



PRIORITIES 2

Meadow Murphy



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Meadow Murphy

Dedication

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

Rita's Story

I had these huge plans for high school, it was going to be an epic year. It started out with Carrie and I spotting a new guy (Brandon) and her ex-boyfriend (Alex) in the hallway. Our sights were set, at least mine were. I wanted Brandon who I compared to Marzipan dipped in chocolate (delectable). Sky was the limit if I could land him, with his superior hockey skills, he had real cash cow potential.

Carrie, (my best friend) and I decided to join the school newspaper writing and photographing sports events, which would bring us to the games. It was a great excuse to be there without looking desperate.

The guy I liked started hanging around my best friend's boyfriend Alex who Carrie caught cheating on her last year with our mutual friend Melissa. Carrie popped her in the nose at a pool party and needless to say, Alex and Melissa got back together, and now, we're not really friends with Melissa anymore.

I hook up with Brandon thinking it's the start of a great relationship and give him the big V thinking it will definitely land him, and the next day, did I say NEXT DAY he breaks up with me. What an absolute waste of two minutes to be exact. I saved something precious for two minutes of less than stellar performance on his part and then he has the nerve to end it the following day.

Carrie hooks up with my table scraps who literally gets offered a contract for 35M to skate for Edmonton but she doesn't want to sacrifice her dreams of working in the **lowest paying sector** of the healthcare industry as a physiotherapist. (Who does that?)

Her story doesn't end there, she stumbles into a writing career and hooks up with an editor who can be found in the dictionary under the word sexy, she finds out he's loaded beyond belief and he's only just the brother of the hugest rock star of our time, 'Slasher!'

Carrie and my table scraps set a date three years from today to see if they should get back together or if they've moved on. I can't see her ever leaving her sexy editor to meet with Marzipan for a lifetime of two minutes or less, and I'm not talking about his hockey career.

Going off topic here, after Two-Minutes I hook up with John who also plays hockey. He didn't get offered the same contract as Marzipan, but he's been offered a spot

in a Canadian league that is one step below major league hockey with the difference that they play for the love of the sport. (Zero money, what a joke!)

After I gave my V to Brandon, I behaved more freely with it after, so it didn't take long