck me, I'm angry at my weakness. I push his chest but he's strong, he doesn't budge. He finishes the kiss and then abides by my wishes and distances himself from me, "I'm sorry," he manages.

"Sorry!" I say in disbelief. "You, you," I stammer completely taken aback, "and then five whole months pass by without you saying anything, and now finally all you say is 'sorry?'"

"It shouldn't have happened," he adds.

"You're damn right it shouldn't have happened. Why?"

He shrugs. I get a shrug.

"What are you doing with Landon?" It's more of a statement than a question. He doesn't give me a chance to answer, because he doesn't want one and then he kisses me more aggressively this time. My body betrays me and I feel myself responding to him, running my fingers through his hair, gasping for breath, I've missed him. I realize his power over me and begin to push him away, this time he hangs on until he's finished with the kiss. "Stay away from him. I don't want him touching you."

"Sure," I say sarcastically. I need to hear why he did what he did, now so I don't let him back into my life. I'm getting the closure I don't want, the answers I dread, "Why did you kiss Melissa in the locker room when WE were together?"

"She said she saw you hugging someone during the third period. I was angry."

I thought for a second, then suddenly I remember, I bumped into Stan at the concession stand, "Oh My God! She saw me bumping into my second cousin twice removed or something like that," it was all coming back to me, "I gave him a big hug. He picked me up and spun me around. She must have seen that."

"Your second cousin twice removed, is that blood relation?" He asks in disbelief.

"Ya," I say firmly (*I'm not really sure*). "You should have asked instead of believing her and that doesn't excuse what YOU did." I say under my breath. This is closure? I think. This sucks! I don't feel any better now that I know he was misinformed and he acted impulsively, it could happen again. "I have one more question."

"Sure," he says, "anything."

"Were you with her more than one time?" I ask.

"No, just that night," he admits.

"Did you make love to her," I begin asking.

"I was angry," he confesses, "Yes, I did," he answers apologetically. I'm shattered again.

"Leave," I order. He gets up and walks out shaking his head at his own stupidity.

He stops by the door and he turns back to me, "I'm sorry," he repeats.

I don't text, it's too much to say, I call Rita, "You'll never guess what happened."

"Just tell me," she insists.

"Alex just left. We spoke."

"And?" She asks in anticipation, "What did he say?"

"I can't believe I forgot this, but do you remember the game it happened at?"

"Like it was yesterday."

"Do you remember bumping into Stan at the concession stand during the game?"

"Your second cousin twice removed. Is that blood related?" She asks sounding unsure.

"I don't know but Ya, well Melissa saw us hugging and then went running back to Alex after the game, telling him. She thought I was cheating. He didn't bother confirming it with me, instead he took her word for it and he slept with her."

"Wow," she says. "I hope you forgave him."

"Hell no, not after he told me that. He's such an asshole."

"Melissa is the asshole. She took advantage of the situation. Alex was just stupid. She's a conniving bitch that masterminded the seduction not Alex. You should forgive him"

"No," I answer unable to agree with Rita's point of view. "He's not a victim, the way you say he is."

"Sure he is," Rita defends Alex, "she misled him and then threw herself at him. He's red blooded. Any red blooded guy is going to mess with a whore if he's deceived into believing that his girlfriend just cheated on him. I would be more worried if he didn't. He thought you did it first. You should forgive him. He's too hot not to. Believe me, if I thought it was his fault, John or no John I would tell you 'good riddance to bad rubbish!' and just look for a new guy"

"I was considering him, you know, to be the one. Now when I think about him, I keep getting that image in my head of him kissing Melissa. Knowing what I know, I don't see how I can ever let it go now."

"Give it time," Rita reassures. "It's not like they're together anymore."

My phone beeps while I'm talking to her, "Hold on, I think someone is texting me." I pull it from my ear to have a look. It's a random text from someone I don't know so I delete it. I put the phone back to my ear, but it makes another beep noise so I pull it back again and another text reads, *it's me Landon*.

"Landon's texting me Rita, did you give him my number?"

"Ya he asked for it! I forgot to tell you."

"Next time let me know," I say sternly but I'm actually quite psyched!

"Okay, I'll talk to you later."

“Sure call me back.”

Me: Hi Landon! Sorry I deleted your first text. I thought it was spam!

Landon: I've been called worse. Just wanted to thank you again for your support.

Me: No problem. How are you doing?

Landon: I miss my first game tomorrow. It's going to be hard to deal with.

Me: Sorry to hear that.

Landon: Right. Want to know if you want to catch it with me.

Me: You want to watch a game you can't play at?

Landon: Support the guys, I'll take you out for a bite after?

Me: Sold! Rita will be with me during the game, she's the reporter.

Landon: I'll meet you in the bleachers.

Me: Wouldn't miss it. See you then.

Landon: See you

5

"I'm going to feel like a third wheel," Rita complains about going to the game with Landon and I. "I can't wait until hockey starts up."

"We can ask him if he knows John," I suggest. "You might even meet another footballer you like more than him."

"I doubt it," she puffs her curly black hair. Her rosebud lips and pink cheeks are even rosier than usual. Rita is five inches shorter than me, at 5'2 she's luckily gifted with a dynamite figure and a cute face to go with it. She's dresses to kill at all sporting events and even for school, in case she finds an opportunity to snag an athlete or boyfriend material.

We walk to the game. It's a great fall day, the multi-coloured leaves are rustling all over the ground and you need a light jacket rather than a sweater and there isn't a cloud in the sky. I take a deep relaxing breath. It's my first date in five months, I want to put the entire Alex experience behind me.

Rita looks at me, "You're nervous!"

"What gives you that impression," I ask calmly. (*I'm really freaking out inside.*)

"Your quiet," she says.

"I guess I am. I haven't dated anyone since Alex."

"He doesn't count," Rita belittles. "Try not to think about him, it's not fair to Landon."

"You're right," I say resolutely.

I see him from a distance, he's the only one sitting next to crutches. When we get closer, he waves us down. He's sitting with..I squint, "He's sitting with someone, I can't make out who."

"Please tell me its John!" Rita says wishfully.

"Its John!" I say surprised giggling because I know she doesn't believe me.

"Fuck right off!" she says in disbelief.

"Seriously." As we approach she see's I'm not kidding.

"Hi," Landon says. "This is John, John this is Rita and Carrie."

"Hi," I greet and then glance at John.

Landon shifts over so I can sit next to him, boldly grabbing my hand. I look up at him, feeling a flutter of attraction. (*I love dominance*) “Is it hard being here when you can’t play?” I ask empathetically.

“Ya,” he says gruffly, “but knowing you were coming has made it easier, and the guys came over before the game to see how I’m doing, so I guess it’s all right.”

Landon looks to his left and spots Alex, popping two fingers in his mouth, he whistles to get his attention. Alex looks over at us and spots Landon’s hand clutching mine, that’s when his eyes blacken with anger. Alex joins us climbing up the seats and sits next to John.

“You know the girls?” Landon asks Alex politely.

Alex nods at Rita and then glances at me before very noticeably glaring at Landon, “Intimately, Carrie and I were a couple.”

Landon looks at me for confirmation. I nod, “We weren’t that intimate, he hooked up with Melissa while we were dating,” I correct.

Landon looks at Alex and then me shrugging, “You’re with me now,” he says under his breath. Landon isn’t the least bit intimidated or sorry for holding my hand. Payback is a bitch! I love how this played out right under Alex’s nose, it looks good on him. I couldn’t have made everything work out better if I tried.

“Better hang on to her tight,” Alex insinuates he’s going to steal me back from Landon.

“You discarded me,” I correct.

John leans over Rita and says to me, “When you’re tired of playing with these bozo’s let me know, I’ll show you how a guy should really treat you.” At this point I’m just flattered. John’s smiling but for some reason there’s a serious vibe to him, Rita’s clueless and staring at him like the rising of Christ (*No blasphemy intended*). I playfully push his shoulder like I’m batting him off and turn back to Landon who kisses me, staking his newfound claim on me. He pulls me closer deepening the kiss and then releases me making me feel very self-conscious.

Alex is irritated at Landon and gets up from the bleachers, storming off. Landon calls out, “Catch you later,” before reconnecting with my lips. It was the first time I ever saw a football player score a touchdown without stepping onto the field.

6

We go to a quaint pub called the Paddock. It's a small restaurant/bar with big wooden doors, small rounded tables, playing jazz music. It's a great place to chill, portions of pub styled food are huge and waiting staff are very friendly.

Landon leads the way using his crutches, picking a table off to a corner. John is friendly with Rita but he isn't overly. The host places four menus on our table. I get up and Rita follows me. We are doing a loo run, because neither of us want to wait until the end of the evening to compare notes or strategize.

The door to the loo practically hits Rita on the ass, "You lucky bitch. John doesn't want to have anything to do with me and Landon is all over you like a fly to fly paper. I love how he kissed you in front of Alex too. He had it coming."

"You know! I did too! He's the most amazing kisser. I get all tingly from him."

"He's so muscular," Rita comments.

"I think he's bigger than John," I cluck. "But, John has a nicer face," I critique.

"John's more into you than me," Rita complains.

I agree with her but don't let on, "No, I think he's just shy."

A few minutes later and we return to the table. The boys are studying their menus. The waitress comes to take our order. That's when the short interrogation begins, "You and Alex went out?"

I break a peanut shell and drop it on the floor, "Yes, we broke up five months ago, we were together about a year."

"Who ended it?" He asked not because it affects what's starting between us but nosy curiosity. I'm not enjoying the conversation anymore.

"I did immediately after catching him with Melissa," I explain.

"I've seen Melissa, you can't help Alex for caving to HER, any guy would have," John adds to the conversation.

"You like Melissa?" Rita asks John with an expression of distaste. I know where that's going, Rita's thinking if John liking Melissa then she's not going to like John because he's not good enough for her. We hate Melissa.

John turns to Rita, "Na, she's not my type. She's the kind of girl you taste, but then spit out, never dine on her for more than a full meal. I told Alex he should get himself

checked out after, you know tested because it looks like a lot of guys snack on her if you know what I mean.” It suddenly dawns on him that maybe he’s said too much, he’s doesn’t know if I know how far Alex got with her.

“I knew,” I said to John, “Before you said anything.”

“You should have stopped Alex before he did anything, you’re on the same team,” Rita advises.

“I was new to the team and it must have happened long after I left the locker room, because I didn’t see anything. Apparently, Melissa was telling lies about Carrie to Alex, and he was falling for it.” He turns to Landon, Carrie doesn’t strike me as the kind of girl who cheats, if I had an opportunity to stop him from hurting you, I would have.

“I’m fine, we didn’t know each other back then. You came here in the middle of last year didn’t you?” I say quietly taking a sip of my water.

“Yes,” John says.

“Did Alex dine on you?” Landon asks concerned under his breath.

“No, just snacked,” I say confidentially.

He doesn’t let me finish, his lips wash up on mine. I plan on feasting on you,” he says making me a hot mess. Landon pulls away, John and Rita are very uncomfortable.

Rita looks at Landon, “Melissa had the nerve to tell Alex, Carrie was throwing herself at a guy at the concession stand, meanwhile she was only hugging her second cousin, twice removed. He was misled. Carrie hadn’t seen him in like two years so they were hugging. He spins her around in the air and Melissa exaggerates the situation saying she’s chowing down on him. Then, she snatches him up for herself.”

“You were defending him,” I remind Rita with a hiss.

“No, I just think if he didn’t have Melissa throwing herself at him and making up those lies, you would still be together.”

“And why would that be good?” slices Landon

John looks at me, “I’ve spoken to Alex at length over this and he’s really sorry. Melissa really misled him and if he could do it over, he would, but he knows he can’t and he also knows he went way too far with her and that you’ll never forgive him for it.”

“John,” I breath, “He had five months to work it out with me, he couldn’t be bothered. Stop defending him.”

“That’s why he doesn’t deserve you,” John concludes.

Rita looks at me, “No, he doesn’t.”

I look at John, "You're his best friend, you could have said something."

"I couldn't, its hard being new to a school and making friends, he was one of my only friends at the time. I couldn't risk it over a chick, sorry but at the time I barely knew you." John tries explaining. "It's on him anyway, not me. I wouldn't do that to you."

"Or me?" Rita clucks

John gives her an expression like, I don't know. *(This was our first sign that we missed. John didn't see Rita as any different then Melissa, someone you taste but don't waste your appetite on,)*

I shake my head.

Landon loosens his grip on my hand, "If all this just came out for you yesterday, you obviously haven't come to terms with it yet. I think we should hold off on us, until you've had time to digest all this."

"That's fair," I agree. "We've only kissed a few times, it should be rather easy to put the brakes us." Spine intact, Plexiglas heart re-instituted, if he ever had a chance of breaking through my barriers before, he sure as hell doesn't have any now. I understand Landon doesn't want to be a rebound but I resent him for making it his decision rather than mine.. I'm also upset with John for not buffering what happened. I was left to wither, and suffer for months when he could have stopped it. A new large part of me hopes that him and Rita don't hook up after all.

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Landon the Top Grimsby Football Player Tears ACL in First Game of Season!

Not a great start to the season when top quarterback Landon gets carted off by stretcher during the third quarter. "Couldn't even get through the first game without an injury," Alex a top player and spectator from the Grimsby hockey team comments with a chuckle during an interview last night....

....The only physiotherapy teammates saw Landon receiving was kissing the hockey player's ex-girlfriend in the front row of the bleachers, "It looks like player Landon will need the full nine months to get back on the field with this kind of work ethic," angry teammates comment.



“Wow, great article,” I compliment Rita.

She smiles, “Thanks,” she says as she continues admiring her photo. Her eyes get big, “What did you do?”

I start laughing as her eyes frantically read the rest of the article. “You’re so friggin mean, I LOVE it! Oh My God! Have you seen either of them since the article’s been published or any of the teammates for that matter?”

I smile, “As a matter of fact, I’ve bumped into a few footballers and they’ve just winked and smiled at me. I think the article is going over quite well.”

“And the guys,” she asks cautiously.

I shake my head, “Haven’t seen Alex or Landon since it’s been published. I kind of don’t want to”

“I guess not! You were angry,” Rita observes.

“Do you blame me?” I defend myself.

She thinks about it for a minute, “No, but I think your were harsh towards Landon if I have to judge.”

“I didn’t say anything that wasn’t true.”

Rita closes her locker and then shoves the last book in her bag, “Remind me to never upset you! “What’s on the docket?”

“Nothing tonight, moms working and I’ve got loads of homework, I was just going to stay in.” I swing my bag over my shoulder.

“You want company?” She offers.

“Sure. Do you have your car?”

“No, I couldn’t get it today, you?”

“No, looks like we’re walking.”

It was a short walk home from the school and other than being a little chilly, it was a perfect day for a walk. Lots of leaves coating the sidewalk, a few clouds lingering, and the smell of winter in the air. I love winter because this is the first year I’m allowed to travel alone with Rita on March break. I’m really looking forward to it. We’re considering Barbados or Florida, whichever is cheaper. Mom said I deserved it.

I open the front door and the smell of moms cooking from the crockpot hits us, “Hungry?”

“Starved!” Rita says animatedly.

I go to the kitchen and grab two bowls, scooping generous portions for both of us. I love mom’s cooking. We put on the dating show that everyone’s raving about and start chowing down.

“Did either guy text you?” Rita asks out of curiosity.

“I haven’t turned my phone on today.”

Rita looks at me in disbelief, “How can you do that? Aren’t you curious? I never do anything without my phone, I go into withdrawal if I don’t have it.”

I give her a look of indifference, “I can take it or leave it.”

“Get it and let’s see if anyone’s tried contacting you since the article! Holy Shit! I can’t believe you.”

“That’s why we’re friends,” I say smugly.

I sprint upstairs to my room and unplug my phone from its charger. I turn it on my way back to Rita and a symphony of notifications play off. Oh my. Maybe I should have brought my phone with me.

“Give it to me!” Rita says eagerly.

“I will not!” I prolong her suspense.

She reaches for it but I’m quicker than her. “What should I read first, texts or emails?”

“Texts!” she rushes.

“Okay, emails I say as slowly as a slug.”

“You’re so cruel!” She complains.

Email:

Will Editor and Chief:

-Congratulations on the first article you wrote for our paper. We usually look for well written and insightful pieces but yours was very edgy and controversial. We’ve had a lot of feedback on it since the morning, it’s creating a stir and in journalism that’s a good thing. Again, well done!

I look up at Rita, “Wow, I didn’t expect that! Did they compliment the picture you did of Landon on the stretcher?”

“I was advised to get action shots and highlights from each game, that anyone can lie flat on a stretcher,” Rita says miserably.

I crinkle my nose, “Don’t worry about it, it’s just the school paper, you’ll get a better picture next time.”

She nods in agreement, “Is that your only email?”

“The only one worth reading,” I answer.

“Okay now your texts,” I bite into my food and chew slowly.

“You’re so exacerbating!” She complains. I totally love torturing her.

“Okay! Here goes. Oh my, there’s tons!” I start reading them to myself rather than out loud.

“Carrie!” She says in a threatening tone.

“Okay, okay!”

Alex wrote: I know what I did to you, but what did he do to you?

I take it he’s referring to Landon.

Rita puts her bowl down, “He’s right, what did Landon do to you other than say it’s too soon to get involved? It really reads like you have a huge chip on your shoulder and if you do then it should be directed toward Alex or John for not saying anything but definitely not Landon. He didn’t really do anything.”

“I just want to forget about both of them.” I consider everything for a second, “I was too angry to write the article. I misdirected my anger.”

“Just a tad,” Rita says sarcastically. “Did Landon write you?”

“No, nothing.”

“You pitted all his teammates against him. It will take a while for this to pass.”

“Well I can’t retract what I said.”

“Retracting doesn’t do much . Lesson number one in journalism.” Rita says sadly. “They’ll get over it.”

“Should I text Landon?”

“If you feel it will help.”

“What should I say?”

“What do you think you should say?”

“You sound like my mother,” I complain to Rita.

She shrugs and grabs the remote, “Movie or series?”

“Either, we’ll study later.”

Text: Me: Hi Landon, I’m sorry for the article.

Landon: You undermined my relationship with my teammates because you were angry at Alex and John.

Me: I realize, I shouldn’t have done that.

Landon: No, you shouldn’t have. The damage is done.

I throw my phone in Rita’s direction. She picks it up and reads it, “You tried.” She scrolls through the rest of the comments, they’re not as interesting, just congratulations on an interesting article and keep it up from my friends. “You might have more luck apologizing to him if you go in person.”

“Should I?”

“Depends how much you want to fix things.” She hands me back my phone. “We can drop by his house.”

“When,” I ask eagerly.

“Now if you want.”

“Sure, while I have the courage.”

We walk to his house. The bungalow has two Mercedes in the driveway. It’s obvious he comes from money, all the houses on this street are nice even though they sort of look the same. Rita rings the doorbell and I stand directly in front of the door. It opens and a man dressed in a butler suit opens it, “Hello, may I help you?”

My eyebrows arch in pleasant surprise, “I was hoping I could see Landon.”

The butler rolls his eyes looking outside and points to the left, “You want next door.”

Rita laughs out loud, “Oh shit, wrong house Carrie!”

I can’t help but laugh too. The door closes and we walk to the next house, “Dude! we were here once already, I can’t believe neither of us didn’t notice. I thought he was totally loaded when I saw the butler.”

Rita shakes her head, “No, I think he’s an actor or works at a hotel or something, who’s going to have a butler living in a bungalow that size?” Rita presses the doorbell. We were still laughing when he answers, both crutches under his arms. He’s drop dead gorgeous carrying a serious expression on his face but I can’t stop the gales of laughter. “You’ll never believe what we just did! It was so funny” I careen into hysterical laughing, buckling over just praying to keep it together so I won’t pee my pants.

He swings the door open wider making room for us to come in. He’s angry because he doesn’t crack a smile. I told him what we did, and he didn’t even crack a smile. Rita feels completely uncomfortable, grabbing her back pack she dodges, “I’ll catch you guys later, I really have a lot of homework to do.” She leaves and now I’m alone with him. His eyes are hooded. His shoulders are bulging with muscles and I find myself very attracted to him right now (*in a fearful way*). I sit there in silence a little pissed Rita left me alone with him. I wait for him to say something, anything, it takes a while but he does.

“I’m sorry John let you down, I get why he did, and I also get why you are angry with him. I especially get why you are angry with Alex and under different circumstances, I would have let him have it on your behalf, dent that pretty face of his.” In the blink of an eye, he’s on me. His lips press against mine and his mouth pries mine open. His kisses are controlling and firm, deepening until they’ve take my breath away. He’s all up in my space and tents himself over me. I’m nearly lying down and pressed firmly against his couch and I feel him wanting me, wow. Our chemistry bubbles off the charts, if I have a spare inch of room, I don’t know where it is.

As quickly as this starts, he stops himself. “You better leave,” he says wiping off his lips. I glance down, he’s mammoth. “I need to get my head back in the game,” he says with a smile at the irony.

It's our first away game against our biggest rivals. I've been studying football plays and terminology for a few days and I'm ready for my first down! Ha ha! Okay, it's going to be rough writing an article directly pertaining to a sport I know nothing about, I shake my head, I can't believe I got myself into this mess.

Rita's mom drops us off at our arch rival's school. It's nippy out and the chill goes right through me. This is definitely going to be a long game. We walk up the bleachers and sit dead centre. It's only the second game of the season so I figure it's not an important one except for this longstanding rivalry that has both teams dead set on killing each other every time they play.

Rita's on my left and two friendly looking girls are sitting to the right of me. I smile in their direction and then focus on the game. I'm assuming they're girlfriends of the opposing team, because I don't recognize them. The brunette girl waves someone down and I follow the direction she's looking in. The guy she waved to spots her and starts climbing the bleachers to join her. I slide over making room for him. It's starting to get crowded.

The first two quarters are completely uneventful and I'm starting to worry about not having anything to write about. I don't even understand what happened in the third quarter and my anxiety level increases until the fourth flies by, "Oh My God, Rita, what am I going to write about? I don't even know what the score is," I complain to her.

"You really are out of your realm," she observed. "The game was kind of boring. You did well on your first article. I think as long as you mention the score and put your flare for drama in the article, you'll be able to pull it off." I nudge Rita, "Film the cheerleaders, I want to zoom in and get a good look at Melissa's face up close."

"The main reason there was no drama was because Landon isn't playing?" Rita starts helping me with new ideas.

Just as she said that we heard a 'ahh' in the crowd and the cheerleaders were doing a stunt, climbing on top of each other to do what appeared to be a pyramid. Melissa was on the second row of people almost at the top when she lost her footing and tumbled down taking two girls out with her. Everyone in the crowd was like Oh My Goodness and I was in hysterics.

“Really?” I ask Rita unsure. I point still laughing, “There’s drama! I hope you caught that.” I knew Melissa could hear me and she stared me down as any semblance of dignity vanished for her.

“I got it,” Rita confirmed filming the blooper.

“Thanks Rita,” I say happily. I know the direction I want to go, if I can just manage it..

What’s a Football Game Without Grimsby Star Quarterback? A Sleepfest!

Grimsby’s star Quarterback Landon continues to be off with a knee injury, teammates gave it their all in yesterday evening’s game, but sadly they lost in overtime to the Predators. During an interview before the game, Quarterback Landon said, “I’m going to work hard to put my head back in the game.” All of Grimsby is wishing him a speedy recovery, Go Landon!

Blooper report: Grimsby cheerleader Melissa stumbled during a tumble knocking herself and two others down with her at the same time. Sadly it was the only comical highlight to speak of the entire evening. Fortunately, nobody was hurt. The crowd cheered when she got back on her feet. Thanks for taking one for the team Melissa! A video clip of this can be seen on Grimsby website.

I emailed a preview of the article to Melissa and Will the editor and chief I really cut it close to the deadline with this one.

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I get some alone time to catch up with my homework. The school paper and going to the games has taken a large chunk of my study time away from me, so I sneak off to the library for a full hour of uninterrupted math homework. I do the first question, good. Then I do the second question, good. The third I'm lost, dumber than a doornail. I reread the first part of the chapter and then look at the question again, still no clue. Finally, out of frustration, I type the question into the internet search engine hoping something comes up, nil. That's when I notice Alex of all people walking into the library. I toy with the idea of asking him the third question and then think better of it. I pretend I don't notice him, but I can hear him get closer, and I'm positive he spots me.

"Hi Carrie," I turn to his voice and he smiles at me.

"Hi Alex."

He glances down at my text book, "Math?" He says making conversation.

"Finite, I'm stuck."

"Let me have a look" he offers pulling up chair. He takes a seat and I spin the book open to face him, "Number three."

He looks up and I pass him my notebook and pencil, "Sit next to me, I'll show you how to figure it out," he offers.

"Sure," I say changing seats. He smells delicious. I want to take a longer sniff and close my eyes concentrating on his smell but I force myself to concentrate at the task at hand.

He very patiently works through the steps and explains them to me. "Try number four he encourages."

I read the question, and start working through it the way Alex did the first one.

"No, that should be a three," he corrects, pointing to where I wrote a five.

I look at what I wrote and understand why it should be a three, "Okay," I say erasing it and changing it to a three.

"Do you understand why it's three or did you change it just because I told you to?"

"I understand. I would never change something just because you told me to."

"Okay," he says smiling at me. "What if I told you to kiss me?" He asks.

"I'd say you better take it up with Landon," I grin. "Let's just focus on this. How do I do the next question, it looks different then the other two."

Alex focuses on the text and works through number five slowly and patiently like all the other questions. He's great at this.

By the time we're done, I'm sure he's worked with me at least forty-five minutes. I feel bad for taking up all his time, I'm sure he didn't come here just to tutor me in math.

He catches me not looking at the book or my notes, "Is something wrong?" He asks.

I shake my head, "No. I appreciate your help. When you explain things to me, you make it sound easy."

He grins, "I'm more than happy to help you with math anytime you need it."

"I'm going to take you up on it," I promise him.

"I'd like that," he says sheepishly. He's grinning from ear to ear, "Thanks!" He begins backing away from my table, "I'm not seeing anyone," he offers.

"That's none of my business," I say quietly, "I want you to see people. I am dating Landon," I inform him.

He starts to disappear down the hallway.

I see Rita talking to Alex in the hallway and then he points to me. She looks like she's going to come into the library but he grabs her arm and stops her. He knows I have more work to do. I'm glad he stopped her, knowing I want to be alone. One star for the bad guy. It doesn't take long before I hit another obstacle so I pull my phone out and text Alex.

Me: Thanks for the help and diverting Rita away :-)

Alex: Anytime.

Me: I know this is so soon but I already ran into another problem, can we get together for more help?

Alex: Sure, when is good for you?

Me: Tonight or tomorrow? Friday is a hometown football game.

Alex: Tonight, my house, do you need a ride?

Me: Sure.

Alex: I'll pick you up at six.

Me: Thanks.

Rita's sitting at her desk which is next to mine in math class. I would ask her for help with the subject if she was any better at it than me. Her helping me would be like the blind leading the blind.

"Where have you been? I've been looking everywhere for you!" Rita complains.

"I was working on math in the library."

"Will the editor and chief was looking for you, he wouldn't tell me why."

"I'm sure you asked," I grinned knowing how nosy Rita is.

"Of course."

"I'll look for him after class." I say laying my textbook and notebook out in front of me. The teacher walks in and starts prepping for class. I don't engage Rita in any further conversation during class, its early in the year and I'm already having trouble.

"Carrie,"

"Shh, I have to pay attention," I whisper, "I don't get this shit!"

Rita shakes her head frustrated, "Oh my God!"

Class drags on and I think I get it but usually when I start working on the homework that's when I realize I don't get it. The bell rings and we gather our stuff, "What are you doing after school?" Rita engages.

"I would love to hang with you, but I need to catch up with my work."

"I didn't ask you to hang with me," Rita chuckles, "JOHN asked me out for pizza after school." She looks totally psyched. I'm happy for her despite my negative feelings for him. I like seeing Rita charged up.

"I hope you have a good time." I say struggling with my locker. Damn thing is so stiff. I'm going to have to bring oil for the hinges. I know the school won't do it.

"You know I will!" She winks shoving everything into her locker. It's too messy though and some of it comes fall back onto her so she shoves it in more.

"You might want to clean your locker, what if John walks you to it and you open it up in front of him and it's a total pigsty. What kind of impression do you think you'll be leaving on him?"

"You're becoming a nag Carrie? Don't forget to go see our editor." Rita reminds me.

"I know, I'm just going," I say. I decide not to tell Rita that I'm seeing Alex after school because she'll make a big deal out of it, and it's only for tutoring, it's not like

we're getting back together or anything. I will never trust him again. He went running to Melissa too easily. I'm curious if he's read my last article or seen the video?

I arrive at the editor's office and tap lightly on the door, "Come in," he calls out.

I open it finding him sitting at his desk which is very neat and tidy. Not a paper out of place, "Hi!" I say.

He motions to the chair, "Sit, sit."

I take a load off on his uncomfortable second chair, "What's up?"

He stops what he's doing and gives me his full attention, "I read your last article, kind of harsh on that poor cheerleader weren't you?"

"Just reporting what I saw," I say innocently.

"The Youtube video you captured got 700 hits in its first hour and we think it's going viral."

I smile, actually correct that I do an evil grin, "Right!"

He looks at me thoughtfully, "Students were losing interest in the paper until you came along and now they are reading it for your articles and your articles alone. I want you to cover the next football game and of course the hockey opener, but I'm thinking of giving you your own gossip column. We'll keep you anonymous so you don't have any problems with the other students, but let's see what you can do with this. We'll give you six hundred words to start out with so a normal sheet of paper and if it's a hit you can go as high as eight hundred. We'll trial it for the next three prints and if it takes off, we'll go from there. Are you interested?"

"More than, completely anonymous?"

He looks at me inquisitively, "Who do you want to tell?"

"Rita?"

"Absolutely not!" He shakes his head.

"I have to tell someone other than my mother, I'll burst at the seams and what if I need advice about what to write, I can't go to anybody?"

"Pick someone different," he encourages.

I think for a second and the first person that comes to mind is Alex only because I'm seeing him tonight and he's sort of been nice to me, "Alex from the hockey team? I'd really rather have Rita though."

Will considers the two, "Rita, nobody else."

"Okay, deal!" We shake hands.

Viral I think to myself, how cool is that. I head home to get freshened up and have a bite to eat before Alex comes and gets me. It'll be nice to see his little sister Brianna. She used to be bratty, but ever since she turned twelve, she's more fun to talk to.

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He rings the doorbell. I'm ready, bag packed, I even have chips, his favourite flavour Sour Cream and Cheddar, "Hi!"

He smiles back at me, "Hi," the car is still running. He opens my door and I get in throwing my bag in the back seat while he hops into the driver's side. I immediately wonder if she's been in his car. I decide he owes me answers but I don't want to sour the session because he's doing me a favour, "Was she ever in here?" I ask meekly sort of in a way not wanting to hear the answer but feeling like I have to ask the question.

Alex looks at me and I can tell from his expression I'm not going to like the answer and his hesitation confirms it, "a few times."

"I thought you were only with her once though."

He glances into the back where I put my bag which in a nutshell tells me where they did it, "You did it in here?"

"You asked," he says less happy, "can we talk about something else? it was a one time thing, it's over, I don't even like thinking about it."

"You could have got her pregnant."

"She's not pregnant."

"How do you know?"

"She would be a balloon by now, it happened almost five months ago."

I relax a bit.

"You're not going to keep mentioning it are you?" He complains.

"If I need to," I won't back down, he's the one who caused this and didn't deal with it when it happened. "I guess when I stop caring, I won't ask questions anymore." I tell him.

"You still care?" He asks with hope.

I consider his question, if I'm not interested in getting back together, then the questions are pointless, so I should stop, but I must care to some extent, "Yes, I guess so," I answer honestly.

He takes my hand in his and I pull away from him, "I don't want to lead you on, I'm not giving you a green light Alex, you're helping me as a friend" I think even though

I pulled away from him he feels slightly hopeful because he doesn't say anything or try again, we just drive in silence until we get to his house.

We pull up and Brianna his kid sister is looking out the window in anticipation. He must have told her I'm coming. Alex opens the door and she runs to me, "Carrie! I totally missed you! Where've you been? Why did you and Alex break up? Are you back together again?"

I grin at her, "We're doing homework together! How about I visit you when we're finished. I'll come to your room?"

"I'd love that, there's a Youtube video with this freak cheerleader falling that I'd like to show you!"

"Sounds great," I look up at Alex, "Have you seen the video?" I ask him.

"Sure have, laugh every time," he grins. "Wonder who posted it."

I grin back at him, "You're lucky you said that."

"Where do you want to work, my bedroom or the kitchen."

"The kitchen works, sorry to disappoint you," I pick. I wouldn't have minded his room either but you need a table and two chairs when you're working on math together. I take a seat and start unpacking my bag starting with the chips.

He grabs the bag and pops it open, "My favourite! You shouldn't have." He shoves a handful of chips in his mouth rendering him speechless. I like it when he doesn't talk.

"Help yourself," I say sarcastically.

"I haven't had this flavour since I found out YOU were CHEATING on ME!"

"I didn't cheat on you. If you asked me you would have known, all of what happened could have been avoided, oh well lesson learned," I say avoiding his gaze. I throw my attention onto my finite book. Alex patiently works through multiple questions with me until I feel the lesson is actually easy now. When we're done, I visit Brianna for a bit.

Alex drives me home after I finish with Brianna. "Thanks, you've been very helpful and it was nice seeing your sister again." His dark hair falls over one eye and I find myself attracted to him just as much as when we first hooked up. "You really thought I cheated on you?"

"She told me you and this guy were all over each other at the concession stand during my game."

"It was my second cousin twice removed, I haven't seen him for three years. He was like a brother to me when we were young."

"I know now," he said remorsefully. "I will never doubt you again."

I can tell he wants to lean in and kiss me, but he refrains.

Before I give in to the temptation, I reach back for my bag, "I better go, thanks for the session. Can we do this again next week?"

"I'd be happy to," He says before I get out and gently shut his car door.

He doesn't leave right away, he sits in the driveway a good ten minutes before I hear his car start. I look at the drawing Brianna gave me, that she made me and wistfully miss what Alex and I could have had. Now with everything going on and my shield of Plexiglas up, I'm sure no relationship will render me vulnerable again, not if I have anything to do with it.

I check my phone, there's a text from Rita.

Rita: We've been invited to a party this Friday after Grimsby's first hockey game.

Me: Who's having it?

Rita: Brandon, he plays offence.

Me: That blond cutie with the blue peepers?

Rita: That's him, a real dreamboat!

Me: Count me in!

10

It's Friday afternoon and our hockey team has a big following. I'm expecting to see at least a hundred people at the game. Grimsby is a hockey town through and through. When they aren't having games in the arena then everyone is skating on a pond.

It's starting to get cold outside and the sky is grey. John offered to take us to the game so him and Rita are coming to pick me up. When the doorbell rings, I come armed with a warm jacket, my phone, and that's pretty much it. I film and I dictate, no pen or paper needed.

I'm eager to watch the game. I jump in the car and buckle up as John begins driving. He glances at me once in the rearview, "We're just picking up Alex, I hope you don't mind," he detonates.

"Ah it's okay," I respond having zero choice or warning for that matter. I honestly don't mind him coming with us but it would have been nice to know, maybe I would have been more selective about what I was going to wear or how I wanted to do my hair. He'll only see me for a few minutes which is a consolation, but why do I care? I shouldn't care dang it!

He pulls up to Alex's house and Alex throws his bag in the trunk and gets in next to me, "Hi," he says quietly.

John winks at me in the rearview. I wink back and he grins.

"Hi Alex," I say.

His eyes scan me from head to toe and then before it gets awkward he looks out his window, "I can't wait to play," he says more to John than me.

"Me too," John agrees, "just wish we weren't playing such a hard ass team for our first game.

"You and me both," Alex agrees.

"So, we can expect you guys to lose and then drown your sorrows with beer, that we shouldn't even have, because we are so underage."

No beer at this party just the hard drinks, Brandon's parents are loaded with an indoor pool at the back of their house. We tease him and tell him we think his dad works for the President. "Did you bring your bathing suit" John asks Alex.

"Ya, you?"

“Ya.”

Rita looks at John, “You never told me it was a pool party! Carrie and I didn’t bring ours.”

John snickers, “That’s the whole point of it. You won’t be wearing any.”

“I’m not swimming!” I fume.

“We’ll find something for you to wear,” he reassures me.

“I’m not helping either of you find anything to wear,” John teases, “I want to see both of you stark naked.

“I didn’t just hear that,” I growl.

“Get down!” John orders his lap, “Down boy!”

Alex chuckles shrugging his shoulders, “It’s John not me,” he throws the blame.

“Sure,” I say in disbelief.

“I’ll swim in my birthday suit,” Rita says.

“We knew you would,” Alex says. We all look at him, he’s a dead man, he shouldn’t have said that. She undoes her seatbelt and turns around to face him, then she pummels him, her strength building, her face red.

When she’s done, she casually turns back around and buckles herself back in. He looks at me with puppy dog eyes, “Sorry but you deserved that one,” I side with Rita. John pulls up to a parking spot in the arena and we all get out of the car. They grab their monster bags and we walk together to the doors of the arena. John bends down to kiss Rita. I stand awkwardly next to Alex, “Good luck,” I throw a punch to his shoulder.

He grabs my wrist and kisses my hand, “Thanks.”

We take our places in the stand and then I go into newspaper girl mode.

Rita looks at me for a second during warmup, “He still likes you,” she informs me referring to Alex.

“That’s nice,” I say indifferently. “You can’t have a relationship without trust and if he heard from another girl that I was all over a guy he should have asked me about it instead of doing it with some random girl. I was totally going to get all close and personal with him until that happened. Thank goodness I didn’t.”

“He’s apologized.”

“He’s done it once, he can do it again. I’m okay with being friends with him, but I’m not putting my heart on a chopping block.”

“If you don’t let yourself feel, which means, allow yourself to be vulnerable to somebody else, you’ll never fully love.”

“Then I guess I’ll never fully love,” I say stubbornly. “Look it’s starting,” I distract her to change the topic.

I watch John play with Alex, they’re on the same line. They work well together like fries and gravy. In the first period neither team scores. The second period our arch rivals managed two goals. I’m starting to worry that we’ll lose, but in the final period, the boys get it together enough to tie the game. It goes into sudden death overtime and our goalie is scored on, damn! It was a great game but we lost. At least it was close.

They disappear off the ice and into the change room to shower. We wait patiently by the front doors for them. They arrive together, “Ready for the party?” They ask.

“Yup,” Rita says eagerly.

“We heard a lot of people talking about it,” I say.

Alex cloaks his arm around my shoulders like nothing has ever happened. Wow, the nerve of him is shocking. He looks down on me waiting for a reaction. I think, two can play at this as I wrap my arm around his waist. A little harmless flirting can’t hurt him can it?

11

We arrive at this huge house that takes up the narrow part of a city block, “Wow,” I say in awe. “Your friend lives here?” I ask Alex.

“Maybe if I make the Major hockey league we could have something like this,” he dreams out loud.

“We?” I snicker.

“We,” he says firmly. My resentment towards him weakens a bit. He knows I like it when he talks to me like this but I try not to show it.

“Do you have everything?” Alex asks me as we get out of the car.

“Minus a bathing suit,” I answer.

“I don’t want you wearing one,” he says in a husky voice.

I just melt into a puddle over that comment. Rita looks at me in shock. I’m still trying to recover from the electric feeling cursing through me. I wonder if I’m more into Alex than Landon. We haven’t really been hanging out much so I’m starting to forget exactly how I feel with him.

We ring the bell, Brandon answers, “Come on in guys! Pool is towards the back of the house, and food is laid out in the kitchen, help yourselves.”

“Who’s all coming?” I ask Brandon.

He smiles, “I invited some guys from the hockey and football team, should be a good crowd.”

“And bathing suits?” I inquire.

“Guys wear em, girls don’t, but you don’t have to swim if you’re not comfortable,” he offers like that’s better.

I look at Rita petrified with fear, “Let’s go home!” I insist.

“Are you kidding, this is the kind of party my mother warned me about, we’re here to stay! Everyone will be talking about it.” She says excited.

I remember the paper, and decide against my better judgement to stay.

12

Music is playing on the surround sound, and the pool is enclosed by glass with special blinds that you can see out but nobody can see in. The first person I spot has blond frizzy hair and huge boobs, Melissa! Before anyone can stop me I sprint to the pool and cannon ball into her direction. She's blinded by the splash giving me just enough time to wind up and punch her square in the face. I felt a bone give-way beneath my fist, knowing I broke her nose instantly after contact, "That's for breaking up Alex and me with your lies. You try charging me, and your whore-ways will be spread across the school paper like wild fire."

I climb out of the pool with my heart pounding in my chest, the rush of adrenaline is slow to subside. Everyone is clustering naked, half naked, and not naked at all around Melissa as she bleeds into the pool cradling her broken nose in her hand. I can hear her wailing like a blubbering idiot while I race/walk home. A few minutes later a car pulls up next to me, I'm shivering, "Get in," Landon orders.

"No," I yell into his open window.

"Now!" He orders authoritatively.

I stop, I'm freezing, I get in.

"You shouldn't have done that," he scolds. "I told you, you weren't over that son-of-a-bitch," He's more angry that I have feeling for Alex than what I did to Melissa.

I look him squarely in the eyes, "It felt great! Liberating!"

He scratches his head, "I don't even know what to do with you, you're going to get sick, I better take you home."

"Where's Alex?" I question.

"He's cleaning up your mess and taking her to the hospital. You should have thought it out instead of just reacting. You might as well have pushed her into his arms, I'll be surprised if they don't hook up after that stunt you just pulled."

We arrive at my house and then it dawns on me what I just did, "Holy crap, I decked out Melissa?"

"Go take a shower and get dressed in your pyjamas Landon says, putting his crutches down and sitting on our couch. Is your mother home?"

"No, she went to work."

"You better tell her what you did," he advises. "She can press charges."

I look at Landon soaking wet, "She doesn't even know I went out with him."

"Well she will now," he tells me. "Go take a shower."

I do what he says and run up to take a shower. I wonder if Alex is mad. Couldn't someone else have taken her to the hospital instead of him. Maybe he didn't take her and now Landon is lying to me the way Melissa did to Alex. I decide to text him, I reach for my phone in my back pocket, I try to turn it on. The screen is black and it feels wet. Damn I broke my own phone over that stupid girl, it just keeps getting worse! Maybe if it has time to dry it will work, I think.

I lay it on the dresser and go into the shower pulling off my soggy clothes before stepping into the hot water. The pulse of the shower head is therapeutic. I decide if my phone is damaged, I'll search for Alex on the internet and find out that way if he's mad, or maybe I can have Rita get him to call me. I wonder what she's doing now? Did she leave the party? Is she coming here or did she and John stay.

Then with the exception of losing a very good tutor, what else have I lost? Someone I can't trust, someone who can only be a friend, if that. Melissa had it coming to her. I never confronted her, and I acted without thinking. Sad thing is I was starting to enjoy Alex's company but how long before it turned into a relationship again, and how long before he hurt me. Maybe my self-conscience was acting out, if I really upset him there would be no possibility of us ever getting back together again and that would save me from getting hurt. That's the only justifiable certifiable reason I can come up with.

I dress into my pyjamas and go downstairs to rejoin Landon. He's sitting still on the couch, "Come here," he coaxes. I sit next to him and he opens his arms to me and that's exactly what I need a huge hug minus any form of judgment. I nestle into the bear and we sit there quietly for an unmeasurable length of time.

"What now?" I ask still snuggled in his arms, I feel safe here, like an old married couple even though we hardly know each other.

"We face whatever comes our way, together."

"We? I like that."

"I'll be as much as I can be there for you, until you feel better," he promises.

"You'd do that for me?"

"Of course. This will all blow over," he reassures.

Landon's phone made a noise. He pulls it from his pocket and reads the text, "She's being looked at right now."

"Oh!", I respond biting my nails. "I think I broke her nose."

"So do I," he grinned.

"That's not good!" I whine.

"Let's just hope, pretty boy can talk her out of pressing charges."

"You're a pretty boy too," I compliment. He smiles.

"Do you think she'll press charges? I did tell her if she makes a big deal I'll put it all over the school newspaper what a big whore she is."

"I don't know," he says thoughtfully. "It depends if she believes you or not. Alex said he'd talk her down when they left the party for the hospital."

"He must love this, two girls fighting over him," I observe.

"I guess so, I wouldn't know what it's like," Landon says modestly. "I usually have the gays in the red-light district fumbling to get action with me," he kids.

"Just take the zucchini out of your underwear and they'll stop," I advise him.

"It's not enhanced," he says with a serious tone. "It scares girls away."

"I'm not scared," I reassure.

"You will be when you see it," he kids.

"My phone doesn't work, it got wet when I jumped in the pool."

"That sucks," Landon says.

We help ourselves to what's in my fridge and cuddle for an hour more before I start feeling tired, "I should leave," he offers, "will you be okay," he asks concerned.

"Yes, mom will be home soon, I'm fine now. Can you take my home number and keep me posted on how she is when you hear from anyone? My cell isn't working."

"Sure," he agrees. I grab a scrap piece of paper and pen from a drawer and write down the house phone number. "I'll see you soon," he says kissing my forehead as he takes the paper from me and leaves.

I'm glad he followed me and supported me without getting angry or judging me. He is correct, I wasn't ready to get involved in a new relationship when I haven't begun to work through the negative taste in my mouth from the old one.

13

"Your mom let me in," I hear Rita's soft voice over my shoulder as she gently shakes it.

My eyes flutter open, Rita's standing over me, "You broke her nose. They didn't leave the hospital until four a.m."

"They?"

"Alex and Melissa, you might as well have given her the green light for a relationship with him."

"Are they?"

"Who knows," she shrugs.

"What did John say?"

"Not much, what should he say?"

"Are you mad at me," I ask Rita.

Rita sits on the bed and starts stroking my hair, "Of course not, as far as I'm concerned you showed a lot of reserve. I would have beat the shit out of her when I caught them months ago."

"Alex and I were just starting to get along again. I went over to his house and he helped me with my homework, he was going to help me more until I didn't need anymore."

"Did the visit get romantic?" Rita probes.

"No, not really," I say honestly. "Do you think he'll still help me?" I ask concerned.

"Your guess is as good as mine, I think it depends if he hooks up with Melissa after the stunt you pulled last night. Why don't you just get a new math tutor. I can ask John to help you," I love that she offers his service when they've hardly been out on a proper date.

"Would you ask him for me? I'd really appreciate it."

"Okay, let's just see what happens with Alex first."

"Sure," I say feeling a bit better. "How did your night go?"

"John homered with me," she grins.

"You and John did it? You.."

"The blood all over Brandon's sheets? Yup that was us! I blamed it on Melissa nose though. There was blood everywhere. Where did you learn to punch so good?"

"When your temper makes you bat shit crazy, you have stores of pent up energy. I think I'm stronger than Landon."

"Speaking of, he disappeared last night. Was he with you?"

"Ya, he found me and took me home, we didn't have nearly as much fun as YOU did. Do you regret it? What was it like? Are you in love with John?"

"Absolutely amazing, he was gentle and kind. I'm a woman now!" Rita flutters.

"You have to tell me more than that! Was it worth the wait, what position did you do, did it hurt? Did you do it more than once? Did he say anything after? Is he in love with you? How many times did you do it?"

"I am a woman, I don't speak of those things." She smiles at me mischievously before joining me under the covers. "It was totally worth the wait. He was on top and of course it hurt, but just a bit. We only did it once. He said he didn't figure me to be a virgin. He said it was nice."

"That's funny," I say under my breath.

"Where did you?" I ask.

"Brandon's bedroom, he let us. Everyone else was swimming and drinking Brandon's Rum. He found a bottle in his parent's liquor cabinet. He replaced it with ginger ale so they won't notice it."

"Are you guys exclusive now?" I asked.

"We didn't talk about that, but I'm sure we are," she says confidently. She pulls her phone out, "Want to see the pictures I took of the game last night? I never got a chance to show you."

I grab her phone off her and start rifling through her gallery, "I like this one," I show her and then I keep scrolling, "And this one."

"I like that one too, it's just before John scores."

"I think you should use that one then."

She smiles and stretches. "Did John text you or send you a love message late last night or early this morning?" I ask.

"No, but it's early he's probably sleeping." She makes an excuse for him, or it could be early denial. I hope among hope he didn't take advantage of her, he doesn't seem to be the type.

"What time is it?" I wonder having no idea.

"Ten!"

"Ya, why are you visiting so early Rita!" I give her back her phone and roll away from her so I can get more sleep.

She taps my shoulder again, "Do you want to go to Starbucks?"

"In an hour," I tell her not moving. "I need another hour."

"Okay," she agrees. I can hear her playing with her phone until I drift off. I love Rita.

14

We love going to Starbucks on Saturday mornings, it's a tradition Rita and I started last year. This time she nudges me harder in the shoulder and I jump out of bed, "Okay I'm up! Just let me shower."

I dress in comfort clothes not expecting to bump into anyone on a Saturday morning. Lucky me, there are four maybe five guys from our school including John and Alex ahead of us in line.

They see us and pretend to be frightened, covering their faces and cowering away. Alex and John chuckle, and to make us feel better they say, "They're just kidding! Join us."

The guys they were standing around with them smile at us, "We were just leaving, and not because you came," they explain so we aren't self-conscious. We quickly cleared the place out.

"Sure," Rita says, but she doesn't believe them completely. We order our drinks from the barista and then join the boys.

"How's Melissa," I'm afraid to ask but I know I have to.

Alex looks at me, "You got a helluva punch, you broke her nose, but she'll be fine. Barbara Streisand has nothing on her now!"

"I wasn't thinking," I say apologetically.

"Glad it wasn't me," he chuckled.

"You're not mad?" I ask Alex. "It would be hypocritical of me after what I did to us wouldn't it?" I am so relieved, it feels like a weight was lifted from my shoulders.

"So we're still friends?"

He fist bumps me, "At least!"

We talk about the party a bit and then John encourages Rita to step outside with him, he wants to talk.

"Why did he have to talk to her outside?" I ask.

"You don't want to know," he tells me.

I start getting suspicious, "He's NOT breaking up with her is he?"

He shakes his head like he's unsure, but he might as well have come right out and said it, "Why?"

She's outside with him for ten or fifteen minutes and then comes back in looking like she lost her best friend which of course she didn't.

John returns to his seat like nothing happens, almost appearing apologetic, and Rita grabs my wrist demanding we leave, "Let's go."

I look at Alex who shrugs giving me a look like you better go with her and we leave. We're almost out the door when I remember our drinks, "Hold on Rita! We paid a pretty penny for those!" I hurry back to the table and grab our drinks, looking at John, "You have a lot of explaining to do mister," I demand before turning my back on them to catch up with Rita.

"What happened?" I ask bummed we had to leave and worried for her at the same time. She was blissfully happy twenty minutes ago, now it's like a bomb dropped.

"John just broke up with me," she said tearily.

"He didn't!" I act shocked but I'm not good at it.

"You know," She accuses me.

"Alex told me while you were outside. He didn't tell me why though."

"Who does it with a girl and then breaks up with her the next day, he's such a jerk."

"Why?" I ask again.

"He said he really likes me but he doesn't have time to have a girlfriend, do homework and play hockey? He has to give one of them up. I'm the one he gave up."

"That sucks," I empathize. "It's early in the year though, you'll find another boyfriend, one who deserves you."

"I want John," she says searching for a tissue.

"You can do better," I encourage. "Let's go back to my place and work on the school newspaper. I make sure only to write the Grimsby Hockey team article while she's with me, I have to wait for her to leave to write the second article."

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Grimsby's First Hockey Game Mimic's Titanic's First Voyage:

A Flop! Dynamic duo John and Alex leave it to the third period to tie it up. Did they forget their skates at home? Little effort way to late, forcing an unproductive overtime! Better luck next time boys!

Staying Social in The Grimsby Social!

Brandon a senior throws a house party while his parents aren't home! Tsk Tsk Brandon! A fight breaks out in Brandon's indoor pool when a jealous girlfriend attacks the beautiful Melissa one of our very own cheerleaders for having an affair with a Grimsby Hockey Player Alex. Some players said if he was more focused on his game rather than his social life, they might have won our hometown opener.

Players should keep their playing to ON THE ICE, John, you know who you are. A special note to girls searching for a kind, loving, boyfriend, don't look to hockey players!

~~

Rita runs up to me with the school newspaper in her hands. Did you read the Social? Oh my God, Not only did they bring up what you did in the pool, but someone spread what happened between me and John. She passes it to me, "Here, look! Read it!"

I reread my work of art with a smile. Rita checks my expression and looks at me with suspicion. "You didn't?"

"That's not me!" I deny grinning.

Homeroom Monday morning, my teacher tells me that Will the editor wants to have a word with me again. Rita looks at me like: Oh my! I get up and go to his office, tapping on his door lightly. I wait a minute and then it opens, but he's not alone, Melissa is in the office.

"Is there something you want to say to her," he encourages albeit sternly.

"You shouldn't have slept with my boyfriend?"

"I was thinking more like an apology," Will guides.

"After she slept with my boyfriend?" I question him.

"I'm getting out of here," she says angrily.

"I'm not apologizing to that bitch!" I say loud enough for her to hear. Her steps get quieter so I know she's walking away. "Do to me what you want, fire me from the newspaper, but she slept with my boyfriend, made up lies and she deserves what she got."

"I'm not firing you," Will reassures, "I just wanted you to apologize to her because she was very upset, it was my idea."

"Well it was a bad idea. Imagine someone sleeping with your wife," I point to the frame, "you punch the perpetrator and I ask you to apologize to him even though she broke her vows to you with him. The guy has it coming to him, the way she did to her."

He shakes his head like there's no talking to me. "Readership is so high that before I even read your article another school is asking me how we keep our publishing costs down because there's been buzz about our paper at his school. I have an assignment for you. The local paper has a writing contest for unprofessional writers every year. Win it. All the information is online. I have faith in you."

"Sure, no problem. I'll just compete with thousands of wannabe writers and I'll kick everyones ass," I say sarcastically, still irritated at him demanding an apology from me.

"I know you can, I wouldn't suggest it if I didn't think you could."

"Is there a topic or can it be on anything."

"You could make a story on how grass grows and it will sound interesting. I'm sure you'll come up with something." He dismisses me and kind of rudely at that.

Rita waits for me near his office, I can tell by her expression she wants to know what happened. My cell dried out after the party and still didn't work so I said to Rita, "Let's go to the mall and get a new cell for me, mine broke when I beat Melissa up. I'll tell you what the editor and chief said when we get to the mall."

"What did our editor want from you?" Rita asks.

"He said my articles are so attention grabbing, that kids are talking about them from other schools and the schools are calling asking how we keep our publishing costs down."

"Get the fuck out! You are that popular?" Rita asks in disbelief.

"What's so hard to believe?" I ask offended.

"I guess nothing," she says but I think it's hard for her to believe. Maybe she's a bit jealous, I don't know.

"So anyway," I continue, "he wants me to write a story for the paper, and enter it into their short story writing contest."

"About what?" asks Rita.

"He said I'm good at whatever I write about, he said I could write about how grass grows, and people will read it."

"So what are you going to write about?" Rita asks.

"Maybe I'll write about how grass grows just to spite him," I tell her.

"I feel like cutting my hair, should we go get our haircut off?" Rita suggests.

"Sure, why not. Then we'll get a new phone for me," I say with excitement.

We stop at the overpriced salon in the mall and Rita goes first. She tells the girl "Just cut it all off." Inches upon inches start falling to the ground and then watching Rita I chicken out.

I walk up to the receptionist and quietly tell her, "I've changed my mind."

Rita glances at me, "What's up?" she asks.

I reply, "I changed my mind. I don't feel like cutting it off." Oh My God, she looked like she was ready to kill me. "But you're going to look great!" I tried consoling the beast but then she started crying, the hairdresser was relentless, didn't even stop cutting for one snip. I felt like the biggest asshole in the world. "Okay, okay, I'll get mine cut off too!" Her tears stopped instantly. Then I think if she could turn them off that quickly, they were real to begin with, "Or maybe I won't," I trick her.

I didn't end up getting mine done, and Rita looked great with hers, she should have done it a long time ago.

15

I kept my long wavy strawberry blond hair the way it was and after the mall, I exiled myself to my room to write a short story. The trouble I had, was coming up with one. I made it about a guy who was standing by his front lawn with his dog, and he had to pass gas but he didn't want to do it in front of anyone so he waited until everyone left, and the wind from his fart was so strong, a blade of grass actually moved. I spaced it out properly and followed the appropriate guidelines and sent it to our editor and chief Will who submitted it on my behalf. It was one word over the minimum length. Without a shadow of a doubt, I knew I would lose, but I didn't care. The short story was a pain in the butt to write.

Mom called up, "What are you doing?"

I ran down with my laptop in my hand, "I just wrote a short story, can I read it to you?"

"Sure," she said finishing off her dinner.

"I entered it into a short story contest. Our editor and chief from the school newspaper Will encouraged me to write it."

"Okay go for it," she said.

I read it to her and she was laughing so hard she almost choked on her food and then practically fell off her chair, "Tell my you didn't send that?"

"I did, I wrote about a blade of grass and it's going to lose the contest and I don't mind. Our editor really likes my writing, he says I'm so talented. I decided to put his theory to the test."

Mom and I started talking about the trip she said Rita and I could go on during March break, it was nice catching up with her. Between school and all my extra activities and friends, I hardly get to see her. Since dad left us, we became very close, she's my best friend,

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A Few Weeks Later:

It was a boring day of regular classes, no games and nothing to look forward to. Exactly one week before the Halloween dance. Morning announcements asked for everyone to congregate in the auditorium before next period. Rita and I looked at each other like I wonder what this is about but we remained silent. The bell went off and the hallways flooded with students all going in the same direction. Rita and I stayed close.

We got a seat together close to the back. When the auditorium was full the lights went down a spotlight shone centre stage. The principal made a bunch of announcements and stated that the first dance of the year was a halloween dress-up. He mentioned the Grimsby Hockey Team and Football team encouraging them to keep up the good work even though they haven't won a game yet and then the principal called the newspaper editor up to the stage. The principal stepped aside while Will spoke.

"A young lady some of you might know has bestowed an honour upon our school, I would like to read the letter to all of you before we ring the bell for next period." It clicked, Oh my God, this could be about me. I nudged Rita in the side really hard.

"Ow!" She said way too loud and everyone looked over at us. I was embarrassed:

Grimsby High School

Attention Will the Editor,
Submission by Carrie Anderson,

It is with great pleasure to announce your short story has won first prize in our short story contest. It was over the top with wit and humour. Unlike many short stories, yours didn't drone on, it was relatable. We all fart! I read it on four different occasions, and couldn't control my laughter each time.

A great work of art! Bravo Carrie. First prize is \$5000 cash and a free online course on how to write a novel, genre of your choice from Grimsby College.

Sincerely,

Frank Smith,
Literature Department

The embarrassment didn't end there. He read my story to the entire school and everyone was busting their gut.

"Carrie, please come up and get your reward." When the laughter subsided, the applause started and I was fifty shades of red. When I arrived at the microphone, he covered it with his hand and encouraged me to say a few words.

He took his hand off the microphone and I looked at him and said, "Thank you, I wouldn't have entered if it wasn't for you. You have done nothing less for me than encourage me to be all that I can be, and when I write my first novel, I will send you the first signed copy. Thanks again!"

Everyone stood up and clapped. I was so embarrassed. People were tapping me on the shoulder all day, congratulating me on my work, they said it was the funniest thing they heard in a long time, and what type of novel was I planning on writing. I had my heart set on becoming a physiotherapist, never in my wildest dreams did I ever even consider becoming an author.

17

I kept my old phone number so if I didn't know my contacts number off by heart, I had to wait for them to contact me. I didn't have the patience to wait for Landon to call me because I knew his knee surgery was this afternoon so I called him. He answered on the first ring.

"Hi Landon!," I start doodling as we talked.

"Carrie?"

"Ya, I want to call you and wish you luck today. What time does it start."

"My surgery is at 3:00pm, I'm starving and nervous," he admits.

"You'll be okay," I exude confidence, "Are you getting the surgery done at Grimsby General? I was thinking of spending time with you after if that's okay with you."

"I'd like that," he tells me.

"You were there for me when I lost my cool at the pool even though you knew it had nothing to do with you. I want to be there for you too, even if you won't have anything to do with me because you think I'm still hung up on Alex. I obviously am still hung up on him if I'm freaking out about something that happened over five months ago. I know I have to put it behind me. It just took me a long time to figure that out."

"You're on the right track," he comments. "The guy wasn't good for you anyway, you should be with someone like me. It really sucks I can't take you to the halloween dance, I wish my surgery was booked either way before or way after," he complains.

"You won't be escorting me to a dance anytime soon. I guess it will have to be Alex," I tease.

"Not even remotely funny," he tells me.

"I thought it was. I'll let you go for now, I'll see you later. You're hunger is probably getting in the way of your judgement of what's funny and what isn't."

"See you later," he grumps.

My next mission: get Alex to tutor me for my next finite math test which is next Tuesday. I dial his number and butterflies scurry in my gut. It rings three times before he picks up.

"Hi, Alex it's Carrie."

"To what do I owe the honour? It's been days since you've called, not that I'm complaining."

"It sounds like you're complaining," I kid. "You could call me too you know."

He pauses for a second, "I wanted to give you time."

"Thanks," I appreciate it, "but I need to ask you a favour. With this favour my time is running out."

"Go ahead," he says cautiously.

"I need to hook up before Tuesday's math test."

"You mean Monday night?" He asks.

"If you have the time," I agree.

"Sure, on one condition." He says and I can tell by his tone, I'm not going to like the condition.

"What is it?" I hesitate.

"You be my date for the Halloween dance!" He invites me.

Oh my, I was just joking about that with Landon and now he's literally asking me. "So you are only helping me with math if I let you escort me to the halloween dance, is that correct? You drive a hard bargain and you're not hard on the eyes, so how could I possibly turn you down?" I'll have to find an opportune time to break this to Landon, because I don't think he's going to be impressed.

"John and I will pick you up at seven," Alex offers.

"What about Rita, is John asking her?" Rita would kill me if she knows I was asking this but it's a weird situation. "I want to go with Rita too, she's my BFF."

"I'll talk to him into asking her, but I'm only doing this for you," Alex offers.

"Why did he break up with her in the first place? Tell me the real reason, I promise I won't tell her. She gave herself to him, that's huge ordeal for a girl."

"He told me he just wasn't feeling it for her like he thought he should."

"Oh, that's too bad, he shouldn't have led her on."

"He wasn't trying to, that's why he broke up with her so early on." Alex said sincerely.

"See what you can do," I encourage.

I shower and change into my favourite outfit: retro jeans with holes in both knee's and my jean jacket. Then I walk over to Rita's. I'm hoping if I plead with her, she'll come with me to the hospital. She hates them so it's going to be a struggle.

I knock hard when I get to her door because I didn't warn her that I was coming. She answers right away, "Hi! What brings you here without calling or at least sending a text?"

"I was hoping you'd come with me to visit Landon in a few hours, he's getting his knee surgery today."

"You so know I hate hospitals! I'm just on the phone give me a minute. She picks up her land line and talks into the receiver, "I'd like that, maybe we can work things out." Then she sits there and she's listening to the person on the other end, "I know, uh huh, sure, no, I won't get my hopes up. Well maybe I don't want to be seen with you then because if we walk in together people will think I'm your date, and then I won't find someone who IS into ME."

Holy hell, she has to be talking to John. That didn't take Alex long. I smile to myself, he must have really wanted to go with me.

"I have to go, Carrie is here. I'll talk to her about it and see what she thinks, so far it's a NO!" She hangs up abruptly. That so didn't go well.

"Let me get a shower and I'll come with you to the hospital."

"Sure, don't rush, surgery isn't until three, and it takes two and a half hours, I searched it up."

I hang out in her room while she's in her bathroom. She comes out dressed in a beach towel and her wet hair lands just above her chin, it is so short but it suits her, "I really appreciate you coming to the hospital with me," I tell her. "I asked Alex for help in math and he said he will on one condition, that I go to the dance with him."

"So YOU told John to ask me?"

"Not exactly. I told him that I don't want to go without you, so he said he'd ask John to ask you."

"Why would you do that?" She whines.

"I was in between a rock and a hard place? He pressed me to go with him, it's not like Landon can take me, and I didn't want to go without you!"

"What did Alex say?"

"Nothing really, he just said that John didn't feel as much as he should have when the two of you were together so he wanted to do the right thing and not lead you on. There is nothing worse then wasting a lot of time with a guy who doesn't care about you the way you do about him, it could also prevent you from meeting the right guy. He feels he was doing you a favour."

"Well thank God he didn't lead me on!" She said angrily and dramatically.

"Please go with John, I don't want it to be John and some other girl if I have to go with Alex."

"Do you still like him," she asks me, "or are you more into Landon?"

"They both have their qualities. I think I'm a bit more attracted to Alex but Alex broke my heart, Landon's been nothing but nice to me."

"Then you shouldn't go without Landon."

"I really need the math help though, Alex is still nice even though I don't trust him, and I don't think Landon will mind too much because he's laid up."

"If you don't think he'd mind like you say he won't, then why didn't you mention it to him," Rita challenges.

I grin, she's got me. "I'll tell him tonight."

"Don't," she says. "It will suck for Landon if you leave the poor guy in a hospital bed while you go galavanting around with another guy."

"I shouldn't go," I have second thoughts.

"You and Landon aren't exclusive, you're not being disloyal, Keep your gob shut to poor Landon. What he doesn't know won't hurt him. He's not going to want to know about you having fun with Alex the guy who broke your heart while he's laid up like this."

"So what do I say or do?" I ask frustrated, "I should just cancel Alex."

"Why? No, have fun, go."

"You'll come with us, say yes to John?"

"Sure, fuck why not! Only for you and just this one time."

"Great!" I say, but for some reason I don't feel too happy about it, I feel like I'm betraying Landon.

~~

Hospital surgeries are delayed by an hour so Rita and I munch on vendor food in the waiting room until he's wheeled from the O.R. We follow the stretcher but when we get to the room, the nurses stop us and say, "Wait here."

We do as we're told and wait outside his room. When they come out we ask, "Is it okay to go in?"

"Sure, but he's still groggy from the anaesthetic, so don't let him eat or drink anything for at least an hour.

"Sure," we agree. We go into the room and his parents are already there sitting in the corner.

"Hello," they greet us.

"Hi," Rita and I say in harmony.

The bed next to Landon's is empty so we use the chairs that belong to it. We pretty much watch him drift in and out of sleep for an hour. When he completely comes to, his parents speak to him for a few minutes and then leave us alone with him.

"Hi Carrie and Rita," he says to us.

I look at Landon, "How are you feeling," I ask.

Landon seems tired, so Rita and I leave him promising to come back tomorrow. I kiss his forehead and his hand goes to the back of my neck and guides me in for one on the lips. It's really hot and I'm tempted to slide my hand under his covers and I do pretending it's being used to steady me, but I cop a feel and he pulls me to him even more forcefully because now he's completely aroused, but Rita clears her throat reminding us she's there and we pull away abruptly.

"You're in a hospital!" She says prudishly. When Landon can't hear her she adds, "I'm glad you didn't tell Landon about Alex," she says.

~~

The next day, I decide not to tow Rita with me to the hospital, that way I can stay longer without worrying about her. When I arrive at his room there's a lot of noise coming from inside. I knock on the door and slowly walk in. He has a neighbour now. I pass the neighbour to find four guys from the football team visiting him. There's cookies, balloons, and bunch of cards. I hand him the stuffed bear I picked up from the gift shop.

"Hi Carrie," he says with a big smile.

His friend taps his other friends shoulder, "Come on man, time to go!" He says looking at me.

"You don't have to," I say not wanting to rush them out on my account.

"Na, we're good, we aren't the hold your hand kinda guys if you know what we mean," he laughs.

They all head out, the last one out the door says, "See you man!"

"I'm sorry," I say to Landon, but he pats the bed showing me where he wants me to sit.

I plant myself on the edge of the bed taking his hand, "How are you doing today?"

His short dark hair is a bit messy but his chiseled features pull off any look. He has a sexy shadow happening, obviously hasn't had a chance to shave yet.

"Do you want me to shave you," I offer.

He runs his hands through his hair like he's contemplating it.

"Your face," I clarify.

"Sure. I thought you meant," he doesn't finish his sentence.

"I like your hair." I say getting up to get a basin. "Do you have shaving cream and a razor?"

"Top drawer, I just didn't get around to doing it yet. They're sending me home tomorrow."

I pull his stuff out and lay it on the small table. I squirt cream in my hands and gently apply the foam to his face. I am so careful, and I take my time as he stares into my eyes. It's a very intimate moment. When I finish, I kiss him, slowly. It's by far our nicest kiss.

"Thank you," he says placing his hand on the side of my face, he kisses me again.

I take the chair by the window, the one his mother sat in last night.

"The halloween dance is tomorrow." I casually mention.

"I still want you to go," he says to me.

"Alex asked me, well he manipulated me. He said if I want help with math, I'm going to have to be his date for the dance," I confess. There's a second of silence that feels like an hour, maybe two.

Landon closes his eyes and pinches the bridge of his nose.

"Please be okay with this," I encourage.

“Ya,” he groans. “It’s the last thing I wanted to hear but I didn’t expect you to stay home. Do you still have feelings for him?”

“No,” I’m such a liar. What’s happening to me? There’s an uncomfortable pause which tells me he doesn’t believe me.

“I don’t want you going with him,” he says.

“You haven’t put a ring on it to stop me,” I tease showing my vacant finger, “we aren’t exclusive, but if we were, then for sure I wouldn’t go.”

“Let’s be exclusive,” he pleads.

“You’re not asking for the right reasons. I can tell you I won’t forget what he did, and that good relationships are built on solid foundations of trust, which I never will have in his case.

Landon repositions himself in bed, “I’m going to be stewing in jealousy the entire time,” he warns me.

“Good, maybe it will get you out of bed faster, give you something to work for. He has nothing on you,” I try consoling him a bit, but it’s always good to have them worried if you really like them.

18

My doorbell rings just as I'm finishing the last of my makeup. I run downstairs at a slugs pace because I'm wearing a light blue mermaid dress that gets tight at the ankles, in fact the entire dress is so tight, I question whether my breathing is being affected, but it looks AMAZING on me so I will have to make it work.

I open the door and John is standing in the frame, the car off and from what I can tell nobody inside it.

"Hi?" I wonder why he's picked me up first instead of Alex but don't say anything. My eyes are glued to him, and his costume, "Clark!" I say breathlessly but not from the exertion of walking down the stairs, in sheer reaction to how he looks. Thank goodness Rita isn't here to see my initial reaction. He's wearing a Superman costume covered by civvies clothing and black rimmed glasses. He is all chest. Oh my, I can see why Rita is so into him, he's deadly.

"Are you ready?" he asks. His eyes do a once over on me, but it takes at least sixty-seconds for him to finish.

I remind myself what he did to Rita and comeback with a snarky, "A picture lasts longer."

"Your beauty would shatter the lens," he sounds corny. Is HE attracted to me too? Shit! I'm totally attracted to him. This isn't good!

"I've shattered mirrors," I try lightening whatever is happening to us because this shouldn't be happening at all.

"Alex is a bit late coming back from the hospital, we'll pick Rita up last. You know how long she takes to get ready." I roll my eyes, because he's definitely correct about that.

"I was just there," I tell John. "Alex and I must have just missed each other."

"Do you want to sit behind me or Rita?" He asks. I motion behind Rita, and he opens the car door for me. His scent lingers around him, and the clean spicy fragrance makes me want to take a closer sniff. What am I thinking!

"Great costume," I say making conversation.

"I was thinking the same," he compliments me looking in the rearview.

"Thanks, I was hoping you'd like it."

He turns to me in surprise, "You mean Alex, you said you."

I try to remember what I said, I can't believe I said you, "Really?"

"Just a slip," he minimizes and turns his eyes back to the road.

We stop at Alex's place and we don't even have to get out of the car, he's waiting for us by his front door. He gets in next to me and whistles. He's a dead ringer for Trump. I laugh at his costume, "Once an asshole, always an asshole," I refer to him cheating on me and dressing like Trump, my joke backfires when John is the only one who finds it funny. I regret saying it. John is laughing so hard, it gets to the point where I think Alex has to be getting mad at him. We then pull up to Rita's. John gets out and rings her doorbell. Her parents invite him in and he's there for a while, Rita's keeping him waiting on purpose.

"I'm sorry," I say to Alex knowing I hurt his feelings, "I was just kidding, you look great!"

He pouts looking out his window. It is going to be a very long night. Eventually they come and not a minute too soon. We drive to school in silence, I don't know what happened in her house, but they don't come out happy.

John parks, and we walk in together, "You look great!" I say to princess Rita.

"Thank you, you do too!" she says.

We go to the gym and as soon as we get there, the 'Time Warp' starts playing so we begin dancing right away. It's followed by another fast song, then another. I start getting sweaty although I hardly move from my spot and point to a table needing a break. Just as I sit down, the DJ plays a slow song. Trump looks at me and holds out his hand. I smile and slowly get up, careful not to rip my dress. He leads me out to the dance floor, taking me into his arms and holding me close.

"I saw you kiss Landon this afternoon." I pull away to look into his eyes. There's pain there. I don't know what to say to him.

"You and I can only be friends, I know it's hard, I'm still attracted to you."

"I want you back, as more," he says.

"There's no going back," I tell him.

Alex hesitates for a second, I see John over his shoulder tapping him, "Can I cut in?"

He gives John an irritated look, "Sure," and then he looks at me, "Well finish this later," he says quietly, stepping aside. I wonder where Rita is, then I see Alex walking

over to her. He's going to ask her to dance, good, at least Rita isn't alone. Did the two of them plan this?

John sweeps me up into his arms, and holds me closely, very closely. I pull away a bit but his hold on me doesn't give. "You need to end it with Alex," he advises.

"I told him we can only be friends, are you worried I will hurt HIM?," I reply sarcastically.

"We're both going to hurt him once he realizes I have feelings for you."

"We, you mean you and me?" I laugh like it's preposterous. "You do realize I'm Rita's best friend," I remind him.

"And I'm Alex's. How long are you going to deny our chemistry? They'll have to forgive us eventually, they'll even move on, maybe together."

"Are you on drugs?" I ask.

He takes his glasses off and then Clark magically turns to Superman. He kisses me and I'm not a mermaid anymore, I'm his Lois Lane and he transformed into my kryptonite. I'm drunk from his kiss, almost staggering from the supernatural force of it. My upper body weakens and he practically has to support me from stumbling backwards. He kisses me again, this time deeper and longer, we are in a dip pose ballroom dancers are always in.

Alex lets go of Rita and goes barreling at John, the two have it out as the rest of the dance floor circles the rivalling teammates. The fabulous Grimsby hockey duo are at each other's throats and Rita looks at me angrily, she's been double-crossed. I don't know what to say to her and I see her in slow motion running from the gym, at the same time footballers jump in to break up the fight. I know Landon will hear about it, but my first concern is Rita. I try running after her, and I hear a big rip, my legs can spread farther apart now, and I'm able to run faster. I don't stop until I catch up to her. When I do I'm breathless.

"You just kissed him!"

"I didn't tell him to!"

"You know I LOVE John. I GAVE myself to him and you LET him kiss you and more awful than that, I KNOW you enjoyed the kiss. didn't you," she growls. "LANDON isn't ENOUGH for you, you have to have Alex and then mine too, you fucking bitch. She slaps me hard on the cheek and keeps running. I let her go. I know she's too upset and nothing I can say or do will make it better right now."

A car pulls up to me, the window rolls down, its John. He has the start of a black eye, "Alex is worse," he tells me. "Get in the car, Rita will be okay," he reassures me.

"You don't know that!"

He slows to a stop and throws it into park. He gets out of the car and faces me on the sidewalk. "You ripped your dress," he observes, "She hit you didn't she," he noticed my cheek.

"I had it coming. It was just a slap."

He swallows me with a passionate kiss. Nothing holding him back, a long sensual kiss. I respond this time, kissing him back. I wrap my arms around him. He breaks from the kiss long enough to get breath, "I'm in love with you." He says. "You're the reason I broke up with Rita. Hearing that Alex saw you kissing Landon in the hospital room made me feel so angry and helpless. I had to let you know how I feel before it's too late and you hook up with the wrong guy again. You should be with me."

I imagine my life without Rita and it gives me the strength I need to tear myself from his arms. "We can't."

I start briskly walking home. "Get in the car, I'll drive you," he offers.

"We can't happen! I choose Rita which means I choose Landon. Sorry," I douse the fire.

I walk away, and he wisely chooses not to follow me.

~~

I'm not ready to go home yet. I slow down and think about what just happened. I can't believe he likes me, the fact that he said he's in love with me completely blows my mind. I find myself going in the direction of the hospital. It's meant to be, I need to go there and tell Landon everything that happened. I need to be honest if I want something good to come from this.

I tap on Landon's door thinking how disheveled I probably appear, my messy hair, my pink cheeks, torn dress, "Landon?"

"Come in," he calls out quietly.

I walk passed his neighbour and then close the privacy curtain. He looks at me shocked and I sit at the edge of his bed, "How was the dance?" He asks. "Your back early," he observes.

"There was a fight at the dance," I inform him.

He sits quietly waiting for the details, he must figure I was involved by the way I look.

"Alex asked me to dance, he told me he saw us kissing the last time I visited you. He started talking about how he wanted to get back together with me, but I told him we can't I don't trust him and we can only be friends . Then John cut in."

"Okay," he says hesitantly.

"John kissed me on the dance floor in front of everyone. I was taken off guard. He said that he couldn't stand hearing Alex complain about our kiss at the hospital. He admitted the real reason he broke up with Rita, is because he wants me."

"What did you say?" Landon appears shattered.

"I told him that I choose Rita, which means I choose you."

"I don't understand the association. The only reason you should be choosing me is because you like me more than either of those two guys, this should have nothing to do with your best friend Rita. This just tells me you're settling for me."

"That's not true!" I argue.

"Just go," he says.

"No, I won't leave. I need you."

19

Massive Fight Breaks Out During The Halloween Dance.

Hockey duo Alex and John seem to have their sights set on a mermaid who manages to swim away from them while her boyfriend and Grimsby football legend Landon is laid up in hospital recovering from surgery on his ACL.

I skip class and drop by Landon's house uninvited, he has to be released from the hospital by now. I don't text first because that opens the door to rejection, "Come in," a ladies voice calls out.

I hesitantly open the door, "Landon?"

"He's in his room, go straight up!"

"Uh sure," I call back. I go up the stairs and say his name again, "Landon?"

I hear him on my right. I open the door, he's lying in bed watching television. "Hi," he smiles.

"Shouldn't you be doing physiotherapy or something?" I ask.

"It starts tomorrow," he tells me.

I motion for him to move over, "Make room," I order. He scoots over to the left and I pull my laptop from my bag.

"What are you doing?" He asks.

"Brainstorming idea's for my novel, what type of novel should I write: Romance, Chick Lit, Sci Fi, Horror, Mystery?"

"What do you like reading?" He asks.

"I'm a romance girl, how about you?" I ask realizing, I hardly know anything about him.

"Mystery, hands down. Have you spoken to Rita?"

I shake my head no.

"Make the effort," he advises. "Relationships and friendships take work."

"I know she's worth the effort, I was totally blindsided to John liking me. I didn't expect John to do that to me, especially in front of her."

"She needs to know that."

“Okay, I will talk to her, but first let me tend to you.”

He lets me curl up next to him and I slide my computer off my lap to get more comfortable. Maybe the chemistry will come later. I stroke his muscular arm engrossed in my thoughts rather than the television.

“I’m going to quit the paper,” I decide spontaneously.

He looks at me startled, “Why? You’re good at it, you’ve already been recognized for your writing.”

I cross my legs and stretch out more, “Rita’s and I did the paper together, it’s not going to be fun if she’s mad at me. I rather start the book, see what I can do.”

“What do you want to write about?”

“I don’t know, maybe I’ll do a murder mystery, about a teen blood vampire named Melissa who sleeps with innocent chicks boyfriends because she’s a real train wreck. The town pulls together and kills her.”

“You’re sounding psycho,” he warns.

“Thanks.” I say defensively. “Have you thought of what you’re going to do now that you need another eight months to rehabilitate? You’re in your last year of high school, and you won’t be picked for a scholarship because none of the scouts will want an injured player. Aren’t you mad? Is there a plan B in your back pocket? You can’t sit around here watching movies or sports and feel sorry for yourself. Next, you will be hanging out with your friends and eventually take up drinking, it’s such a small town mentality.”

“You have me wasting my life away in your bleak scenario. I need encouragement rather than discouragement. I don’t want to be your second choice and I definitely don’t want you bringing me down when all I ever do is encourage you.

He picks up the glass from his bedside table and smashes it against the wall, “Is this what you expect me to do? I don’t punch or slap the way you do, I have no underlying issues. I get dealt a hand, I make the most from it.”

“I shouldn’t have said that,” I say softly, wishing I didn’t go out of my way to upset him, I don’t know what my problem is. “Your right, I need to fix things with Rita, and stop upsetting you.”

“That would be a start,” he encourages.

“Are you okay up there?” His mother asks.

"I just dropped a glass, sorry mom." He calls out.

"I'll clean it," I offer.

His mood plummeted, "Don't bother, mom will do it after you leave."

If that was a sign, I was oblivious to it, "After you leave," he repeats.

I look at him, "Oh! You want me to leave?"

"I'm kind of tired," he says politely.

"I can take a hint," I tell him getting off the bed.

"If its fed to you," he teases.

"I'll see myself out."

20

I call Rita's phone and she picks up, that's a start, baby steps.

"Hi," I greet her.

"What do you want?" She asks angrily.

"To say I'm sorry," I offer my second apology. "I don't know what I'll ever do if you don't talk to me again."

"You'll recover. You have entire hockey and football teams wanting to console you."

"Don't be ridiculous," I start tiring of her always being the victim.

"You can get anyone you want too. So what if John's not into you, he was an experience, you might meet someone next week, why waste your time on someone who treats you like that. It doesn't say much for his character."

"Sure, thanks," she says ungratefully.

"I do have my sights set on someone else. John, did take advantage of me. My new guy will be better to me, I can tell just by the way he acts."

"You're new guy? Who?"

"I'm not telling you, you'll probably snatch him out from under me like you did John," Rita insults me.

"You don't have to tell me who," I say to her. "But did somebody ask you out?"

"Not yet, but it's probably coming," she suspects.

"I'm not after your boyfriends. You can tell me. I would never get together with John, I know how much you liked him."

"You can have him," she says petulantly.

"I told you, I don't want him," I repeat.

"You think you don't want him, but my intuition tells me otherwise."

"Your intuition is wrong," I say flatly. "Let's go to Starbucks," I invite her.

"Oh, no thanks, Melissa and I have plans."

"Wow, seriously? You're hanging out with her now? Are you going out of your way to upset me?"

"No, it's not all about you.," she sounds unconcerned.

John, Landon, Alex, can do whatever they want with Melissa but to hear my BFF would rather hang out with her over me, that's just below the belt. "I shouldn't have called, you're still too angry." Now I'm feeling mad, I want to rub it in her face that John is an amazing kisser and he literally broke up with her to be with me, but I don't go there. I just cut the call short.

~~

Before school starts, I stop at the papers office and wait to speak to our editor. He looks delighted to see me, "Hi," I say to him taking a seat.

"Hi, what brings you here?" he asks me pleasantly.

"I would like to quit the paper, I'm sorry you've been amazing to me, but I'm going to start that online course sooner rather than later since I have zero social life, and I'm going to start writing my novel."

He shakes his head and paces, "I'm sorry to hear that, but happy for you at the same time. Did you want to talk about your social life?" He asks.

"Not particularly, but thanks for the offer," I smile at him.

"Are you okay?" He questions.

I start to tear up and have to break eye contact, "I will be, but I'm not right now."

He nods. "Have you decided what type of book you want to write?"

I shake my head, "I'm clueless."

"Well from anyone I've ever spoken to about writing, they all say write what you know about."

"I don't know anyone who wants to read about weak ex-boyfriends, sleazy girls, and best friends who can't find it in their heart to forgive, although, Landon's been nice to me."

"Draw from that, lean on him then. He's most definitely strong enough to hold you up," The editor teases. "Writing the book during this time in your life might be cathartic but don't let your grades slip. Maybe write what you wish would happen in your life. A feel-good story everyone can relate to."

"I'll try," I tell him. "Again, I'm sorry for quitting the paper."

"Our readership will drop, but if you want back in or need anything I can help you, just say the word."

“Will do.”

21

I lock myself in my room and start the online course. I have a vague idea what I was going to write about so now I just have to learn how to do it. My storyline is going to be about Landon and how he injured himself, of course he won't know my storyline. He's going to make this huge recovery and get drafted into the CFL but not without falling in love with his physiotherapist, a.k.a. me! I am going to be there every step of the way until he's a big success back on that field. If I do a book two he will retire and become a sports agent, coach, or motivational speaker, I haven't chosen yet, we will have two children and live in a white picket fence neighbourhood in Connecticut.

The doorbell chirps and I offer to get it. It's the physiotherapist. Holy Mother of .. She's gorgeous, dark black hair, beautiful porcelain face, she introduces herself as Tony. I just wish if he's going to have someone come in to train him and build his strength, that she looks more like a soviet grandmother, aged and overweight, kind of militant was what I was hoping for. It would have been easier for me to swap myself out with someone like that in my imagination than this physiotherapist who I think is way prettier than me and more petite.

Landon's expression is unchanged, almost like he's dreading her visit, "Hi Tony," he greets.

"Hi," she says cheerfully. "Are you ready for your first session of physiotherapy?" She asks.

"As I'll ever be. This is my girlfriend Carrie."

Wow, did he say girlfriend? That kind of has a nice ring. I replay what he said in my head again and smile to myself, maybe I smiled to everyone, "Carrie?" Landon asks concerned.

"Oh sorry, hi Tony, nice to meet you."

Landon looks at me like, "Are you okay?"

I mouth girlfriend and smile, and then he gets it, he knows he made me happy, he smiles back and the reverts his gaze back to her.

"I'm going to do some passive range of motion exercises with your legs. I brought a matt. I have to go get it from the car."

"Sure," he says. She leaves us alone, "You are my girlfriend," he establishes, "if you want to be."

"Of course I want to be," I answer like it's a no brainer.

Tony comes right back in and lays the matt on the floor. "I would do these exercises from the couch if I were alone but since your girlfriend is here, I'm sure the two of us will manage to get you back up. Come lie down Landon."

He lies down in the middle of the living room on the matt she provided. She starts working on the good leg to prep him for what she is going to do to his operated leg, "Have you had pain medication today?"

"Twenty minutes before you came," he hesitated, "Is that okay?"

"That's perfect, you want to take pain medicine twenty to thirty minutes before I come for the next while," she instructs.

"Sure," he says obediently.

She takes his bad leg and repeats the exercises but she doesn't seem able to move this leg as well, "Can you bring it back more?"

"No, that's as far as it will move," he says.

"Are you sure," she struggles.

"Ya," he groans with effort.

"It's stiffer than I would expect it to be," she sounds perplexed.

"Is there a problem?" he asks.

"I don't think so, we'll see how the rest of this weeks sessions goes and if it's still like this by the end of the week you should book an appointment with your surgeon." Tony looks at me, "Do you think you can repeat these exercises on the days I don't come to keep him limber?" She asks me.

"Sure!" I say glad I can be helpful.

"Okay, I'll see you Wednesday. Then to me, "When I'm not here, you can do these with him lying on the sofa."

"Sure," I say. We both assist him up from the floor onto the sofa. Landon turns the television on and stares at it without watching it as he gently rubs the top of his knee, the dressing looks disheveled.

"You're going to ruin your dressing," I advise.

He looks up at the clock, "The nurse is coming in an hour."

"Is she going to be beautiful to?" I ask sarcastically. He shrugs and zombies himself out, I think he's probably worry about his knee but I don't want to ask, if he wants to talk about it he will.

~~

We do the exercises she told us to, and the next time she comes, there is zero improvement. She looks at us with disbelief, as though there's no way we could have been doing them. She gives us another chance. She says she will see us Friday and she wants to see more mobility. Friday comes and he's the same.

She appears frustrated, "You said you are doing the exercises?"

"Yes," he starts sounding angry. "Believe me, I'm doing nothing else with Carrie BUT the exercises you taught us. They aren't working isn't there any other exercises you can give us?"

"You need to make an appointment with your surgeon. When the nurse takes the dressing down is it red and swollen. Does your knee excrete any puss or obnoxious odours?"

"No, none of the above, the nurse says it looks like it's healing well."

He calls the doctor and makes an appointment for two weeks time, "You need one sooner she insists."

Landon tells the receptionist, "Can it be sooner? My physiotherapist is here, and she feels it's more of an emergency."

He listens for a minute and writes down a day and a time two days from now. Tony nods with satisfaction before Landon gets off the phone.

"Is this an emergency?" He asks.

"It's always better to air on the side of caution, you want to get back on that field don't you, we need your range of motion to increase."

He nods, but his confidence looks like it's slipping.

"You're going to be ok," I reassure. "Do you want me to come with you to the doctor's office."

"Sure, I'd appreciate that," he says gratefully.

22

We kept doing the passive range of motion exercises, but I wasn't seeing improvement. I met up with Landon and his mom an hour before the appointment.

Landon's mom says to both of us in the car, "I have an errand to run, I'll do it while your at the doctors office if that's okay with you," She looks directly at Landon.

"Sure mom," he says lost in thought as he stares out the front windshield.

"I'll take good care of him," I say in a chipper tone but the mood in the car is dismal at best.

We arrive at the hospital, Landon notices my reaction, "My Orthopod works out of here," he explains.

"Orthopod?" I ask.

"Orthopedist," he corrects.

"Oh." I stop while I'm ahead. Landon uses his crutches to walk into the office. He's become a pro.

We end up waiting over an hour in the waiting room with tons of weirdo's waiting to see the doctor. People are in casts, no casts, splints, braces, you name it. Finally, the secretary calls out Landon's name and we both go in. The doctor's office has a desk, and two chairs not including the doctor's chair. It's messy, and there are acknowledgments and accreditations adorned in cheap frames hanging on his wall.

Landon tells the doctor that his physiotherapist is disappointed with his progress, in particular his range of motion. The doctor then takes Landon into the next room and assesses him before the two rejoin me in his office. The doctor steeples his fingers and is silent for a minute like he's thinking what direction to go in before expressing his concerns to Landon.

"Well Landon," he pauses and starts scratching his chin, "When I manipulated your leg, you seem to have a significant amount of pain and stiffness. I'm going to have to advise you that your surgery is a failure, we're going to have to do a redo."

That's when I jump in, "So doctor, you're saying the surgery failed and he needs ANOTHER operation."

He nods, "Unfortunately, I don't feel his physiotherapy has failed him, because Landon you've been doing it regularly correct?"

"Yes doctor," he says.

"Then why did it fail," I ask frustrated.

The doctor shrugs looking clueless, completely leading me to question his judgment, "We won't know until we go back in."

"What's the success rate of a second ACL surgery after the first one fails? Will he ever be able to play football again? Is this the end of his career?"

"He'll be more prone to knee instability and poorer outcome if it gets done again," he advised. "He should be able to return to his sport."

"Do you even specialize in sports medicine?" I ask relieved I did some homework before coming in.

"No," he says honestly, "but I've done a significant number of surgeries on athletes."

"Are Landon's complications common?"

"It depends on the person and the extent of the injury, I won't know more until I go back in."

I turn to Landon, "I think you should get an Orthopedist who specializes in sports medicine," I turn to the doctor, "No offence."

"None taken," the doctor says politely but I'm sure his tail feathers are in a spin. "It is your prerogative, if you want to get a second opinion," he encourages Landon.

"I think it's wise to have a more focused specialist working on you if you want to get back to Football and have a chance at making the Canadian football league or better yet American (*They pay more*)." I advise.

"The sooner you get the surgery the better," the doctor says.

"So obvious," I say under my breath.

He see's us to the door, "Let my secretary know what you've decided."

Landon shakes his hand, "Sure doctor, we'll let you know."

His mom's waiting for us by the time we arrive at the main floor, "Did you prep for that appointment?" asks Landon.

"Of course, didn't you? Your entire football career is at stake." I remind him.

"I was kind of surprised seeing how you were just there to keep me company," he reminds me.

His mom glances at me in the rearview, "What happened," she asks cluelessly.

"Nothing," I explain. "You should tell your mom what he said," I advise.

Landon looks at his mom, "The doctor suspects I need another surgery, something went wrong. He needs to go back inside my knee and figure it out."

"He's doesn't even specialize in sports medicine. I think Landon should look for another doctor, get a second opinion, maybe have the a sports orthopedist do the next surgery."

She smiles, "Carrie has a point Landon. She's advocating for you."

"But this doctor knows me," Landon argues.

"If he was good, the surgery would have worked," I argue back.

"Not necessarily," he snaps.

"It can't hurt getting a second opinion," his mother sides with me. "I'll talk to your father about it when he gets home from work."

Landon turns around and rolls his eyes like that's the last thing he wanted. Judging from his reaction I'm instantly suspicious that his father is one of those parents who push too hard. "Did your dad play football," I ask wondering if my hypothesis holds weight.

"What do you think," he says miserably.

Those four words tell me everything. This injury can be his way out, he can be happier as soon as his father's dreams are dashed. I just automatically think Landon's in love with his sport, star quarterback and all. I wonder where his true passion lies?

When we get arrive back at his house, Landon's mother starts preparing dinner and we take our places in front of the television. I start surfing the web, -75% sports players come back from ACL tears as long as their non-dominant leg is the first to be operated on. "Is your injury on your dominant leg?" I interrogate.

"Yes," he breaths frustrated, grabbing the remote from the table.

"From what I'm reading here, even a second injury on the same leg doesn't mean your career is over."

"Oh goody," he says sarcastically.

I put my phone down, "Tell your dad you want to quit," I say impulsively.

"I don't to quit, I just want him to stop being an asshole at the games. I wish he wouldn't even come," Landon confides to me. I slide my fingers through his.

"Don't tell him when they are."

"I try that, it works sometimes," he smiles.

I kiss him, because I can, he's my boyfriend now! "I better go," I tell him, "your moms making dinner and mine will be expecting me home."

“Sure,” he says kissing me again.

“We’ll get through this,” I say on my way out.

23

I'm kind of looking forward to hiding away in my room and reading more about how to write a novel, especially now that my storyline has a plot twist. I stop at Starbucks to get my favourite Chai Latte and don't I bump into John, of all people. I smile at him and say, "Hi" because I have to, he's seen me see him, I impatiently wait for the barista to finish my drink.

"Are you here with anyone?" he asks. I can't really lie because I have nobody I can pretend to be with.

"Nope, I just left Landon's, I was on my way home," I tell him.

"Then join me, just for a few minutes," he pleads.

"Sure," I say.

"What's up with you? Have you talked to Rita?"

He shakes his head no, "I don't want to lead her on even if I'm not dating anyone right now."

"How good of you," I half mean it.

"Are you and Landon?"

He pauses long enough for me to jump in with his answer, "We're dating."

"That's nice," but sincerity doesn't reach his eyes, and I'm not going to be rude and call him out on it.

"I don't expect you to be happy we hooked up, but I hope you realize that even if I'm attracted to you, we can't go out because of Rita."

"So, you are attracted to me," he clings.

"You're not ugly, clearly for me to kiss you back, your features are potent to say the least." I know I shouldn't have said that but who's he going to tell?

"I'm okay with being friends if you are," he offers.

"I can always use another good friend," I agree.

"So how is Landon, I haven't seen him for a while."

"Not good," I confide, "He's not healing quickly enough, so the surgeon suspects he needs a redo surgery. It looks like he's going to be out longer than expected."

"That's too bad," he says sympathetically. "I didn't see you at our last game," he mentions. I never knew anyone except Rita ever missed me if I didn't attend a game.

Football is like watching wallpaper dry and hockey isn't that much better for me. I only went when I had to because of Rita, not because I wanted to. I miss her.

"I quit the paper. I'm focusing my energy on a book now."

"That sounds exciting Carrie. I want a copy when it's done."

"Sure," I agree starting to get up, "I better go now, it was nice talking to you, I'm glad we're friends," I tell him.

He smiles back, "Me too."

It should honestly be illegal to be that good looking.

24

I was creating characters, not an easy feat when my phone rings. I saw the screen light up Rita, "Hi," I say first.

"Hi," she sounds like nothing happened between us, "Do you want to go to a game and then out to dinner?"

"Are you asking me out on a date?" I kid.

"Ah sort of! I'm asking you out on a double date!" She clarifies.

"So, you and I are good now?" I ask amazed how she could change her tune so quickly.

"Depends on who you bring," she says a little more seriously.

"Landon obviously, who are you bringing?"

"BRANDON! He totally just asked me out. I'm NOT going to sleep with him either, I don't want the same thing happening with Brandon that happened with John. You better never touch him or we're finished," she says exasperated.

"Good idea," I chuckle, "make him wait."

"Right!"

"Right! I'm so glad you invited me," I tell her. "I guess I better ask Landon."

"Sure, call me back."

"Okay," I agree.

I hang the phone up and call him. He answers on the third ring, mobility is still an issue for him, "Hi Landon, you'll never guess who just called me."

"Before or after you had coffee with John, or was I not supposed to know," he spikes my balloon. Wow, that travelled so fast, I don't know how to react.

"Uh," I wasn't even going to mention it because it's not a big deal, "we bumped into each other and sat down for five minutes, it was nothing really. Who told you?"

"What did you talk about?" He asks.

"I don't see how our conversation is really any of your business. Don't be like that?" I challenge.

"You're making me like that," he says angrily. "The guy has it bad for you and you lead him on by sitting with him," Landon sounds frustrated.

"If it's not Rita, it's you! I can't control whether he likes me or not but I can choose who I go out with and it's YOU, I'm calling to ask you if you want to go on a double date with Rita and Brandon tonight. You are my boyfriend to which John is aware."

"Okay, I just had a really shitty session with Tony and she said we should stop until I have the second surgery. She doesn't want to cause more damage doing physiotherapy if something isn't right."

"That's fine, don't take frustration out on me. Let's go out with Rita and get your mind off it, just have fun."

"Sure," he surrenders.

I call Rita back and we decide that Brandon should drive because he has an SUV which will be easier for Landon to get in and out of.

~~

We arrive at the rink super early which is annoying, because I hate killing time before games. Landon the gentleman he is says, "I'll meet you guys in the stands."

"Do you need help?" I offer.

"Sure," he takes me up on it and hands me a crutch while he grabs the railing with his other.

"We'll meet you in the stands," I tell Rita. "Good luck Brandon!"

"Thanks," he winks.

We select front row for more leg room, home side. Just as we get settled the coach walks by with his big bag slung over his shoulder, "Landon!" He sounds pleased to see him.

"Hey coach!" He fist pumps.

"I heard about your knee, it must have you bummed."

"Understatement of the century," he confides. "Just found out I'm going to need a second operation on it."

Coach looks like he's trying to figure something out, "So that will put you out for how long?" He asks.

"According to my surgeon and physiotherapist, the better part of nine months."

"We can't have our star quarterback languorous that entire time," he comments.

"Don't you know it," Landon agrees.

"I have an idea, to shake things up a bit. I'll make you temporary assistant coach until you can get back on the field. You can learn what it's like to instruct athletes and show the boys a real workout at the same time, shit, I'm sure you'll have them using muscles they never knew they had. Feel free to use our equipment for your benefit too, help you get back on the field sooner," he grins.

"Are you serious?" Landon asks barely able to contain his excitement.

"Serious."

He looks at me for approval, I nod definitely not wanting to hold him back from anything he wants to do, "I'd love to coach, thanks!"

"Well you better come with me to the change room, we have an announcement to make.

"Sure, I'll be right there, it takes me longer to move right now,"

"Take your time," he says patiently before waving us off."

"Wow! That's great!" Landon says to me.

"I'm so glad you're happy Landon. I'll help you down the steps and then wait here for Rita."

"Sure," he says.

Rita finds me a few minutes later, "What's Landon doing downstairs?"

"He's just been asked to be the hockey team's assistant coach until he's ready to get back onto the field."

"That's great!" Rita exclaims. We can go watch all the hockey games together again, "Now that I'm seeing Brandon and you're dating the assistant coach!"

I look at her very displeased, "When will I have time if I'm doing schoolwork and writing a book."

"What are you writing your book about?" She asks. "Maybe you can do one on me!"

I look at her and roll my eyes, "As if. I need an interesting subject! I haven't told Landon yet, but it's going to be on his miraculous comeback from injured high school footballer to a Canadian or American league, I haven't decided on the details yet."

"You better tell him," she warns, "He might not want to be in your book."

"I'll change the names!"

"Doesn't matter, you should tell him. Have you started it yet?"

"No, I need to know how to write one first, I've never written a story 60-80000 words long."

"How long do you think it will take you to write?"

"Upwards of a year but everyone is different."

Rita looks at me like she was contemplating telling me something, "I bumped into John and Alex downstairs."

"Oh, did they talk to you?" I make sure to sound disinterested when truth is the complete opposite. Then it dawns on me, Landon will be coaching John, Alex, and Brandon, I'll be seeing all three of them all the time.

"Alex asked how you were doing, John didn't say anything. John doesn't give a shit how I'm doing compared to Alex, who, even though you aren't going out with him, still asks. You even kissed his best friend and then deserted him."

"I want to make sure you were okay, our friendship means everything to me." I tell her.

"Then don't kiss my boyfriends," she says rather obnoxiously but I get it.

"Too right, won't do that again," I smile at her and she half hugs me for a second. I know she's better, and that makes me feel good.

The game starts and Landon doesn't return to us, he stays with the boys on the bench. He's talking to them, patting them on the back, he's a real natural. The game feels like it went quicker than normal and our team won this time, maybe Landon is good luck.

~~

We decide to try a new restaurant on the edge of town called, 'The Artery Clogger'. The restaurant is really cool, each table is in shape of a heart and there are arteries drawn on each table. An artery is clogged with a thrombus and necrotic cardiac muscle, it's so cool. The chairs we're sitting on are shaped like stents with padding of course.

I study the menu because rumour has it this restaurant is the bomb. I settle on the aortic dissection medium rare, with fries smothered in v-tach sauce.

Rita looks impressed, "I'll have the same."

Landon considers what we're getting and says, "I think I want something more filling, I'll have the triple bypass with a side of septal defect."

Brandon asks, "What's septal defect," as he scans the menu looking for it.

"An order of onion rings," chuckles Landon.

"I'll have the same!" Brandon smiles. "Do you think the owner is a doctor or something?"

"Definitely something," I joke. "Just hope the food is good."

"Me too!" Landon agrees.

The waitress brings us loads of food, greasy, comfort food like nobody's business, "When I get married, I want to have a table of food from this restaurant, you know after midnight when we need a break from dancing."

Landon looks at me and then his food and turns bright red, "should I be nervous?"

"No worries," I steal an onion ring, "I don't plan on settling down until you've been picked for a football league. If you aren't making high six or low seven digits, you aren't putting any ring on my finger!"

"Don't listen to her," Rita says, "You get down on one knee and the only thing that will come from her lips is the word, 'yes!'."

"Oh please Rita," I address Brandon, "Propose to her on a farm, she told me ages ago that as long as she's in love with her husband she doesn't care if she's poorer than a church mouse. Let's test it!" (We are completely misleading the boys and it's fun)

Rita looks at her fries, "Ventricular Tachycardia is hot! Listen Brandon you better have been drafted by and Major hockey league team if you want me to marry you. I don't mean to be picky, but I've always only ever seen myself marrying a hockey player in the Major hockey league."

"Do you have a team preference?" He plays along.

"I feel very unpatriotic, but I would prefer a warm state in the U.S." Rita says.

"What if I never make a football league," Landon worries. He must be thinking about his knee, poor guy.

"I'll still love you," I reassure.

"She just won't marry you," Rita snickers.

"Yes, I will, pay her no mind," I reassure him.

He leaned in and kissed me softly, it was a thank you kiss, like the words I just said meant the world to him. "I mean it," I reassured Landon.

My big bear gave me a long hug.

“Take it outside,” teased Brandon, and just as we’re pulling away from each other, John and Alex walk in with a bunch of friends. Their eyes locked onto us in a flash, but they don’t join us, they just wave. It’s not as comfortable anymore, and even though nobody is saying it we want to leave sooner rather than later. We forgo desert and then Brandon drives us home. I’m first to be dropped off. Landon walks me to the door and we kiss for a lengthy period of time until Rita calls out, “Gas doesn’t grow on trees!”

I salute her with my middle finger and kiss him one more time, this one way longer than the others before I disappear behind my door. I can’t wait to sit in front of my computer and describe that kiss. I don’t think there’s an adverb in our English language that would do his kiss justice. It could almost touch John’s, but not quite. I disappear behind my door.

25

3 Months Later:

The End. My two favourite words! I call Rita, "I did it!" I screamed into the phone.

"You did what?" she yells back.

"I finished the book!" I tell her.

"Wow that's great! Can I have a copy?" She asks.

"Soon!"

I hit send, "the editor from our paper promised to edit it. He told me to take a break of one week before I look at it again. I can't wait to see the changes he makes to it. Let's celebrate!" I tell her.

"Sure," I'll make the calls, we can do it here," she offers.

"Great, but I'll call Landon."

"Okay, so eightish?"

"Perfect," and we hang up.

I call Landon, "I did it!"

"You did what?" He asks.

"I finished my book, just sent it for editing!"

"That's fantastic!" He tells me, "I knew you could do it!"

"Rita's going to have a party for me around eight tonight, is that okay with you?"

"Tonight?" he says with doubt.

"Do you have plans?"

"Coach invited me to a Leaf's game. I can meet up with you after."

What a drag, I can't help but feel a bit disappointed, "Okay, later is better than not at all, it's going to be at Rita's place."

"I'll be there as soon as the game ends. We'll come straight back. Are you going to tell me what it's about now? I've waited months and you say absolutely nothing."

"Absolutely not," I tell him. I try to shake off my disappointment and decide to get cleaned up for tonight's party. I get a long-needed trim at the mall and a new outfit, for a fresh look. I spent so many hours by myself, in my room writing when I wasn't there supporting Landon. My friendship with Rita has taken a place on a back burner and it's time we rekindle and catch up. I guess it's good he's going to be late. I wonder how her

and Brandon are getting along. I see them together from time to time when Landon encourages me to go to one of their games. His physiotherapy sessions have intensified since he had the redo on his knee. Tony feels that he might get back onto the field over the next couple of months but school will be over by then, so I don't know what Landon is going to do except apply to college and hope to try out for a team once he's there.

~~

I'm the first to arrive showing up a whole half hour early, "You're early!" exclaims Rita, "Where's Landon?"

"He's at a Leafs game with the coach, he's coming later."

"You look fantastic!" she says. "Writing agrees with you. Are you going to tell me what you're writing about?"

"No!" I smile. "I miss you, it feels so long since we've talked!"

"Because it has, let's go into the kitchen," she coaxes, "I have a lot to do before everyone comes! This party is going to be huge. Once I mention that it's for you everyone wants to come. It's gone from thirty to probably three-hundred."

"I hope it's not three-hundred," I say for Rita's sake, "I don't even know three-hundred people. We'll see."

Rita puts the music on low, and starts dressing several homemade pizzas. I open the fridge and see it's filled to the brim with beer and coolers, I look at Rita puzzled. She shrugs, "My parents are proud of you, I don't think they would ever do that for any of my other friends or me for that matter. They keep saying the same shit, 'You should be more like Carrie. Why don't you write a book?'"

"I'm sorry," I apologize to her, "I wish your parents wouldn't compare us, my mom doesn't."

"That's because I don't give her anything to talk about. I'm a disappointment. I don't do anything. I can't even take pictures for the school newspaper without the editor criticizing how they aren't action packed enough."

"Maybe you just haven't found your thing yet. I don't even know how this book is going to turn out. Maybe no one will read it. I doubt I'll find an agent or get it published." I say trying to make her feel better.

It is true though, writing is so competitive and my storyline is kind of lame. I wrote about Landon injuring himself, us hooking up, but he never makes it back on the field. He starts drinking out of depression and he takes it out on me. He starts hitting me and getting angry over the small stuff until I can't take the abuse anymore. I leave him becoming a major novelist, travelling the world and getting teen readers all praising me asking for sequels to all the novels I write.

I changed the names and played with details, hoping anyone who reads it doesn't associate the storyline with Landon and me. I keep the hockey assistant coach thing out because that will definitely give it away even though Landon is frustrated with his situation or me at times, he's never hit me. We did have words once or twice, but he never hit me, he did push me once and I lost my balance but he said it was an accident and the incident never repeated itself.

The doorbell distracts me, "You want me to get it?"

"Sure," she says.

I hop to the door kind of excited this party is for me. It's euphoric finally finishing a book I worked so hard on for so many months. I open the door, it's Alex and John, "Hi guys! You're early it's just Rita and me in the kitchen. There's alcohol!"

Alex grins, "No date Carrie? Are you back on the market?"

"You look nice Carrie," John interjects.

"Thanks, Landon's coming later" I reply to Alex.

"Too bad," John says quietly, barely loud enough for anyone to hear but Alex and I manage.

"Pardon," He calls out John with a growl.

"You lost your rights to her when you cheated," he says quietly to Alex, "Get the fuck over it already."

"Lover's tryst" I try lightening the mood.

They look at me like they're forgetting themselves, "Sorry," John says, "It's just a conversation we've had one too many times. Fucking guy won't move on."

"We have beer!" I try diverting.

Alex strolls to the fridge, "Why the fuck do you care if I move on anyway?" He says throwing a beer to John, "She's with Landon, she won't touch you with a ten-foot pole." He says bitterly.

"You either," he catches it popping the tab. He takes a really long drink when he knows it's not going to foam over. I'm taken aback by the conversation. I never felt so important before, or invisible.

Rita doesn't get involved, she just keeps prepping the food. Alex walks over to her and kisses forehead, "Hi," he greets.

"Hi Alex, John," she says sprinkling shredded mozzarella over the pizzas.

John looks at Rita, "Is Brandon here?"

"Came and now gone home to steal spirits from his parents liquor cabinet."

"Good man!" John says, "It takes me ages to get hammered on beer alone."

I shake my head in mock disapproval.

The door opens without the bell ringing, it's Brandon, "Hey," John and Alex greet him. "What did you get?"

He reveals a rum, gin, vodka, and a few different types of whiskey."

"Wow," John comments, "Your' parents won't notice?"

"No man, they're in Washington on business. Got plenty of time to find a way to replace."

He walks up to Rita and kisses her like a married couple, "Coach told me Minor hockey league scouts are going to be at our next game. I'm so excited."

Rita pulls away, "Isn't that tomorrow?"

Brandon pretends to be thinking, "Yup, it's tomorrow."

"Then you shouldn't be drinking," Rita nags, "It's an early game."

"I'll just chase the tail," he says.

John smiles before taking another sip of his beer that's almost gone, "She's got you whipped," he pokes fun at him.

"At least I have someone, "Brandon comes back. You're still choking your own chicken since Carrie turned you down flat at the Halloween dance?"

"Guys," I didn't like where any of this was going and they haven't started the serious drinking yet, "This party is about me completing a full-length novel, not about chickens, football or hockey, so give it a rest or leave."

"You heard the lady," John says to everyone and then winks at me.

He's already reaching into the fridge for a second cold one. I want to slow him down but it's none of my business, "Leave some for the rest of the party goers," I advise.

"I need it more than them," John says to me.

I fall right into his trap, “Why’s that?”

“Because they don’t have to watch the girl they want, fall for a washed up football player, who has no business coaching a hockey team, and he’s doing a crap job.”

I want to defend Landon by strangling John for that comment, “Where do you get off saying that about Landon, what’s he ever done to you?”

“Besides take the girl?” John’s eyes darken. I’m sort of flattered but wish he wasn’t so apparent in front of Rita. It’s kind of uncomfortable.

Rita is starting to worry, “Why don’t you guys go talk it out in private,” she suggests.

“Sure,” John storms off. I follow him, wanting to get down to the bottom of it.

We sit on the edge of Rita’s bed, none of us are willing to go first. He stares into the depths of my soul, “Is there something about Landon you haven’t shared with me, or obviously anyone else?”

I pause wondering what he’s referring to.

“He has a reputation, a history of roughing up girls. It’s never exactly enough to call him out on it, yet a couple of girls warned me that he’s rough. Has he been that way with you?”

“No,” I deny too quickly, even I can tell I’m holding something back by the way I’m acting. “Okay, we had one heated argument or two and he pushed me once, just once and he was very apologetic,” I admit.

“If he does it again, at least talk to me or someone else about it, I can be there for you, protect you if you need it. He’s generally a good guy, but I’ve heard he has a hard time controlling his temper.”

“What made you suspect he did something?” I ask John.

“The last game we were at, I heard Landon telling the coach how frustrated he gets with his progress. He said you were trying to help him but he just couldn’t do it so he pushed you off him and you hit your head. I get that he was frustrated and that accidents happen, but he told the coach he didn’t feel as bad as he should have for doing that, he’s just pent up with frustration and it’s killing him that he’s not back on the field yet.”

“Wow,” I lay back, “You heard more than he’s ever shared with me.” It makes me aware that he’s not sharing his feelings with me and he apologized without really feeling sorry.

“How’s your head,” John asks concerned.

"Better, it happened a while ago."

"Has he hurt you since?"

"No," I say honestly.

I think I said it convincingly because John says, "good. So you're okay?" He confirms.

"I think so," I tell him, "I'm not okay with what he said to the coach about not feeling sorry."

"You need to talk to him," John encourages.

"I will, thanks for letting me know," I tell John.

"I would do anything for you. I'm waiting for you."

"Don't put your life on hold like that for me. Landon isn't going anywhere soon. You should put yourself out there have a good time."

John shakes his head disapprovingly, "If he does it once he'll do it again, break up with him."

"So you are trying to snatch me up? I will not break up with Landon," I turn away from John. "I've forgiven Landon for his little temper tantrum. He was frustrated. It could happen to anyone. Part of the healing process, is getting angry, 'why me?'. He's in love with me and I'm in love with him."

"Sure," John says, but his lips are on a mission and quickly approaching mine, I don't even bother pulling away because I remember how the first kiss felt and I want to feel it again, just one more time.

I won't compare his to Landon's this time. I know I should make it like I don't want the kiss so I lightly push him off because I should, and he holds me tighter, kissing me again. I deepen the kiss, grabbing the back of his neck, wanting to swallow him. He's gorgeous.

He releases but I don't let go. I want more. My hands whisk all over him. Finally, I have to breath, so we part and I hold my lips like they are hurt or burned, "I'm warning you, I'm going to talk with Landon tonight," I tell him.

"Sure, I might just do the same," he says getting up and leaving the room. "I know you want me," he grins.

I grab his sleeve, "What are you going to say?" I panic.

"Whatever I have to so he never does that to you again."

"He won't," I reassure John, "It's been two weeks and he hasn't even come close to doing it again, I didn't even bother telling Rita."

"She should know, in case he tries, everyone should know, especially girls, he's strong, capable of a lot."

"He's not a monster," I defend Landon, "he's still my boyfriend."

John shakes his head, leaving me alone.

~~

Rita sneers at John, "You guys were gone a long time."

John starts pouring himself a whisky, there are more people scattered in the downstairs rooms of Rita's house. I'm following John, curious what he's going to say, who he's going to talk to, I should have told him to keep it a secret, maybe he knows.

John sips his whisky, "I was just making sure our mutual friend here wasn't getting any more shoves from her very lovely boyfriend Landon," he says sarcastically.

"Pardon the fuck me," Rita says angrily turning to me.

"It was nothing," I minimize, "I'll tell you about it later after the party."

"You're damn right you will," she threatens.

Alex looks at me, "What are you doing staying with Landon after he shoves you around like a piece of trash? You don't think you're worth more than that? Once is one too many times. You didn't give me a second chance after cheating on you, why are you letting him off the hook, what he's done is worse."

"No, you made love to someone else which I think it's way worse."

"Really?" John questions, "Violence of any sort is unacceptable."

"He has a point," Rita agrees.

~~

Landon doesn't appear on Rita's doorstep until almost midnight. "Carrie!" Rita screams out.

I happened to be standing right behind her, "Rita! I'm right here!"

"Sorry," she said. "Hi Landon, we were just about to present Carrie with the cake, come on in!" We go to the living room and she takes off into the kitchen. He leans down

and gives me a kiss, I hear someone clearing their throat in the room, when we pull apart, John's acting casual in the corner, his friendly reminder that I still have to confront him.

Rita returns with an enormous cake that could feed this party three times over. It's a chocolate book (my favourite) with Congratulations and my book title, "The Comeback!" Everyone claps and then Rita places the cake down on the table and Alex hands her a knife.

Landon rubs my shoulder, "Congratulations, sorry I didn't get here sooner, the game went into overtime. Is that the title of your book?"

"Yes!" I say proudly.

"It's not about, about me is it?" He asks cautiously.

"No, not at all," I hope I sound convincing and now more than ever, I hope he doesn't read it.

"When do I get a copy?" As soon as it's printed," I tell him, "It won't be for a while."

We start cutting into the cake, John hasn't been drinking as much as he did when he first got here, he slowed down, thank goodness. When there is less attention on me, I encourage Landon to follow me to a quiet area so we can talk for a few minutes.

"What's up babe, I hardly had a chance to drink a beer?" He complains.

"I was talking to someone who heard you talking to the coach. He said you told the coach you pushed me and you said you didn't feel as sorry as you should have. He also said that you've been having anger issues lately."

"I apologized for that," he said dismissively. "Who told you?" You know i've been under a lot of stress lately," he reminds me.

"You'll never do it again?" I ask.

"Never," he swears. "Who told you?"

"That other time?"

"I was just reaching for something, and you got in the way."

"Honest," I doubted it.

"Honest," he repeats. I like giving him the benefit of the doubt, so as far as I'm concerned the issue is dead in the water and John is making something small into something big.

We leave the room to rejoin the party but John is in the hallway, apparently waiting. I gave him a dirty look, warning him not to say anything he's going to regret. Landon makes the association that John's the one who told me.

John looks at both of us, "Glad you worked it all out," he says lightly, "He knows about our kiss?" John must have a death wish I think to myself. "Fuck up again, and I'm sure you will, you won't be able to recognize your own face and Carrie will be my girlfriend, you fucking hasbin."

"Don't listen to him," I advise.

"You kissed him tonight?" Landon asks.

My silence screams guilt, "How could you?" He sounds so disappointed in me.

"It didn't mean anything, he's drunk," I make excuses for John.

"No, I'm not," he denies, "I'm sober as a judge."

"How could you push her hard enough to make her hit her head and NOT be sorry?" John butts in.

"Oh fuck off John!"

Landon leaves the party and because he's somewhat incapacitated due to his injury, I am in close pursuit, "I shouldn't have kissed John, I was upset because the party was for me but your hockey game was more important."

"So that's your way of punishing me?"

"It was stupid, but I was angry when he told me that you weren't remorseful for pushing me."

"I have a lot of conflicting feelings right now, I'm messed up, physiotherapy is slow and football is everything to me. Unless you are in the same situation, you don't understand. My fucking knee is fucking up everything. Nothing is working out well and then I have this fucking asshole lingering in the sidelines looking for any reason to take you away from me."

"It was just one kiss, and yes one kiss too many, he was just telling me what he heard you say to the coach, because he's a friend."

"And you saw him at Starbucks for just a minute, but you found time to talk to him. He doesn't concentrate at the games when you're there, I catch him looking into the stands and when I follow his gaze, it's always on you. You let him kiss you, you're leading him on. If you want him just break up with me already, put me out of my

misery, so I don't have to keep looking over my shoulder being worried that one day you won't be there anymore."

"I will not leave you so don't talk stupid. The only way I will ever leave you is if you ever touch me in a physically aggressive way or cheat on me. You will never lose me to John or anyone else for that matter, because you're the one I like. Nobody else."

"I needed to hear that," he admits his eyes filling a bit. I jump into his arms and he holds me close and whispers in my ear, "I'll take you home, I can't wait until one day we have a place of our own."

"Me too," I tell him. "Am I hurting you?" I ask concerned?

"Not anymore, please don't ever kiss John again."

"Promise," I smile.

26

The game is huge, and the pressure is on. This is a step in every boys dream of becoming a famous hockey player. It is essential they do well. Several scouts are expected to be here, and only a select few will be chosen. John wisely stopped drinking hours before the end of the party, but I can't say the same for: Brandon or Alex. They were plastered beyond belief.

The boys warmed up longer for this game. Rita and I chose to go in a separate car so we could stop at Starbucks and pick up coffee and scones to bring to the game. My adrenaline is pumping and I don't have a boyfriend in hockey, but how the boys skating reflects on Landon's coaching abilities so it can potentially affect me too if I'm still with him in the long run.

Rita's really psyched for the game, "I can't wait for it to start, Brandon better skate well or he can kiss the Minor hockey league good-bye.

"As long as he tries," I say with what I feel is the right attitude to have.

"What do you mean, 'as long as he tries?' If he doesn't make it we're finished. I'm not wasting my time with a nobody!"

"Don't you think you're being a little harsh?" I can't help thinking to myself, *who is she? She's no major athlete, or talented in anything in particular. Who is she to dump someone because they aren't chosen to go to the next level.* "I hope you didn't tell Brandon that, he has enough pressure on him right now without you adding any."

"Sure did," she sips her Starbucks. "I'm not under-marrying like you hear tons of girls do. I want a seven digit man, and If I have to date every Minor hockey league'r until I land a Major hockey league'r than I will. I was going to tell you, you should stop wasting your time with Landon, from what John, Alex, and Brandon tell me, he's washed up and football doesn't pay as well as Hockey."

I bite my delicious scone, "I don't need a seven digit man like you do, I'm happy with a low six digit combined income as long as I'm happy and the person I'm in love with, loves me back. I still want to be a physiotherapist."

"Even after everything you've seen Landon go through?"

"More than ever," I say supportively. "I'm not sure how this whole writing business is going to work out. Will the editor and chief said he would revise my book for me, I approve his changes and then he will act as my agent and try to find a publisher."

"He's done a lot for you, what does he get out of it?"

"I don't know."

The Zamboni pulls into his spot and the assistant scrapes the excess snow off the ice before the door closes. The referee's step onto the perfect looking ice. They go to the score keeper and then approach both coaches. After a minute or two, they open the doors for the players who step on the ice for the game warm-up. It's quite surprising, there's twice the number of people here today than there normally is. Tension fills the air. Everyone is sitting in their perspective home visitor side, so many of the faces surrounding us are familiar but we're too focussed on the players to pay attention to anyone. Brandon and Alex wave, John's in his own world. I make a conscious effort not to watch him because I now know that Landon watches John watch me, so I can't look in his direction or Landon will suspect I like him more than I do, which is just as a friend. "When will they find out if they've been picked?" I ask.

She doesn't take her eyes off Brandon, "They find out at a gala type event one town over at the end of the month. Landon didn't invite you?"

"He didn't mention it. Hey, wait, that's tomorrow!" I realize.

"You're right, at least we won't be left waiting in suspense."

"What if Landon doesn't invite me? Will I still be able to go? Does it cost anything?"

"No the league is paying for it. Don't worry I'm sure Alex will take you if Landon doesn't ask."

The players take their positions and the referee blows his whistle. We are now on the edge of our seats in anticipation hoping one or all three of the boys will score. Ten minutes into the game John is cross checked into the boards, Brandon retaliates and then gloves come off. Brandon throws the first punch and to his misfortune draws blood. He's slammed with a five minute penalty for fighting, and Alex skates by him with a sneer.

Rita is half out of her seat, "Stupid idiot. John can fight his own battles. What's he thinking!" She says to me.

"Some people get paid to stand up for their strong players, so the strong player doesn't get hurt." I explain.

“Brandon is supposed to BE the strong player,” she says with disappointment in her voice. “He better start smartening up. I hope Landon is useful and talks sense into him when he gets back on the bench.”

“He’s always useful,” I defend.

She shakes her head in disagreement.

“So you’re siding with the boys that Landon is washed up?”

“I didn’t say it,” Rita says.

“Buy you’re thinking it?” I tell her.

“It’s written all over the wall, kind of hard to ignore.” She explains.

We pray they kill the penalty, but it bites us, and the opposing team is now leading 1:0.

We break before the second period. I decide to head out to the snack bar and get some popcorn, nothing better to eat at a game than popcorn. When I return, the game is already back on and we’re tied. “Who scored?” I ask eagerly.

“John,” she moped. “Alex got the assist.”

“Well at least we’re tied!” I see the cup half full.

“Brandon better do something before it’s too late,” Rita says.

I start chomping down on my popcorn when everyone jumps up screaming and I almost spill it, “What happened?” I gasp.

“John scored again!” I look out onto the ice and he’s waving his stick in the air and his left leg is dangling in excitement.

He’s pumped, I wouldn’t be surprised if he scores again and gets a hat trick. He’s never played better. He wants it more than any player on the ice, “John’s going to make the Minor hockey league for sure.”

“Well that asshole broke up with me, so he better not be the only one who gets into the Minor hockey league.” Rita hisses.

“I don’t know much about hockey, but from the looks of it, John’s the only one standing out right now, I could be wrong.”

The third period clinches it, John gets his third goal and we win 3:1.

“Alex gets two assists,” merely a shadow in John’s limelight.

I don’t ever think I’ve ever seen Rita as mad as she is tonight. She drives with a led foot to the Paddock where we were expected to meet the guys for drinks after the game. We easily beat them and pick our table. It sucks that we aren’t old enough to drink

alcohol in public so we wait for them to show up and suggest going back to Rita's to polish off the rest of the booze from the party. Everyone is in agreement, so we go back to her place and make ourselves comfortable in her living room after we help ourself to the spirits.

Alex, John, Landon, and Brandon come in stoked! Rita glares at Brandon, I mean she's staring daggers at him, "What are YOU so happy about she asks Brandon."

He looks at her completely dumbfounded, "What are you talking about? We won, and Alex got two assists, John got a hat trick, the game was awesome."

"You're dumber than a stick of gum," she acts shocked. "This game was make or break you. You had scouts from several Minor hockey leagues here today. You had to stand out among your peers, skate the best you've ever skated if you wanted to get picked. You are way less likely to get into the Major hockey league if you don't get into the Minor hockey league first. You might as well have just put the spotlight on John and John alone."

Brandon gets mad at her, "It was a great game, John just had the skate of his life. They fist bumped each other and chugged. "You're so emotional," he complains, "is it that time of month for you?"

"I'll give you time of month," she threatens Brandon. Alex who's closest to Rita holds her back to give him a head start.

I'm peaking through one eye at them while snogging Landon. When we finish kissing, everyone's gone.

"Where did everyone go?" Asks Landon.

"We're in here, it's too hot out there," Alex says referring to where we are. "It sucks being single," he complains.

"You should have kept it in your pants," I tease, completely over him.

"I told you asswipe, it's time to move on," John says to Alex.

"There's nobody to move on to! Alex complains. "Brandon's already got the only other girl I'd ever considered going out with, (referring to Rita)" He must realize he shouldn't have said that because he sticks a bottle in his mouth.

John looks at Alex perplexed, "You want to go out with someone who's meaner than the coach?"

OMG he didn't just fry Rita, he fricassee'd her. I couldn't help it, I start laughing into Landon's mouth, it's the funniest thing anyone's ever said about her.

"Thanks for defending me," Rita's thunders.

"If you only heard what she said at the game!" I snark her out.

Brandon returns into the living room, "What did she say?"

I smile thinking I shouldn't have said anything, "Just that she needs a seven digit man in her life, and Minor hockey league won't cut it."

He looks at her like 'did you really say that'? She blushes her signature look of guilt.

He faces off, "Nobody except me will ever go out with you from our hockey team after I'm done with you," He tells her.

"Is that a warning?" She asks.

"No, it's our unspoken code of conduct. If a guy has it in for a girl, no other guy on the team can go for that girl."

Rita argues the code, "Then why did you get involved with me, I was with John first."

"Okay, don't feel bad Rita, but you were just a nighter to John that doesn't count," Brandon explains.

"A Nighter?" She asks Brandon not understanding.

His expression to the other guys is like what did I get myself into as he's explaining the code, "Ya, you were just a nighter to John, a one nighter, so he had no hold on you.

"What about what Alex did to Carrie, how do you explain that?" Rita asks.

"Other than being a complete idiot? You mean when Alex cheated on Carrie?" Asks Brandon. "Okay, don't get mad, but that's normal." He explains.

"What do you mean normal," I jump in.

"Hockey players cheat, it's expected, Normal. I thought you knew that. Hockey players are never exclusive. If you marry one, don't expect them to be monogamous. They are never home and they have needs. Some hockey players have several girlfriends in different towns, like truckers. Unwritten hockey code of ethics," he grins.

"Brandon, you are truly a dirtbag," I announce to everyone.

He looks over smiling proudly to Landon, "Come on bud help me out here, it's true for football too right?"

Landon shakes his head, "You never share the code with girls Brandon, it's like cutting off your nose despite your face."

Brandon walks up to Rita, “No one ever humiliates me in front of the guys whether I play the best or the worst game of my life, you got that,” he threatens her before storming off.

Rita’s eyes fill with tears, “Just leave him,” John advises, “He’ll get over it”. I think why does she want him to get over it, he’s a dirtbag but I don’t push my opinions, she can come to her own conclusions. We cut our celebration short after the mood plummeted.

27

Rita calls me the next morning:

“Is he still taking you to the gala?” I ask after last night’s fight, I’m not sure.

“Of course” she says. I could see her smile through her tone of voice if that’s even possible. “Brandon was just acting like a player for the boy’s sake. He told me how special I am when everyone left. He has to keep up his tough guy persona”

I want to pummel her for forgiving him so easily. “What are you wearing to the Gala, are you dressing up?” I ask. I don’t want to dress at odds with what she’s wearing.

“Did you get invited yet?” she drips sarcasm.

“No, but I think Landon just forgot to invite me.” I make an excuse for him.

“How do you forget to invite your girlfriend to a Gala. You should call him up and find out if he’s taking you.”

“Maybe you’re right, I should.” I say now on a mission.

We get off the phone and I call him right away. He answers on the third ring. “Good morning handsome,” I butter him up.

“Hello Carrie,” he says sounding groggy.

“Did I wake you?” I ask feigning concern.

“No, just relaxing, what’s up?” He asks.

“I was just wondering if we’re going to the Gala tonight? You haven’t mentioned it.”

He groans, “Sorry, I can’t. I promised my mom I’d take her to bingo tonight, we go once a month.”

“Bingo?” I say in disbelief.

“Bingo,” he repeats.

“Are you kidding me?”

“She’s my mother, and it’s not a football gala, to be honest I’d rather have my teeth pulled then sit there all night and see other people get awards for a sport that I’m only involved in until I get better.”

“Wow,” I’m shocked, “So do you mind if I go with someone else?”

"Be my guest, as long as it's not your ex-boyfriend Alex."

"That leaves John," I say under my breath.

"Then go with John," he says dismissively.

"You're not worried?" I ask, thinking about his crush, and how he kissed me not too long ago. I would think the concern would be less for Alex than John.

"No, you promised you would never kiss him again, and I trust you," he explains.

I like that he trusts me, that's great. Do I trust myself is another question, "That's great," I say in response. There's a pause in conversations, "So I guess I'll see you tomorrow?"

"Sure," he says pleasantly, "text me if any of the guys get called up to the Minor hockey league and by who."

"Sure," I say.

I get off the phone with him and instead of being disappointed, I'm sort of excited he's not taking me. I decide to text Rita first.

Me: Landon's not going to the gala. He's taking his mom to Bingo, he says he'd rather have his teeth pulled.

Rita: Wow, what are you going to do.

Me: He doesn't want me going with Alex because he's my ex, so that leaves John, he's okay with me going with John. You don't mind do you?

Rita: After being called a nighter? You can have him.

Me: John it is then, I can't go alone, I don't even have an invitation.

Me: Hi John, how's it going?

John: Hi Carrie. Landon isn't taking you?

Me: No He's taking his mom to Bingo, ridiculous, he spoke to you?

John: More like threatened.

Me: Threatened?

John: You better not touch her, Do you want to be my date?

Me: I'd love to thanks! I can't believe he's not going.

John: You and me both, especially after he helped us so much this season.

Me: His loss. What time should I be ready?

John: It starts at Seven, I'll be there quarter to.

Me: Sure, that's great thanks.

John: My pleasure.

~~

The doorbell rings, I wait. I don't want to appear eager and give him the wrong impression. Eventually I open it and it's just John, he's wearing a suit and cleans up way to well, "You picked me up first?" I ask.

"Rita and Brandon are going with Alex."

"That's weird," I comment.

John smiles, "I think Brandon's afraid to be alone with Rita."

I chuckle. We walk to the car and he opens the door for me. It feels like a date but it shouldn't. He gets in the car and there's an uncomfortable silence. I tell myself it will feel more normal when we arrive at the venue, "Can I put some music on," I cut through the weird vibe.

"Sure," he says. "I'd like that."

I leave it on the radio station he's already tuned into and 'I Put A Spell On You,' comes on. "You must be excited about tonight," I try making conversation.

"Sure am," he agrees, "It's not everyday you agree to go out on a date with me."

I laugh, "You know what I mean, I'm referring to the possibility of you moving up to the Minor hockey league.

"That's just a bonus," he blushes and looks away from me shyly.

The banquet parking lot is full, "There's a lot of cars," I observe.

"It's for hopefuls all over Ontario," John explains.

"Oh!"

We walk in and John presents two tickets, to the lady at the greeting table. She asks him his names and then tells us we've been placed at table two. "Are we going to be sitting together?" I ask concerned.

"Ya, our team has two tables." I'm totally relieved it won't just be me and John. Alex is sitting on the other side of Brandon. The hall is crowded and loud. The carpet is Grey and the Chiavari chairs are silver. Ornaments and decorations are silver and leafy, it's really pretty. We find our table and see that Rita and Brandon have saved us seats.

"Hi guys!" I say excited taking a sit next to Rita.

"It's about time you guys are here, there must have been three or four different couples who've asked us if they could sit in these seats."

"Well I'm glad you saved them for us!" I say. A person approaches Rita and myself with two pitchers of water. We shift so he can place one down on the table and then he goes to the other side of the round table and places the other one down. The noise level is high and the ceremony hasn't really began yet.

"You look beautiful," I gush to Rita. She smiles knowingly, making me wish I didn't bother complimenting her.

"So do you," she replies only out of courtesy, you can tell by her tone she said it because she felt like she had to. I can't help but wonder what's up with her.

"Are you okay," I ask.

"We're still sort of fighting," she explained. "I'm sorry, you really do look great, I'm just in a bad mood, he got me angry a few minutes ago in the parking lot. He's accusing me of not respecting him."

"You were hard on him," I whisper but just as I say that there is a sudden hush in the crowd and I sound a lot louder than I intended to. The lights dim and I'm frustrated because I know everybody at the table heard. I mouth sorry to Rita, knowing she knows it was a complete accident. She waves her hand like don't worry about it.

The MC introduces himself and congratulates the players on an amazing season. He then discusses the advantages for playing for the Minor hockey league and how it doesn't necessarily guarantee you a spot on the Major hockey league but it's a great stepping stone. A special congratulations is made to everyone for making it this far and that even if your name isn't called up this year, it doesn't mean the scouts don't have their eye on you, and there's still a chance the following year to be called up. Then he lost my attention and I started people gazing out of boredom while I waited for them to serve the first course.

"Bored?" John whispers.

"A bit, you caught me," I admit.

We get five or so leafs surrounding half a tomato. Wow. I'm starving and they consider this a course? I bite into the tomato and I'm pleasantly surprised how good it tastes, "This is delicious!" I tell Rita.

"Do you want mine?" she offers. "I don't like the middle layer of cheese."

"Sure," I gladly snatch it up.

John notices and without saying anything, he scoops his onto my dish, "If you're offering," I snicker. I savour every bite, it's the best tomato I've ever had in my entire life.

"You really like that," John watches me as I close my mouth and roll it over my tongue.

"Oh ya." I say.

The MC takes to the stage again, "Ladies and gentleman, I won't make you wait any longer."

Come to think of it, I know I would be dying with suspense if I was one of the players.

The MC continues, "I will now announce the players who have been called up and their perspective Minor hockey league teams. If I can have Brandon and Alex from the Grimsby hockey team please come up to the stage," Rita's practically jumping from her seat in excitement. They arrive on stage and the MC passes them envelopes and blank jerseys and shakes their hands, "Gentlemen, you've been selected for the Niagara hockey team, congratulations!"

They both smile and take turns shaking his hand before leaving the stage and returning to our table. Rita's all excited and congratulating both of them before slobbering all over Brandon saying, "See! I told you you would make it!" I'm starting to lose my appetite for the main course. Partially because of the way Rita's acting and because John hasn't been called up, maybe he wasn't picked.

The MC drones on and more people go up. Rita realizes that John hasn't been called and looks over at him, "Maybe next year!" she gushes like it's not a big deal as long as Brandon makes it.

She turns back to Brandon and Alex but now I look at John, "He's not finished yet," I say full of hope. We continue to pay attention to the MC while Rita chats loudly enough to get stares from other people about how rude she's being. I grab John's hand for support, only for support.

He squeezes it. "And Lastly," the MC continues, I would like to comment on a player from the Grimsby team who didn't make the Minor hockey league." I notice John's shoulders drop in disappointment, "John can you please stand," John drops my hand and stands confused as to what's happening, "You must be wondering why you weren't chosen for the Minor hockey league," he starts glancing around the room at the

other players and continues, "I should explain for those of you who didn't see his last game, John managed to score a hat trick that the scouts had to be blind to miss, it was probably one of the most exciting games I've ever personally watched. Come on up here John, bring your date."

John waits for me to stand, takes my hand and we walk up on stage.

The MC continues, "I know I would have offered you a spot John. Yet you haven't been called up to the Minor hockey league and it's a travesty, for that I'm so sorry John, it makes me hate being the barer of bad news." People in the crowd start booing on his behalf, but I'm guessing he's working up to something bigger and better.

The MC reaches for something underneath the podium that only John and I see. He passes what he's reached for to John and gives him an envelope. John unfolds the blue Jersey for all to see and suddenly everyone is on their feet cheering, hooting, and hollering, almost uncontrollably, deafening. "John, you have been chosen to skate for the Ice Rats! Congratulations. Your hard work, and leadership has put you ahead of all others, inside this envelope is an offer of employment with a very generous salary for a rookie Semi-professional hockey player. Pandemonium continues for a few more minutes and I find myself crying with joy for him. He kept his cool, shaking the MC's hand and thanking him before humbly taking mine and leading us off the stage.

When he gets back to the table, he takes me into his arms and kisses me hard on the lips, I can hear from the next table, "Check it out! He's kissing the assistant coaches girlfriend! After the kiss I send the text Landon's probably waiting for:

Me: Hi Landon, hope you're enjoying bingo. Alex and Brandon got Niagara, John the Toronto Ice Rats.. Semi-professional hockey!

Rita asks John, "What's the difference between the Minor hockey league and what John got?"

Brandon rolls his eyes, "50K"

John explains, "Minor hockey league is playing for Canada Hockey League, and the Semi-professional hockey is the US Hockey League. The US pays a salary and players are more likely to make it to major league hockey, whereas the Minor hockey league you play for the love of the sport, no money but you still have a chance of the Major league hockey, just less of one."

Rita's happiness becomes clouded. It looks good on her. You can tell Alex and Brandon picked up on it too, they are pleased with getting into Niagara but not pleased with Rita, it's obvious.

Landon's another disappointment, he should have been here tonight. He had a hand in helping these guys make it, he should have been here to cheer them on, his lack of support is just absolutely dumbfounding to me. Between him and Rita, I don't know who's worse. I look at John and apologize for Landon on his behalf. I tell John he sure missed out on a helluva evening.

"You're here, that's what matters," John told me. That made my night.

28

The dinner at the gala went by quickly after the announcements were made. An area is cleared for dancing when Rita all but shouts in my ear, "The boys want to drink at my house, are you good to leave?"

"Let me ask John," I partially shout back over the music. I look at John, "Do you want to go?"

He gets up indicating he does. We say good-bye to the rest of their teammates and then walk out in a line for the door. We step outside and it's dark and the night air is cool. The sound diminishes and I take a deep breath in, I'm glad to be out here.

"Do you want to come with us or go with John?" Rita offers.

"I'll stay with John." I tell her. "John you don't mind driving me home do you? I'm kind of beat."

"Sure," he says.

She looks over at me disappointed, "Your not coming? The night is still young," she pleads.

"I'm really not in the mood," I tell her. "She sort of irritated me the entire night. I wanted to get away from her for a while before I spoke my mind."

We hug and she gave me a peck on the cheek.

I glance at Alex and Brandon, "Congratulations again guys," I say as we start walking in different directions.

We arrive at John's car and he gets my door for me, "Thanks," I say quietly before we get into the car and buckle up. He doesn't start it right away. "Rita's a real piece of work," he complains.

"She was so rude to Brandon until he got called up," I agree.

"I had a narrow escape," he confides in me.

"You did," I chuckle, "just the sucky thing and please don't take offence to me saying this, but I think you went too far with her before you did."

"We got carried away," he explained. "The second I realized I didn't have the feelings for her, I ended it."

"Well that's definitely better than leading her on I agree."

He starts the engine and begins driving me home. "I'm so happy for you getting called up. The MC really had everyone going."

"Except you?" he asks.

"I kind of thought he was leading up to something but I wasn't sure. At one point I was convinced you weren't called up at all and I felt so bad for you. I could see the disappointment in your shoulders."

"It was one of the worst feelings I ever had in my life," he admits.

"And then when you found out you were being called up?"

"The second best feeling I've ever had in my life."

I'm surprised it wasn't the first, "What was the first?" I ask.

"Kissing you," he says quietly. The Plexiglas is gone and he's taken my heart in his skilled hockey trained hands and he's shaken it back to life. I sit next to him and replay 'kissing you' in my head two or maybe three more times and I feel new warm blood circulating through my veins and this so isn't good. I have to be careful. "Are you okay?" he asks noticing my silence, "do you have a headache?"

He starts the car and begins driving.

"No my head is fine," I tell him and in a few minutes he's pulling up into my driveway. He shuts the car off indicating he still wants to talk. I'm not rushing out of his car to lie alone in my bed. I try to divert the conversation though because there is a whisper in the back of my head, and I mean the whisper so faint telling me to be good, but I can literally ignore it considering Landon couldn't even be bothered coming tonight, I should not go there with John, it's not doing anyone good. "Does a part of you wish you were called up to the same team as Brandon and Alex?"

"No," he says honestly, "we'll still see each other and I can use the money, also I think I'll train harder when they aren't with me."

"Probably," I agree.

"Are you mad at Landon for not coming tonight?" He asks.

"A hair under furious," I admit.

That's when John places his hand over mine, "Don't be."

We face each other and I'm taken aback by what he just said, "You're defending him?"

"It's been a long time, and he's only just started getting ready to play again, you can't blame him for not wanting to see a bunch of other guys reach their goals while he's held back from his, even if it is a different sport."

"Trust me, I was pretty cool about it, I just hope he's cool with me when I need him to be."

"Sounds like there's something you're not saying," he picks up intuitively.

"Let's just say, I hope he doesn't read my book." I grin mischievously.

"What did you do?" John stares at me, his eyes are dark, but have a glow to them.

"I wrote about him in my book, I changed the names obviously but if or when he reads it, he's going to know. I'm scared he's going to break up with me when he realizes it, to be honest with you."

"Don't be scared, he should have gone with you tonight, it's inexcusable," John calls Landon out on it and then he thrashes my world with a kiss that makes my head explode. I'm not expecting it, and I gasp into his mouth and he unimaginably deepens the kiss. I throw caution to the wind and I literally struggle to get on top of him so I sit on him facing the back of the car as we continue to kiss. He tilts the wheel and pushes back the seat making more room for me and when I land on his lap it's firm and I frantically run my fingers through his short hair roughly pulling his head closer to mine. I gasp for a bit of air, because I'd rather have a build up of carbon dioxide than pull away from him and then with unbelievable self-restraint he grabs both sides of my waist and moves me back to my side of the car, "We can't," he struggles to say. "I promised Landon, I'd stay away from you. I shouldn't have kissed you in the first place, even when I was excited, it was selfish."

I'm trying to calm down at this point, "Did it still feel better to you than hearing you made it to the Ice Rats," I ask.

"Most definitely," he says quietly.

I close my eyes to savour his words, and then I'm suddenly filled with dread, "How long's that car been sitting there?" I ask.

"What car?" he asks looking around and then spotting the car I'm talking about a short distance from us with its lights out. "I don't know. Is it?"

"Oh My God, for sure it's Landon," I tell him. "What are we going to do? Did he see us?"

“Yes,” John says, “act casual and go inside the house, don’t make eye contact with the car. I’ll take care of it. I’ll text you.” He tells me.

“Oh my God, I hope he doesn’t hurt you. Congratulations I creak at him before leaving the car,” I’m shit baked. I get out and casually walk toward the house, my heart is pounding. They get out of their cars and talk in the street. It’s a good thirty minutes before both of them drive off. I wait anxiously for John’s text.

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I wait up with anticipation for the text. It takes nineteen long treacherous minutes, from the time they left.

John: He saw us kiss and he's mad, really mad. I told him I initiated it because I was excited, that it didn't mean anything. If he lays one finger on you, so help me.

Me: He won't I say confidently. He's not like that.

The next morning I text Rita:

Me: You'll never believe what happened last night!

Rita: I'm so hung over. Don't keep me in suspense just tell me.

Me: John and I were having a friendly chat, and he kissed me.

Rita: That's happened before. You know you have a boyfriend.

Me: He started it, not me. My BOYFRIEND was spying on us in a car down the street.

Rita: Now you're story is interesting, so then what happened.

Me: John told me to go in the house, that he'd deal with it.

Rita; And did he?

Me: They were outside my house for like thirty minutes last night. They weren't yelling or anything. John texted me that Landon's really mad but he told Landon that he initiated the kiss out of excitement from the evening and it wasn't my fault.

Rita: How chivalrous.

Me: Oh My God, I'm totally expecting the shit to hit the fan. This is the quiet before the storm.

Ding Dong

Rita: Is that your doorbell?

Me: Yes.

Rita: There's your storm. Let me know what happens.

I looked out my window, she's right, Landon is standing there patiently. I called down from the window, "I'm just getting changed, I'll be right down." I run around the room getting dressed. I wish I had time to shower but that's delaying the inevitable. I don't know what I'm going to say to him, but I'm fully expecting him to break up with me.

I open the door and the first words spill out of my mouth with no thought, "I'm so sorry."

"Were you going tell me?" He asks.

"Absolutely not, because it didn't mean anything," I say honestly. "I would have kept it a secret if we hadn't seen you last night. No point in hurting you, it was just a kiss."

"Will you ever do it again?" He asks. I get the feeling he's not going to break up with me.

"Probably not." I again am way to honest for my own good.

"Probably? What the fuck is probably," he asks.

"With all due respect I don't want to promise you something I can't carry out. I was really disappointed you chose Bingo over going to the gala with me. You should have considered my feelings and attended anyway, no matter how difficult it would have been for you to watch. I didn't initiate the kiss but that doesn't mean that I didn't enjoy it. It was way more heated and affectionate than yours. You haven't kissed me like that since immediately after your injury. It's like someone let the air out of your sail, have you given up?"

Seriously, you went to bingo with your mother instead of dressing up and proudly carrying me on your arm. Do I intend to be loyal to you? Is there a hockey and football girlfriend code of ethics that say I have to be if you aren't planning on it?"

"I have been loyal." He tells me unconvincingly I can hear it in his voice, and the honesty doesn't reach his eyes, they're shifty. I question it completely with nothing to substantiate it.

"Tell the truth," I growl so out of my character, "Who have you cheated on me with?"

"Nobody," he denies.

"Bullshit!" I persist. "You've grown distant from me, who the fuck is it?" I demand.

"I'm not telling you who," he unintentionally confesses.

"So you DID cheat on me and now you're protecting her?"

"I guess so if you're going to be such a bitch!" he growls.

"Your double standard is bullshit and if I didn't just assume that you cheated on me too, and on the fly, might I add, I never would have known your stupid shit. We are so finished, but don't worry, I'm more than happy to send you a copy of my book."

"You were never around, always writing," he explains. "You weren't spending any time with me anymore. I spent more time with her than I did with you." He blurts.

"Should I feel sorry for you? You don't have to tell me, I think I already know, was it Tony?" I stab in the dark.

He shakes his head miserably, I hit the nail.

"How far," I ask, because I like self-torture.

"A lot further than you and John," he rubs salt in it. I want to slap his self-righteous face off his block but I don't lower myself to doing it.

"And you have the nerve to come here and hash it out with me?"

"Let's redo," he suggests questionably desperately. "It's not too late to save us."

"There's no redo." I tell him, "just recover."

We don't make it off the doorstep, our relationship is over. I need to call Rita so badly. I start walking away from him.

"Where are you going?" He calls out.

"To Rita's," I tell him.

"Let me at least drive you," he says.

"It's okay," I tell him. "I'll walk."

"Get in the car," he orders.

I relent.

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"Thanks," I say miserably as I reach for the door handle to get out of the car.

"Wait," he pleads. I fall back against the chair, "I'm so sorry. I made it sound worse than it was, it meant nothing to either of us."

"That's worse," I tell him, "You sacrificed us for nothing."

"I exaggerated. It happened a few times, she has a boyfriend."

"I don't want to hear anymore, we're irreparable," I tell him. Weirdly, I'm now at peace with what John and I did because what Landon did was far worse. I get out of the car and ring Rita's doorbell. She answers poking her head out. She's in her PJ's. She lets me in and closes the door behind me.

Rita looks at me, "Are you okay?" She asks concerned.

I follow her upstairs flopping onto her bed, "We broke up."

"What happened," Rita stays next to me, waiting until I'm ready to tell her. The floodgates open and I start crying, "We talked about the kiss he saw. I admitted to Landon that he doesn't kiss me the way he used to and that John's was more passionate. He asked me if I would ever do that again, and I said probably. Why should I stay loyal if apparently football and hockey players have their own code of ethics regarding relationships, it's a double standard."

"True," she agrees.

"Then I picked up signs in the way he answered me, thinking about the code and his eye contact that maybe he cheated on me too but wasn't telling me, so on the fly I accused him not even suspecting he was."

"Oh my," Rita says more to herself.

"He admitted, he's been with Tony even though she has a boyfriend."

"Tony?" Rita asks.

"His physiotherapist."

"Wow," she says in disbelief.

"Oh ya, but he said it didn't mean anything and it happened only a few times."

"Wow," she repeats.

"I broke up with him for good, told him it's irreparable. Is it me?" I sob. "This is the second whose cheated on me."

She wipes my tears away, "Of course not!" she says angrily. "They're a bunch of jerks. Maybe they all cheat, seems that way so far!"

"I don't want to have anything to do with an athlete ever again, I don't want to even consider going out with any guy for a long time!" I'm swearing off men.

"Good for you," she encourages. "Just think about it, John threw me away like garbage, Alex and Landon cheated on you. The only half decent one so far that we know of is Brandon."

"Hopefully he's not like the rest of them," I say for her sake, but I doubt he's any different.

I cry until my cheeks are hot and then fall asleep on Rita's bed.

31

I never should have written about Landon because if my book makes it, I will have to live, eat, sleep, drink his storyline like a horrid nightmare. Will the editor and chief sent my manuscript directly to four or five online publishers, acting as my agent. It's not on the up and up, but nobody needs to know. I have two responses that I'm scared to open. I decide to forward them to Will and when he writes me back, I'll read that instead. I know it's weird but his letter will either say congratulations or sorry and I think it will be easier to read coming from him. I'm expecting multiple rejections, I plan on framing my first one for keepsake.

My life has changed in the eighteen hours since we broke up. I eat and sleep less, and I've made a huge decision, I'm going to write a new novel. In my second novel, I'm going to hook up with John and he's going to become a major league hockey player. He's going to play for the Major hockey league. I'm going to have six published novels because it's a round number that I like and I'm going to have two children by him and we're going to live in a warm climate. I'll squeeze some obstacle in there like maybe our baby is stolen by a jealous ex-girlfriend who wishes they were with him for his money, kind of like Rita, but I will win in the end. John and I will live happily ever after, and that code of conduct will not exist in my book, he will be loving and loyal, the perfect husband.

There's no chance of it happening because I'm never going to trust dating an athlete who plays hockey or football for that matter. Rita is happy with Brandon so she won't be jealous of anyone going out with John anymore, because she's not carrying a flame for him. This storyline I think is safe to write. I sit at my computer for a while but the words don't come so I throw in the proverbial keyboard and sulk on my bed, shutting my phone off. I don't want to talk to anyone. Luckily mom's at work and the house is clean so I can't even see a reason for her to call me except to see how I'm doing. She has a new boyfriend, the first since dad left, so I'm happy for her. She won't introduce me though, she's worried how I'll react, constantly reassuring me he won't replace my father. I tell her to feel free to replace him if she likes.

When I'm feeling sorry for myself, I get up and have a shower and then go back to bed staring at the ceiling. He cheated on me with Tony. Of all people in the entire world,

he picks his physiotherapist, or did she pick him? She's older I'm sure, but I don't know by how much. I try to picture them kissing, and just the thought of it nauseates me. He was starting to act distant with me and I didn't notice. It's amazing how hindsight is 20/20 as they say. It must have been all the attention I paid to my writing.

Writing is the only thing in my life, I feel I have complete control over. I create the story, characters, and timeline and only I know how they're going to react to any given situation. When you read me, you are entering into my imagination, it's the ultimate act of intimacy. Eighteen cooped up hours in my room turned to twenty-four to thirty-six. Finally, my mom gets frustrated and pounds on the door, "There's a call for you, someone from the paper."

"Okay," I say. I get up feeling stiff, my hair is greasy now, and I haven't really stepped outside for a while.

Mom opens my door and I walk passed her to get the phone.

"Hello?"

"Carrie! Where've you been? I've been trying to get a hold of you for two days now, the publishers want answers. You have two offers on the table."

"Can you please repeat what you said and way slower? I can't process it."

He chuckles, "You haven't even read the emails that you forwarded to me?"

"The rejections? No, I've had some personal problems I've been dealing with, a crises brought on by my writing in the first place," I chose not to elaborate further.

"It's unprecedented, two offers when we've only sent out five manuscripts. You definitely are going to have a career in writing."

"Thanks to you," I smile for the first time in three days. "I never would have considered becoming a writer if it wasn't for you. Are they good offers? I heard there are a lot of publishers that take advantage of writers."

"These ones are definitely reputable," he says.

"Paper or online?" I ask.

"Both."

"Royalties?"

"Competitive."

"Which one do you think I should go with?" I ask his advice knowing he has my best interests at heart.

"I don't want to influence your decision, just read the emails and let me know which one you want to go with."

"The third?" I ask.

"Rejection, but two out of three is amazing."

"I'm going to frame my first rejection and my first offer," I inform him. "I'll get back to you tonight. Thanks!"

I hang up the phone and jump up and down with excitement, "Mom! Mom! My book is getting published!"

"That's great honey!" She hugs me, "We should go out and celebrate!"

"I'd like to mom, there isn't anyone I'd rather be with more than you," I say sincerely. "We've been through so much together."

I text Rita the news but she must be busy because she doesn't get back to me. Her and Brandon are either out having fun or fighting like cats and dogs.

I call out to mom, "Mom? Can I take the car? I want to pick up a tea."

"Sure, I was really starting to worry about you," she admits. "I'm glad you're feeling better."

"You don't need too worry anymore, I'll be fine" I say confidently. "I have some contracts to review!"

32

I'm halfway through the second contract when there's a knock at the door. Mom's out and I'm not expecting anyone. I contemplate not answering it, but something makes me. I slowly make my way to the door mainly out of curiosity. It's probably Rita. I swing it open and it's two uniformed police officers. I don't have time to think or guess why they're there. One of the two say, "Hello are you Carrie?"

"Yes," I say opening the door.

They carefully step in and glance around, "You might want to sit down," the other officer suggests pointing towards the sofa in our living room.

Suddenly butterflies are nose diving in my gut. Could this be about Rita, no it has to be about mom. This can't be good. I rush to sit down, "What?"

"She," the first officer starts. "Your mother,"

"Was in an accident," the second officer finishes.

"It was immediate, she was alone in the car," I want to scream, tell them they have to be wrong.

"Fuck off! Get out of our house," I yell. "This shit happens in movies not here not now, it can't be."

The first officer remains calm, "How old are you Carrie?"

"Eighteen."

The second officer says, "Do you have a purse or keys to the house. We can take you to the hospital to see your mom," he offers.

Hot tears are streaming down my face, "Dead?"

"Yes, but that's only if you want," the second officer says, and then we need to bring you to your closest relative.

"Your father," the first officer informs me.

"He's dead, he died when I was a toddler." I tell him.

"The officer shakes his head confused, "No, we have him living a few streets over, close to the school."

"Absolutely not," I say confidently, "mom told me he's dead. I haven't seen him since I was three, she never remarried."

Now both officers appear to be walking on eggshells, “Is your father’s name Bill Anderson?”

“Yes,” I confirm.

“He’s very much alive then,” the officer is relieved he’s correct. He starts putting things together for me, “maybe it was easier for your mother to say he was dead instead of telling you that he’s remarried with a new family practically living in your own backyard?”

“So, your making me go live with a virtual stranger?” I ask.

“He’s your biological father, the rest of your mother’s side resides in the states. You would lose your school year. If you want to live with your mother’s sister, you will have to get your father to arrange it.”

“What about the house?” It’s so surreal for me.

“The law will govern your mom’s estate and it will go to you, someone will be appointed until you’re 21.”

I get up and look for my keys, they’re where I always keep them. Moms aren’t there, “The car?”

“Unrecognizable,” the first officer answers. Insurance will contact whoever’s appointed.

I can’t talk anymore. I excuse myself for a minute to freshen up and then I’m escorted to the back of a cop car. I forgot my phone. “My phone, my clothes.”

The second officer looks in the rearview at me, “We’ll drop you off to pack a bag before we take you to your dads.”

“Does he know?” I ask.

“We’ve contacted him, he’s getting a room ready for you.” The nose dives get worse as we get closer to the hospital.

“Where is she?” I ask cautiously.

“She’s still in emergency. We thought it would be easier for you.” The officer says. *(I’m assuming the other option was the morgue.)*

“Thanks,” I manage.

The officers bring me to a room, slowly opening the door. The room has a stretcher and on it was a white sheet that covers mom.”

As soon as the nurse removes the sheet revealing her I break down, wailing. A doctor comes into the room looking apologetic, "We can offer her sedation to calm her down." He's talking about me to the officers.

The police officer shakes his head, "I don't think it's a good idea right now, we have to bring her home to pack and then she has to go to her fathers. Can you give us a pill to give to her when she gets to her fathers?"

"It goes against hospital policy, but I'll make an exception under these circumstances."

"Thanks," the officer appears grateful. The doctor is back in a minute with a solitary pill in a yellow pill bottle, just give this to her dad to give to her.

"Sure," the officer says. The officer who appears grateful escorts me by the arm to the car. I can't imagine ever doing what they're doing but I'm crying so hard I can't see straight and my stomach hurts. The butterfly carcasses are lying in the pith of my stomach, my heart is catastrophically broken. Nothing I've ever experienced can match the sadness I feel now.

We drive back to my house, and in a trans-like state, I grab a suitcase and shove my clothes in it. I don't care what I'm bringing or what I'm leaving. I finish and go into mom's room and grab all the albums and her favourite mementos before finally remembering to bring my phone and charger.

"Got everything?" The second officers asks.

I nod following them outside and locking the door before us. I get in the car with them. I watch the streets pass by as we get closer to school. They pull up to an average house that can't be more than ten years old. It looks like the rest of the houses on the street, nothing fancy. I notice the number, ten.

"This is it?" I ask, "where my father lives?"

"Ya," he answers. "This is all new to us, we've never had to do this before," the first officer admits.

"It's new to me too," I say sarcastically.

The officers stand behind me, and let me ring the doorbell. I'm not even going to be in my own bed. The comforts of home are lost to me, just died with my mother. How can this be happening? How can they take me out of my own home? Why did she get into a car accident? What happened. I turned to the first officer, "How did she get into the accident? You never told me."

"We suspect she was on her phone," he says sadly.

It was her fault. I guess it doesn't matter, she's gone. "Did anyone else get hurt?"

"No," he said simply, offering no more details than absolutely necessary.

I take a deep breath. I can hear a set of footsteps as the person on the other side gets closer to the door. It opens slowly and there is Will, Will the editor. I turn to the officer, "There has to be a mistake, this is Will Anderson, he's not my father."

He looks at the officers to explain, "I am Bill Anderson, I go by Will at the school."

My mind is in a fog of grief, "You're my dad?" I ask in disbelief. "You changed your name?" I ask confused.

"It was the only way I could see you without you knowing who I was," he explained.

"Why?" I asked.

"Your' mother would never let me see you, it was the only way I could be a part of your life," he keeps explaining.

"Why did you wait so long?" I ask. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I don't have an answer for that," he admits, "I wasn't allowed to tell you. If your mother found out I moved to be near you, she would have taken you somewhere else. She hated me."

"You took special interest in me," I reflect back.

"You're talented," he says with a glimmer of pride.

"Wow, I need that pill now officer," I'm feeling completely overwhelmed. I just want to curl in a ball in my own fucking bed and be left alone. The fact that even that won't happen is making everything so much harder.

My dad looks at me with doubtful eyes, "Do you want to meet my wife and daughter."

"The pill!" I demand impatiently.

The officer fumbles, "I must have left it in the car, I'll be right back."

We all wait for him, then he opens the bottle and looks at dad, "It's a sedative the emergency doctor gave to her," he explains. Dad nods his approval, "Do you want me to show you to your new room?"

I take the pill from the cop, and then nod. Dad walks them out and I follow him up the stairs. The door is open and the lights are on. "This is your room," he points.

I step in closing the lights and the door behind me. I grieve on an unfamiliar bed until I fall asleep.

33

They talk a lot, their voices blend together like background noise, oddly comforting. I have my own en suite so until hunger pangs set in, I have no need to leave my room. I splash water on my face, it's time. My father calls me down for dinner, I can't ignore my stomach anymore.

They're sitting at the table, with a look of surprise that I left my room. I see a plate of food in front of a vacant chair, I assume it's for me. He points to it, "Sit, sit," he encourages. I pick up my fork, it feels heavy. I'm so hungry I shovel a mouthful of food in, "This is Veronica, we call her V and her mom Gwen."

"Hi," I say shyly. V and Gwen smile at me. I swallow and take another mouthful.

He looks at me, "I saw Rita at school today, she's worried about you. Your mom's funeral is tomorrow." I haven't turned my phone on or looked at it since the afternoon my mom died.

I take a sip of the water and slowly get up expecting some sort of reaction, but they all remain motionless, afraid to do anything wrong. "Thanks," I mutter. I slowly back away from the table and the relentless tears begin again, I think about how I'll never have that meal out I planned with mom, never sit across from her at a dinner table. She'll never comfort me or give me advice or ever hug me again. I retreat back to my unfamiliar room with my unfamiliar bed, keeping the lights off as I slide under the cotton sheets and quietly weep until there isn't a morsel of energy left in me and I again fall asleep only to dream of her.

~~

I hear them getting ready, they don't have to tell me, I know it's time. I wear black of course because I'm expected to. There's a limo waiting outside. I go downstairs and they're waiting for me, "Do you want breakfast?" asks Gwen.

I shake my head refusing.

V points outside, "Dad ordered a limo!"

It's not her fault, I don't know her, so I acknowledge her lifting the corner of my mouth because that's all I can manage.

"I'm sorry about your mom, I didn't know her," she offers.

"Thanks," I say. We walk to the limo, he ordered a driver, so we sit in the back together. The limo drops us off at the funeral home. I half expect butterflies but they don't come, dread fills me. I'm not ready to say good-bye. Her final resting home before burial is a plain mausoleum-like place with fancy carpeting and multiple rooms. I guess if a lot of people all die at once, this place would have the capacity to run several funerals at one time, they're obviously in it for the money.

Mom's sister hasn't visited us in years, I'm not sure why but they are estranged. He notices her first, "That's your moms sister," he tells me, he knows I haven't seen her in a long time. I didn't notice her.

"You know her?" I ask.

"I dated her before your mother, when I went with your mother they fought and never spoke again. I tried getting them to repair their relationship but it was no use."

"So you ruined their relationship and you cheated on my mother with Gwen?" I guess.

"I was young," he explained.

"Then it's okay," I say sarcastically.

I step away from him and that's when Rita comes barreling over to me, "I'm so sorry, Oh my fuck, you poor thing. I've been trying to get a hold of you for days, I didn't know you were at Will's house!"

"He's my father, apparently. We need to talk."

She hugs me, it feels good being in her arms, she goes to release me but I don't move so she maintains her hug. It's the first human contact I've had in days, it's primal in nature. I need her support or I'm going to fall apart to pieces on the floor. "Don't leave me," I beg.

"Of course not," she reassures, and takes my hand. We go to the front pew, from stretcher to casket. It's white and beautiful, probably top of the line, I look at him, guilt.

V and Gwen sit behind me. Alex, John, Landon, and Brandon are sitting three rows back, I saw them as we passed. I feel so distant from all of them right now. They're here to support me but everyone with the exception of John and Brandon have let me down. I see Brianna, Alex's sister. I motion for her to come over to me and I hug her tight, "Miss you my friend."

"I miss you too," she says to me. "Alex doesn't have a girlfriend, he still talks about you, you should come over," she says eagerly but quietly.

"I might," I say to her. "Only to see you, I love you," I tell Brianna. She's so sweet.

"Sorry about your mom." She says sadly.

"Me too," I admit to her.

The Minister takes the podium and Brianna goes back to her spot.. He says wonderful things about mom and then I'm escorted back to the waiting limo with my new family and we go to moms burial place, to lay her to rest. Mom's sister hasn't talked to me. I don't know if I want her to. My mom was no angel from what I've learned, she lied about my dad, and took her sister's boyfriend away from her.

She was young and will always be my angel. My mom can never do harm, all of her choices were what she thought was best. I love her but it doesn't stop me from feeling a bit of anger towards her. She didn't give me choices about time I can't get back, she kept the truth from me and now everything is blurry with grief.

Rita comes for me at the limo and doesn't leave my side the entire time, holding my hand, it's keeping me up.

It feels like she's all I have, "I love you Rita," I choke out.

She cries.

Then I cry. I can't stop crying.

The only thing I want to do is hold my mom, feel her warmth against my skin, it's a dream now. I resent all the wasted time I spent away from her with boys who ended up cheating on me, Alex, then Landon. They should be ashamed of themselves. My time could have been much better spent with mom. I can't take it back, and it's easy to be angry at everyone else rather than myself or mom. I know they didn't take her away from me and I chose to spend too much time with them rather than her, I have to get passed this.

It finishes. People are walking by her casket placing flowers on it. I bring Rita to my father, "I need to spend some time with her please?" I say weakly.

"Of course," he says kindly.

"I'll bring her home when she's ready," Rita promises him.

"Thanks," he says. They watch me leave with her, I can feel their eyes on us.

"I came with Brandon," she says apologetically.

"That's fine," I tell her.

I climb into the back of Brandon's car, it's the first time I noticed it's sunny outside and the weather is getting warmer. Brandon doesn't say anything to me but I can feel his condolences like a vibe. I'm glad he doesn't say anything. He just drives us to her house and doesn't try coming in or asking when he'll see her next. He just leaves, and I'm grateful.

We go directly to her room and we cuddle in her bed without speaking for a long time. I fall asleep, it's a familiar bed and it's the first sleep since this all happened that's restful. She doesn't stir, scared she'll arouse me. When I awaken, she's still there, in the same position she was in when I closed my eyes. I wish I lived with her.

I don't make her ask, I tell her everything, "My book got two offers, mom went out and I started reading the contracts. I was halfway through the second contract when two policemen showed up at my door. They told me mom was dead. Apparently, she was on her phone and driving. They took me to the hospital to see her and then they said they had to take me to my closest living relative, I found out it was Will of all people, he's my friggin father, can you believe that? I told the cops my father died when I was three, and they said he didn't. My mother came up with that story because she didn't want me seeing him anymore." I give Rita a second to process it before continuing. They drove me to where my father lives and the door opens and I see my Will our editor. I told the cops they must be wrong my dad's name is Bill Anderson, and this is Will. Will said he changed his name so he could still see me and I wouldn't put the pieces together. There's even more to the story than that. Apparently, Bill dated my mom's sister first and then liked my mom, so they became estranged. Bill then proceeded to cheat on mom with Gwen causing their break-up. So he literally single handedly destroyed my family and now I'm expected to live with him, his new daughter and wife."

I take a breath, it's the first time I've told anyone and I wait for her reaction. Rita's stone faced, "Are you mad?"

"At my father for what he did, for dating and wasting time with Alex and Landon when I could have spent more time with mom. Mad that she's gone, she was apparently on her phone when the accident happened. I have so much to be angry about," I start feeling pains in my stomach again, not hunger but grief. The dead butterflies are back. Warm tears slowly trickle down my cheeks, I guess they've had enough time to replenish since the nap.

“I would be too,” Rita analyzes. “You are going to have to learn to work through those feelings and forgive each person for all their mistakes, because everyone makes them. These are all people you love. I’m sure, that your father doesn’t want to be apart from you a second longer than he’s already been. He found secret ways to spend time with you and discovered you’re an amazing writer in the process. Your’ mom broke the law but she didn’t intend to hurt herself or leave you. That’s why they’re called accidents. Landon and Alex, they’re young and stupid, and not mature enough to have relationships, they probably never will be. If you hadn’t dated either of them, you wouldn’t know what to look for in your husband, whenever you find him. You also have a great relationship with Alex’s sister Brianna. Embrace that relationship, and set a strong example for her. Show her how life should be lived. Most importantly always remember how much I love you.”

Part 2

1

Rita and I went to a fast food restaurant. We ordered burgers, fries, and shakes. She downed her food and I picked at mine. We took a small booth hidden off in the corner so nobody would bump into us.

“When are you coming back to school?” Rita asks.

I look outside and it’s getting dark already, the day is almost gone, and every year this one will be the hardest to get through, April 27, 2020. “Tuesday, what else am I going to do. At least I will be with you instead of a home full of strangers.”

“Shouldn’t you take time to grieve?”

“A day, week, month, it just puts me farther away from my schoolwork and it doesn’t bring her back. She’s all I think about.”

I stop eating and suck the straw of my milkshake. “You can have the rest,” I offer my food.

“Don’t mind if I do, I’m starving,” She drags my food to her. We’re going to John’s first hockey practice at his new rink, I take it, you’re not going to want to come.

I sip, “Just the opposite, distraction is my best friend. Is there room for me in the car?”

“We’ll make it,” Rita says with determination. She pulls out her phone and starts texting, I’m guessing letting the driver know I’m coming. “Landon won’t be coming, he’s got a practice of his own to go to, so it will just be me, you, Alex, Brandon, and John of course.

“How are things going with you and Brandon?”

She shrugs, “Good I guess, nothing’s changed in my world since your world fell apart.”

“That’s a good thing,” I conclude. “Have I missed a lot in school?”

“Nothing we can’t help you catch up on.”

Rita and Brandon take me to the rink to watch John. They keep the conversation light while I sit in the back quietly depressed, it’s my new norm. The rink is impressive.

We act like we know where we're going and they don't question us. We take first row centre ice and chill watching the drills. From what I can tell, these boys are worked way harder than the Grimsby Hockey team.

I start feeling chilled to the bone but I try not to complain. There's only ten minutes left. My body betrays me and starts shivering ever so slightly, I blame the lack of food I've had over the last several days.

"Are you okay," asks Rita concerned. She's hyper-vigilant of me.

"Just a bit chilled, I'll be fine," I tell her.

John gets off the ice, showers, and meets us at the front doors, "Hey guys," he says pleasantly, "Carrie."

"Hi," I say meekly.

"Are you coming back to my house?" Rita asks. "We can ask your dad if you can sleep over."

"I nod affirmatively," and she texts him.

A minute later her phone responds, "We're good," she tells me.

"Can I drive you?" John asks since we have two cars here.

I hesitate, and Rita answers for me, "I think she'd rather come with me," she says.

"She's all I've got," I try explaining, but my voice fails me and I start crying.

"You're coming with me" John insists "and I'm not taking no for an answer." He grabs my wrist and starts dragging me to his car. I pull away, but he pulls harder. "I need to talk to you."

I make it super difficult for him to get me there especially since he's lugging his super big hockey bag back to his car. I get into his Sports car and buckle up while he places his gear in the trunk and joins me. He doesn't start it right away, I think it's a habit of his. He gazes at me instead, "She's not all you have, I want in on your circle. You can come to me for anything, a shoulder to cry on, a person to yell at, a person to listen to you. I will do anything for you, I'm so sorry you went through all this alone. I feel like I failed you," his dark eyes start shining.

"Don't cry," I plead. "I don't want you cry." He betrays me and I see him shed a tear.

"That circle thing, I might take you up on it. I don't think Rita can bare the burden of me on her own."

"You're not a burden. I shouldn't ask," He starts.

"But you need to," I finish.

"I have to, what happened with Landon, you guys are still going out right, did he support you?"

I swipe my tears away with my shirt, "He cheated on me with his physiotherapist Tony, I broke up with him the day before mom died."

"So you were all alone?"

"Yes and no, the police escorted me to the hospital and then they took me to my dad's house. Mom told me he was dead so that was weird and it turns out my father is the editor of the paper, Bill.

"That son-of-a-bitch!"

"Who Dad or Landon?"

"Landon, maybe both!" and for some reason it makes me laugh, until the damn tears show their ugly selves to me yet again. John holds me close to his chest before starting the car. I feel safe there. We stop talking, he's lost in his thoughts, the way I'm lost in mine. I can only imagine what he's thinking. I just want to drown my sorrows, putting some of it behind me before my sombre reality returns.

He pulls up into Rita's driveway and I thank him, not for the ride, but for being there. I don't have to elaborate, he knows

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I take the big couch in her living room, stretching out, grabbing the throw blanket and covering myself. My face is still red with splotches from crying. Rita and Brandon, take the other sofa leaving the nice lazy recliner for John, but that's not good enough for him, he eyeballs me, "Can I sit with you?"

"Nooooo," I groan.

"You can put your head on my lap, I'll just play with your hair and drink my beer while we watch the movie."

"You are so pushy," I complain scooting down involuntarily.

He sits down and lays his beer on the floor. He starts running his fingers through my hair, it feels good. I close my eyes losing interest in the movie all together. I drift off, not moving until the movies over and he strokes my face until I open my eyes, "That was nice," I tell him. he smiles at me. He gets up stiff from sitting in one spot the entire

time. Rita sees the boys out and we go to bed. It's been another long day for me. I wonder when it's going to get easier.

Rita asks me in bed if I had feelings for John. I still want nothing to do with men, but I don't answer her, I pretend to sleep, it's easier. I don't want to analyze something I have no intention of acting on. I'm glad that he wants to support me as a friend. You can never have too many of those. I glance over at Rita knowing her back is turned to me, and I question how I would honestly have ever gotten through this without her.

I don't plan on living with my father long. I can't forgive him for estranging my mother from her sister, or cheating on mom. I don't care if he tried rectifying it by spending time with me, a very small gesture, way too late. When I start getting royalties that will sustain me, I'm going to get my own place. I'm determined to start writing again, this time it's going to be about something different, meaningful. I'm scrapping the storyline I never wrote, for something new, maybe my own.

2

As much as I don't want to, I go home to get my bag for school. I arrive there finding them having breakfast together.

"Hi," I say walking passed them and grabbing my schoolbag.

He watches me, "What are you doing?"

"Getting ready for school." I answer.

"Don't you think it's too early? You haven't given yourself enough time to grieve," he's concerned.

"It might help her," Gwen wisely interjects.

He glances at her, "I never considered school as a tool to be helpful, you think?"

She nods smiling, "Of course."

"Thanks," I say to her, and her smile widens. I guess none of this is her fault, I should start being a bit nicer to her.

"So it's okay if I go," I ask her more than him.

"Sure it is, if it becomes too difficult for you I'm a text away, I'll program my number in your phone under Gwen," she says holding her hand out for my phone.

I pass it to her, she messes around with it until she's figured out how to do it then gives it back, hers must be android. "Do you want a ride to school?" She offers pleasantly.

"No thanks, if it's any closer, it would be attached to the property."

She giggles.

I head for the door and then turn back, "Do you want me to take V to school?" I offer.

Now they're both smiling, "It's fine, one of us will drop her off, but thanks for the offer."

"You're welcome," I say before closing the door.

I walk slowly because school's really close now. It's going to feel weird at school, I'm sure what's happened to me went around like wildfire. I don't want to go in by myself so I text Rita and wait. She gets back to me and says she's waiting for me by the front door. I wave and we walk together to first period. "I'm so glad you met me at the front door," I say appreciatively, "I didn't want to come into school by myself."

"No problem, I was just making out with Brandon near the lockers," she smiles.

"Good to know," but it's not really. "When does he start skating for Niagara?" I ask.

"It's not like the Ice Rats, they don't start until next fall."

"That's a long way out," I say surprised.

"Ya, Brandon and Alex are bummed, especially after watching John."

"The players on John's team are a lot older than him."

"That tells you how good he is," Rita tells me.

"That's cool, but do the rest of his teammates even attend school?" I ask.

"I don't know," says Rita. "He'll be making so much when he gets into the Major hockey league, school won't matter, for any of them," she includes Brandon and Alex into the mix.

"I don't think you're guaranteed a spot in the major leagues just because you're in the American minor leagues, Rita. Get that out of your head."

"Our boys will make it don't you worry," she says over confidently.

We walk in, most eyes are on me and then attention is drawn away when our teacher walks in and begins class.

I'm distracted coming up with ideas so I don't have to live with strangers. Maybe my royalties might cover first and last months rent, I can take furniture from moms house and pick up a part-time job if things get tight. Who am I kidding, I'll definitely have to pick up a part-time job. The only person who is working in our group of friends is John. If it gets too tight, I can ask him to be my flat mate! Problem averted.

I ask to be excused and I text John to meet me by the front doors, there is no urgency to this, it could have waited until after class but to me there is. I need out of Will's, I feel like I'm suffocating. I appreciate what he's done for me, but he will only ever be my editor. I hear footsteps coming in my direction before I see anyone. As they get closer, John turns the corner. "Hi," he says. "I'm surprised you're here, it's kind of soon isn't it. Are you okay?"

I nod, "I'm fine thanks. You want to skip class and get breakfast together, I want to run an idea by you." I thought of asking Rita but she doesn't have a job or a reason to move from her parents right now, you might consider it."

"I'm IN class right now," he eyes get big, "you want me to LEAVE right now, midway through class?"

"Just say I'm really upset to your teacher, and you want to help me, then if you don't mind, go into my class, and say you bumped into me and I'm really upset and you want to get my bag to take me home."

"Sure," he says easily.

I think of Rita who was sitting next to me. She's going to be worried. I text her that John and I are going for breakfast and that everything is okay.

John comes back in a few minutes, carrying both bags, "Easy, but Rita gave me a weird look."

"I just texted her."

"Which restaurant do you want to have breakfast at?"

"I don't care," I tell him.

We walk to his car and throw our bags in the back. "You're quiet," I comment.

"I've got a lot on my plate," he says, "sorry."

"What's going on with you," happy for a mental diversion.

"It's the Ice Rat schedule. It doesn't leave much time for school," he complains.

"Do the rest of the players even go to school?" I ask.

"Well, apparently I'm the youngest hockey player to ever join them. I don't know what other people have done in the past so there is little to go by. I don't want to lose the school year. I'm going to have to go to college in Toronto."

"So it makes sense to live there?" I ask. This is going in the direction I was hoping for. We arrive at the restaurant, go inside and order our food.

"You want to eat here or in the car?"

"Here's fine," I say, "It's quiet."

"What's up with you," he asks. "Were you sad in class?"

"I don't feel comfortable in Will's place. You know how weird it is living with strangers?"

"No," he replies honestly.

"I want to get my own place, but I'll be lucky if my royalties cover first and last months rent. You weren't by any chance thinking of getting an apartment since you're salaried with the Ice Rats?"

"I'll have to get a place if I'm going to be working and going to school downtown, I like where this is going," he grins.

“I’m going to need work part-time until I get more royalties, they aren’t a reliable source of income. Let me know if the Artery Clogger is hiring.”

“Roommate?” I ask. “platonic roommates,” I clarify.

“Roommates! Can’t guarantee platonic,” he shakes my hand, “Deal!”

3

A heavy package comes in the mail addressed to me, strange, I didn't order anything, then I realize, it must be my books! I open the box with a steak knife. The cover is beautiful just as I imagined it. I flip through the pages and they're perfect, but why did Will order so many?"

I go into my room and start working on the second book for several hours before he comes home. I hear him call out, "Anyone home?"

"Just me," I answer.

"Your home?" Will sounds surprised. "How was school?"

"It was okay, but I left early, you were right, it's a little too early for me. I've been writing for a while now."

"Did the books come?" He asks.

"Yes, they're great." I hand him the one I took into my room.

He studies it. We should start promoting it.

"How?"

You need to make a web page, plaster it all over social media, get the word out, I'll help you.

"Sounds like a lot of work to be done, how do you expect me to do well in school and write a second book, if you also want me to do my self promo's?"

Will encourages, "You're a great writer but if you don't, you won't sell anything."

"I just like the writing part, I don't like self-promoting, you know, you can do it if you'd like, I'm sure you would be better at it than me."

Will looks at me with what appears to be frustration, "You want ME to promote YOU?"

I give him a second or two to consider it.

"I'd be honoured!" he's astonished.

"That's great, so you're okay with it?"

"Sure am," he agrees. "Did you see the letter?"

"What letter?" I ask.

"There's a letter for you on the kitchen counter," he informs me.

"Really? From who?" I get up and start walking to the kitchen.

"I think it's your royalty cheque."

My first royalty cheque for a book that took me a little over six months to complete. The excitement I feel is greatly diminished due to what's happened, "Oh, this is great," I say lacking enthusiasm. "It would have been nice to share this moment with my mom, if she was here, I'd be taking her out to dinner to celebrate."

"We can go out," Will offers lamely.

"No thanks, I don't mean to hurt your feelings but it's not the same."

"Sure," he says but his feelings are hurt.

Gwen interrupts returning from the pantry (an oversized closet), "Get cleaned up for dinner, it should be ready soon."

~~

Dinner is laid out and I'm not really hungry but I play with the food on my plate occasionally taking a bite. Will is going on and on about the book and promotion, like he wrote it or something. It starts grating on my nerves so I interrupt his ramblings, "I'm thinking about getting an apartment in Toronto. I have a friend who's agreed to be my flatmate."

"Toronto is too expensive." Will informs me.

"I'll be getting a part time job," I answer. "Unless the royalties are okay."

"Absolutely not," Will denies. "We just finished discussing how you have too much on your plate, now you want to take on the stress of a new apartment and a part-time job? I'll help you bet by."

"Will!" Gwen admonishes, "Don't discourage her. She needs to keep busy and if this is what she absolutely wants, then we should support her ambitions."

"See, Gwen would like things to go back to the way they were, you can't blame her!" I'm grasping and it's obvious even to me.

"That's not true," she disagree's, I like having you here."

"You don't know me," I snap.

"I'm getting to," she argues.

"Stay out of this Gwen," he growls. "I am supporting her."

"If you want to get a place downtown, I'm all for it, but I want to stay in touch with you because even though I barely know you, I quite like you," Gwen adds.

"It's mutual," I agree. "You and V are a victim of these circumstances as much as I am. So? I can look for a place?"

"Sure, we can turn this bad situation into a good one. Toronto is very expensive though, you might want to look at the outskirts, maybe the College just outside of Toronto.," she suggests.

I get up out of my chair and go over to her and hug her while she's sitting. I hold her tight. When I release her, she's got tears in her eyes, "Thanks," she whispers,

As we part ways, I look at Will, "I'm going to my room."

I can hear Gwen and Will arguing when I leave. He starts saying, "How can you go along with her, she's too young. She doesn't even know what she wants yet, she can't think straight, her mother just died."

She says back to him, "Look at all she's been through, you have to support her, even if it means letting her go, if you don't you'll lose her."

"She's not yours, so you don't care," he accuses her.

"V Can you leave us for a minute please?"

I hear V come up the stairs towards her room, closing the door behind her.

Gwen and Will are alone now. In an angry voice she hisses, "Fuck Off! I call the shots around here, not you anymore. I bet you she's right, you're still carrying on with that teacher Heather, or is there someone new now?"

"No," he sounds squirrley.

If I was in there talking to him like she was, I'd have him confessing in the blink of an eye. Once a cheat always a cheat. There's nothing more special about Gwen that wasn't just as special about mom or her sister. It's in him to cheat, he cheated in the past, he's probably cheating now, no different than Landon or Alex. No point in breaking up this family, it won't benefit anything.

I come up with a better idea, if he continues to oppose me getting my own place, then I will use his own indiscretions against him.

4

I go to my room and check my phone, I have texts from Rita, John and Landon.

Landon: Hi Carrie, I haven't had a chance to talk to you since your moms accident. If there's anything I can do, just let me know.

Me: Thanks.

That was nice of him. I guess it's time to let bygones be bygones.

~~

Rita: Hey! We're meeting at the Paddock in an hour, I wanted to go to The Artery Clogger but John doesn't, because he works there. He said if we worked, we'd understand.

Me: Ok, Can you pick me up?

Rita: Sure.

~~

John: Hey Fucker I mean Alex! Shacking up with the A-bomb! You know, the one you were stupid enough to cheat on! Platonic for now but not for long! Should I tell Landon?

~~

Wow, I read the last message two or three times and each time I get more angry. I get dressed up because I don't want to lose my A-bomb reputation. I take a nice shower, use beautiful fragrances and spend the last twenty minutes applying make-up. I leave my hair alone and it goes into a natural wave.

Brandon and Rita pick me up. I get into the back seat, "Hi!" I greet.

"Hi," Rita says.

We pull up to the Paddock and take our favourite table. John and Alex aren't there yet. I excuse myself and go into the bathroom to freshen up. I touch up my make-up,

reapply my lipstick and then reread the accidental text. When I finish, I spot John, Alex, and Landon at the table.

I sit in the vacant seat next to Rita. "You were a long time," she comments, "Are you okay?" She asks concerned.

"Actually I'm a bit confused," I answer. I take a deep breath and pretend to think, "I was just reading your text to me and you said John didn't want to go to the Artery Clogger because he works there and if anyone of us worked we'd understand." I glare at John, "So does that mean you don't consider writing a novel working?"

He's speechless, "No no, that's not what I meant," he says.

I look at Rita, "I got another text and I don't even think this one is meant for me, should I read it out loud Rita?"

"Sure honey," she says pleasantly. "Go ahead."

"Okay the text said, 'Hey Fucker I mean Alex! Shacking up with the A-bomb! You know, the one you were stupid enough to cheat on! Platonic for now, but not for long! Should I tell Landon?'" I look at John, "This definitely isn't for me is it John? I'm pretty sure you sent it."

He looks horrified, "You, uh, no," He doesn't say anything else, what can he say.

"I agree it sucks Alex cheated on me, but calling someone 'A-bomb' is that even a compliment? I ask.

Rita is in hysterics, Brandon too.

"Sounds like it is," Rita looks at John, "Boy you really fucked up!"

"You really did," I tell John.

"Dude, not cool," says Alex angrily.

"You deserve better than him," Landon says crossly.

The jokes over now and my disappointment shows, "John, you struck me as different. I took you seriously when you said you wanted to be there for me. I'm so stupid for believing in you. I think I'll get my own place, I don't need a roommate."

"Give me one more chance," he pleads. "Can we talk, in the car?"

"Don't do it," Rita warns.

"Please?" He begs.

I follow him to his Sports car and open my side. I sit looking out the front windshield giving him a chance to talk.

"I'm so sorry. First of all I'm excited we're getting a place together. Everyone including myself thinks Alex is a complete moron for cheating on you with Melissa. A day doesn't go by that I don't remind him how stupid he was."

"You are so beautiful, you blow the competition away, that's how I came up with Carrie the Bomb! Given half the chance I would never in a million years cheat on you. I'll never deny I've always had a thing for you, I said when you're done with those two idiots, give me a chance. You told me you want platonic and that's what you'll get. I don't think it will be easy, but I'll make it work."

"I know you are going through a terrible time in your life, and I want to be there for you to make it less terrible. My text was immature and if I could take it back I would. Don't change your mind. I'm really looking forward to getting a place we can call home. I've never lived with anyone other than my parents. We can have parties, help each other with homework, take turns cooking."

"Okay, okay!" I cave, "One more chance. Lets go back in now," I suggest. We walk back in together and everyone's staring us down, "We're good!" I inform them.

Rita jumps in, "Are you guys still sharing a flat together?"

"Ya," I say like it was never in question.

"Where are you guys moving to?" Brandon asks.

Rita backs Brandon up, "Well we need to know where party central will be."

I grin, "Just outside of Toronto, wherever we can find cheap rent."

The rest of the conversation was about hockey and Landon's recovery

5

“Mom might have found a place,” John tells me, “but we have to go look at it right away before someone snatches it. Can I pick you up?”

“Oh my, another one? It feels like we’re never going to find a place we can afford,” I complain.

“I wouldn’t encourage you if I didn’t think we have a really good chance, an old lady is renting it out and mom heard about it from a friend of a friend, It’s not on the market yet.”

“Sounds like three places ago but I’ll get ready,” I agree hanging up.

~~~

The landlady is eighty pounds soaking wet, vaping. If I had to guess, she’s probably around eighty-five or ninety years old. She’s wearing a dress, glasses, short hair, cachectic, not much different from many ladies her age except she vapes, “I’m trying to give up smoking fags,” she says with a British accent..

“Good for you,” I say thinking she’s kind of old to worry about lung cancer, as far as I’m concerned she’s done pretty well already.

She pulls a wrist size ring from her pocket with fiftyish keys on it and magically choses the correct one on the first try. “Take your time, John, your mother said if the two of you like it, she’ll come back tonight a put a deposit on it, so just let me know if you like it. I’ll be in the front office, I have to get my Ativan.”

John looks at me questioningly, “Ativan?”

“I think its for anxiety, mom used to take it,” I tell him. He nods and pushes the door open for us. I go in first. To my left is the kitchen. It’s yellow with old white cabinets. It’s narrow and long with an electric stove. Straight ahead is a living room minus furniture or television. I go into the kitchen first. I open one cabinet at a time really quickly and then move on to the next.

“What are YOU doing?” He asks.

“I’m checking for mice and bugs. If you do it slow, it gives them time to hide.”

“Gotchya! Find any?” He asks with a grin.

"Have I screamed yet?" I reply.

"Nope," he answers.

"Then I haven't." The living room is a fair size and since there's nothing in it, it doesn't take long to glance out onto the balcony and then turn right. The first door is the laundry room, "The washer and dryer have to be as old as the landlady, you can't even fit a mop and bucket here." The bathroom is okay, that's when I notice only one more door to explore, "Just one room left?" I ask surprised. "All the other apartments we've been looking at have two bedrooms, your mother must not have realized."

"She did, she knows we can't afford it."

I open the door, "It's spacious. Too bad we can't take it."

"Why not?" He asks.

"I like it, what do you have in mind? A pull-out sofa in the living room or two twins?"

"Okay don't get mad," he says cautiously, "but what about a king?"

"I'm staying calm. You want to stay platonic and share a king bed?"

"You want platonic," he reminds me, "I made it very clear that I want to shack up with you, even go as far as saying shag you, but a king is no different than two singles pushed together," he points out.

I shake my head no, "Let me paint you a picture, you're out, you meet a girl, you invite her back to your place and oh my gosh, there's a girl in your bed, yes that would be me, what do you do next."

"We can make an arrangement or just not bring anyone back to our place. You're going to be busy writing, and between hockey and school I don't have much free time, this place can be temporary until we can afford something better. Let's take it and deal with the issues as they arise," he suggests.

"Okay," I agree. "This will be our first place."

"Great, I'll text mom, and we'll tell the landlady on our way out."

6

We start early in the morning. "I'm excited!" I tell him throwing all my clothes in the trunk of his car. "This is going to be my first place!" We have no furniture yet, just sleeping bags for now. We have to go to mom's and take what we need, the POA will sell off the rest. The money can go towards my education.

"Do you have everything?" He asks before starting the car.

"Oh my Fuck, I almost forgot my computer!" I get out before he has a chance to tease me. I'm back minutes later, placing it carefully on the back seat. "Okay, ready, sorry about that."

"No problem," he says starting the car. It growls to life, I love sports cars. His is a fancy one with racing stripes on it, black on black. We already have the key so we don't have to look for the landlady if she's still alive, that is. We pull into the parking spot that goes with the apartment and grab as much of our possessions as we can.

We get to the apartment and he freezes, "The keys are in my front pocket, I put them there so I could carry more, do you mind?"

I am carrying less than him, but I'm still carrying stuff, "You want me to dig in your FRONT pocket for the keys? Do you not remember the word, let me repeat, PLATONIC?"

He's really loaded with stuff and I feel really bad for him because it's ridiculous, "Please! It's getting heavy, just dig in my front jean pocket for the keys,"

"Like hell I will," I refuse.

He gives up and has to put all his stuff down on the ground to search for his key.

I try explaining, "If you were Rita, you would have done it in a heartbeat, but you're not and I don't want to get your fruit salad in a tailspin, if you know what I mean."

"Fruit salad? I've never heard it referred to like that before. Ya don't worry there's no tailspin happening over here, hasn't since before Rita" John complains sarcastically.

I grin, "Good! That's what we want, no tailspins."

He opens the door and I drop all the stuff I'm carrying and spin around, "Ours!!" We both head to the bedroom to start hanging our clothes. "Should we take a dresser from my mom's house?"

"I think we'll need it," he says.

"I'm putting my sleeping bag farthest away from the bathroom. No fan will mask what I can produce," I call out proudly. "So, when you're sleeping on the ground over there, I point, the fumes will seep from beneath the door," I do an evil laugh for affect.

He looks at me disgusted, "You are way more like a guy than a girl, and that's not a good thing."

"Thank you, I tend to take on many guy characteristics such as cheating and treating the opposite sex like shit."

"Whatever makes you happy, but I'm taking the living room tonight so I don't have to smell your seepage on my first night."

"Ok! I don't blame you."

I hang my clothes up in the closet taking up two-thirds of the rack, "Okay, you can hang your stuff up now," I call out.

He comes back into the room carrying a big white board and looks into the closet. "You're kidding right? You took more than half!" he complains.

"I'm a girl," I answer simply.

"So?" John's expecting me to elaborate more.

"Well dah! I need more room," I explain. "What's that board?"

"It's for practicing my puck handling, what about my hockey bag, where am I going to put everything?" he asks perplexed.

"Trunk." I answer.

"You expect me to keep my gear in the trunk? Do you have any idea what its worth?" He asks exasperated.

"I know how much it smells. It's fine in the trunk." I answer.

"It can get stolen, it stays here," he puts his foot down.

"Sure, you can keep it next to your sleeping bag," I encourage. "Sleep with your smell."

"I will," he says stubbornly.

"Next to the bathroom, I think seepage and your gear together could cause a global warming," I joke.

"Ha ha," he says with a smile. "Lets go get the truck and pick up stuff from your moms," he suggests.

"I can't," I say suddenly getting serious.

"Okay," John says, "It's okay, I thought it might be difficult for you, I have an alternative idea if you're up for it. Let's go to one of those furniture stores where you don't have to pay for a year."

"You don't mind?" I ask preferring it to the sadness I'll feel going home again.

"Not at all. Lets go!" he suggests. "We'll just be cheap."

"I can do that!" I say proudly and I give him a huge unexpected hug. "Thanks," I say gratefully.

We drive to the cheapest furniture store that doesn't make you pay for at least eighteen months. My therapy is beginning. "Okay John, what type of sofa do you like. Pleather, cloth?"

"Cloth," he picks.

"Okay, lets check prices." I suggest. We walk around and I find the cheapest one, but it is so ugly.

He looks at the one I'm looking at, "That works," he says pleasantly.

"If you have zero sense of style and don't care what anyone thinks of you."

"Okay," he says cautiously. "Which one do you find reasonably priced that won't embarrass you?"

I keep strolling until I see a comfortable looking grey couch with low arm rests, "This one is okay," I tell him.

"It's eight hundred more," he complains.

"We can't cheap out on the couch," I act like little miss snobby.

"Sit down on this one, and then sit down on the cheap one and tell me what you think," I suggest.

He goes to the cheap one, sits and then comes back to me and sits on the nicer grey one I chose. "This one is way better," he agrees.

I join him, "It does feel nice."

He puts his arm around my shoulders and looks at me, "Should we get it?"

"Yes!" I say enthusiastically. "Matching love seat?"

He nods, "Sure."

"Okay, now we need to pick a dinette. It has to seat at least six, in case we have our friends over."

I start looking at the dinettes and it only makes sense to get something either grey to match the rest of the furniture or bring a splash of colour into the dining room, I chose colour. "Do you like this one?" I ask.

"Whatever you choose, I DO NOT COOK," He confesses.

"Then you're cleaning," I delegate.

"Deal," he agrees.

"I'm having fun," I admit. "We still have to decide on our sleeping arrangements," I study him.

"I'm eighteen and I have needs, I haven't slept on a single mattress since I was nine, and I wouldn't want to mess up that beautiful sofa you picked, so my obvious choice is still the king because I love hardened bananas in my fruit salad, and I'd be a moron not to want to share a bed with you, even if I am NOT allowed to lay a finger you. I've put great thought into it as I'm sure you can tell."

"Okay, fruit salad with hardened banana's it is!"

He smiles. "We'll get them to deliver everything and we'll go to a kitchen store to get you some pots, pans, and the lot."

"Don't forget we need to pick up a t.v. and a gadget so we can stream."

We did just that, he let me pick out everything we needed in the kitchen store and then he chose the t.v. and the gadget. Once we were finished our shopping spree we picked up food and brought it back to our place.

I won't admit to Rita or John this, but I like the comfort of knowing I don't have to go to bed alone. I was never opposed to the king, I just didn't want it to be my idea.

7

"I'll get dressed for bed in the bathroom," I tell him.

"You don't need to wear anything," he discourages clothing of any sort. "You're sleeping bag will cover you, I'll just make sure you get there safely."

"Sure you will," I chuckle.

"It's nothing I haven't seen before and we're flatmates now," he convinces.

"There's not much to see but yes, okay," I say grabbing my pyjama's and ignoring him.

"Don't put yourself down," he calls out.

When I'm done changing, I come out and he's already in his sleeping bag. I leave the bathroom and shut the light off in our bedroom slowly finding my way to my sleeping bag. I slide inside and rest my head on the pillow.

"The move has gone smoothly so far," I comment.

"I agree," he says.

"When's your first hockey game?" I inquire.

"The day after tomorrow, you want to come?"

I might not be too into hockey, but I love supporting close friends who've been there for me. "Sure would. I'm proud of you for making it into the the Ice Rats," I admit.

"I'm proud to have a friend who's an author," he says. I sort of swell with pride. "I can't believe it. I never thought of writing until Will encouraged me."

"Your father," he reminds me shuffling around in his sleeping bag, "Do you ever think you'll be able to call him your dad?"

"I don't know," I consider his question, "maybe with time. Are you close to your parents?"

"Very," he admits.

"Don't lose that," I tell him knowing the pain I've suffered losing mom.

"Do you need a cuddle?" He offers. I don't answer because I can't right now, I always feel like I need one. The devastation comes back in waves and this one is a tidal wave. The worst is usually at night and my silence is all he needs. I hear his steps and then he slides in next to me. "You never have to ask," he tells me. His body moulds to mine, a perfect fit as his muscular arms wrap around me. I cry until I fall asleep.

8

We gave ourselves a week to settle in before inviting the gang over for dinner. We decide to keep it simple and order pizza. Landon offers to get beer because he looks the oldest out of all of us. Everyone arrives fashionably late, but before the pizza.

“Let ME give them the tour!” I push John out of the way.

He looks down at me and smiles, “Whatever!”

“Okay guys,” I say pointing to the left, “that’s our kitchen, you are in our living room. Beyond the living room is the balcony, and to our right is the washer/dryer closet, bathroom, and bedroom. I’ll show you the bedroom.”

Everyone follows me and then I pop open the door and Rita says, “Wow, you have a king? Where’s John’s room?”

“It’s a one bedroom apartment Rita, I told you,” I say facing her.

“So he’s sleeping on the sofa or are you sharing a bed?”

“Sharing the bed,” I tell her grabbing her wrist and dragging her out, I never should have offered the tour.

Brandon, high fives John, “You rocked this arrangement!”

Alex grumbles under his breath to him, “She’s my ex-girlfriend. You’re not supposed to hook up with your teammates ex.”

Landon blurts, “Are you sleeping with her?”

John’s head spins to both of them, “I don’t give a shit what you ask me, but don’t disrespect Carrie by asking me in front of her, you both fucked up so what I do with her, is neither of your business.”

“YOU GO JOHN!” I root.

Rita is unusually quiet. I turn to her, “Are you okay?”

“Sure,” she says discouraging further questions. Something’s wrong. Obviously she doesn’t want to tell me in front of everyone, I’ll have to find out during alone time if I can manage it, there’s three rooms here to choose from.

Brandon looks over at us, “Tell them!” He orders her.

His tone is shocking. They usually have a great relationship, he’s never this forward with her.

Rita remains quiet.

All eyes are on Brandon now, "She's fucking pregnant," he says.

"Are you?" I confirm.

Rita nods.

I glance at Brandon, "Are you marrying her?"

"Your kidding right?" He asks me seriously. "People don't get married anymore just because they're pregnant. I'm still in school, I just made Minor hockey league, I'm not going to ruin my life with a little selfish bay-bee," he mocks. "She has nothing going for her. She never wrote a book like you did. She just dates jocks until she finds the right one whose willing to marry her."

Rita halls back and slaps him.

"You had that coming," John says. "Have a beer and shut the fuck up."

"Narrow escape," Alex whispers to John. She didn't hear though because she dragged Brandon into our bedroom a second ago and shut the door behind them.

"How dare you speak to me like that in front of our friends!" Rita yells at him.

"I told you I wouldn't make it easy for you if you don't have the abortion I'm willing to pay for. It might not even be mine!"

"It's more likely yours than John's, it's been ages since I've been with him. Admit it, the baby is yours."

"I don't know who you slept with," Brandon growls.

"I thought we were perfect together," Rita whines.

"We were until you trapped me like a caged animal."

"Consider yourself free, I lied to you to see your reaction. I'm not pregnant. But I'm sure as hell finished with you!" Rita spits.

We are all so listening in through the walls with thankfully are paper thin.

We start hearing footsteps but they stop, he must have grabbed her, "You're not pregnant?" He treads on eggshells. "Babe, I'm so glad, no don't cry, I'm sorry. I don't want to break up with you. Ya, of course I would have taken care of it," he kisses her ass, "but why did you make me think,"

"I just wanted to see if you love me," she confesses.

"You didn't have to test me," Brandon says, "Of course I love you." Then, there's silence.

"Get them out of our bedroom before they start doing something on our new bed," I say with disgust to John.

John goes to retrieve the now happy couple leading them out by their shirts, “Off limits to you guys,” he explains. “Is everything better between the two of you now?” He asks. They are literally having a go at each other’s tonsils. I didn’t know Rita could hold her breath that long kissing Brandon. The rest of the evening is calm, but you needed a hose to pry them apart. It’s almost like he’s so grateful to Rita for not being pregnant and ruining his future, he learned a large lesson this evening.

~~

Everyone is gone now, and it’s just John and I going to bed in our new king bed. I take the door side and he takes the bathroom. It’s become a habit that we chat before going to sleep. Tonight we have a lot to talk about.

“Rita’s something else,” John comments.

“I think she was trying to figure out if Brandon is a stand up guy. We’ve both been let down, her by you, me by Alex and Landon.”

“So faking a pregnancy is going to help her figure out if Brandon cares about her.”

“Brandon was pretty mean to her,” I observed. “He compared her to me, and accused her of dating hockey players so she never has to work a day in her life.”

“Some girls are like that,” he tells me.

“I’m not. I don’t need a guy to support me. I’m going to become a physiotherapist and continue writing so I can make it on my own.”

“I didn’t know you want to be a physiotherapist?” John says.

“Yes, sports physiotherapist to be exact. I want to work and travel with a team.”

“That’s a wonderful goal,” he encourages.

“What’s your goal,” I ask.

“Major hockey league and for school MBA specializing in finance.”

“Why finance?” I ask.

“So when I make loads of money in the league, I know how to invest it so I can retire at forty, or if I don’t make the Major hockey league, I have something to fall back on.”

“I like that.” I didn’t hear anything because he was so quiet but suddenly I feel him against me. “I didn’t ask,” I tell him.

“You didn’t need to.”

"I can feel your fruit salad, I think you better get back on your own side, just for tonight," I suggest.

He doesn't though, not right away, "Are you sure?"

"Absolutely!" I lie.

9

Rita's lying on John's side of the king bed, he's in the other room watching: you guessed it, hockey.

"He asked you to his first game and didn't invite any of us?" Rita clarifies.

"Maybe he only had one ticket," I reason.

"Then he would have invited Brandon if there's only one. Brandon eat, sleeps, shits, hockey. He's not going to give the only ticket he has for tonight's game to you over Brandon, this is a DATE."

"I can hear you in there," John calls in to us. "It's not a date!"

Rita giggles. I slap her shoulder, "I told you we are just friends."

"Her call," he says. "That's not my choice."

Damn the thin paper walls. "Maybe turn up the volume on the game your watching, I feel like your invading our privacy," I complain.

"It's not a date Rita she won't give me the time of day," John complains through the walls, "Why don't you go accuse someone else of getting you pregnant," he pokes fun out of irritation.

"I'm don't like you guys being mean to each other," I complain. "You guys need to be nice to each other for my sake," I reason.

"Not until he admits tonight is a date," she says stubbornly.

I hear his footsteps and then the door opens, "I've begged Carrie, pleaded with her, she won't date me, in Carrie's eyes: God must have plastered my ass where my face should be," he says sarcastically to Rita.

I can't help it, he makes me laugh so hard, I actually let one rip by accident. I make such a loud, farting noise, they both look over at me shocked. "The fume seepage you were telling me about," he asks displaying heightened fear in his eyes.

"Understory," Rita says, "I think Carrie has problems. Nothing should ever smell that bad," Rita teases. My face is red, and John just backs away closing the door behind him.

"At least put the fan on!" Rita pleads.

I get up and oblige.

"I can't believe how Brandon spoke to you, why did you forgive him so quick?" I ask getting back into bed.

"I shouldn't have pulled that prank on him," Rita says seriously.

"You did, and look at what he said to you, he doesn't respect you," I acknowledge.

"He had a point," Rita defends him, "I don't have any plans for my future, and I want to stay with Brandon, he's already in the Minor hockey league, it could be my ticket to forever happy."

"Wouldn't you be happier achieving success on your own? I know it's fun to watch someone else achieve it but doing it is better.

Rita shakes her head, "I don't have guys falling all over themselves for me, I can't write a novel, I'm not gifted the way you are."

"That's not true, you just haven't figured out what you're good at yet and guys aren't falling at my feet like you say they are." I tell her, "That's ridiculous."

"It's true!" he calls out.

"Would you turn up the volume to your t.v. please?" I ask again but this time with a raised voice.

"We have to go!" He says.

"On your date," Rita finishes.

"It's not a date," I argue.

John comes back into the room to grab his bag. Rita looks at him annoyed, "You know we would have loved to have come and watch your game," she informs him.

"That would have ruined our date," he kids.

"See I told you," Rita proves her point.

~~~

John gets ready while I go to the box office to get my ticket. I take my assigned seat, it's not a sold out game but it's pretty busy. I'm two rows up centre ice, so I've got a great view.

The warm up starts and he waves once he's noticed me, it took him a few times of skating around before he did. I feel butterflies in my stomach for him, finding myself at the edge of my seat hoping for his sake that he makes a good first impression. The first period the other team scores two goals. I'm crushed. The second period, John's teammate

scores so they're losing 2:1. In the third period, last minute, John tips the puck into the opponents net tying up the game. Oh my God his teammates are so happy for him. They slam into him and fist bump him, because now they have a chance, they are tied 2:2 with a possibility of going into sudden death overtime. John's teammate manages to score the winning goal. I'm elated.

I wait for him at our designated meeting spot and I charge at him with full out adrenaline. He drops his big bag, opens his arms to me and we squeeze each other tight. We release each other pretending to be cool, but the elation hasn't subsided, "I'm so proud of you!" I tell him.

He smiles back, "I can tell," he teases, "Artery Clogger?"

"Totally," I tell him.

I text Rita from the car telling her to meet us there. I encourage her to invite everyone.

John looks over at me, "Who are you texting?"

"Rita, she's meeting us at the restaurant."

"Next time tell me," he insists.

Is he disappointed that I invited them I wonder? "Sure," I say easily, "Next time just you and me." It's hard to believe he only wants to celebrate with me. We've been spending so much time together lately, even though most of it I'm just writing, I can't believe he's not bored of me yet. He never has anyone over to our place, and the only time he goes out is to shop or visit his parents.

We're the first to arrive. The waitress takes our order, "I'm buying," I offer.

"After your next book," he says.

I look at the waitress, "He won!" I say proudly, she thinks its about who's paying the bill. "Can I have a tricuspid valve with a bruit on the side?"

"I'll have the same," John says closing the menu.

She walks away, "I was on the edge of my seat the entire game," I tell him eagerly.

"I didn't think you were that into hockey."

"I was tonight. You skated great. You were just as good as they were, even better," I boast.

"I wouldn't say that," he says modestly.

Rita, Alex, and Brandon enter the restaurant, "Well?" they ask.

I encourage John to give them the game details, "I helped tie up the game so we played sudden death overtime. We won, but I didn't get the winning goal, I just helped tie it up."

Alex grabs his chair and turns it so that back is touching the table and he straddles it, "You want to explain why you didn't invite us?" He puts John on the spot.

"Too much pressure," he claims.

That makes sense, maybe having his friends watch is harder when there's already enough pressure from him just having to play in this league, "It was boring," I lie.

"Sure," Brandon says in utter disbelief.

"Rita told us you and John are dating?" Alex interrogates.

"I said no such thing, but Alex, you have something to tell everyone don't you?" Rita starts him off.

Alex gives her a dirty look before directing his response to me, "Melissa and I are officially dating now."

My gut feels like it's twisted in a tight ball, "That's great," I say with a strained voice, genuinely happy for him but not quick enough to hide my initial gut reaction because I see John noticed. I know he'll be asking me tonight how I really feel, it's not like Melissa and I are friends.

"You're okay with that?" Rita confirms.

"It doesn't matter if she's okay with it," Alex says, "it's not going to change anything if she's not. I've tried multiple times to get her back, she keeps turning me down, all of you tell me I should be moving on."

"I'm in the room, and I'm totally cool with it," I tell Alex. "I do want you to move on, Melissa and I will become friends again no worries," I reassure him.

~~

Later that night while we're in bed John's quieter than normal. I wait for him to say something but he doesn't. I suspect my reaction to Alex is bothering him but at the same time, if it was, he would come right out and ask about it. I notice his rhythmic breathing, he's asleep. He must have been really tired. I roll away from him facing the wall, telling mom I love her in my mind and closing my eyes to sleep. Today was a happy day.

10

It didn't take long for John's promotion to the Minor Hockey League to make it around our school. He's become the school's overnight sensation. People in the hallways who didn't even know him are congratulating him, on last night's game.

Rita and I are having our lunch when Delilah comes to our table asking to sit with us. She's very timid.

"Sure," we instantly agree. She carefully places her tray on our table and sits next to Rita. She's risking her life with the macaroni, but ignorance is bliss so I don't tell her about the gastrointestinal problems I suffered last week from that lunch. Come to think of it, I think that's why I farted in front of John and Rita. I had two helpings earlier that day, I paid the price with embarrassment!

"How's your macaroni?" I ask making conversation.

"Delicious," she gushes. "You want some?" she offers.

Just from the two minutes of sitting with her, I like her. She seems nice, "No thanks, I'm okay."

"I'm sorry about your mom. I've wanted to tell you that for a while now, but we don't really hang out and I didn't want you to think I'm weird," she doesn't maintain eye contact, they drop to her plate.

"Thanks, it's been a very difficult road for me," I admit.

"If you ever need anything," she offers.

"That's nice of you, but I'm doing okay," I tell her.

We spend the rest of the lunch hour together, and just before it ends Delilah leaves us a few minutes before class starts.

"Why do you think she wanted to join us," I ask Rita.

"Maybe she finds us genuinely interesting?" Rita guesses.

"You know she likes John," I tell Rita.

"Seriously? How do you know that?"

I smile at her mischievously, "She told me when you were getting your dessert."

"Get out!" Rita says.

"Yup! I promised her when she's not around I will casually mention her to him. Let him know she's crushing on him but not make her look desperate if you know what I mean."

Rita looks stunned, "You're setting him up with her?"

"Sure why not?" I ask confused, "Maybe he likes her."

Rita shakes her head knowingly at me, "He doesn't WANT her, he wants you."

"We're friends. He knows it and I know it," I say stubbornly. I see him coming down the hall towards us, "There he is, I'm going to tell him," I inform Rita.

"I thought you were supposed to be casual," Rita warns.

He comes over to us, carrying his books, Alex is walking next to him, "Hey," he says to us.

"Hi," we say in unison. "John, I have something to tell you," I sing to him almost taunting him.

He looks at me with curiosity, "What's up?"

"You know Delilah?" I ask.

"Yes," he says suspiciously.

"A little bird told me she might like you." I smile at him. It's fun playing matchmaker.

"Who's the bird?" John asks.

"Delilah," Alex calls it.

"Tell her thanks, but no thanks, I'm not interested," John says instantly.

"What's wrong with Delilah? She's nice, pretty, why don't you like her?"

"Told you," Rita says knowingly under her breath.

"Ya, why don't you like her," Alex mocks me.

"Fuck off Alex," John says uncomfortably. "I'm going to class," he storms off.

"What's up with him?" I ask Rita cluelessly. "I don't want to tell Delilah he's absolutely not interested in her, it's going to hurt her feelings," I confide. "What should I say to her?"

"I'm sure you'll come up with something," she says. The bell goes off and we disperse to our classes.

~~

I see Delilah sitting a few rows up from me two classes later, maybe I'll tell her when class is over. I start daydreaming about how our courses are finishing for the summer. We can start enjoying the weather without worrying about homework or grades for a while. My acceptance or decline letters should be coming in any day now. I notified the colleges about my change of address along with the post office but some of the colleges told me they already mailed out their decisions. I've been getting John to drive me home so I can check the mail there (Where mom and I lived) and sometimes I'll ask him to take me to the graveyard for a visit.

The bell startled me back to reality. I collect my books quickly to catch up with Delilah. She's standing as I reach her desk, "Hey!" I greet her, "How are you?"

She smiles, "Good," she drawls.

I think there's a hint of southern accent in her voice I never noticed before. "Where are you from?" I ask with curiosity.

"Arkansas," Delilah smiles, "You picked up on the accent?"

"Sure did," I drawl back. "I didn't get a chance to talk to John yet, why don't you come over for dinner, pretend like you're hanging out with me. It will give you a chance to spend time with him." I couldn't bring myself to telling her the truth.

"You LIVE with him?" She asks.

"Ya, but we're just friends. So what do you say, you want to come over tonight, I'll make dinner and we'll monopolize the television? I'll ask Rita too."

"Sure, sounds fun," she says. We exchange numbers and I tell her where I live. I start really looking forward to tonight. I have matchmaker in my blood!

Time slows down to a crawl as my anticipation for tonight builds. I don't think John has practice tonight but if he does, he usually shows up shortly after dinner. We'll just act casual and watch television. He can't think Rita is my only girlfriend, I have more than just her. Maybe if she hangs out with me enough, he'll become attracted to her. She's nice enough. Better if she hooks up with him rather than me. I don't need a cheater. I don't want her getting hurt either though. Maybe instead of hooking them up, I can talk her out of liking him, who knows! She's better off with a more academic kind of guy.

I make baked chicken and salad for dinner, before mixing up a chocolate chip cookie dough recipe I searched up. By the time I hear the first knock on the door, I have the apartment smelling amazing. I hurry to answer, "Hi!" I all but sing.

"Hi," she smiles taking a step in, "I can smell the food from the hallway!"

"Chicken, salad, and fresh made chocolate chip cookies," I rhyme off the menu. "I also have coolers which are like spiked pop, the alcohol level won't touch you if you just have one." She follows me into the kitchen, "Would you like one?"

"Sure," she says. "Is he here?" she whispers.

"No, not yet, he's probably at hockey practice. I grab her cooler before checking to see if his bag is here. Yup, he's at hockey," I tell her.

"Oh," she flutters, "I get to see him after practice, that's so cool!"

"If he showers," I kid. "You don't want to be anywhere near him if he hasn't had one at the rink."

"I'll take him hot and sweaty," she says loudly, gushing and not expecting him to step in but he did at that very moment.

He looks up and doesn't manage to mask the surprise in his eyes, "Hi?" I can finish his thoughts, 'what's she doing here,' but he manages to refrain from saying it.

I answer his unfinished thought, "I invited Delilah and Rita over for dinner, there's enough for you, we're going to watch a movie."

"Cool," he says walking towards the bedroom, "I got loads of homework," he grumbles.

"There's only a few days left of school, you can't have that much," I call him out. "Do it later," I pressure.

"Okay," he agrees because he's clearly on the spot.

The door rings again, thank goodness, Rita's finally here. I open it, "Hi!"

"Smells so good in the hallway, what's your neighbour cooking?" Because it can't be possibly something I'm cooking, Rita insults me.

"It's my cooking!"

"Yum," she says walking in like she owns the place, "Can I have a cooler?" She walks to the fridge not waiting for an answer, "Delilah, do you want one?"

"I already have one thanks Rita," she says from the couch.

Rita looks at me, "Is John here?"

I point to the bedroom, "He's doing his thing," I say having no idea what he's really doing, probably pouting or something.

I start dishing out the salad on four plates and place the drinks next to each of them. Our table looks nice or rather I'm really hungry, "Dinner!" I call out.

Delilah, Rita, and I all stare at John while he joins us. "How was hockey?" I engage him in conversation.

"Tiring," he grumps.

"I'd love to watch you play!" Delilah chirps. "It must be so exciting playing with older players because you're so good."

"It's harder," he contributes.

"Alex and Brandon have to wait until September to play on the Niagara team," Rita complains, "I want to watch you play John. Can you get us tickets?"

"When's your next game?" I ask.

"I'm not sure," he answers evasively. "Where's Alex and Brandon?"

Rita waves her fork around, "They didn't want to come, they said if they wanted to watch a cheesy hook-up, they would watch a dating game on television." She covers her mouth and starts laughing, "I'm sorry, I just had to say it."

Delilah turns beet red and finds herself speechless. I look up at John who looks at me. I shrug, "We're not setting you up," I deny. "Delilah is our friend and we wanted to watch a movie with her, right Rita."

"Right," she agrees.

We finish our dinner talking about school and how it's going to be over soon. Delilah wants to be an o.r. nurse, telling us she loves watching operations on television. Rita still hasn't decided what she wants to do, she's secretly hoping Brandon makes it to the Major hockey league and I continue to think physiotherapy is my profession of choice. Then we discuss which colleges we applied to and why. John sits quietly listening to us cluck until it was time for our movie, that's when he politely excuses himself from our company.

"What do you think he thought of me?" Delilah whispered.

"Oh I think he likes you," Rita shit disturbs.

"Shush, I want to watch the movie!" I tell them but they look at me and I motion that he can hear everything we're saying. Rita giggles.

"Isn't John a cutie?" she asks Delilah.

Her eyes grow big, "Beyond dreamy. Do you really think he'll let us all go to his game?"

"Of course," I chime in. Then we really do watch the movie, all of it, damn thing ended too soon and then I wished we watched a second one but they had to go home and

now I have to go to bed. I try procrastinating, taking a long shower and slowly getting dressed before brushing my teeth. I go back into our room and he's already in bed. He appears to be sleeping so I creep onto my side, but the second the mattress moves he's aware I'm in next to him.

"That was awful," he tells me.

"You didn't like the food?"

"You know what I'm talking about," he gripes.

"She's perfect for you, what's wrong with her!" I argue.

"She's not YOU," he accidentally says turning away.

"No, she's not me. She's not mourning her mom, she's trusting and hasn't been cheated on by several guys., I'm scarred whereas she's unblemished. I have made it so clear to you, we're just friends,"

"Fine! It's crystal now, you couldn't have gone more out of your way more to prove it, if you tried." he says irritably getting out of bed, "I'm sleeping on the couch tonight, friend!"

"Don't be mad," I plead, "I just want you to be happy."

"I need to be alone!" He storms off into the other room.

I can't answer.

It's the first night since being together, we've slept apart.

11

The doorbell rings, I must have been in a deep sleep because at first I think it's my phone, when I reach for it, it's off. John comes into the room half naked with a blanket thrown over his shoulders. He looks exhausted, "It's for you." he grumbles, he's still edgy from yesterday's argument.

He slides into his side of the bed as I'm sliding out. I grab my housecoat from our tiny closet and expect to find our little ancient landlady to be standing at the door, instead I see through the peephole it's Will. I open the door, "Hi," I say unsure why he's come. I glance at the stove for the time, it's seven, "What are you doing here so early?"

"Do you have a minute?" He asks stepping in.

"Sure," I rub my eyes, "Is everything okay?" I ask quietly hoping John's able to go back to sleep. the last thing I want is a confrontation after Will leaves.

"More than, I got a call this morning, one of the largest UK publishers wants to meet with us. They must have read your book and want you to write a series for them, I didn't get all the details but they assure me it's the genre you already write in. I told you your talented! It's very uncommon for a publisher to offer you a deal after reading your book from a different publisher. They booked us two first class tickets to fly out today. We need to be at the airport in an hour, our flight leaves in three. You have to pack a bag."

"This is so exciting," I exclaim, "but what about school?" I ask.

"I'll text them from the airport, we have to go, hurry!"

I grab my suitcase throwing my best outfits, pi's, phone and charger in. I take a quick shower donning comfortable clothing for the plane. Will's made himself comfortable on the couch while I was getting ready. John hasn't stirred.

"That was quick," Will says approvingly, "we better go."

We hustle out and I lock the door behind us completely forgetting to leave John a note, I'll have to call him from the airport. Will parks and when we find the terminal, our boarding passes are there as promised, we just show our i.d. and check our bags in. We have under two hours before our plane leaves. It's too early to call John, not point in waking him, it makes more sense to do it when we land.

We don't talk much until we board, Will is notifying the school and saying his good-byes to Gwen and V. Once on the plane we start figuring out times. We left at ten and our flight is eight hours, so that means we arrive at dinner time our time but in Manchester it will be eleven pm. we'll be tired, so I'll have to text him the next day when I wake up or after our meeting. If he notices I'm gone and can't reach me, I'm sure he'll call Rita, who I haven't been able to reach..

"How are you doing," he asks me.

"I'm okay, it's hard but John and Rita have been so supportive. I'm really lucky to have them in my life."

"You and John?"

"Are just friends," I finish.

"Have you been writing more?" He asks.

"Whenever I can find the time. I enjoy it, it's cathartic."

"That's great, a lot of people aren't able to do what they are passionate about as a profession, you are one of the lucky ones."

"I want to be a physiotherapist," I insist, "Not just a writer."

"You're very driven," he observes.

"I guess I picked that trait up from mom, she had to provide for both of us on her own, we had it really rough sometimes. She didn't have anyone she could lean on financially, although she had a close knit group of friends."

"Your mom was always independent," he remembers. "We were young, and I was stupid."

"Do you have any regrets?" I ask him.

"Tons, but the biggest one is not being able to work it out so I could spend time with you."

"We're not dead yet," I say weirdly, my way of giving him hope. We have some lunch together before the movie starts. I don't really watch it, getting caught up in my own thoughts, imagining if something happened to the plane, who would really miss me? Rita, John, Alex, Brandon, and Landon, my only family is sitting right next to me and I haven't made it easy for him, just the opposite. Instead of giving us a chance to get to know each other, I chose to move out and live with John. There's no saying John and I will live together forever. He can find a girlfriend or wife and want to leave me, I definitely can't get involved with him because that would mean letting my guard down.

Will, on the other hand, will always be my biological father. He's clearly told me that he wanted me in his life, and I literally slammed the door in his face when I left. The only time I've ever received him well was when he was putting himself on the line for me. I have a dire need to trust someone, nobody can be living the way I've been living, not happily anyway. He's all I have.

I reach for his hand.

His abdomen shakes once and I see him pretending to be engrossed in the movie. He swipes the tear I noticed running down his cheek before he pinches the bridge of his nose. He's trying not to cry.

I don't let go.

12

We're one of the last flights to land tonight, shortly after the expected time. Having only carry-ons we get through the gates in record time. There's a man holding a sign with our names on it, heading in his direction we smile acknowledgment, "We're Will and Carrie," I introduce ourselves.

"Nice to meet you! My name's Aaron and I've been asked to take you to a hotel close to your publisher, he says. "I actually work for the publishing company."

"Great, I'm beat," Will complains.

"Me too," I look up at him, "it's been a long flight."

"An enjoyable one," he adds.

"Is that all your luggage?" Aaron the driver looks with disbelief.

"Sure is," Will replies.

The driver looks confused, "Okay, I was under the impression this is your first stop of two, but it won't be the first time I've ever been wrong. You seem to have packed very lightly."

Will and I look confused. "News to us," he says.

We drive fifteen minutes from the Manchester airport until we stop at an impressive hotel. The publisher booked us in joining rooms overlooking the city. Will makes sure I get into my room okay, before he opens his door.

"Goodnight," he says as he starts going in his room.

"Goodnight dad," I try on for size.

He pops back out into the hallway, "Did you just?"

I smile, "You bet."

I wasn't ready to full out hug him so I quickly escaped into my room. I offered an olive branch, there is hope.

~~~

Will knocked on my door early the next morning, "Time to get ready," he said. We meet outside his room, he's dressed in a suit. "You look sharp," he says.

"Thank you!" I bounce a curl in my hand, "I'm kind of nervous. Do we have time for breakfast? I'm starving."

"Continental," he says leading the way to the elevator. The hotel has a room with breakfast you basically do yourself or restaurants where they serve you. The do it yourself one is no different then the average hotels we have in Canada, but the restaurants: their breakfasts look delicious. I really feel we're being deprived.

I quickly grab what I want and join dad at the table. It's easier to think dad than to say it, more often than not I refer to him as Will out of habit. I set my plate down and then dig in my purse for my phone, it's not there. I must have left it in the room. "Can I borrow your phone? I must have left mine in the room?" I ask.

"Sure," he reaches in his pocket and hands it to me.

"Should I call or text?" I ask.

"I don't have data," he grins, "you're going to have to call."

I try Rita's number and it goes directly to voice mail, and I can't leave a message but her mailbox isn't set up. It's so frustrating. I try again thinking maybe I dialled or did something wrong. I didn't, the same thing happens again. Her phone must be off or something so I try John, I don't want either of them to worry about me.

He answers on the second ring, "Hello?"

"John? I can hardly hear you!"

"Hello?" he repeats.

"Can you hear me?" I ask. "John!"

People in the help yourself style breakfast start looking over at me in annoyance. I cover the phone with my hand, "I'm trying to call Canada," I explain to the onlookers. They nod now seemingly as though they now are more approving.

I listen again, and the line is dead. "It's dead," I inform Will, "Can I try again?"

"Later honey, we really have to eat and then go or we're going to be late, we have to be there in forty-five minutes. A car is going to be outside in ten."

~~

"That went well, what do you think," I ask my father in the car.

"Well?" his eyes bulge, "They offered you royalties that are twice my salary for a series of three books."

"To be fair," I correct, "the average person takes a year just to write one book and they want me to write three in two, so they want me to squish three years into two." I analyze.

"I make that in two YEARS," dad points out.

I grin, "I'm so happy! I can't wait to tell John and Rita. I have so much research to do," I'm talking more to myself than him. I can't believe they kicked you out of the room when we discussed what the series was going to be about, it's not like I would keep it a secret from you."

"What's it going to be about?" Dad asks.

"It's a secret," I tease turning my attention away from him. "My earnings can pay for my University and I can contribute more to the rent."

"What University are you thinking of going to?" Dad asks, "I'd like to help you financially," he offers.

"You don't have to, not with my new contract." I smile. "I applied to all the local colleges," I inform him. I wanted to stay close to Toronto because John's playing for the Ice Rats and I'd miss him and Rita, they're my closest friends. I anticipate he's going to make it to the Major hockey league soon.

"He must be talented. Which University in Canada is the best for physiotherapy?"

"Luckily, the one close to the arena."

"That's great, so when you're in school, I'll still get to see you."

"I'll make a point of it," I reassure him.

"So when do we have to leave?" I ask.

"According to the itinerary, we have time for a shower and nap before New York. They should have told us, about the second trip, it's like they forgot on purpose."

"You think so?" I ask.

"Well, forgetting to tell us that we have to fly to New York City is a big mistake as far as I'm concerned. What if we had plans."

"Right!" I agree. "Oh well, we get to fly home tomorrow night so that's not too bad," I admit. The second we get back to our room, I start searching for my phone, no luck. I ask Will if I can borrow his phone again. He gives it to me and I try Rita, same thing happens now that happened earlier, so I try John.

He gets it on the third ring sounding out of breath, "Hello?"

"Hi John?" I say happily, "How are you?"

Dad mouthed to me, 'You got through?'.

I nod yes. He gives me a thumbs up and mouths, 'I'm going to take a shower and have a nap.'

"Okay," I say to him before I get back to John, "Sorry, how are you?"

"How am I?" He asks incredulously. "How am I? Where the fuck are you? I've been worried sick!" he says angrily.

"I'll hang up," I warn him.

"No, no, no, don't hang up! Where are you? Are you okay? Did you leave me?"

"Leave me?" I ask "I never once thought of leaving you, why would you think that?"

"I wake up and you're gone what do you think I'm going to think," he asks.

"My father came over to our apartment early in the morning and said that a publisher wanted to fly us to Manchester England for a meeting," I start explaining. "It was all very rushed."

"You're in Manchester England?" he asks in disbelief.

"Yes, I've been commissioned to write a trilogy for a publisher in Manchester England. They are paying me twice my father's yearly salary for three books. They tell me what they want me to write about but I still have some artistic expression."

"What do you have to write about?" He asks.

"I can't tell you," I chuckle. He doesn't laugh though so I think he's still in a tither.

"They have phones in Manchester," he says flatly.

"By the time we got here, it was late and I was tired so I figured I'd call you in the morning. We were rushed in the morning. I couldn't get through to you or Rita. Then on the way to the meeting, I forgot my phone, but really I lost it and this was the first chance I got to get a hold of you, and I'm using my father's phone," I gasp.

"He's not Will to you anymore, you're calling him father?" He asks.

"Yes, I'm calling him father, sometimes even dad. I can't keep everyone out because I'm afraid of getting hurt, keeping everyone out also hurts and I don't want to be that person who's scared of loving someone."

"These resolutions," he asks.

"I had a lot of time to think on the plane."

"I see," he says. "It sounds like this trip has been good for you, you've had a lot of time to reflect on your emotions."

"I have, namely Will as my closest living relative and I have to forgive the mistakes he made when he was young."

"That's so mature of you," John compliments me.

"So you're not mad at me anymore," I confirm.

"Don't ever make worry me like that again," he warns me. "but no, I'm not mad anymore. When are you coming home? Do you like it there?"

"I haven't had a chance to sight see. We're coming home late tomorrow night, we are stopping off at the publisher's sister company in New York City."

"What for?" He asks.

"Your guess is as good as mine, they forgot to tell us they're sending us there," I confide to John.

"I'll call Rita and tell her you're okay, she must be going out of her mind with worry like I did. I'll leave the details for you to relay, I know the way you girls like chatting."

"Thanks for calling her, I'm sure she's not that worried. Brandon keeps her busy," I admit to him.

There's a pause in our conversation, "I was so worried, I'm relieved you're okay," if a tone can be affectionate, his is. "I'll pick you up when you get back, just text me."

"That's great thanks, but don't get all soft on me," I warn him, "I changed my tune only in my fathers circumstances. You are and will always be a hockey player who follows a relationship code of conduct I absolutely cannot accept. I need someone who'll remain loyal and love me for who I am. I've been burned twice and I refuse to let it happen again."

He laughs, "Who's asking you for a relationship? I'm just glad you're not dead in a gutter somewhere. When I started calling around looking for you, I tried Delilah and took your advice, I asked her out."

"Oh," vomit rose up to my throat for a second, "that's great," I force myself to encourage him.

Another pause occurs, this time longer than the last. Sadly, he's moving on.

John asking Delilah out on a date seems to cause me a severe case of reflux. He's moving on. I imagine John with Delilah. The possible repercussions of me setting them up begins to haunt me now: Is she going to tag along everywhere we go? Is she going to be his only other topic of conversation other than hockey? What if he doesn't spend

anymore time with me, or stops sleeping with me? I'm suddenly finding myself wanting to call him back, telling him to forget it. He doesn't need her, but how can I keep a guy from dating someone, when I won't date him, it's selfish.

I turn my thoughts off and have a shower before lying down and trying to nap. My not so estranged father and I will be flying to New York to meet my editor before flying home. I'm going to be exhausted after this trip!

~~

The Big Apple is the busiest city I've ever seen as our airport cab tries navigating with the rest of the cabs uptown. My appointment is with Hunter. To clarify, the Manchester office said I will be visiting their sister company in New York City to meet Hunter my editor, not his first name or his last name, just the name he goes by. He's sited as one of the best editors in the world and I have no idea what to expect, but the Manchester office warned me not to question any of his changes and if he has an idea run with it, and absolutely under no circumstances am I ever to question his judgment or take my idea over his, he's a genius.

The appointment is in Hunter's penthouse (It's too late at night to be in the office). The building is not impressive but the fact that he lives on the upper two floors of it is. We take the elevator up and Will is really quiet, he must be so tired and missing the rest of his family, "We'll be home soon," I reassure.

He nods, as the elevator lands on the first floor of Hunter's penthouse.

A man is waiting for us in his hallway as we get off. He looks to be in his early thirty's wearing a grey suit with a shaved head and a goatee. I question whether this guy is Hunter or some type of security guard because he's much younger than I expect and doesn't appear to be a literary guy, he seems oddly sexy depicting an unusual level of self-confidence, not to mention his smile is infectious.

"Hi, are you Hunter?" I ask.

"Yes nice to meet you, Carrie and Will?"

"Yes," dad confirms

We shake hands, "Come in," he invites, "can I get you something to eat or drink, I know you've had a hectic schedule."

"We grabbed something at the airport we're fine," my dad propels the conversation.

Hunter brings us into a sitting room but it's out of a magazine perfect. I've heard about the astronomical real estate prices of New York and if his sitting room looks like this and he owns two floors of this building he's richer than our unimaginable dreams.

"You aren't to write any description of what you see right now in any of your three books," he informs me very telepathically. I nod. Dad's eyebrows go up. I'm awestruck. Hunter's eyes are fixed on me, "You need to cut your hair, lose the curl and, I want dark rimmed glasses that suit your face for the back cover, less 'hometown' more 'edgy'. I'll tell you when you need to do it and where to go. If I need to see you, drop what you're doing and get your ass on a plane. You should be doing thirty-five hundred to five thousand words a day. I want it sent to me every night. You will find yourself always wanting to please me because if I like it you know it's good. Make sure you read all my text messages, emails, and ANSWER your phone. I don't want you coming back to me whining, 'I didn't know' or 'you should have told me,' because I will have told you and you're work will be scratched out and you'll have to redo it if you don't listen, am I understood?"

"Yes sir," I say mesmerized, "I'm accountable to you."

"I control everything you do for the next two years."

"Yes," I confirm.

He smirks approval, He hands me a slip of paper with his phone number and email address on it, "Text and email me when you get home, don't forget. A cab is waiting downstairs to take you to the airport," he's finished with us.

Dad looks at me like 'What the fuck?' and I give him a warning glare to keep his mouth shut. We leave.

"What a cocky s.o.b. I've never seen you act like that," dad's astonished.

"Nobody's ever made me feel that way," I tell him.

"What way? Bossed around?" he asks.

"Harnessed."

"You mean controlled," dad analyzes.

"No harnessed," I inform him, "There's a difference."

## 13

We land in the Toronto airport immediately before midnight. I reassure Will I'll be fine until John gets here to pick me up. Finally he leaves.

Moments later, it's just like the movies, I spot John at the end of the hallway, in full out excitement, I charge at him leaving my bag behind me, until I feel his muscular arms squeezing me, lifting me in the air and spinning me around.

"Oh My God, it's so good to see you," I gush running my fingers through his short dark hair which is absolutely unnecessary and copping a feel of his thick neck. He lowers me down using one of his arms to press me harder against him. His eyes bore into me, it's the most exotic and natural thing in the world, he kisses me, explosive, aggressive, utterly amazing.

For a split second my guard drops and I'm consumed by him. Literally I want his mouth all over me, I want him penetrating me more than I want to breathe. His electricity makes my body tingle. He's stone hard. He pulls my clinging body from his so he can grab my bag. "So tell me how was your trip," he asks.

Did I just imagine that? We kissed, so I know THAT happened but how come he's already recovered while I'm still a drooling hot mess? I touch my lips as though I'm savouring it, it must have meant way more to me than to him. I'm disappointed and my feelings are hurt but I shake it off because it's just a kiss. "It was great, I met the publisher in Manchester and then I flew to New York to meet my editor. This is really happening."

The plane's double chime rouses me, dad pats me on the shoulder, "We're going to land," he tells me, "Buckle up".

My bowl of fruit is filled with an abundance of juice, oh my! I was dreaming and I'm sorely disappointed.

~~

Dad drives me home. I'm excited to see my BFF's again. I slowly turn the key in the lock, just in case John's sleeping. I open the door and the lights are out, so I creep into our room. He's sleeping almost in the middle of the bed. I won't have that! I change

into fresh PJ's and slide in next to him, but I have to gently tap him, "Shove over handsome, you're in the middle of the bed."

"Did you just call me handsome?" He grins. "Get over here you little shit, I missed you!"

I cuddle into his arms, "Me too," I admit. We didn't part the rest of the night.

14

Rita was knocking on the door before John or I stirred, "I'll get it," he offers. He disappears and then Rita comes into the bedroom like she owns it of course, followed by John.

He gets back into bed next to me, but Rita isn't having it, "Shove over," she orders me. I squat in the middle of them and the interrogation begins.

"Okay, why the fuck didn't you phone us," Rita blasts.

"I tried, at one point I couldn't find my phone so I had to use Will's."

"Did you find it?" She asks, like it's the most important part of the story."

"Yes, it was buried in a mess in the hotel room, I was so relieved when I found it. It's my lifeline," I admit.

"Anyway, John eventually answered."

"You're lucky he answered," she teased me in the most threatening of manners. "So you flew to Manchester and met a publisher who offered you a three book deal, is that right?"

"Yup," I say proudly, "I'm going to be making more money than my father," I brag.

"Wow! I'm so proud of you! What do they want you to write about?"

"I'm not allowed to tell you," I remain tight lipped. "Holy crap!" I freak out scrambling from bed, almost crushing Rita.

"What?" John asks.

I'm too frantic to answer, I start searching through my travel bag, it's not there, then I search through my sweater pocket feeling for that piece of paper and my phone. I text my number and email address pressing send. "I forgot to check in with my editor," I explain, "I was supposed to text Hunter last night! He's going to be pissed!"

Not even sixty-seconds later my phone rings, "Shit!" I curse. "Hello?"

"Carrie?"

"Yes," I answer timidly.

"You were supposed to text me yesterday," he barks sternly.

"I'm sorry." I tell him, "I was tired and I forgot," I explain.

"I want seven thousand words today," he orders.

"Seven-thousand?" I ask in disbelief, "I can't do that much!"

"You can and you will, I want to see commitment from you." Click

My phone chirps, it's a text, I open it and on it is his email address, nothing else.

"Who the fuck is this Hunter dude barking at you?" Asks John, "and did he just hang up on you."

"He's my editor and it's my fault. I told him I would text him last night."

Rita shakes her head disapprovingly, "That doesn't give him reason to hang up on you." She picks up her phone and starts looking at it, "Hunter, New York Editor, he's cute!" she clucks, "Is this him?" She flashes me her phone, "Okay, I'll totally make an exception in his case," she grins.

"Let me see," John says nosily. Rita hands him her phone. "He looks like an ass," John grumbles.

"Do I detect jealousy? Rita prattles.

"No, he's going out with Delilah," I tell her.

"I just told her she can come to a game," he admits.

"GET OUT!" She's shocked then her expression transforms to anger, "You haven't even invited US to one of your games," she says referring to her, Brandon, and Alex.

"Okay," I rush, I need everyone out of here. Get out!"

Rita's brow raises and John looks at me, "Excuse me?"

"I have to write seven thousand words by tonight or Hunter will have my head."

"You haven't even told us what you're writing about," Rita complains.

"It's a secret! Now go. I'll call you if I get done early," I let her know.

Rita looks at John, "Coffee?"

"Hockey," he says apologetically.

I walk Rita to the door and just as she's about to pass through she turns back to me, "I forgot to tell you, Melissa invited all of us to her pool party this Friday."

"Yay," I say sarcastically.

"Will you go?" Rita asks. "She is with Alex, and said you'd try to get along with her, for his sake."

"Sure, if I've finished writing. "

"Good," she says, "I'm looking forward to it."

"Bye Rita." I close the door and now it's just John and I.

John digs in the fridge, "How are you going to write three books and go to school? You are still going to school aren't you?"

"Of course I am. I haven't really thought about time management," I admit, "I'll just have no social life," I smile.

"What about my games? You're still coming to watch me play aren't you? Do you want a bagel?" He asks.

"Sure I'll have a bagel toasted, just bring Delilah to your games!" I say feeling my stomach contents raising again."

"It's not the same." He sounds really serious. "Are you attracted to that Hunter Hot Pants dude?" He waits for my answer.

"There's something seriously sexy about him," I confess.

"Are you attracted to Delilah?" I ask.

"I asked her out to make you angry," he says dryly, "so no, I'm not."

"You are," I reply in lighthearted relief.

"Serious," his eyes bore into me. "I'm only attracted to you."

He challenges me now. Drops the bagels to the floor and chest to chest pushes me up against the counter. The space is tight and just like in my dream he kisses me, natural, aggressive, explosive, utterly amazing. He doesn't let up fisting my hair. Once he's in total control, he expertly slows the kisses down. I don't find myself fighting him off, rather I'm squirming to undress. My consent clear, he scoops me up in his arms like a civilian by a superhero and he makes slow languid love to me in our previously platonic bed.

We crossed a line, we shouldn't have because I fear I'm going to lose what we have over one bout of intimacy taking root. It just can never happen again, but I have no more time to think about it because I have to get up and manage seven thousand words today, or Hunter Hot Pants will be upset with me. (I love the nickname John came up with, he's so jealous, it's funny.)

~~

I'm in the dining room with my laptop frantically typing away when he comes out, "You want to come to my practice?" he offers.

"Too much work," I decline, "Sorry."

He drops his bag next to me, "We'll work it out, give me a chance, the last thing in the world I want to do is hurt you the way the others have."

He moves my hair and lays his lush lips against my neck, my resolve vanishes, "Okay! Please whatever you do don't break my heart!" I face him, "Please," I plead.

"I LOVE YOU," he says kissing me.

I touch the lips that said those beautiful words to me, for my benefit he repeats them, "I love you."

"I love you too, since you cut in at the dance and kissed me," I confess, "the only thing keeping me away from you all this time was my fear of you breaking my heart."

"You never have to worry," He promises.

"When I flew with Will, I decided I don't want to go through life guarding my heart and never truly letting myself love anyone anymore. I trust you."

"Are you sure you can't come to my practice?" He begs.

"Positive!"

John leaves and I'm dying to tell Rita but it's not a five minute discussion with her and the heat is on, so I decide to tell her at Melissa's pool party.

15

We arrive stylishly late because John has an afternoon game and I had to squeeze some writing in. Rita spots us at the door and comes charging at me, "It's about time!"

I grin at her, "Let's get a drink," I suggest, "Do you want one boyfriend?" I ask John for Rita's benefit.

Rita catches it in a beat, "What?!"

"Our platonic bed isn't so platonic anymore," I giggle. "He loves me," I tell her.

Rita tears up, "I'm so happy for you! So you guys are together?" She gushes.

"How much have you had to drink?" I ask.

"Well you weren't here and it was pretty boring so probably way too much," she starts laughing.

"We're a couple now," he says proudly.

"I don't mind sharing my sloppy seconds," Rita makes this funny face as she critically eyes him from head to toe giggling. She always has to be one up on me. "We can compare notes! Brandon is a big improvement she boasts. Where is he?" She starts scanning the room.

I look at John and shout whisper, "It's going to be a long night."

"I'll get my own drink, and talk to Delilah about us," he suggests.

"Great idea, I'll try sobering Rita up and tell her how much I love you."

"You think she'll remember anything?" He asks.

"Probably not, but I don't mind telling her again when she's sober."

"See you soon," he says before leaving.

I see Melissa in the distance, "Hang on," I shout in Rita's ear.

"To what?" she tries joking, I just leave her and walk towards Melissa, who see's me, see her, I can tell her guard is up. The last time I saw Melissa at a party, I literally broke her nose for lying to Alex and then proceeding to cheat on me.

"Thanks for inviting me," I talk loudly over the music, "I know you're going out with Alex and I hope we can be friends. I should never have done what I did to you before."

She nods like what I said was acceptable to her and we shake hands, there forgiven. It feels like a weight has been lifted. We can go forward now.

John comes from behind me and wraps his arms around me. It feels good having a boyfriend, I turn to him and kiss him, "I can't find Delilah."

"My drink?"

"Oh shit, I forgot," he says.

"Not acceptable," I pinch his butt. My phone vibrates, I pull it from my pocket, it's a call from Hunter. "I have to take this," I tell John loudly and then run to the front door so I can go outside before he hangs up, needing quiet. The noise turns from loud to background as the door closes, I swipe my phone, "Hello?"

"You liked that? Oh, ya, I can do that. It's going in the right direction? Don't stop now? I can change the name, should I change it now or when I revise? Sure, I'll do that. Oh, I'm at a pool party. You want me to what? Seriously. Right now? But I just. Sure, okay. Bye."

"I look at John apologetically, Hunter wants me to go home and finish writing the section I was working on."

"You wrote all afternoon it's Friday night. Call him back and tell him no," John orders.

I look at John slowly shaking my head, "I can't do that. I've been told to do whatever he tells me to. I'm not to question anything he says or does. Honestly, he's making me cut my hair before the first book is published, he's even dictating where and how it's to be done. If he tells me he wants to see me I have to get on a plane and go, right now he wants me to go home and write, so that's what I have to do, the UK publishers told me that. Basically, for the next two years, I'm to do what he says."

"That's ridiculous," John says disapprovingly. "So if he says jump,"

"How high," I tell him.

"I don't want you cutting your hair," he deflates.

My phone rings again, it's him and I roll my eyes with annoyance to John, "Hi, no I haven't. I was just leaving. Okay, I'll call you from the apartment, ya, as soon as I get there, ya." I hang up the phone, "Can you take me home now please, before he gets mad."

John doesn't answer me and starts walking in the direction of the car, "We don't want him getting mad," John says sarcastically, "He called you just to see if you left yet?"

"Ya, well we are on a time line," I remind John.

"Don't make excuses for him," he growls.

~~

I arrive home and open my laptop finding the spot I was working on, when I call Hunter. I'm alone now and it's nice and quiet, I encouraged John to go back to the party. He doesn't know or understand that I'd rather be home writing in my make believe world, than making small talk with a bunch of people I hardly know or taking care of Rita who's drunk beyond belief.

"I'm home now," I tell Hunter. "Just like you told me to," I point out.

"Good," he says, "I want you to make your Mandy character more submissive. You want her strong but a little less strong psychologically, and she can't lose herself completely even though Dylan is domineering. You have to make her obedient without appearing weak, it's a fine line. Modern readers don't like weak women. Dylan has to captivate her, she's enthralled by him. How you paint your picture of them early on dictates how your reader will relate to them later."

"You know when I'm writing, mentally I'm putting myself in Mandy's character, she's me," I inform him.

"I know," he says, and I completely believe him, because I'm definitely not the first writer he's worked with.

He's quiet. "If it helps you, Imagine I'm your Dylan. What would I do to rein Mandy in."

"Have Mandy leave her boyfriend at a party to work for Dylan even though she spent the entire day just doing that?"

"You got it! I have complete control over you, but you don't feel the choice wasn't yours. I make you want to listen to me. Readers want to read about the Alpha male having unspeakable powers over the heroine without her appearing spineless or like she can't critically think for herself."

"Just because I listened to you doesn't mean I have no spine or can't think for myself," I tell him. "My obedience of leaving the party was ultimately my own decision to make, you didn't have to force me," I surmise.

"Exactly, now finish the section and send it to me tonight. I'll be waiting for it and I'll calling you in the morning."

“Okay, bye!” I say eagerly, writing is going to be so much easier after what he’s told me. I can just imagine what Hunter Hot Pants would do when I write for my character Dylan.

I’m still working on the book when John creeps in. I rub my eyes and glance at the time in the corner of my screen, Oh my it’s two in the morning! John stops creeping when he see’s I’m awake, “Are you coming to bed?” He asks.

“Just five more minutes I plead.” He disappears into the bedroom. Five turns to ten, into twenty. I hit send at four in the morning. John’s sleeping now and I’m tip toeing to bed hoping not to wake him.

16

The ring of my phone wakes me. I reach for it on my nightstand to answer. I glance over at John's side, bare, the bathroom door is closed so I assume he's showering, "Hello?"

It's Hunter, "Hi."

"Hi, How are you?"

"Pleased with last night's work. Keep it up. Take today off start fresh tomorrow. I want to see you in my office Wednesday fifteen thousand words and idea's with where you want the story to go. Your flight will be booked, I'll text you the time to be at the terminal."

Click.

He's so rude! I chalk it up to him being busy. John comes out of the bathroom, "Who was that?"

"Hunter."

"What did he want and what time did you finish last night, I must have fallen asleep."

"He wants me to see him in his office Wednesday with fifteen thousand words done and I didn't finish until four."

"Isn't his office in New York City?" Asks John.

"Yes," I grin. "Kinda feeling important," I smirk.

He comes over to me and plants one on my lips. "Glad you're happy. Can you make time for my game tonight? I've invited the gang minus Delilah."

"As a matter of fact, Hunter Hot Pants said he's happy with my work and told me to take the night off tonight."

"After ruining the party for me, how kind of him," John says sarcastically. "Breakfast?"

"Wouldn't mind if we do, you're becoming quite the chef John, maybe when your career finishes you might want to open your own restaurant?"

He starts opening the frozen ready made breakfast sandwich, "I might consider that!"



We are first row, close to the team, John managed to get us great seats this time. Alex and Brandon talk hockey, while Rita and I catch up.

“Okay, why did you desert me last night at the party,” Rita asks crossly.

“Hunter Hot Pants called, when he tells me to do something I have to listen. The Manchester office informed me that whatever he says goes, he’s a genius editor.”

“So what did he say to you?”

“We talked about how the main female character should be in the book in relation to the main male, and he told me to go home and write.”

“Did you tell him you were at a party?”

“He didn’t care.”

“So he says jump and you really say how high?”

I nod emphatically. “He’s really smart.”

“Was John upset you had to leave the party?”

“No he wasn’t too bad.” I take a few kernels of her popcorn. “I didn’t go to bed until four and then Hunter Hot Pants John came up with that name called me and told me he wants to see me in his office with fifteen thousand words done and storyline ideas on Wednesday.”

“Does he have an office in Toronto?” Rita asks confused.

“Nope, he’s flying me there.”

“Wow, big shot!” Rita comments. “What’s he going to be doing with you Wednesday?” she asks.

I stop to think, “He didn’t mention actually! I have no idea. Hopefully he’s not making me cut my hair yet, I’m not ready for that,” I shiver, I need mental time to prepare myself.

“He’s making you cut off your hair?” She’s astounded.

“I have to present an image, he knows what sells, I just do whatever he tells me to, that’s what I’ve been advised.”

John’s okay with all of this?” Rita questions.

“He doesn’t want me to cut my hair,” I tell Rita.

“Your editor is like the sexiest bald guy I’ve ever seen, I don’t even trust myself or you with him,” she admits. “Okay, change of topic: I have something serious I need to

tell so you can help me figure out what to do. I have to almost mouth it because I don't want," she points towards Brandon, "to hear."

Rita lowers her voice considerably, almost mouthing the words, "Remember when I tested the waters telling Brandon I was pregnant even though I wasn't? Well I suspected I was."

"But you aren't," I ask hopefully. I'm not liking where this is going.

"I am," She mouths, "and he's going to shit!"

I sadly shake my head, hoping I've heard wrong. "What?" I get her to repeat it because there's a one percent chance my lip reading skills aren't perfect.

"I'm pregnant," she re-mouths. "I'm scared to tell him, he probably won't even believe me." she predicts.

"I have an idea." I mouth to her. "Get John to break the news for you, Brandon will believe John."

She considers it, "Ya, it's a total chicken shit way to go but that's what I'll do. You'll tell John for me?"

"Sure, your my BFF, I will support any decision you make."

"Are you keeping it?" I ask.

"Bloody right, I've hooked a cash cow! I'm set for life as long as he makes it into the Major leagues and he's almost there."

"There's no guarantee he's going to make it," I warn her.

"Of course he'll make it, he's almost as good as John, and John's a step away."

"I'll talk to John tonight and text you about how it goes down."

"Thanks," Rita looks relieved.

There's a minute left in the third period, we're losing by two goals, it doesn't look good, Rita and I stand up to get a head start on the leaving crowd, "Maybe next time," she says indifferently.

"He has a playoff game Thursday," I tell Rita.

"Sit down!" the boys demand. "Jeez THIS is a play-off game too!" Brandon snaps.

"I'm definitely not telling him today," Rita says quietly chuckling.

Brandon, Alex, and Rita decide to go out to eat, I'm not sure if John wants to go or if he's too tired, so I wait and ask him after his shower. While I'm waiting, I have a brilliant idea! I can't wait to meet up at the Clogged Artery to spring it on Rita.

We arrive at the restaurant, and they already at a table.

"Sorry that you lost, man," Brandon said respectfully to John.

"At least you got an assist out of the game. You still have a chance if you win Thursday," Alex consoles.

John waves down the waitress and orders for us, I usually get the same thing so he doesn't bother asking me. I grab the vacant chair next to Rita and say quietly, "Come with me to New York. That's when John can break the news."

Rita's eyes lit up, "I'd love to, but how am I going to get the money?"

"Ask your parents, if they can't help, I'll see what I can do, we'll only be there a day or two." I tell her.

"Okay!" She says quietly but with a tone of eagerness to it.

"What are you two scheming about?" John asks suspiciously.

"Just girl stuff," I evade, deciding to break everything to him when we talk tonight. I look forward to when we lay in bed having heart to hearts, but I'm leery of tonight's discussion. He might even refuse to do it.

Minutes later once we've been served our food Delilah walks in with a guy who has his arm around her shoulders. Alex nudges John, "Look who just walked in."

John looks knowingly at the couple, "I set them up he's the goalie we played against tonight," John tells us waving at him. "Good game tonight," he compliments, "I'm planning on getting a few past you Thursday's game," John warns with a smile.

The goalie smiles back, "Your series is ending this Tuesday if I have anything to do with it." He says.

"Hi!" I greet Delilah. "Do you guys want to join us?"

"Thanks, but another couple is coming," she says pleasantly, "I missed you at the party Friday, John said you had to work."

I nod, "Ya it sucked."

"John, thanks for the set up," she winks at him.

He was true to his word and she appears happy. I give his knee a squeeze, "You did good." I tell him.

~~

Later that night, we didn't invite anyone over, we want to enjoy some fruit salad having our dessert in bed, and then we cuddle in each other's arms once we've finished chowing down on the banana's, cherries, strawberries, and whipped cream.

"I'm sorry you didn't win," I say to him sweaty and satiated.

"I'll just try harder Thursday," he says optimistically. "I think we have a good chance."

"Me too," I agree. "There's something I need to tell you, something I need you to do," I warn him.

"Does it have anything to do with you and Rita having your heads together the entire night including my game?"

I chuckle, "I can't get anything passed you."

"What is it," he asks wearily.

"Do you remember when Rita told Brandon she's pregnant and he flipped?"

"Yes, but she wasn't," he reminded me.

"Correct, but what she didn't tell us: is that at the time, she suspected she might be, and today it's been confirmed. Brandon doesn't know."

He runs his fingers through his hair, he's not happy, "Wow, he's going to be upset."

"Exactly," I stress. "So we were hoping YOU would break it to him."

"Hell no, that should come from her," he refuses.

I start peeling his banana, "She's scared, are you sure you won't do us that itty bitty favour? I was thinking you could tell him when we are in New York."

"So you are bringing her to New York with you on Wednesday?"

"It will give you time to break the news and have him cool down," I reason.

"No, no way," he refuses.

I start eating his banana, "Please," I say with my mouth full.

"Okay! But I don't know how I'm going to break it to him," he says a few octaves higher than normal. "You are so cruel!"

17

John and Brandon drop us off at the airport bright and early Wednesday morning with the expectation that we'll be back the next day in plenty of time for John's play-off game. We hug and kiss at the terminal.

"Good luck," I whisper into John's ear before kissing it, I love his ears.

He pulls away and rolls his eyes, "I'll need it."

"You'll be fine," I reassure unconvincingly.

"I was vulnerable when you got me to agree," he complains.

"I'll say you were," I tease.

"Be good Brandon! My best friend loves you," I tell him eerily. He looks at John with the expression, 'what does she mean?' plastered all over his face, wait until he finds out. "Ready?" I ask Rita.

"As ever!" I can tell she's dying to leave. She already told Brandon that she's not bringing her phone because of the charges, but the three of us know the real reason. I told her, when he's mad he'll just call my phone but she says that she'll think of something when the time comes.

We leave the boys and find our gate. I have two copies of my writing so if something happens to one I have back-up. I decide to brainstorm on the plane but the flight is short and Rita is going on and on about her morning sickness and bleeding gums. I look at her baffled, "Exactly how far along are you anyway?" She is so going to be a terrible pregnant person, it doesn't take much to figure that out.

She looks at me like she's calculating the time, "I should have had my period not last Sunday but the Sunday before, so I'm a week and a half pregnant."

"Are you sure you're even pregnant?" I ask.

"Positive," she replies grimly.

"I thought you were happy about it, you know cash cow," I remind her.

"I'm up and down about it, I think it's the hormones. Right now Brandon is eighteen and still living with his parents. He just made the Minor Hockey league but as you say, he might not make the Major one. Right now I wish I wasn't pregnant."

"Don't listen to me," I regret saying anything at all, my warning went unheeded. "Let's just have a fun trip and we'll deal with it when we fly home tomorrow afternoon," I advise.

We land and once we have our bags we spot my name in someone's hands. "That's us," I point.

He looks at me confused, not expecting anyone else, "She's with me," I tell him, "Hunter is aware she's coming." His relief that Hunter knows is apparent.

We follow him to his car and drive silently to the hotel. "I'll wait for you here," he tells us. "Bring your bags to the room and then come back, I have to take you to his office.

"Thanks," I say.

"They really take care of you," Rita says impressed.

"It's a big city, I guess they have to," I tell her.

We check into the room and once we get our key, we drop our bags off and meet the driver back at his car. I'm fixing my makeup as we drive.

Rita looks over at me shocked, "I never see you like this, doing up your face up, the way your dressed," she observes. "You are so into him!"

"When we get there don't say anything," I tell her.

The driver pulls up to the curb, "Check your teeth," he suggests.

I check them, sure enough lipstick on my teeth, "Thanks," I say shutting the door. Rita follows me in. Hunter's office is one of four with three others being top corporate lawyers.

"Wow," she says.

The desk informs Hunter of our arrival, "You can go up," she says.

We take the elevator to the top floor and find his office immediately. I knock, "Come in," he says. He's sitting on his desk wearing a grey suit and white shirt, he's edgy/sharp again. He watches us as we walk in, but he doesn't say anything. I can't read him.

"I booked the meeting with you Carrie, you're not divulging your story to anyone are you?" He asks testily.

"I'm not," I answer.

He looks at Rita, "You can wait downstairs until the car returns," Rita is dismissed. She looks at me like 'Did I do something wrong?'

"Just go," I tell her.

"Email me the words," he says.

I place my laptop on his desk and send him a copy of my writing. He turns his computer on, that's when we get down to business and start going over the story. He makes me read it aloud to him, while he follows along listening to me and stroking his goatee. I sneak glimpses of him catching him engrossed in my story.

"Stop there," he orders. He gets up behind me and reaches over me to change my words, I can feel his breath on my neck, the heat of his body close to mine. I close my eyes for a fraction of a second while he corrects my hard work until it meets his standards. I relent as he makes several changes, some I don't approve of and some I do. I just don't want him to move or stop what he's doing.

He moves away from me, "Read it now," he says.

His new distance is disappointing. He goes back to his chair and lets himself get swept away with my story, playing with his goatee which seems to be a habit. I want to touch it too. Rita's right, I don't trust myself around him. There's something about his confidence, brilliance, the way he moves. "That's way better," I compliment his improvements.

"Leave it with me, I'll have it sounding like a symphony of words, remove one and the entire book will unravel."

"Please," I breathe.

"What are your thoughts about storyline, where do you want to go with this?"

I ramble on until I have his approval, making notes as we go.

"My driver will take you to the fashion district, I have a shopper hired to outfit you with five book signing outfits, from there the salon. Send me a selfie when they're finished. I want to see you in three weeks time, forty thousand words. Keep a low profile with your boyfriend, that's not the image I want you to portray. I want teenagers to be able to relate to you, you have to be one of THEM. Any questions?"

I say nothing, packing up my stuff. I fondly touch the tip of my hair, "I've told them what I want done to you, just close your eyes and let them cut," he advises.

He escorts me out, touching the slight curve in my back. His touch is guiding, and makes me quiver a bit, in a good way, way too good of a way.

The driver is waiting for me downstairs and to my delight, Rita's in the car, "Your friend can go with you on your shopping spree, but only your personal shopper chooses what you're buying, she knows what she's doing," he lets me know.

"Okay, thanks for advising us," I tell the driver.

He smiles at me, "No problem."

Shopping in the high end stores with a personal shopper is amazing. I hardly have to try anything on, and she picks amazing outfits for me. It happened way too quickly because now the dreaded time is upon me, "I'm to drive you to the salon now," the driver warns.

"Please don't and say you did," I suggest.

"You're getting your haircut today?" Rita gasps.

"No, take us back to our hotel," I chicken out nervously.

The driver looks in his rearview, "Hunter said if you refuse, he's going to go to your hotel and cut it himself."

"Fine, make him do it," I say petulantly. "Tell him to come here and cut it. It's an empty threat," I tell Rita. "He's not going to come to the hotel and cut my hair, that's ridiculous.

"Don't be so sure," the driver warns.

~~

We aren't back in our room for more than an hour when there's a knock on our door. "Hello?" I say peeking through the peak hole. He's there. "Oh my God Rita he's here!"

"Let him in," she said seeming to be enjoying this.

"No you!" I spit.

Rita goes to the door and opens it, "Hunter," she greets.

"Hello," he greets her pleasantly. "We have a disobedient child," he teases.

Rita looks at him, "I tried talking her into it, she promised you and the Manchester publisher she would listen.

"Go wet your hair," he says to me sternly.

I look at Rita for help. "Just do what he says," Rita says exasperated.

"Who's side are you on," I ask with anguish.

She looks at him from head to toe, "His obviously, do whatever you want to her," she permits.

He grins at her. I storm off to the bathroom. A few minutes later, I see the door open and he's there brandishing scissors and a comb, "Come out now," he demands.

"Pass me a towel," I order.

He locks the door and I'm at his mercy, "Sit."

"You made me do this," he said angrily snipping at my hair. I cringe closing my eyes.

When he's done, he picks up my fallen curls and hands them to me like he's won this round. "Next time listen to the Manchester office he says angrily. Be ready to leave one-thirty tomorrow afternoon.

I look in the mirror horrified at the length. I throw the hair into the garbage. Dylan punished Mandy, I know how Mandy feels, I can't get to my computer fast enough to write, at least Mandy stood her ground.

Rita see's me, "Oh my God, he is a genius, you look so much better." nothing else.

What a traitor Rita is. I take a selfie and instead of sending it to Hunter, I send it to John. My eyes are blotchy from secretly crying. A minute passes, before my response comes,

*John: You're still beautiful.*

He's my champion, I text him back.

*Me: I can't wait to be in your arms.*

*John: Either can I. FYI Brandon's lost his shit. I would tell you to stay away longer but my play-off game is tomorrow.*

*Me: I want to be home with you.*

I look up from my phone, "I just sent a selfie to John."

"What did he say?" She asks putting on nail polish. "Can nail polish harm the baby?"

"He said I'm still beautiful and John lost his shit. I don't think nail polish can hurt the baby but I don't know, get a book or something."

"I want to get a name book too. It's going to be so cool picking out names." She blows on her hand.

"Do your parents know that your pregnant?" I ask.

Rita rolls her eyes, "Mom slapped me and then cried saying I'm ruining my life. Dad seemed indifferent saying, 'Your genetic mutation isn't living in this household!' and in the same breath he says 'Brandon's the best boyfriend you've had, he's really going places, just make sure your little fxxx throws me hockey tickets now and again.'

"So will they help you care for the child?" I ask.

"It's early yet, but they'll come around, I think they will." Rita guesses.

"Brandon's not taking it well. John thinks we should stay away longer but at the same time he wants me back for his game. I can't leave New York quickly enough after this visit. He'll need time like your parents," I conclude.

The next day there's a knock on the hotel door and I see a delivery man carrying a box in his hand with a card, from what I can see through the peephole. I open the door and the delivery guy isn't a delivery guy at all, it's John! He's here in New York! I lunge at him clinging to him for dear life. He kisses me frantically like we've been apart for years. What a sight for sore eyes, such a gallant gesture.

He lets go and gets down on one knee holding the box I forgot he was holding in front of himself for me, "I know we're really young and this might be ridiculous, but I can never see myself going through life with anyone but you, and there's nowhere I should have been last night, but with you, so please Carrie, I know this was fast but when you feel the way I do, you know it's right. Will you Marry me?"

I can't see my eyes are burning with tears of joy. Rita is sobbing hysterically behind me, "That's all I ever wanted, for myself," she's crying with jealousy, "Why can't that ever happen to me?" She whines.

"Yes, you are my hero, my kryptonite, the food I eat and the air I breathe, I'm so madly in love with you!" Soaring above the clouds before we step on the plane, my only wish is that I could share it with my mom. He places the ring on my finger, a perfect fit. I pull him into the hotel room and we close the door behind us.

I continue hugging him, when Rita complains, "Get a room!"

We lay down on the bed as Rita begins packing. I'm looking at my ring in the light, "How can you afford such a beautiful ring?" I ask.

"I'm a saver, and my flight was free, Hunter called me last night said you might need some cheering up. His words not mine."

"So HE payed for the plane ticket?" I asked incredulously.

"He felt bad for taking drastic measures but he said it was going to benefit you, increase your popularity with the younger market, so he thought surprising you would make up for what he did. The costume, surprise: his idea, the ring, and me asking you to marry me: my idea."

I pick up my phone from the bedside table and text one word to Hunter.

*Me: Thanks.*

John angles my hand so he can read what I just texted, and then kisses me. "Thank him for me too, you've made me the happiest guy alive." John says.

Rita looks at us, "You two are gross."

*Me: John and I are so happy, thanks from both of us!*

"We'll tell our parents after the game. Your dad already gave me his permission."

"You asked her father's permission too," I say in disbelief, "You're every girls dream."

"Can I get a run down of what I'm in for?" Rita asks impatiently, she must be thinking about Brandon.

"Sure on the plane," John starts rushing us. "We're going to miss the plane if we don't hurry."

~~

We board the plane, John politely asks to switch seats with a man who's seated next to Rita, he appears irritated by the imposition, but kindly moves.

"We dropped you guys off at the airport and I invited him back to my place for drinks. I reminded him of the joke you played and told him at the time there was a possibility that you were pregnant but his reaction deterred you from telling him you might be."

"Anyway, I told him you are pregnant and at first he didn't believe me but I told him the only reason you were going to New York with Carrie was because you were afraid of what his reaction might be. It got out of control, he was saying stuff you would never want to hear."

"Like what?" Rita asks stonily.

"The baby could be mine not his, I should step up to the plate, my life is better than his, I've already got a paying job in hockey, he still has nothing. I'm terrible for not stepping up. He called you a tramp and that was the nicest name."

"It's definitely one hundred percent NOT yours John," she said honestly. "We can do a DNA test if it will make everyone happy but there's no physiological way it can be yours. It's been way too long. So then what happened."

"He,"

"He what," Rita encouraged.

"He called you a whore. I almost lost my shit on him, but I managed to keep it together, reminding myself that it's a favour to you, and it's giving him time to get all these bad idea's and anger out of him before you come home. "

Rita cringes, "I'm literally afraid to see him."

"Don't be. I threatened him that if he lays a finger on you, I'll be on his case."

"You're in such a mess," I comment.

Rita touches her stomach, "It will all be worth it. We'll be hanging out with all the other hockey players wives, pushing our strollers, living in mansions."

"You're happy today?" I turn to John, "She's very ambivalent about her pregnancy," I explain.

"Crazy!" He comments.

## 18

The heat is on, series is tied, win or lose, this is it. I kiss John good luck before he disappears into the dungeons of the smelly locker room. Alex, Melissa, Brandon, Rita, and I are all sitting together. Brandon and Rita haven't spoken since we returned. Warm-up starts and John skates by. I shoot my ringed fist toward him as a symbol of strength and solidarity (like a fist bump) and he smiles under his helmet visor. He pops his glove off, and holds up four fingers pointing at me. He's skating for me.

John's teammate scores early in the first period. Momentum from the crowd begins to take its effect and John feeds off it scoring a second goal late in the period for a 2:0 lead. The opposing team beefs up their offence in the second period, but our defence is strong and they only manage a goal. The third period John skates circles around everyone and manages two unassisted goals early on in the period ensuring the win.

We're on our feet cheering him on, my heart is so full it's swelling. He's only been on the team for a few months yet he stands out. I'm getting the impression he's one of the stronger players on his team, but I'm biased with pride.

The game ends and we see the hallway is filled with fans, there's no control and the pandemonium is contagious. I clutch Rita's hand, sharing our highs and lows together.

Rita gives me the biggest forced smile she can manage, as her situation weighs heavily on her right now. She's not supported by the guy who means the most to her. I pity her, but I want to embrace John's moment. Unlike all his other games, there are reporters at this one. We inch closer as on goes are slowly pushed away by security. The lights are on a player, I realize it's John. He's being interviewed. Suddenly people are making way, "Let her in, let her in," someone says loudly.

"Carrie," John calls out.

I quickly flag him saying no, Hunter Hot Pants told me to keep a low profile around him, I have to honour his wishes, my career also takes consideration. I blow him a kiss, and clearly make it obvious, that I don't want to be photographed. The gap made for me closes and they continue the interview. When the interview is done, the reporters move on to the captain of the team.

"What did you tell them?" I grab John's hand, his bag slung over his shoulder.

"When you declined the interview, I kept the topic on myself, just that I skated for you. We have to let our parents know everything before we announce it to the world."

I smile approvingly, "Thanks."

We invite everyone back to our house. Fingers crossed: Rita will manage to break the ice. Everyone arrives with the exception of Rita and Brandon. I text Rita but she doesn't answer. I tell John, "Rita's not answering her phone, they should be here by now."

Alex and Melissa look up at me, Melissa asks, "Are you worried?" to me.

"Very," I reply.

Alex adds, "Brandon is really mad and he's not himself right now."

John quickly gets up and grabs his keys, "Where should we look?"

Alex calls out over his shoulder, "Check the rink parking lot, that's the last place we saw them, and then try to figure out where they would go to talk,"

"I'll go with you I offer," turning to Alex and Mel, "text us if they come back here."

"Sure," they say in unison.

We jog to the car and drive back to the arena, jackpot, it's one of the few cars left. The windows are down, and you can hear their raised voices before you even pull in, it's no wonder someone hasn't called the police on them. John pulls up to a stop, and Rita burst out of Brandon's car from her side slamming his door.

He gets out and argues over the cars roof, "You don't even know if it's mine."

She starts briskly walking away from him and he runs after her until he grabs her arm, she open palm slaps him across the cheek with her other hand, which intensifies his anger. He returns the hit full force and her neck snaps, making her fall to the ground really awkwardly. An eerie silence takes over and she's unconscious.

I run up to her screaming, "Rita!"

John looks at Brandon, "What the fuck did you do? Don't touch her," he warns me.

Brandon backs away in shock.

John calls the ambulance.

We hear sirens in the distance.

My mind works overtime, to make this terrible situation benefit Rita somehow, someway. I turn to Brandon, "If any of us tell the police what just happened you'll go to jail for assault and you can kiss your hockey career good-bye. Rita's baby is coming into this world whether you like it or not, and it like all other babies deserves parents who

will love it, but all he or she has it the two of you idiots. So I suggest get your shit together and take responsibility for your baby-making activities. If you are going to do what you've done, you better be willing to care for and love that baby because they're coming into this world whether you want him or her to or not," I spit.

"Well said!" John agrees.

A police car arrives in the parking lot and soon after an ambulance. Rita still hasn't come too yet. The officers step out of their car. The first officer glances at me, "Carrie?"

I remember him from when mom died. "How are you?" He asks. I don't recognize his partner.

I nod, because it's not really about me, "I'm worried about my friend. We arrived in the parking lot because we were looking for them." The officer grabs his pad to continue writing. The ambulance arrives. I wait for them to get out of their truck to continue explaining, "We were expecting Brandon and Rita back at our house, when they didn't come we came back here, starting to look for them. When we arrived they were arguing. She got out of the car and started running away and she must have tripped."

"Ya, officer, I was trying to talk to her, but I must have frightened her and she started running, I wasn't going to do anything."

The officer who recognized me looked at me for validation, "Seriously officer, he's never abused her to my knowledge. The ambulance report stated she tripped. Our story stuck, a large part due to the officer who recognized me. He stands close to me as the paramedics attend to Rita.

"You're hair," he comments as he looks more closely at me, "I barely recognized you."

John's standing next to us, "Should I be concerned?" He says sensing the officer likes me.

"I don't remember your name," I ask the police officer I recognize.

"Constable McCleod, you can call me Dexter,"

"Dexter and I met when mom died," I explain to John.

"Should I be worried," John repeats.

Dexter looks at me from head to toe, lingering in various areas, "I'd say you definitely have something to worry about," he tells John.

"She's unavailable to you Dexter," John says challengingly.

"That's officer McCleod to you," he crushes John.

The ambulance is ready to go. Brandon appears to want to join her, "I'll go," I quickly volunteer, beating him to it.

"Sure," the attendant agrees.

"I'll follow you," Dexter says

"Thanks," I say gratefully. "I'll see you at the hospital," I touch his uniform flirtatiously, "It's a date."

He smiles.

I step into the vehicle, John looks at me in disbelief, Brandon complains, "I want to go."

John looks at Brandon, "We'll follow, let's take my car," John says hurriedly.

I look back, "You can't, Alex and Melissa are waiting for you."

He kicks stones knowing I'm right. We lead the police to the hospital, John and Brandon go home.

I get a text from John:

*John: What's with you and flirting. Do you like Dexter.*

*Me: That's officer McLeod to you.*

*John: Officer McLeod.*

*Me: He's a man in uniform.*

*John: So you like him.*

*Me: What's not to like.*

*John: Your editor?*

*Me: He's sexy*

*John: So you like him too?*

*Me: What's not to like.*

*John: Me.*

*Me: My Universe.*

Dexter gave me his number before leaving us in the Emergency department. Normally I would throw it out so as not to get John jealous, but a small untrusting part of me, makes the decision to tuck it in my purse just in case. I make a mental note to memorize it and toss the paper. 3 Hours later, the hospital informs me they're keeping

her overnight for observation. I text John asking him to bring my computer so I can write while I stay with Rita. Rita's level of consciousness improves. I update her on the blow she endured, and how I thought preserving his career was in her and the babies best interest. She agreed. Then I told her about the police officer who chatted me up.

"You get all the sexy men," she smiles.

"I don't hide my attraction to them from John either," I boast.

"He has nothing to worry about," Rita says, "because John is everything to you."

"You got it," I tell her, "but he doesn't need to know that."

19

A few days later:

We arrive at dad's in the early afternoon. Gwen and V are excited to see us. They invite us in, offering us drinks and a snack.

"It's so good to see you dad, sorry for the short notice," I apologize.

Gwen and V are surprised I call him that and smile to each other.

"I have something I want to tell you," I announce.

"Come sit," he offers.

I'm bursting at the seams, "I know we're young, but I've fallen in love with John. He asked me to marry him, I said yes!"

Gwen and V jumped out of their seats with excitement. Dad shook John's hand, "Congratulations and welcome to our family." then dad looks at me, "you are such a great addition and now John," he gets teary.

I hug dad and he hugs me back tight.

John clears his throat, getting our attention. "I hope you don't mind Will, but I invited my parents over to hear the rest of the announcement. They should be here any minute."

We continue to wait, then the doorbell rings. "I'll get it," V volunteers going to the door. John's parents are invited in and we repeat the good news about us getting married. They seem happy with it, but voice concerns that we are too young. Neither side discourages us because they see how much in love we are.

John looks at me, his eyes are on fire, "I have another surprise that even Carrie doesn't know, I need all of you to dress up and meet back here in an hour. We scramble to do as we're told, "Not so fast for you he says, check the trunk."

He pulls the key fob from his pocket and pops the trunk. I walk to the car, "What did you do now?" I ask.

Inside the trunk is a white box with a pink bow, "For you," he says.

I slide the bow off with great difficulty, the complete opposite of anyone getting a magnificent present on t.v. John gets frustrated waiting, "Here let me," he insists.

I pull the top of the box off, and inside is the most gorgeous evening gown I could never imagine affording, “You shouldn’t have,” I say in awe. “This is the kind of dress movie stars wear!”

He looks down at me kissing me softly, compassionately. “I’m going to spoil you,” he promises.

I push him away, “WTF! I have to get ready! Did you bring my makeup?”

“The back sat,” he laughs.

I grab the box and makeup and look to him, “We’ll get dressed in my old room.”

He grabs his stuff and we rush. Sixty minutes to the second, we all meet back in the living room. “Follow us”, John directs. We get into the car and he leads everyone to an assembly hall I’ve never been to before.

We enter, and I see Rita, Brandon, Alex, and Melissa, “What the?” I don’t finish what I’m saying and run up to Rita to give her a hug, “You look beautiful! Are things better,” I ask concerned.

She nods, “A lot better!”

“Do you know what’s happening?” I ask out of curiosity.

“Your guess is as good as mine.” She says.

We wait for everyone to meet us at the doors. John supplies everyone with a ticket and we all enter. We are one third of the way up the seats.

The MC takes the stage, and the lights dim, “I’d like to welcome everyone here tonight to the 2021 Major League Draft Picks. I look at John with a strong inkling. John sits next to me, on my other side is my father then Rita and Brandon. I look over at Rita and Brandon, “You don’t think?”

I ask John, “Are you being called up to the Major hockey league?”

John shakes his head no, “It’s way too early for that, I’ll probably be in minor for at least another year or two,” he tells me. “They asked me to present a Jersey to someone from my team who’s getting called up. It’s a huge honour.”

Dad shushes us.

I tune out the MC until I hear John being called to the stage and everyone is standing and hooting and hollering. John is standing next to the MC before he continues, “John you’ve been in the Minor leagues for how long now?”

He’s shy, “Six months, give or take,” he smiles humbly.

The MC continues, "I told John that he's been asked to represent a player with a jersey, but John, that's not really why you are here," he stops. It becomes deafening until the MC starts dropping his hands to get the noise level under control.

John asks the obvious question, "Then why am I here?" He's completely clueless.

The MC continues, "It's my privilege to announce YOU are the number one draft pick of 2021. Congratulations! The jersey!" He calls for someone to bring it, everyone is in suspense, a younger hockey player dressed in gear comes to the stage with a Jersey and an envelope, "Son, your talent is being recognized. You have been chosen by the Edmonton Snakes who might I add is a very strong contender for the Cup with a seven million dollar a year contract for five years, you are the highest paid rookie in Major league hockey."

As quickly as the torch to our relationship is lit, destiny snuffs it out. The applause continuous until he returns to his seat. Rita stares at us with admiration, "You're so lucky Carrie, you're never going to have to work another day in your life. I hold John's hand, "What now?" I ask.

"We'll talk about it later," he procrastinates.

The night of celebration is clouded with 'what if's' John and I needed to have a head to head, decide where our relationship is going. We eat, drink, and act like we're merry, but tonights conversation is going to be the most critical one of our relationship and I'm dreading it. We leave the festivities just after eleven and head home. Complete silence in the car when we should be elated.

We undress for bed and snuggle.

"Thirty-five million over seven years Carrie. Imagine what we can do with all that money. I can't believe I'm getting paid so much to do a sport I love."

"A dream come true," I stroke his face lovingly.

"You can still write in Edmonton, apply to the University out West," he suggests.

"I've been accepted to the ivy league of schools for physiotherapy John, you can't ask me to give up my dreams just because you've reached yours."

"Consider it please," he chokes, "so what now? We go our separate ways" He asks incredulous.

"We open our cages and fly." I slide the ring off my finger and place it in his hand closing his fingers.

“What if officer Dexter or Hunter Hot Pants go after you when I’m in Edmonton and you’re in school,” he says miserably.”

“You’ll have hundreds of girls yourself.”

“I don’t want anyone but you,” he insists. “They’ll only want me for my money, or my body.” He giggles but it’s strangled sounding. “I’ll never love anyone as much as you.”

“June 30th 2023, drop whatever you’re doing and come home. We’ll revisit the possibility of us getting back together if it’s not too late.

“If this is it, I want you to be the one to say it.”

“I’m breaking up with you John. Pack your belongings tomorrow and leave,” I’m blinded now, tears burning my eyes, I’m sobbing as hard as the day mom died. John’s chest pulses against mine, unable to hide his broken heart.

*Dear Rita,*

*Contrary to what you may think, John and I aren't living the dream right now. I'm excited for him, watching him accomplish his dreams of getting in the Major hockey leagues at such a young age, it's a dream come true, but it's come with a cost.*

*I can't sacrifice my own dreams to follow John's because I can see it causing resentment in the future. I never told him that, but I should let him know because he needs to understand that. I don't want him to think I'm selfish and only care about myself.*

*After the ceremonies yesterday, John and I went home to have a heart to heart which ended in a deadlock. He has no choice but play hockey for Edmonton and I need to complete my education and two more books. I suggested in three years he comes home and we'll see if there's anything left worth fighting for. We are going to remain friends.*

*I told him to pack his bags and leave. He moved out this afternoon. I can't cry right now because if I do I won't stop. When the door shut behind him,, I went online and booked a flight to Florida. You remember mom said you and I could go alone this March break, but that's when mom died. Our plans went down the toilet.*

*I will be gone one week and when I get there, I'll let you know where I'm staying in case you want to join me. I need to meet Hunter (hot pants..as you call him) soon after the trip, you know how mad he gets if I'm not there when he snaps his fingers. I'll be so glad when he stops editing my books.*

*Hope you come to Florida. Tell Brandon I say hi. He's a good guy. One day he'll get into the Major leagues too and hopefully all your dreams come true too. Sometimes you have to be careful what you wish for. I love You.*

*xoxo Carrie*

*Dear Carrie*

*Hi, Is there something wrong with you head? Gone off the deep end? Flipped right out?*

*I know as a best friend I'm supposed to support your decisions, and back you up, the old be by your side thing but when you make messed up decisions that make no sense, bordering on ridiculous, am I supposed to stand there and just agree with them? Hell NO!*

*You landed a guy that was so super talented that he made major league hockey years before any of his teammates managed the same accomplishment. His starting salary is only seven million a year, something you or I can never imagine making in a lifetime, HE MAKES THAT IN A YEAR.*

*Forget going to Florida, he's going to meet someone else and then slip away from you. Chase him, fly to Edmonton and surprise him, declare your undying love. The two of you can pay cash for the house of your dreams with a white picket fence. You can have two point five kids, heck, I'll let you buy the one I'm carrying if it means you getting your head on straight. You'll never have to worry about money the rest of your life.*

*You have my DREAM LIFE and you dispose of it like an empty water bottle. I'm still your best friend but I hope you don't think I feel sorry for you, on the contrary I want to slap you, wake you the fuck up.*

*Give me the details of where you are in Florida and if I manage to stop crying from anger and calm the fuck down I might come to Florida to see you but you better check the expression on my face and my bag for a weapon you stupid shit.*

*Love Rita*

*Dear Rita,*

*Tell me what you really think? Lol! I've sent an attachment with all the details to Florida. I hope you come as long as you don't bring a gun. Do you know how insane you sound?*

*You want me to throw away all that I've worked for to chase around the most handsome, athletic guy in the world who makes seven million dollars a year, okay-sure, but at what cost? Shouldn't I be putting myself first rather than second. Do you think John will respect me if I follow him like a puppy?*

*I wrote a novel, managed to get accepted into the best school in Canada that teaches students how to help injured players make it back on the fields/rinks whatever. I can travel with a team and work on many John's and Brandon's who are hurt and want to get back on the road recovery.*

*If I throw everything to the wind over a boy who might not know what he wants for sure, or change his mind about us, how do you expect me to continue respecting myself, or be happy? I will always be wondering what if? Here's an example, John cheats on me or finds another girl, what then? My dreams are by the wayside, and him and his money are gone. My self respect is also gone.*

*That happens. Don't forget the attachment, I really hope you come.*

*Love Carrie*

*Dear Carrie,*

*You get the guy to marry you, if he leaves you get HALF of everything he owns. YOU CAN'T LOSE.*

*It's so unfair that you get golden boy and I get Brandon who only has a small chance at making the major league. John even when he was in the minor leagues made money, it might not have been much but at least it was something. Brandon is still playing for free, the love of the sport, it's so pathetic.*

*Chase John, forget Florida. Let me know if you're going to take my advice, if you don't then I'll book.*

*Did you see the American basketball game on T.V last night? The managers walked off all the players in the middle of a game. There's talk of them cancelling the season. It's that Covid virus, apparently it's in the U.S. I heard it's really dangerous to old people and mild if you're young.*

*It was eerie watching that game, I wonder if we have anything to worry about. It might affect hockey too. They said they would announce it tomorrow.*

*Love Rita*

*Dear Rita,*

*I'm not chasing John. Book the flight. I don't want to marry someone just to get divorced. If it's meant to be, we'll know in three years, we've cut the ties, he can date anyone he wants now. I'm going to be busy with writing and school.*

*I totally saw the same thing on television (replayed on the news.) It's creepy. They are calling it a Pandemic.*

*Try to sit near me on the flight. I gave you my seat number in the details.*

*Love you... Carrie*

21

I haven't spoken to Rita since our last email so I'm not sure if she'll be on this flight or not but she said she's coming. I have a small carry-on with a weeks worth of clothes. I need to get away to work through my feelings. I feel John all over the apartment and it makes things harder. School doesn't start for a while. Until I'm busier, he's all I think about.

My phone vibrates, I haven't turned it off yet because we aren't ready for take-off.

*Hunter: Hi, you can send me the 40000 words when you're done.*

*Me: That won't be for a while.*

*Hunter: I gave you a deadline. You had three weeks.*

*Me: I have personal issues. I'm on a plane to Florida. I can't even think about writing right now.*

*Hunter: You have to learn to use what you are feeling to write*

*Me: I will, sorry.*

*Hunter: Are you going to be okay?*

*Me: Ya, just need some time.*

*Hunter: You're seeing me in a week.*

*Me: I know, I'll be there.*

"Who are you texting?" asks Rita.

Oh my gosh, she startles me, but I'm so happy to see her. I unbuckle my seatbelt and jump up to hug her.

"All right, all right," she says returning the hug frigidly. "You don't think I'm letting you go to Florida alone. This gives me time to talk sense into you, poolside," she says coolly.

She puts her carry-on over our heads and then sits next to me, "I can't believe you got the seat next to me."

"I told the person who had this seat that you were suicidal and if he didn't give it up, you might open the door and jump out of the plane."

"You didn't," I ask shocked.

"I did!" and knowing Rita I believe her.

"Brandon know's you're coming?"

"Yup, she says putting her purse by her feet. He's on my side. He thinks John should have you by his side right now, not going in the opposite direction. I'm sure anything I say to him is getting back to John. We are skating on thin ice," she giggles at her own pun.

"I don't want to hear about John the entire trip to Florida, I'm trying to put him out of my mind. I can't even write right now, I'm so upset."

"You shouldn't have invited me then," Rita threatens. "No trilogy is going to compare to the dollars and cents John is going to be bringing in. No book is going to keep you warm at night. You put your ego first, you want to be a critically acclaimed writer, a physiotherapist to the sports stars. A wife to a pro athlete isn't good enough for you."

I'm regretting inviting her. I don't have an argument, I put earbuds on even though movies haven't started yet. I will write my father when we land, my heart is sinking with sadness.

~~

We land and pick a three star motel near the beach, it has it's own pool, and a chain restaurant nearby. Funds aren't fast flowing so we share the room. Rita complains instantly, "Can it be any smaller? Where's the remote for the t.v. I'm scared to go into the bathroom, there might be something crawling there."

I lay her fears to rest and open the bathroom door flicking on the light, "Nothing!" I say quietly stepping on a centipede, so cringey! I fake having to go closing the door behind me so I can dispose of the carcass. I shiver at the thought of what I just did, I hate them and they crawl so fast. I'm hoping there's just one and it was coincidental.

Rita starts up when I get out of the bathroom, "John would be booking a five star hotel with his new salary. Even when he was making less, he still drove around in a respectable car, he'll probably buy a sports car now. He has good taste."

"Please don't make this entire trip about him," I plead.

"It's for your own good," Rita says stubbornly.

"I'll get another room!" I threaten.

"Can you AFFORD another room!" She brings her point home. "At least email him."

"No, I can't. I don't know what to say."

"Out of sight, out of mind, ask him if he's okay, how is he doing, tell him you still love him."

"Will it shut you up?" I consider doing what she asks just for that reason alone.

"Yes, temporarily," Rita agrees to stop talking about him.

"How long?" I ask.

"The rest of the day." She offers generously.

"Two days," I demand.

"Tomorrow morning." She negotiates.

"Two days," I hold steady.

"Okay! Fuck!" she says irritably, "Try to give a little help, and this is what I get?"

*Dear John,*

*I hope you're well. It's difficult for me to write this when all I wish for, is us being together right now. I can imagine us flat hunting, and exploring the city, it would be so much fun.*

*Maybe once you're settled, I can visit you if you'd like that. I'm in Florida right now. I needed to get out of the apartment, especially our bed. Everything I look at and touch in there reminds me of you.*

*Rita came with me. She keeps encouraging me to forget myself and follow you. In the long run three short years is a small price to pay. If it was meant to be after all this is said and done we'll be together, right?*

*I still love you John. Take care and good luck.*

*Love Carrie.*

*Dear Carrie,*

*I hope you're well too. I would have loved to go flat hunting and explore the city with you. It's not too late. Maybe you'll reconsider everything while you're in Florida. I wish I was there to protect you from the gators.*

*I'm glad our apartment reminds you of me, not a minute goes by, that I don't think of you. Listen to Rita, follow your heart. It will bring you to me, before I find some hockey crazed chick who makes me forget about you, just sayin..*

*Love John*

“Rita, look what he wrote back!” I showed her. She saw what I first wrote him too.

She grabs my phone from me and reads all the emails, some twice before laughing, “He’s trying to make you jealous so you’ll follow him, good for him! I like his style.”

“I guess you do! Okay, you can’t bring him up for TWO days,” I remind her.

“Two days,” she repeats. “That shouldn’t be too HARD,” she says holding up her two index fingers apart the distance of a banana.

“Very subtle,” I laugh and then I start crying. Yup as easy as that I go from laughs to tears, hardly having a reprieve from my broken heart even in beautiful Florida with my best friend.

“Stop feeling sorry for yourself you stupid bitch and get your bathing suit on before I throw you in a pool fully clothed.”

It’s like having a sergeant around, “Okay,” I surrender going through my stuff until I find my bathing suit. “I forgot lotion,” I pout.

“I have some,” Rita says, “just get dressed.”

I do what she says, I’m hungry but I won’t complain, a swim sounds better than food. “We go down to the outdoor pool that’s caged in, it’s still nice but weird at the same time. Why is there a cage around the pool?”

“I think it’s for the bugs,” Rita sun worships. “I wonder if this sunlight will affect the baby?”

I search it up on my phone, “Great question, it can cause neurological and birth defects by causing a folic acid deficiency in you. Should I search up if sunscreen decreases the chances,” I start laughing again.

“It’s not funny,” Rita looks at me horrified.

“I never would have thought sunbathing can hurt a baby,” I try explaining. “Are you taking folic acid and a pregnancy multi-vitamin?” I ask.

“No! Should I? I don’t know anything about being pregnant! I haven’t even broken it to my parents yet!”

“Don’t you think you should?” I ask. “You won’t be able to keep it a secret much longer.”

Rita covers her stomach with a towel, as if that’s going to help, “I should.”

I start typing into my phone. Rita looks over, “What are you doing now?” she asks.

"I'm texting dad telling him where I am and a brief run down of what happened between me and John."

"Sure, you don't want him to worry, tell him I'm with you."

"I will and Rita, no matter what I say, I really am glad you're here," I tell her.

"I know," she says.

There's a hut by the pool selling hot dogs and hamburgers. The pool is deserted with the exception of us, and the hut opened a few minutes ago, so I grab my wallet and head over there to get food. Rita asks me just to bring her back anything, so I order two hamburgers and wait for them to be done.

We rest by the poolside but Rita's internet searches confirm what I told her and now she's restricting the time we spend outside. We return to our room shortly after the hamburgers and spend the rest of the day watching movies, and talking.

"When do you think Brandon will ask me to marry him?" She's daydreaming wistfully while staring at the popcorn ceiling.

"Do you want Brandon to ask you?"

"Of course, That's a stupid question. He's the father of my baby," Rita says, "why wouldn't I?"

"You're going to be showing soon, if you take pictures of him asking you to marry him and people can see your belly, they're going to think that's the only reason why he asked you."

"Oh my God Carrie, you're right. He has to ask me before you can see it!"

"Or after you've had the baby," I suggest.

"I'll be fat! NOT A POSSIBILITY, IT HAS TO BE DONE NOW. It's critical."

"You can lose the weight and then get married," I suggest.

"But then everyone will think I'm a you know what. I'll have to bring the baby to the church, it could cry during the ceremony and then my wedding night will be marred with pain because of the stitches, I plan to have her natural."

"You have everything planned out," I'm impressed. "You want a girl?"

"Yes, she will be so cute!" It strikes her like a lightening bolt, "Oh my God, Brandon has to ask me now, marry me now before it's too late! I don't want to be forever known as the one who trapped him."

I hide my little smile because she is the one who forever trapped him, "You should call him," I suggest.

Just then the phone rings, Rita snatches it up like it could be Brandon. Her end of the conversation gives nothing away so I'm curious who it is.

She hangs up, "The front desk told us to go out on our balcony right now."

We get out of bed and go out the sliding door of the balcony. It's dark and nothing is happening. I'm about to leave, it's chilly but Rita grabs me insisting I stay. "Wait, the guy said something about fireworks, just give it a minute."

A few minutes go by and fireworks can be seen in the distance. I look around, we're the only ones outside on the balcony. After a few minutes of explosions more people join us to watch. A song starts playing in the direction of the beach and then a spotlight highlighting the ocean turns on, Brandon is kneeling in the light, "Rita, will you marry me?" He calls out?

"Oh my gosh! She sizes up the balcony to see whether she can jump down to get to him on the beach, when she realizes it's two storeys, and two storey's too high, so she runs back through our room out the door. A minute later I see her plowing into Brandon on the beach who in turn falls into the sand.

It's so romantic I find myself more lonely than ever and now crying for myself and for Rita's happiness. I'm a mixed bag of emotion. I open the hallway door to watch her come back to our room with Brandon, instead I see John walking towards me, he scoops me up and kisses me like long lost lovers. We don't say anything we just kiss and kiss like a mirage, I'm scared he'll disappear if I let go, but he doesn't. I cling to him for dear life. "I've missed you so much," I say in between kisses.

We manage to let go of each other long enough to return to our room, "Lets pack her up," he says, "I'm staying with you, Brandon has a room for them."

"When are they?"

"Tomorrow on the beach," John says

"Wow, holy fast."

He smiles, "It should be us. It's not too late."

Several hours later and multiple combinations of fruit salad, we fall asleep in each other's arms. I wake to the raise and fall of his chest. I miss him so much, I get sad thinking that it really should be us, I love him that much. He awakens, "Morning."

"Good morning," I snuggle in closer to him. "How much time do we have before we get ready."

"The service is on the beach, it starts in sunset, we have a few hours yet."

"I don't have anything to wear," I complain mildly.

"We bought you dresses, yours is in with my suit," my knight in shining armour once again I think to myself.

"Why didn't you tell me you were coming," I ask playing with the tiny hairs on the back of his neck.

"I wanted to surprise you. Did it work?"

"Yes, like spring water in a desert" I admit. "Rita and I were just talking about Brandon proposing, she wanted him to do it sooner rather than later before she starts showing. What made him ask her?"

"Can I tell you the truth without you telling her?"

"Of course," I falsely reassure him crossing my fingers behind his neck. My priority if Rita over any man but he doesn't have to know it.

"Brandon was doing it with some chick we went to school with, apparently he called out Rita's name in the throws of passion, the girl he was with slapped him hard across the face and stormed off, that's when he had an epiphany, apparently if he's calling out Rita's name she's the one. I think it was just an accident but what do I know."

We don't get out of bed one single second before we have to. John pulls out the most beautiful dress I've ever seen and helps me put it on like he's dressing his most prized possession. I help him into his suit before going down to the beach to watch the nuptials of our best friends. He cleans up so well. I find I can't tear my eyes from John, wishing it was us rather than them. John's eyes never leave me either.

"Look at us!" Rita hisses, "you're going to ruin our pictures!" I smile shyly at John who sees me get in trouble by Rita. Brandon less obviously nudges John. John looks at Brandon and then stealing their fleeting moment of glory he walks up to me in the throws of passion, my true hero, plants one on me seconds before the Priest is to announce 'you can kiss the bride'. To hell with them. John's knocks me off my feet with true passion an undying love nobody else can imagine.

They sign their stuff and see the Priest off, and we haven't parted from our kiss yet. When we do, I ask John the question I don't want to hear the answer to, "How long do we have?"

"I fly out in the morning," he says sadly. His eyes look like the cat in the movie 'Shrek' like it's the last thing he wants to do but he has no choice. Rita and Brandon would rather lay into us then participate in honeymoon activities of their own. We run

away from them, returning to our room, locking the door behind us. They have the rest of their lives together while we suffer three long years apart at the chance of returning to where we are right now.

22

The next morning I see John off and now I'm a third wheel, a cog in their spoke. It's like losing him all over again. On the bright side I have six more days of this beautiful sun before I have to fly back to New York to meet with Hunter my editor. I use my quiet time to write my trilogy. I don't even remember the number of words he wanted from me, but it was a lot. Luckily school is starting soon, that will also keep my busy. I find even when I write, my mind drifts to John. No character I can write about can ever be as amazing or romantic as him.

Rita burgles into my room because she never returned the extra key when the guys came. "Hi," she says lightly, "has JOHN left yet?"

"What if he hadn't and you just barged in here right now?"

"Nothing compares to you ruining my wedding."

"How so, John just kissed me, it was almost over anyway."

"The Priest said, 'You may kiss the bride,' and YOU KISSED JOHN! If you weren't my best friend I would have beat the crap out of you!"

"It was his best kiss by far," I try to recap how it felt but with Rita in the room and John long gone, it's impossible.

"I'm writing," I tell Rita. *a.k.a. get lost please!*

"Let's do something," she suggests.

"Where's Brandon? It's your honeymoon."

"He flew back to Edmonton with John," she cries, "Our honeymoon and he'd rather be hanging out with John in Edmonton than being with his wife."

"Wow," I'm dumbfounded. "What did he say to you? You're in Florida and you just got married and he's following John? Holy mother of.."

"He said we have the rest of our lives, John has five years to skate for Edmonton and he wants to be as much a part of it as he can until he gets called into the Major leagues!"

"Your husband is my ex-boyfriend's bitch!" I laugh. Ha Ha Ha Ha

"It's not funny," she's still crying. "Lets go to Edmonton!" Rita suggests.

"Ah No!" I tell her.

“Why not?” she whines more.

Oh my she’s going to drive me crazy, “I’m not chasing after a boyfriend I broke up with, it’s going to send him more mixed signals. I can’t be with him for the next three years so why the heck would I chase after him like a desperate school girl?”

“You are a desperate school girl,” Rita calls me out on it.

“Every time I see John, I miss him more, it’s like torture. You can go chase after Brandon to Edmonton, spend your time in hockey rinks and come up with baby names together, I have a book to write.”

“What’s it about?”

“I AM NOT TELLING YOU! Plus, I still have to fly to New York in six days.”

“To be with Hunter,” she says, “Why do you have to go there in person. Can’t you do everything online? I’ll tell you why, it’s an excuse. You are being hunted, you’re his PREY. He cut your hair for bloody sakes, if can’t tell he’s showing you who’s in charge than you have issues.”

“Don’t tell me like you see it,” I hiss sarcastically. “He’s my EDITOR, way older than me, he has no interest in me, and if he did, my hearts with John and Hunter knows that.”

“You’re a slow kill and he has three years.”

“Okay,” I cut the conversation short, “so are you staying here with me or flying to Edmonton?”

“Brandon didn’t invite me to Edmonton, I wouldn’t know how to find him unless I bring you.” Ah ha! Now I know the importance of me coming.

“I’ll help you find him without traveling with you if you want, all I have to do is text John.”

“Please do,” she begs.

I pick up my phone and text him. I don’t get any answer, “He’s probably on the plane, when he responds I’ll come to your room.”

“Thanks,” Rita says, flopping herself down on my bed. “At least tell me the title of your trilogy.”

“Kiss and Cry,” I tell her, that’s all I can say. “Aren’t you going back to your own room?”

“No, I’m bored, I’ll be quiet so you can write.”

“Thanks.”

Rita falls asleep on my bed. I get a good bit of writing in. When she stirs, we go for lunch in the hotel. It's a nice break even though I was onto something and needed a few more hours to get it down. It will have to keep.

The hotel has a buffet restaurant serving all day breakfast and regular foods too. I select a light breakfast where Rita loads her dish up.

"Wow you must be starving I comment," shaking the serviette out and placing it on my lap.

"I'm eating for two, and after having landed my cash cow, my calorie counting days are long over!"

"You don't want to blow up," I warn her.

"Don't start nagging," she says stuffing a sausage into her mouth, you could see the fat oozing out onto her lips.

"Did you try contacting Brandon?" I ask.

"He's not answering, I wonder if he's on the same plane as John. Do you think they planned it?"

"I doubt it."

"Oh," Rita appears lost in thought. She stops chewing and takes a sip of her orange juice, "Was exhausted from the flight last night?"

"No, he was exhausted from our extra curricular activities! How was Brandon?"

"Ya, our extra curricular activities lasted two minutes if that before he fell asleep. I hardly got any enjoyment out of it at all," she complained.

"Well at least you consummated."

"The very least," Rita sounds angry.

A few hours after we return to our room John replies to my text.

Me: Where are you in Edmonton, can I have your address?

John: Sure. 1234 River Street, A1BC2D Are you coming?

Me: No, I'm sorry, I haven't changed my mind, I need to finish school.

John: Let me know if anything changes.

Me: Promise. I miss you already.

John: Me too.

"Let me see," Rita says nosily. "Ask him if he flew with Brandon. Ask him about us getting married."

I roll my eyes, please don't get me involved. Rita nudges me. "Here give me the phone," she insists.

"Tell him it's you writing," I order her.

She doesn't look up or listen for that matter.

*Me: Did Brandon fly with you? Rita said he's not in Florida with her anymore.*

*John: Ya, saw him at the airport.*

*Me: So you didn't plan to leave together.*

*John: No, he said he felt suffocated.*

*Me: Rita was bothering him?*

*John: He's having a hard time digesting he's going to be a dad and that his wild oats can't be sewn anymore.*

*Me: Is he angry at her?*

*John: No, he says he resents her though.*

Rita tosses my phone on the bed, "I have to be alone," she gets up.

"Are you going to be okay?" I ask.

"Ya," I just need to cry. "I'll be fine, he'll come around, I just have to be patient. I'm having his baby," she reminds herself.

After she's left my room, I go to the bed and retrieve my phone.

*Me: John?*

*John: Yes*

*Me: Please don't be mad, but that wasn't me texting you it was Rita, I told her to tell you it wasn't me, but I scrolled up and she didn't do that.*

*John: Oh!*

*Me: You can probably expect to see her on your doorstep sooner rather than later.*

*John: Good to know. Why don't you come with her.*

*Me: I can't. I have to write and then I'm flying to New York to see Hunter.*

*John: What do you do when your with him?*

*Me: Ceiling fans, the splits, cat and mouse games.*

*John: Seriously, not funny.*

*Me: We work. That's all we do. Don't forget he flew you out, just to make me happy, he's not going to try anything on me. Rita thinks I'm his prey. She talking shit about him having three years to capture me. I think it's her hormones.*

*John: I don't think she's too far off the mark.*

*Me: Not you too?!*

*John: Just sayinn*

*Me: I have to let you go, don't be insecure, you have three years to do what Brandon can't, get those oats sewn, because when I'm done school, I want you to put a ring on it!*

*John: :-) Gladly.*

*Me: xoxo*

Rita lets herself into my room just before dinner, "Hi! Here's your room key, I can't have dinner with you, I'm flying out to Edmonton."

I shake my head, "You're chasing after him when he left you here alone on your Honeymoon. He barely managed a two minute dessert with you before falling asleep. "Why don't you get your marriage annulled, you still have time, you can even abort the baby which I would never normally encourage but under these circumstances and with your age."

"Absolutely not. Pretend I listen to you. I break up with Brandon and don't have the baby. I'm back to square one, having nobody, and nothing to care for. This way, I will always have a hold of Brandon. I don't care if he cheats on me, at the end of the day, I'm his wife with his first born child. I will be worth fifty percent of everything he has, its a waiting game. I stop now, I end with nothing. I stop when he's in the major leagues I'm worth two-four million a year. I'm just here to tell you I'm going. Give me a hug!"

"Good luck," I tell her.

"Thanks," she grins. I close the door behind her. I have just over five days of uninterrupted writing.

~~

I arrive in New York: soldier mode. I'll never stop missing mom and I shouldn't keep weakening and letting myself go back to HIM every time he does a romantic gesture. He is my achilles heel, my weak spot. I'm armed with my laptop, chauffeured through the streets of New York City, I go see Hunter. He wants me in his office, dressed to kill his secretary says he's ready for me, waiting in his office. "Go in," she encourages.

There's pandemonium, "What the?" I ask.

A woman I don't know plucks me from the room and brings me to the bathroom. Makeup is laid out all over the counter. She points to the chair and when I do nothing she says, "Sit." I do as I'm told and she starts wiping all my makeup off. A man walks in with a bag and starts working on my hair, cutting, blowdrying, she's painting my nails, lips, highlighting my eyes. They take a plastic bag covering my face with it, then remove my top to change it for another. The bag is take away. I look at the girl like 'what the hell' "We didn't want to ruin your makeup," she explains. She hands me pants, leaving the room with the man and I'm to put them on. Heels are by the door, I guess they're mine.

I return from the bathroom, Hunter stands in front of the door, "Glasses."

I stand there expressionless, he calls out, "Glasses!" with irritation. The girl doing my makeup starts searching the room, she's freaking out. A minute later, someone spots them and hands them to her, "Good," he settles down. Hunter's desk is cleaned off and my pretend novels are piled up with one opened in front of the chair like you would see at a book signing. He doesn't say hi, he just points to the chair. I scurry to sit down. He stands over me. People are adjusting the lighting, getting the camera's ready.

It's quiet now, hair and makeup leave and we are left with two photographers. I greet him, "Hi Hunter."

He tips his chin upwards as a greeting. The man doesn't waste words.

"For the first book?" I ask.

"Ya, do you want to tell me why you allowed yourself to be photographed in Florida with your number one Major league draft pick when I told you to stay low?"

"I was what? I didn't know," I try explaining.

"Your stardom will be masked in his shadow, I don't expect you to get it, but don't let it happen again."

"No, I don't get it," I state firmly clearly demanding an explanation.

"You will be photographed only on your own merits as an author, not because you are some hockey players girlfriend. Once your an established writer, it doesn't matter as much."

"Okay," I nod.

The photographer interrupts us, "Are you ready?"

I look at him, Hunter leans over me, looking at him too. He has an arm on the desk standing close to me. The shooting starts. It takes over an hour to wrap up. "Are we done?" I ask Hunter.

"You can change, I want to take you out for dinner." He offers. "I had the driver drop your stuff at the hotel.

"That's great," I escape into the bathroom and change into my clothes.

"I'm going to take you to a top New York restaurant," he calls into the bathroom.

"Sounds great," I sat starving.

I finish in the bathroom, he's waiting for me. "Let's go," he says. He presses the button and we wait for the elevator. It comes, we both step on.

The doors open and we are on the main floor. I don't see his car. "Are we walking?" I ask.

"No, wait here, I'm driving." I stand in the lobby of the older building and wait for him to arrive.

He pulls up in a 3M sports car. He doesn't get out, the passenger door magically opens in the air. I climb in and he presses a button in his cockpit and it closes. It feels like we're sitting on the road. He pulls from the curb and the growl of the car excites me. I can't hold back my smile, he sees it, and he smirks back. He likes my smile. He likes that I like his car.

We arrive at the restaurant and he gives his key to a valet, "You're letting someone else drive this?" I ask agog.

His hand gently touches the lumbar region of my back and he guides me up the stairs to a restaurant I would never be able to afford. We have multiple courses, whatever I want to try on the menu, he buys, even if I just mention it as I read from the menu he orders it. He has money to burn. I get one dish in particular that is mouth watering. I close my eyes savouring every forkful. "What is it?" he asks eagerly.

I show him. He knows what it is, "You'll get that every time you visit me even if I have to hire the chef to cook it for you."

My eyes get big. It's been so much fun, "I've never had anything as savoury as this except tomatoes one time." I tell him.

"That will all change. I'm going to make you a big writer, they're going to make movies from your books, everything your going to touch will turn to gold."

"Like you?" I ask.

"Like me," he tells me.

"How long am I here for?" I ask.

"You and I are going to work exclusively together for the next six weeks, I'll make sure you're back for school."

"Are you serious?" I ask.

"It only makes sense, there's nothing keeping you in Toronto right now. Your 'friend' is in Edmonton isn't he?"

"We broke up," I spew. Hardest three words in the world to say.

"So there is absolutely nothing keeping you in Toronto except your school."

"My best friend Rita," I add.

"Okay, so keep your apartment."

"Well Ya obviously, I have nowhere else to live!" I tell him.

He pays the bill with hundred dollar bills, we didn't even drink. "Wait here," he orders.

His gorgeous car rounds the corner. The wing opens, I get in, people are snapping pictures of us with their phones from the street as we pull away from the corner. "Where are we going?" I ask.

"You'll see," he says mysteriously. The area looks vaguely familiar, oh, his penthouse.

He parks the car and we we take the elevator only he doesn't press ph he presses the floor directly below his, "You pressed the wrong floor," I tell him.

"No, I didn't." he tells me. He walks to an unfamiliar door and opens it. Inside is my suitcase, the apartment is a quarter of one of his floors fully furnished with extravagant pieces, "I had time to hand select furniture."

"Did you move?" I ask.

"This is where you'll stay while you're in New York, this is your new apartment for as long as we work together. I'll get the rent, you don't have to worry about it.

"No I'll pay," I say like an idiot. "How much is rent?" I ask.

"A dollar," he sneers.

"This CAN'T be only a DOLLAR."

"It is when I own the building," he brags. His back turns doesn't so much as give me a chance to thank him, "I'll see you in the morning, nine, my floor."

"Sure," I say. He leaves.

Wow, I can't believe it. The apartment must be four times the size of the one I shared with John. The living room has a leather couch, the kind you see in the movies. One wall is a window overlooking Central Park. The television has to be ninety L.E.D. The bedroom is a queen, a table with a drugstores worth of makeup at my disposal. The bathroom has a hot tub and shower. Finally the piece de resistance, an office also overlooking central park.

I decide to check the kitchen, surprisingly it's stocked up with anything I can imagine needing. He's so thoughtful. The closet is filled with clothes all in my size. I can't wait to text Rita, in such a short time I have so much to tell her.

*Me: Hi! How are you?*

*Rita: You don't want to know.*

*Me: Of course I do*

*Rita: It's too much to type, can I call you?*

*Me: Sure*

A minute later my phone rings.

"Hi," I say excited. "How was your trip to Edmonton. Did you see the boys? Did John say anything, how does John look?"

"Awful, he's not doing well without you" Rita says sadly. "Brandon on the other hand seems to be having a great time. I decided not to ring the doorbell, can you believe I caught him snogging another girl in John's new house?"

"John bought a house?"

"Stay with me here?"

"Why did he buy a house?"

"He's going to be living here for five years?"

"Why not an apartment?"

"They don't appreciate as much? Okay listen its not just about John can I please talk?"

"Sure, sorry," I say to Rita. "Did you know the girl?"

"No, it gets worse. So, I start chasing after her, hitting her with my bag."

"Oh my gosh, what did she do?"

"She ran out of the house calling me a crazy so and so."

I chuckle, "You are a little crazy, but shouldn't you have acted cooler if it doesn't bother you the way you say it doesn't? You said you don't care if he has an affair or anything. You know hockey players do it all the time their code. You're the one having his baby, and married to him.."

"Easy to say, not easy to do," Rita spits. "He must have picked the bitch up from the airport."

"Perhaps Brandon will settle down," I say optimistically. "Just give him some time and space, maybe when the baby is born. You're making him feel too trapped."

"Maybe," she considers.

"Did John have anyone over?" I ask.

"No, he has pictures all over the place of you, it's like a shrine. He's got it really bad for you. You can't help feeling sorry for him when you see what he's done to the place."

"That's sweet," I say wistfully. "I miss him."

"You shouldn't have broken up with him," Rita's a skipping record.

"If it was meant to be, we'll get back together when school is done, I couldn't make him be loyal to me while we're miles apart from each other, hardly seems fair."

"Where are you now?" I ask Rita.

"Watching t.v. with the boys, John's quiet but Brandon's brooding like a little boy caught with his pants down." Her voice for a second sounds farther away, "Well you ARE!" I take it she said that to Brandon.

"Oh my god! Carrie! You're on TV!"

"I'm what?" I ask.

"Ya! Turn on the news channel!"

"Ok hold on!"

I grab the remote and flip until I find news, I don't see myself, so I keep flipping until I do, It's me! I'm sitting behind the desk, Hunter appears to be signing something, the reporter is calling me an up and coming writer being groomed by none other than

Hunter top editor to the highest grossing publishing company.. Then there's a picture of him guiding me up the stairs to the expensive restaurant.

I come back on the phone, "Please tell me John isn't watching that."

"He saw everything," Rita reports.

I guess, I was worried about him not moving on, this will definitely encourage him I guess. I want to ask her to put him on the phone but I'm not being fair. He has to make his own conclusions whether they're right or wrong.

"What's going on with you?" Rita says.

"I just got here this morning. The driver brought me to work and then they prepped me for a press conference I didn't know we were having. They did my hair and makeup and started photographing myself and Hunter. He said I had to have publicity surrounding my own celebrity and not be photographed in John's shadow. Then he took me in his super fancy sports car out to dinner. We ordered almost everything on the menu, spent hundreds of dollars like it was nothing and then I thought he was taking me back to a hotel room but he drove me to his Penthouse. He pressed the wrong button, said he didn't press the wrong button, that when I work in New York I have this new apartment. It's one floor under his and fully furnished. He said I have it until I stop working with him. I offered rent, he said I don't have to pay it, he owns the building. He's so rich it's crazy Rita. His car is worth three or four million dollars."

"He's paying for you to live in New York? I told you, he's into you. I hope you didn't tell him you've separated from John?"

"I did, he was mad that I was photographed with him by the media in Florida."

"How did Hunter react when you told him you broke up with John?"

"Indifferent." I admit.

"Give me the phone," John demands. "I want to talk to her."

"No man, leave her alone, she broke up with you," Brandon steps in.

"Give it to me," John says almost fiercely.

"No!" Brandon argues.

"I better go," Rita's sounding more distant.

"Carrie!" I hear John. "Carrie," he calls into the phone again. There's a second of silence. I don't respond. I listen to his breathing. He listens to mine, "I know you're there," he says.

"I hang up."

My phone rings, I turn it off, it has to be John, it can't be Hunter, he just left me.

23

I show up at Hunters for nine. "Set up in the living room," he suggests. I turn on my laptop and wait for him on the couch. He comes with a tray of food, and coffee. He takes everything off the tray and places it on the table with the exception of a dish with a silver dome. He silently waits for me to remove it.

I remove the lid and inside is a single rose. I look at it and then comment, "Rita says you like me," I confront him, the rose is evidence her suspicion is correct.

He doesn't answer. "Don't let Rita think for you, you're in a different class," he says. I challenge him merely staring back into his eyes. "I know you like me," I admit.

"What are you going to do about it," he says, like he's challenging me.

"Nothing," I reply, "absolutely nothing."

"You're prerogative," he tells me, "Can we get back to work now?"

"What if I did something?" I ask curious. "What if I said it was mutual. You know I just broke up with John, do you want to be on my list."

"You're shit list? No thank you," his irritation is showing.

"Do you think spoiling me with an apartment, roses, will get me in bed with you? Maybe you thought flashing your money around me would draw me in. Did you have us publicized to hurt John, show him I'm yours now? He was definitely hurt!" I say sarcastically.

"You finished with him, I'm not concerned about his feelings," he rips. "Don't lash out at me, if you don't like what I do quit. Walk out that door and don't ever come back or pull your shit together and be professional."

He leaves me alone. I'm a complete mess. I lost it on him why? Because he's been super nice to me. Flew John out to Florida to be with me. Gave me an apartment and a rose. I lost my shit on him because he happens to be here. Rita is right, he likes me, it's a compliment. I have another one of god's gifts admiring me, I'm lucky. I follow him upstairs almost stumbling. He's pacing, angry. He notices me and stops. "I'm sorry." I apologize to him. He comes over to where I'm standing and he studies me. His angry eyes flick down to my lips, then back to my eyes again. He's standing really close, I can't read him. Is he going to kiss me or yell? "Go home," he punches. He's referring to Toronto, not downstairs. His anger is beyond words.

“No,” I reply petulantly. “I need to be here with you right now. I want to pick your brain, come up with story lines, get coached from the best of the best.”

He takes a step back, he’s not as in my space as he was a second ago. I liked it when he’s closer. I want to show him how much I want to be here, I know no other way, I lessen the distance and I kiss him. It feels like I’m kissing a stranger, its so different from kissing John. He clasps my shoulders roughly and pulls me away from him, “You’re thinking of John,” he says. “Don’t kiss me to prove something to yourself.” How does he manage to get in my mind and read me like that? “Go home,” he insists. “We’re finished.”

I pack everything up and leave but I don’t do as he says, I go downstairs. I remind myself that I told John to date other people, I don’t expect him to remain loyal to me for three long years. I shouldn’t feel guilty for kissing Hunter. He was right though, it’s like I was proving something to myself more than him.

I open my computer and my fingers are on fire.

24

I burn out shortly after midnight. My wrists are hurt from writing so much. I have a great idea and I'm running with it. I send my work to Hunter and shut the computer down. I have a shower and tuck myself away under the massive comforter on my new bed.

I text Rita:

*Me: Hi! How are you?*

*Rita: Great you?*

*Me: I upset Hunter. Not so good. Your trouble in paradise is averted?*

*Rita: Ya, Brandon apologized.*

*Me: That's good.*

*Rita: What did you do to Hunter? He doesn't strike me as the kind of guy who displays his feelings.*

*Me: I rubbed him the wrong way and he told me to go home.*

*Rita: What did you say?*

*Me: I said you think he likes me.*

*Rita: You're kidding me, you told Hot Pants that I think he likes you? What did he do to give you that impression?*

*Me: Breakfast and a Rose.*

*Rita: Go on!*

*Me: He said, 'You finished it with John, not me,' he rips. "Don't lash out at me, if you don't like what I do quit. Walk out that door and don't ever come back or pull your shit together and be professional."*

*Rita: That's so hot!*

*Me: Oh he's texting me, shoot!*

*Rita: What did he say?*

*Me: Hold on, let me check.*

*Hunter: Finish it off, before sending me the rest. Manchester office wants a finished piece.*

*Me: Did you like it.*

*Hunter: It needs work. Your popping too frequently from past to present tense.  
Romance seen needs more edge.*

*Me: Okay, I'll go over it and resend it to you when its finished.*

He doesn't write me back. I screenshot the texts and send it to Rita.

*Rita: You hurt his pride.*

*Me: How?*

*Rita: Trust me. With this kind of guy you have to shut up and do whatever he says.*

*Me: I try. How's John?*

*Rita: Call him and ask him, or visit. You've shattered him.*

*Me: What's a call from me going to do but lead him on?*

*Rita: I just feel sorry for the daft bugger, wish Brandon was into me the way John  
loves you.*

*Me: Give it time.*

*Rita: I snuck a peak at John's schedule, he's playing in New York three weeks from  
now.*

*Me: Okay.*

*Rita: Surprise him.*

*Me: It's ..*

*Rita: I know you're like a broken record 'leading him on'*

*Me: He's too nice to do that too*

*Rita: He LOVES YOU*

*Me: and he knows I LOVE HIM that's why it's so hard*

*Rita: Listening to the two of you is getting tired.*

25

I don't hear from Hunter for several days until he sends me a two word text, "Dress up." I accommodate his demands, applying makeup, not even knowing when he's coming for me or where we're going. Forty-five minutes later there's a knock on the door. It's him. He doesn't smile. I close the door behind us and he takes my hand.

He brings me to his super fancy, super hot sports car. I watch him drive, he becomes part of the car, the stick shift the clutch, it's all very sexy. He notices me watching and then I get the sneer. He likes that I'm watching him. He pulls into a reserved spot guarded by security in a stadium, one of the largest venues in New York, "What?"

"You'll see," he has me enthralled.

We go through a few tunnels, and then it opens up, people are running around backstage, fixing the lighting. It's obvious we're at a concert, "Who's playing?"

"You'll see," He says mysteriously.

"Backstage passes?" I'm getting super excited, I hope it's someone I know!

"This is better than backstage passes," he brags to me. First time I've ever seen him literally brag.

I realize it is. The concert hasn't started yet. He takes my hand, bringing me to a door belonging to tonight's entertainer. "We're meeting the singer? Who? Who's singing tonight?" I'm really excited now, I hope it's someone I know. I frantically try to guess who the superstar is before Hunter reveals it to me.

People glance at us smiling, "Hunter."

"These people know you?" I'm impressed.

He taps on the door, "Come in," a man calls out. The door opens, OH MY GOD! It's just the most amazing super sexy singer I've ever totally gone crazy for! "Hi Hunter," Slasher casually says.

I close my mouth, "You?"

Hunter sneers, "Yes, I know him, he's my brother."

Wow! Hunter's sexy mannerisms is genetic! I think of the car, that explains everything, but the building? "He hasn't paid for most of it," Hunter tells me, "I earned it the way he earns his money, hard work."

"How do you read my mind?" I asked flabbergasted. "You do it every time!"

"He's uncanny at it," Slasher agrees. "Do you want to stop being rude and introduce us," he says to Hunter **(HIS BROTHER!!)**.

"This is Carrie." Hunter introduces. Slasher gets up to shake my hand.

"Can I hug you?" I gush. Slasher looks at his brother for approval. Hunter gives him a cool nod.

"Sure," he says sweetly. I walk up to him and give him a hug, "Rita's going to be so jealous!"

"Do you guys want anything?" Slasher offers.

"Can I take a selfie with you?" I'm starstruck.

"He means drinks," Hunter tells me.

"Let her have her fun," Slasher insists. "Where do you want me to stand?"

"Here! The light is good here!" I insist. Slasher goes to where I point, "No more to your left." He steps to his left.

"I'll take it," Hunter offers.

"No, I want you in the picture!" I insist.

We do a selfie, the three of us, me and the two brothers. Hunter and Slasher, I send it to Rita. He offers us drinks, he puts mine in an inconspicuous container sensing I'm under age, "She's kind of young for you isn't she," Slasher says to Hunter.

"She's writing for me," he explains.

"Sure," he says knowingly. His grin tells me I'm not the only one he's brought to his brother, but I'm the youngest.

"It's true, I'm writing for Hunter," I say sipping my beer. This is too cool! I'm having such a great time. I can feel my phone vibrate, but I'll text Rita when this is over, she'll ruin it for me texting me every few minutes.

"You didn't give me enough warning," Slasher complains, "you're going to have to sit backstage. I'll get you set up. Clara!" he calls out.

She pokes her head in, "Get them set up, they'll be backstage."

"Sure," she says and leaves immediately. A guy calls from the hallway, "Ten minutes!"

"Did you call mom and dad since you've come here?" Hunter asks.

"They're in Paris right now," I'm going to meet up with them on the tour.

"When?" Hunter asks.

"Concert will be there on the seventeenth so I'll be able to spend some time with them then."

"Good," Hunter approves. "We'll meet up with you, text me where everyone is staying, so we can swing by."

"We're going to Manchester on the seventeenth?" I interrupt, "Can we watch his Paris concert too?" I ask enthusiastically.

"Let me check," he pulls his phone out, "We'll be there a few days before, your first book is done. They're going to want it. You'll be talking to them about the next one." Hunter informs me. "Can you manage tickets?" He asks Slasher.

"I'll leave them at the box office, send me a reminder text," he tells his brother.

I can't help smiling from ear to ear. I compare the two, they look like brothers, Hunter looks at me, "Ya, that's what I look like with hair."

"Fuck," I say to myself, "he did it again."

"People could never tell us apart, I had random girls chasing me when I was out with clients, it was a pain in the ass, so I shaved my head," he touches it. "He can keep his crazy groupies."

"You liked it," Slasher teases.

"A small price to pay," I comment, "you look good."

"I'm fucking better looking than him," he says referring to Slasher, and it's the first time I've seen Hunter laugh. It's better than his sneer and his sneer is so ridiculously hot. I grin, "Okay, sorry Slasher, you brother is better looking than you, no offence!" I compliment.

"She IS working for you," Slasher says in disbelief. "I'm always the better looking one," he insists.

Hunter takes a breath insinuating he's heard that before. I love watching the brothers together, it's a side of Hunter I've never seen.

"Thanks," I say.

He nods.

"I have to get ready," Slasher pretty much kicks us out but not before kissing the top of my hand like a perfect gentlemen. "He is truly a genius, but don't let that intimidate you into saying he's better looking than me, we both know it's not true!"

Slasher's employee Clara meets up with us and brings us to the two chairs backstage. There's a small table with camouflaged drinks and snacks on it, "You can sit here," she says, "sorry we couldn't get you first row."

"This is better!" I say eagerly. "Can I take pictures from here?"

"Sure," she smiles.

Two opening bands and an hour of Slasher before we find ourselves leaving the stadium. It was amazing. I can't stop telling Hunter how much fun I had. "My place?" he asks.

"Sure," I say, "but I can't stay too long, I've got a mean boss who expects the moon from me, deadlines to meet you know."

"I'm glad you came," he ignores my comment.

"Me too." I relax into his couch and he comes back with two drinks.

"You never told me about your brother."

"You never asked," he said.

"You had girls chasing you?" I asked.

"Everywhere I went," he admits. "I had no choice but make the change."

"Can I touch it?"

He tips his head ever so slightly towards me and I reach towards him stroking gently, gliding my fingers down his head to the back of his neck, his eyes never leaving mine.

"You are better looking," I quiver, "really."

"Your boss, is going to want you up early," he smiles.

"Ya," I straighten up my outfit, "he will."

"You looked beautiful tonight," Hunter admits.

"I know," I sneer at him the way he always does to me, before leaving his place.

I can't wait to call Rita, the second I get home

26

Rita calls me at the peak of dawn before I've started writing, "Hunter brought you to see Slasher backstage in concert? You are so lucky!"

"Slasher is his brother," I say casually.

"You're kidding me! Hunter is Slasher's brother?"

"Right! I was shocked! When they stood together, you can see the similarities. That's why Hunter shaved his head, he got sick of girls mistaking him for his brother."

"Wow, poor guy!"

"Hunter brought me in the craziest sports car I've ever seen and we parked in a secret spot away from the public with special security. Everyone behind the scenes knew Hunter. He introduced me to Slasher and I hugged him, and he let me take the selfie that I sent you, There were seventeen thousand people at last night's concert! When we go to Manchester in three weeks, we're going to connect at his Paris concert," I brag.

"Why's Hunter bringing YOU? He can get anyone, not to mention he's way older than you."

"I know, Slasher looked at me and said 'She's kind of young', I guess he doesn't mind spending time with me."

"You're really living the high life, a few months ago we were in school dating nobodies and now the boys are progressing, you have an apartment in New York, a published book, working on your second. You hang out with Hunter hot pants and Slasher! Wow!!"

"We almost kissed," I confess to Rita.

"Slasher or Hunter?" She clarifies.

"Hunter, we went back to his place and I guess I flirted with him."

"Too bad you didn't," she says unsympathetically. "What are you saving yourself for, you don't have anyone on the sidelines. Some girl's been calling John," she tells me.

"Really?" I asked shocked.

"No, but it's just a matter of time," she shakes me up. "He still has it bad for you."

"I love him too. I need to let you go, I have a lot of writing to do, we're going to Manchester in three weeks and my book is expected to be finished."

27

The doorbell rings I run to it still damp from the shower, I'm sporting a towel that barely covers me. It's nothing he hasn't seen before. I open it, he's leaning against the frame. His eyes scan me from head to toe and he pops off the frame and enters my apartment, "Good morning," he greets.

"I've just stepped out of the shower," I explain.

"I can see," he grins, sizing me up. "Dress up, I know it's early but I want to take you out for breakfast."

"Sure," I say. I dig through my closet for something that will meet his standards but I choose flats because I'm not in the mood for heels, this will have to do.

We arrive in the main lobby and he tells me to wait, he's going to pull the car up. Its a normal car this time. "What happened to the other one?" I ask not that I really care which one we take.

"It's supposed to rain today, I don't take it out on wet roads, the tires are too slick," he explains.

"What are we doing after breakfast?" I ask.

"What do you want to do?" He banters.

"Take a walk with you in central park," I suggest.

"I have a better idea, but I'd rather keep it a surprise, do you mind?"

Now I'm interested, I wonder what he has in mind, "I love surprises," I gush.

"Good," he smiles.

The restaurant he choses is styled from the 1950's era diner. I'm surprised because most of the places he seems to select are very upper class. He notices my expression, "Best breakfast in NYC," he explains.

"I should have expected," I grin at him. He sneers back at me. We pick a booth and he puts a quarter in our table jukebox and chooses a Buddy Holly song.

"Were you alive during those times?" I ask teasing his age.

"No," he grins. "But I like the music, my brother listened to it all the time when we were growing up together."

The waitress stops at our table plucking a pen from her hair, carrying a pad, "What can I get you?"

We order the eggs Benedict with bacon. She slowly walks off. I wonder if she's trying to listen in on our conversation. Does she know who he is? "Is your storyline almost wrapped up?" He asks.

"Yes, I just have to finish the book, I should be done in a day or two, Mandy is just about to chase you back to your hometown declaring her undying love."

"I told you it would be easier if you imagined me as your lead character."

"Totally," I agree sipping the water.

"You won't be writing today," he lets me know.

Nosy waitress comes back with our coffee, "Your food will be right up," she says.

Minutes later we receive our hardy breakfast. We take our time and then he tosses money on the table. He's a generous tipper.

We leave the diner and he starts driving, I don't know where, I leave it up to him as I watch the New York streets pass by. People are always rushing around, the odd couple is stopped on a sidewalk kissing. We drive over a bridge I'm guessing the Brooklyn Bridge, but I'm not sure, and then it opens up more. Strange, we're pretty far. My first clue is a hanger, "We're flying somewhere?" I ask.

"Sure," he answers. God forbid he gives me any idea of what's going on. He parks the car and walks us into an open hanger. Oh of course, there's a jet with his name on it, "You own that too I suppose," grinning like I can't believe him, he's ridiculous.

"Slasher did buy me this," he admits. "I had to learn to fly it."

"You're flying the plane?" I ask skeptically. "Is there anything you can't do?" I puff his feathers up.

"Don't be ridiculous, there's a lot I can't do. But for now, I'm your pilot. You have to do everything I say," he smiles.

"Yes sir," I say playfully, "but what's new?" I declare.

"We're scheduled for takeoff soon, lets get in," he encourages escorting me to a seat on the plane and then disappearing into the cockpit with his copilot. His voice comes on overhead telling me to buckle up. Within minutes we're soaring into the air, I have no idea where, until we start out decent a little over an hour later, Toronto airport. His voice comes on telling me not to unbuckle. The door to the airplane opens and to my surprise V, Gwen, and my father climb into the plane. They are very excited and come over to hug me before they buckle up.

"Where are we going?" I ask Hunter who's still with us.

Gwen smiles, "It's a surprise, Hunter orchestrated everything.

"He's taking us out as a family, even though we don't know where we're going," V tells me.

"Hunter, you're very considerate doing this for Carrie, I really appreciate it. It's something I would do if I had the money."

"Don't worry about it," Hunter reassures sipping his bottle of water. "If you guys are all buckled in, we'll depart. We should arrive at our destination in a few hours."

We all look at him and then each other wondering where he's taking us. If I had to guess dad knows but he's remaining tight lipped.

We ascend into the air and within a few hours we are landing again. Hunter comes on telling us we can unbuckle. The plane door opens again and Rita runs up the flight stairs. Oh my gosh! I jump up and down so happy to see her, I'm crying with excitement, we're in Edmonton. "He has his own plane?" She gushes. "Wow, just wow!"

"Right?" I say. I turn to Hunter, "So we're in Edmonton?" I confirm.

He nods, "I thought you might want to see one of John's games. I booked two limousines to take us to the rink. I've arranged for someone to notify him when we arrive so you can see him after the game. You can spend some time with him and then I'll fly you back. I have a meeting with another writer while you're with him after the game, so it works for both of us. I'll take you back to the plane when I'm finished my meeting."

I'm excited to see John but ambivalent at the same time. We disembark and two limousines are waiting for us on the runway. I go with Rita and Hunter, my family is in the other one. "This is amazing," I tell him with gratitude, "Are you watching the game with us?"

"I wasn't sure you'd want me to," he's hesitant.

"Of course I want you to," I tell him.

"Sure I'd like that," he admits, "they're playing Toronto tonight."

"This should be a great game," Rita clucks.

"I can see your bump now," I comment.

She takes it as a compliment, "Thanks! I'm getting really excited for the baby now, I hardly ever get depressed anymore. Brandon starts playing for Niagara in a few weeks, so he's been getting ready, he wants to really impress the scouts and get into the Major hockey league in six months like John did."

"That's great," I say.

"We're squeezing Manchester and Paris in before I go back to school the second week of September right Hunter?" I ask not sure whether his planned dates overlap with my return to school.

"I'll have you back in plenty of time," He reassures.

The cars pull up to the front doors of the arena and we feel like movie stars bypassing the line. Hunter reserved us a box so we have first class service the entire game, our own bathrooms and all the food and drinks we can eat. Hunter makes a few calls while V goes on about how excited she is to watch the game and Rita talks about her pregnancy. The only thing I can think about is seeing John. Hunter gets off the phone, John knows you're here, he'll shower and come up to see you, so don't leave when the game is done. I want to give you time with John, I'll have your father and the rest of your family picked up from here immediately after the game and flown home."

"I don't get to see John," V asks disappointed.

"Next time," Hunter promises. "You did get to fly on a private jet though," he tried making her feel better.

"That was cool," she admits.

"You have no idea how much this means to me," I tell Hunter.

"Of course I do," he says. "That's why I did it."

The game starts, we all take seats and watch, in particular #14. My eyes never leave him. Sadly Toronto beats them 3:2. Edmonton put up a good fight but it just wasn't in the cards.

"Good game," Hunter comments. "I'll walk all of you except Carrie to your cars that will take you to the airport. Rita do you need a lift?"

"Please," she says.

I give everyone a big hug including Hunter and they leave. Twenty minutes later the door swings opens and I lunge at John, expecting him to embrace me in return. It's not what happens. His hold of me isn't tight and I slide off him, "Aren't you excited to see me? Are you upset you lost the game?" I ask.

"I'm don't care about the game," he answers irritably, "Why wouldn't you come on the line when Rita told you I wanted to talk to you?"

"I was afraid of what you had to say," I admit, his eyes are penetrating me, I can hardly maintain eye contact.

"You haven't called?" He complains. "Too busy with Hunter going to rock concerts and fancy dinners to be bothered."

"We broke up, I didn't want to lead you on." I admit.

"So why did you think coming to my game with another guy would please me?" He asks.

"Hunter is a friend, no different than Brandon. I missed you, and I wanted to see you play, I also thought you would be happy to see me," my voice cracks.

"So when I miss you I can't talk to you on the phone? You on the other hand can be spotted all over town with this Hunter hot pants guy and choose if and when you get to see me" He argues. "I hardly think that's fair." He looks disappointed.

"Hunter was nice enough to fly me here just to spend time with you."

"Maybe he knew we would fight." John says, "Maybe he wanted this. He's manipulating you," John calls out Hunter's behaviour.

"You're insulting," I gripe. "We're wasting time," I complain, "he's going to be back soon."

"That's too bad, you could have spent the rest of your life with me and gone to school in Edmonton, finish your books here, but YOU chose to leave me for three years in the off chance our personal lives don't take off the same way our careers do and then you galavant with this Hunter dude who clearly wants you in between his sheets and you don't even see it. For a smart girl, you're being stupid."

"You're calling me stupid?" I ask. "What are you three?"

"If the shoe fits. I would have done anything for you," He states.

"Unless I do something you don't approve of? You are open to date anyone you want for the next three years if you desire, I make a friend and I'm galavanting now?"

"Whatever," John swipes at the air. "Go back with your friend, just remember who was there for you when your mom died, who will always be there for you, who asked you to marry him, ya that was ME." He dismisses me leaving the room. My head is spinning, what just happened? I realize I am sending mixed signals yet again.

I pull my phone out and text John:

*Me: Come back!*

*John: No. Stop calling the shots and then breaking them when its convenient for you.*

*Me: I'm sorry maybe I shouldn't have come but when Hunter offered I got excited to see you. I miss you.*

*John: You do realize you came to watch me play hockey with another guy, one who's interested in you. How did you think that was going to go over? You're turning into Rita.*

*Me: You think I'm idolizing Hunter for his money?*

*John: Ya, it's obvious.*

*Me: Go fuck yourself!*

*John: I'm blocking you.*

*Me: Fine*

But it's not.

28

I wait a good half hour before Hunter returns, "Are you ready?" He asks looking around, "Where's John?"

"Yes," I'm relieved I don't have to wait any longer. "He left twenty minutes ago."

We're chauffeured back to the airport by limousine which I'm getting used to but I'm still stunned that he flies a plane with his name on it.

"How was your visit," Hunter ventures breaking the silence.

"Not good," I say quietly.

He's surprised, "How so? Wasn't he happy to see you?"

"On the contrary, he was unhappy I came with another guy to one of his games, he also accused me of galavanting around town and becoming like Rita."

"You're not like Rita, and I wasn't going to stay for the game."

"I wanted you to stay," I defend Hunter. "I'm glad you did, I'm just sad that John doesn't realize we're just friends."

"You couldn't resolve it?" He asks concerned.

"Don't worry it's not going to affect my writing," I reply bitterly.

"I didn't bring up your writing he snaps. I just wonder if there's something he's not telling you."

"He blocked me from future contact," I start crying. We travel the rest of the way in silence.

"I'm sorry he did that, "I'll have a word with him,"

"No don't," I plead. "He thinks you want me. I can tell him until I'm blue in the face your a friend, he thinks you want more, there's no dissuading him."

"I didn't consider that," Hunter admits under his breath, "If you change your mind, I'll talk to him, make it up to you."

"No I won't, don't worry, I thought that even if I went to the school of my choice and wrote, eventually we would find our way back to each other."

"Call him," Hunter suggests. "You have nothing to lose at this point."

He hands me his phone. I can't use my own, he might have already blocked me out. I take it from him, dialling John's number.

"John?"

"Carrie?" He asks.

"Please don't hang up, I had to use Hunter's phone in case you blocked me."

"What do you want," he sounds frustrated.

"For you and me to be okay, for us to keep our plan. For you to know that Hunter brought me to see you out of kindness," I plead.

"Thank him for me," he says, "You've made your choices, now you have to carry them out, I loved you so much," he breaks down. I can't help it I start crying.

My voice sounds pathetic now, I'm pretty much begging, "What about after school?"

"I'll see how I feel in three years," John manages before hanging up.

I let out a sob, Hunter takes his phone back, "You weren't well received I take it,"

"No," I creak.

"You tried," he consoles. We walk quietly to the plane. He makes sure I'm buckled in before disappearing into the cockpit, "I'll see you when we land," he disappears.

The trip was a flop, the only good thing that came from it was seeing Rita. She's glowing. I'm restless on the plane so I unbuckle when I'm allowed and walk over to the cockpit. I try opening the door, but it doesn't give, I knock. I wait a few seconds and Hunter's co-pilot opens the door, "Hello," he greets me pleasantly.

"Hi," I smile shyly.

Hunter turns to look at me for a second. He removes his headset, "Are you okay?"

I shrug, "I can't sleep so I decided I wanted to watch you fly the plane."

"Sure, Charlie do you mind?"

"Not at all, page me when you want me back he offers."

I take Charlie's seat, Hunter puts his headset back on. The dash is above his head, in front of him and on the floor, it's amazing he knows what to do, "It's like driving a car," he says self-assured. "You want to try?" He asks.

"No thanks, I kinda want to live," I kid. "Can I take a picture of you flying the plane for Rita?"

"Sure."

I snap a few pictures. He's so concentrated on flying, it's super sexy.

"Text it when we land," he tells me, "your phone should be off, it can interfere with radio signals."

"Sure, sorry." I say turning it off the second I finish taking the pictures. I sit quietly next to Him, it's taking my mind off what happened with John earlier. I love Hunter's confidence, he seems to be good at everything he does too. "You're really cool," I tell him.

"Why do you say that?" He flicks a lever.

"You have a rock star for a brother, and you don't seem to be bothered or jealous, you're an amazing editor, you have your own building a beautiful sports car, and you can fly a plane, you're sexy enough to get any girl you want, I'm sure you realize it, the list just keeps getting longer," I stop.

He freezes, "Did you just call me sexy?"

There's an uncomfortable pause.

"I don't know did I," I pretend I forgot.

"You did," he sneers. (I love it when he sneers)

"What's the point of having all this, when there's no one to share it with? It takes all the fun out of having it. I had more fun driving you around in my sports car, taking you to the meals I'm used to, giving you an apartment with free rent, flying you to your family and boyfriend because I like seeing YOU appreciate what I've earned more than enjoying it for myself. I love what I do, the rewards are secondary."

"I'm not after what you have, but I've really enjoyed the time we've spent together, there's no envy or jealousy involved." I explain to him.

"I never thought there was. I have to cut this conversation short, I need my co-pilot back, we're going to be landing soon."

"Sure, thanks for the talk," I tell Hunter. I leave the cockpit and tell Charlie, Hunter wants him back for the landing.

The descent was smooth and a few minutes later Hunter is landing the plane and then escorting me to the car. Its early dawn in the morning, I would guess five.

We park the car at Hunter's building and he reluctantly takes me to my door. I'm tempted to invite him in but, I'm not sure if he would expect anything from me, and the last thing I want to do is disappoint him.

I unlock my door and begin opening the handle, "Would you like to come in," I invite albeit hesitantly.

"I don't think you're ready for the likes of me," he teases. He used the same skilled hand he just flew the airplane with to reach into my hair fisting it before giving it a harsh

tug. I'm taken off guard and my jaw drops. He takes that opportunity to kiss me, "I'll have you screaming," he warns before turning to go to his penthouse.

The little taster has me wanting to beg him to come back, but I don't. I take a cold shower before snuggling into my empty bed.

29

I don't stir until lunchtime when I hear a knock on my door. I open it and there's a bag of Chinese take-out with a note, I thought you might like some-Hunter... I bring the bag in, before grabbing my phone and texting the pictures of Hunter flying a plane, and a picture of the plane with his name on it.

Her response:

Rita: Should have known! He's a pilot. Did Slasher buy him the plane?

Me: Yes, isn't it cool? I got to sit in the co-pilots seat and watch him fly, it was super sexy.

Rita: What time did you get back?

Me: 5a.m. I almost invited him into my apartment.

Rita: His apartment.

Me: I told him he's sexy when we were on the plane.

Rita: Naughty girl!

Me: Right! So he brought me to my door and he put his pilot hand into my hair and tugged it. I got caught off guard and he kissed me.

Rita: That sounds so sexy!

Me: It was, and then you know what he said?

Rita: Don't keep me in suspense,

Me: He said, 'I'll have you screaming.'

Rita: Oh My God!

Me: He knows I'm still in love with John.

Rita: How do you know that?

Me: I pretty much told him, I think that's the real reason he didn't come to my place when I invited him in. I was tempted to chase after him, naked if I had to.

Rita: Ha ha ha.

Me: I really complimented him I said he's an amazing editor, he has a brother he's not jealous of, a fancy car, his own building, he's super sexy, and you know what he said to me?

Rita: Go on then, what did he say, he wants to give you everything like any other guy who comes into contact with you?

Me: No, sort of, he said there's no point in having all that he has if there's nobody to share it with. He had more fun taking me out to restaurants I've never been to before, flying me to see my boyfriend and family than he does spending his own money on himself.

Rita: Great, another knight in shining armour. How the hell do you attract them?

Me: Fluke? I guess, if I didn't start writing I never would have met Hunter, so I can thank dad for that. I would have been separated from John no matter what because of school. I guess I'm lucky.

Rita: Spread some of it over here. Brandon starts playing in three weeks and he wants to move to Niagara while he skates for them. I was willing to move with him, but he said that will take his mind off the game and a screaming baby is the last thing he needs. He said he'd put me up in a place in Toronto, and he'll move in with me after he finishes playing for Niagara, however long that might take. I was accepted to your school, so I picked general courses because I have no clue what I want to do. What I'm trying ask is can I share your flat with you? You know the king bed (obviously not New York)."

Me: I love the idea, until your baby comes that is.

Rita: What do you mean until the baby comes?

Me: Don't get mad, but I can't study and write with a screaming freakoid.

Rita: That's my baby you're calling a freakoid. But we'll share the flat until I have the baby?

Me: Sure, I'll save up, and get my own place if Brandon moves back or you have the baby, whatever comes first.

Rita: You're the best.

Me: You must have been upset when he said he didn't want you in Niagara.

Rita: He's such an asshole, but as long as I keep carrying his baby, he's going to have to take responsibility even if he lives in a different country.

Me: Don't say that! I better start writing, ttyl!

30

I knock on Hunters' door. He answers with a grin looking at the bag in my hands, "Thanks for the fine dining, can we eat together?" I ask.

He opens the door wider, inviting me in. I follow him to his state of the art kitchen and he takes out two plates I consider fine china from his cabinet. I start removing the containers from the bag and opening up everything. The scent of chicken balls and spicy beef fill the air, "I'm starving," I tell him.

"Drink?" he offers.

"Water with ice is good."

He pours two waters with ice.

"I spoke to Rita," I make conversation. "She wants to live with me in my old apartment while she goes to school."

"Isn't she pregnant?" Asks Hunter. "I figured she wasn't going to school."

"No she still plans on finishing her education, she just doesn't know what she wants to do you. Brandon's the father of her baby and her new husband, they literally just got married in Florida. He's going to be playing for Niagara in a few weeks so he wants to live there. He's best friends with John."

"He doesn't want to live with her?"

"Well, she applied to University with me before she got pregnant. He says he doesn't want any distractions while he's playing for Niagara, he wants to keep his head in the game, but I think he resents Rita for getting pregnant," I explain.

"She trapped him," Hunter concludes.

"In a nutshell," I confess.

"That's too bad," he empathizes.

"For Rita or Brandon? I told her I can live with her until she has the baby but I can't write and go to school living with her and a screaming kid."

"Smart move, I can set you up," he offers. He's an expert with his chopsticks. I watch him bring his food to his mouth with little effort.

"No need," I say "my independence is everything to me."

"Can we talk shop?" He asks. "I have an issue with your writing that needs to be ironed out before Manchester sees it."

"I don't have my computer here," I tell him.

"I'll bring it up on mine," he offers. He pulls up a chapter I worked on last week. It's here. I look at his screen, it's all red, out of the margin it says redo.

"What did I do so wrong?" I ask quickly reading the section he's talking about.

"Girls want to feel what you're describing and frankly they won't feel this. They need to know how Mandy feels with him, she needs to be less passive in their love scenes, do more things to him, you have her as just a receiver."

"I can't describe what I've never experienced. I think my love scenes are okay."

"For a nun maybe," he grins. "There are different levels of intimacy, readers want to read each level and details where they can almost feel it happening to themselves."

"Okay," I try retaining everything he's saying.

"In the hallway, I grabbed your hair and yanked it firmly, your jaw dropped almost like a reflex, I kissed you passionately. Did you feel that? Was it electric for you, did your heart pound in your chest or did it repulse you? How would you describe my assertion, did it challenge you or did you want to be in the drivers seat. Did you see into the depths of my soul after the kiss, were my eyes hooded, my jaw tight? You have to describe what every girl would likely feel in that situation. You want them to be you. Can you do that?"

"Yes," I tell him.

"I need to see improvement."

"Is that why you kissed me?" I ask.

"No, I wanted to clutch your long beautiful hair, and yank it. Show you that I'm in control. Touch those perfect soft rosy lips of yours, lick your tongue and imagine it exploring my body. I kissed you because believe I want you more than any other guy, given half the chance I can make you happier than any other girl if you're mine."

"So kissing me had nothing to do with my writing?" I ask. "You kissed me because you wanted to."

"It had everything and nothing to do with your writing. You haven't experienced what you need to for this book, don't get me wrong I don't doubt you're in love with John."

"So kissing me was your idea of a favour, so I can experience what the book needs? Thanks," I say lightly masking my offended feelings. I finish eating and help clean up before I find an excuse believable enough for me to leave.

31

My first novel for the Manchester publishing company is done and I'm elated. Two weeks of reviewing what I've done with Hunter before it goes to press. I decide to enjoy the summer day and take a leisurely stroll in Central Park. I bring a picnic basket stacked with my favourite foods for one and find a nice spot under a shaded tree to have my brunch. I slept in late this morning because late last night I managed to type those three glorious words every author loves, "To Be Continued"

I check my messages and surprisingly even though it's early, Rita tried contacting me:

Rita: Hi Carrie, I have some news, I hope you're sitting down.

Me: Don't be so dramatic. I have news too.

Rita: You first.

Me: Are you sure, you're the one who texted first.

Rita: Ya, go.

Me: I finished my book, I'm so happy, only two more to go and then the series will be done! I love writing.

Rita: Congratulations. Are you sitting.

Me: Yes, I'm having a picnic by myself something you would never do in Central Park actually.

Rita: By yourself?

Me: Yes

Rita: Here goes: Brandon told me John hooked up with someone last night.

Me: Ow ow ow. Did Brandon describe her to you?

Rita: Are you into self-mutilation? Isn't the news bad enough, you need to know what she looks like?

Me: Did he? I demand.

Rita: He said picture the hottest chick you can imagine and then tone it down a notch.

Me: Ow. Maybe we will never find our way back to each other.

Rita: I told you NOT to throw him back in the pond. But what you have now is unimaginable and I was jealous of what you had BEFORE.

Me: Hunter is all about his job. He'll kiss me not because he wants to but because he wants to improve my writing, he says I'm not describing the love scenes good enough for my readers.

Rita: Ask for more coaching, like I said, you have nothing to save yourself for anymore. Get him to teach you what he wants you to write about.

Me: He must think he's God's gift if he thinks he can teach me how to write every girls fantasy. I told you the book is done now.

Rita: I can't wait to read it! When do you go to your publisher?

Me: Two weeks.

Rita: Good luck! The Manchester office are the ones who have to like it. Can you come to Brandon's first game?

Me: Send me the date and the time, and the address of the rink, I will try to make it.

Rita: Great!

I pack my leftover lunch up and go home waiting to hear back from Hunter on the section of my book. I should be more careful for what I wish for, when I get home, he's waiting at my door, "Where were you?" he asks.

"Central park, having lunch."

"By yourself?" he asks in dismay.

"I'm a black belt," I tease.

I notice he's carrying a large envelope, "I have something for you," he hands it to me.

I wonder what it is, a finishing bonus? I open the door letting us in and take the envelope from him.

"You're going to want to sit down," those seven same words Rita said to me just a few minutes ago. I know what's in the envelope before I open it.

"You had him followed," I'm shrill.

He looks at me like how the hell did you know without even opening up the envelope.

"Your clinging to something that's not there anymore and it's beginning to affect your writing."

I slice through the seal and pull out the report of dates, times, phone calls, and images of John dining, and kissing one of the most beautiful girls I've ever seen. The dates go back before our surprise visit to Edmonton. He didn't let me know he moved on when I saw him, and Rita probably knew way before she ever told me too. I'm angry at everyone, John, Rita, and Hunter the world in general. John wasn't different then the rest of the hockey players, it just took me longer to figure out, or I'm being emotional because this is what I told him to do, so essentially he's not betraying me.

"You're all about my writing and nothing else no matter what the cost." I spit. "You can leave now," I'm enraged.

I call Rita even though Hunter hasn't left yet, "How long ago did you know?" I ask.

"It was so hard to tell you," she explains. "I never found an opportune time."

"Before the Edmonton trip?" I ask.

"Just before, I'm so sorry."

"You should have warned me, you're my best friend." I hang up.

"You're phone," I demand of Hunter. He passes it to me. I dial John's number.

"Hi, John? This is Carrie, I've been inundated with photo's and investigative work that has you with a Sheila Price since before I visited you in Edmonton. Why didn't you tell me?"

"I did nothing wrong, you never asked," John hangs up on me and now I'm reeling.

Hunter's watching me like I'm a wild animal, "I told you to get out!" I scream throwing his phone at him, "Get out!"

He advances towards me, "You needed to know."

"Great I know!" Blood is coursing through my veins at twice it's regular speed. My face is hot with anger and it's increasing because HE won't leave. "He had the nerve to make me feel bad for bringing you to the game the entire time he was already hooked up with someone else!"

"I'm not leaving," he says calmly. "Take it out on me, I don't care."

"No! You'd like that!" I tell him, "You don't give a shit about me it's only what I can do to make you look good for our publisher."

"That's not true. I backed off BECAUSE of John. I'm just telling you he's NOT in the picture anymore."

"I don't want you," I rage.

He gets his phone and smashes it against my wall. "Fine," he smoulders, "I'll treat you the same way I treat the rest of my writers no different. I'm giving you notice: after the Manchester trip move your belongings from here, I'm kicking you out. You can commute from Toronto."

He leaves slamming the door.

I decide not to wait until the Manchester trip, packing my most essential belongings and stopping by the penthouse to drop the key off. I think better of ringing his doorbell. He might ask me in, get more mad at me, or who knows what. I slide the key under his door and head back to my little apartment with the king bed.

I remove John and Hunter from my contacts and refuse to answer doors or calls until a day before the Manchester trip. I don't even speak to Rita.

Days Later:

I turn my phone on and it turns into a Christmas device for a good three minutes with countless notifications.

I see ten to fifteen texts from two different numbers, one has to be John the other Hunter. I figure out which is John's and delete them before reading them. I don't need to associate myself with him anymore. Hunter's, I don't waste my time reading, I scan down until I see travel details. I find the time for when I need to get to the airport and then delete his as well.

Rita's messages I read:

Rita: John gave me a key he had for the apartment, I'm going to fly back from Edmonton to move in. Brandon doesn't seem to care if I leave early.

Rita: I've just landed and I'm not feeling well. I'm going to have the cab drop me at the Grimsby hospital.

Rita: Oh My God, there might be something wrong with the baby. Are you getting my messages? Brandon's trying to get a flight. I said I'm sorry!

Rita: I'm going in for emergency surgery. I don't know if my baby's going to survive. Carrie! Where are you?

All my problems are suddenly insignificant. She never made it here, she has to still be in hospital. I check the dates and times of her texts, the last one sent to me was

yesterday afternoon. I call a cab and rush to the hospital, I can't get there fast enough. I get to the front desk and ask for her name, I lie just in case they won't let me see her, telling them I'm her sister. They give me her room number and I rush up the stairs not waiting for the elevator. Brandon and John are waiting outside her room, I ignore both walking passed them and push the door open to see her, the lights are out and she's weeping into her pillow. I sit on her bed and take her into my arms. She doesn't have to tell me the baby didn't survive. I'm devastated for her and I start crying too. No matter why she was having the baby, she loved it and this is a huge loss for her.

"When can you come home?" I ask.

"They're letting me out now." She tells me.

I pack her stuff, crying the entire time. I don't talk to Brandon or John, I hate them both. I go to the nurses station and ask if she has all the paperwork to leave, she nods, I'm taking her home. I should have been there for her. Manchester is tomorrow, but I don't want to go anymore, she needs me.

John and Brandon start following us out of the hospital, I continue ignoring them both, Rita follows suit. I assist her getting out of the wheelchair and help her into the car. It doesn't take us long to get home. I pop the trunk and get her belongings.

Rita settles in my bed and I snuggle next to her. It feels so good even under these circumstances. We don't need men as long as we have each other.

32

Manchester was booked for an overnight flight, I have no intentions of going anymore. Rita comes first. I'm in bed lounging with her, when I check my messages. Repeated ones from Hunter demanding I get back to him about the flight. "I'm supposed to go to Manchester tonight," I inform her. I consider calling Hunter.

He picks up on the second ring, "Hello," he says.

"Hi." The line is quiet. He's waiting for me to speak.

"Are you going to be on the plane? I have you flying from Toronto seven tonight."

"I don't want to leave Rita, she was recently discharged from the hospital," I explain. "She miscarried Brandon's baby, she's miserable."

"You should go," Rita encourages. "You've known about the trip for a long time."

"Even she wants you to go," he overhears. "Is Rita well enough for me to book her a ticket? I don't mind if she comes. They really need to see you," he urges.

I hit mute, "He said we can bring you to Manchester with us, if you're up to it. You can meet his brother and we can go to the concert together in Paris."

"I'm not up for it," Rita says sadly.

I take the phone off mute, "I'm not going, she's not up to it, and if there are any complications nobody will be here to help her."

"Can Brandon stay with her?" He asks. "I wouldn't push if it wasn't important for us to be there. he was the father."

"No, I AM NOT GOING," I put my foot down, "whether Brandon can be here or not."

"You're insufferable." He hangs up the phone and within a few hours there's a knock on the door. I peek out thinking it's probably him, probably flew his jet to Toronto to drag me by the ear, instead I see a girl our age in scrubs.

I open the door, "Hello?"

"Hi! My name is Misty and I've been hired by Hunter to care for your friend Rita in your absence. I'm an OB nurse from Grimsby Hospital.

Of course I think, opening the door to allow her in. "Rita, Hunter hired you a private nurse," I call out, "she's to your right, second door on the left."

"Thanks," she says. "I'm supposed to pass on a message."

"Yes?" I can only imagine.

She looks at me, "He wants you ready by four."

"I just got off the phone with him a little while ago, and I told him I'm not going," I refuse, "I'm just not stupid enough to turn away our knowledgeable assistance in caring for my best friend. I follow Misty back to the room. "Would you like something to eat or drink," I offer both Rita and her.

"No thanks, we're okay," she speaks for Rita too. I help myself to a cooler and go back to bed to spend time with Rita.

I crack the top, "How was Brandon when it happened?"

"I could see the relief flood his eyes," Rita's bloodshot eyes are crimson with anger. "I'm filing for divorce when I feel even a little bit better."

"Good for you!" I tell Rita, "He's nasty!"

"Did they tell you why you lost the baby?" I ask.

"They don't know," she tells me. "They said it may be hard for me to carry a baby to full term with my anatomy whatever that means."

"Did you tell him you want a divorce?"

"Not yet," she says. "I was going to do it later when I have more strength. Maybe I'll stay with him until he hits the Major league hockey, at least then he'll be worth something."

"It's almost four Misty warns."

"I hope Hunter doesn't find out I'm not going until he lands in Manchester," I snicker, "I'm going to take a shower," I announce. I grab a towel and disappear into the bathroom. It feels refreshing, the water beating down on me. I dry up and rejoin the girls in the bedroom when I hear THE KNOCK.

"Oh for fuck sakes!" I curse. "Please don't be," I peep. There he is. "Open the door," he demands.

I open the door covered only with my towel. He glances at it and then I remove it for his benefit, "I don't want to leave anything up to your imagination."

I keep the towel off my body and storm to the bedroom pissed off. I grab my bag, "Asshole is here, I have to go to Manchester, I'm so sorry Rita!"

"You're so naked," she laughs. "Come on in Hunter," she invites him into our bedroom with us, "I bet you love it when she's a rebel!"

He stands in the doorway and sneers, "You sure you can't come to Manchester?"

Rita nods, "I lost my baby, I'm sad and feel sick, they said I can still bleed, I'm supposed to be in bed forty-eight hours."

He nods towards Misty, "I really need to steal Carrie away, I hope it's okay with you that I hired a private nurse to care for you. The trip has been planned for months, she goes in between novels. They need to let her know what they expect for the next novel and what they want from what she's already written in final editing."

"I've never had a private nurse," Rita talks to Hunter like he walks on water.

"We'll call before Paris, in case your better by then, I'll fly you out for my brother's concert," he offers.

"I'd like that," she gushes.

"Let's go," he says firmly to me.

I dress casually and zip my bag including my laptop and phone with charger, "Fine!" I punch.

I kiss Rita good-bye, "I love you," I tell her and we leave.

33

We are silent in the car, “Are you flying?” I ask. The only reason I want him to fly is so that I don’t have to sit with him during the flight.

“No,” he clips. “You’re stuck with me.” We board the plane and I’m miserable. I rather be with Rita than him, I’m not in the mood to stand in front of my publishers and have them critique my work. How Hunter manages to always read my mind I’ll never know, am I that predictable.

“You shouldn’t have left New York, your manuscript needed work before this trip,” he says straight up.

“I’ve worked on it. I didn’t bother showing you. You’re not in my drivers seat anymore.” I say spitefully.

“Show me,” he demands quietly.

“No,” I hiss.

He fidgets with his goatee not wanting to make a scene in front of the other passengers on the plane.

“If you represent me badly, I won’t work with you on the next book, they can find another editor.”

“Are you quitting,” I challenge. “Actually, don’t answer that, I’m firing you! If they want the second and third book they better find me a new editor. You had no right to cut my hair or insinuate yourself into my life the way you did. I still haven’t forgiven you for either yet,” I admit to him.

His eyes turn to black cesspools of anger and there’s nowhere for him to go except sit with me until we land. It looks good on him.

Four more hours of silence will do me just fine.

Hunter pulls his computer out from his carry-on and opens it on the tray in front of him. He starts typing, from what I can see it’s to the Manchester office. I guess he’s notifying them of my decision to fire him. He sends his letter and minutes later he’s opening a reply from them. He closes his computer and then puts a headset ignoring me the rest of the way.

The plane lands and we disembark, grabbing our luggage and looking for the chauffeur. We both get in the same limousine but sit as far from possible as we can from each other. I just want to get this over with and go home to be with Rita. The driver takes us straight to the Publisher's office.

We take the elevator up and wait to be seen. We're called in together, there are three people waiting to speak with us, I don't remember any of them, they just appear vaguely familiar dressed in business casual pencil skirts and heels, one man in a suit.

"Hunter," the man greets.

"Hi," he replies. Hunter places his bag down, before taking a seat at the extensive boardroom table. He opens his laptop, typing in something and then a minute later the laser printer in the corner of the room which I didn't notice was there before, makes a noise and he gets up to get a paper. Everyone's watching him not knowing what to expect.

The woman in the grey pencil suit sizes me from head to toe, "I like the hair, but Hunter didn't tell you you're going to a book signing? You're dressed very casually."

"We came straight from the plane," I explain.

Hunter signs the form that comes off the printer, walks over to me, "Sign," he orders.

It's a sheet relinquishing him from editing my book.

I look at the three Manchester employees, "We had words on the plane, I've released him from my duties as my editor." I explain.

The man shakes his head, "You don't have authority to do that, you signed a contract allowing him to edit all three books."

"Then what am I signing?" I ask Hunter.

"My clause states I can terminate my assistance at any time during the process of creation for any or all of the three books. I'm using power today."

Pencil skirt looks at me shocked, "YOU tried firing HUNTER? You realize he's the best romance editor in the WORLD. Who do you think you are? He can MAKE or BREAK you Carrie. He's unconventional but he'll turn you into a modern heavy weight writer."

"Sign," he demands. I do what he says and then he packs up and leaves the room. We are left looking at each other like idiots.

Pencil skirt looks at the man, "What do we do now?"

The man shrugs and looks at Pencil skirt two, "Is the first book finished?" He asks me.

"Mainly, Hunter didn't review the last few chapters."

Pencil skirt two looks at pencil skirt one, "If we set her up with another editor there's no saying she won't upset the next one too. Hunter's never signed himself off a job."

"She's trouble," the man says.

"I'm in the room," I complain.

Pencil skirt sizes me up again, "She's only written the first book, fire her, get another writer to work with Hunter, he has too much time invested to give the series to another editor."

The man looks at me, "You're fired, sorry Carrie. We told you never to question Hunter, and do as he says. It was simple."

"So that's it?" I start crying.

"Yes, the book you wrote will have your name on it, but the next two will have the new writer. You will get royalties only from the first book. We won't hire you in the future."

Pencil skirt looks at me empathetically, "She's a stupid girl, she tried firing our best editor, self absorbed. She doesn't know how ridiculous she's been."

"I'm still in the room," I complain. I pack my belongings and leave the building. My destination is to go back to Rita but now I have plenty of time to stew on the mistakes I've made. Hunter was larger than life, I was attracted to him but hung up on John. Now I've lost John and Hunter. I learned so much from Hunter. He supported me, enjoyed going out with me, really improved my writing. He proved to me who's boss all right. I tried like an idiot to fire him, and he got the last laugh before leaving the office, now he gets to work with someone else and I'm labeled a trouble maker.

I get to the airport and instead of boarding the plane to Toronto, I call Hunter. He answers on the second ring.

"Hello," he says waiting for me to talk.

"It's me Carrie."

"I know," he says. "What do you want?"

"You, I want the guy who brings a nurse to my friend so he can take me to Manchester, the guy who brings me to meet his rockstar brother, the guy who shaves his

head so he doesn't get chased by girls, the sexy guy who can fly a plane, drive a crazy expensive sports car, edit a book, buy a building, the guy who cares more about making me happy than himself, flying me to see my boyfriend and family just to make me smile. I want YOU hunter."

"I want you too, where are you?"

"The airport. I was going to board a plane."

"Wait for me," he says. "Just wait there."

I see him in a distance and walk briskly to him. We stop a meter apart. "I was fired but I don't care, losing you mattered more." He clutches my hair and tugs hard, (his signature move), my jaw drops and then he kisses my rosy red lips, imagining my tongue all over him. I can't ask for a better fairytale ending.

THE END

(Rita's side of the story is coming soon, look for the title 'Benched!')

Look for [Priorities 2](#)

**The conclusion**



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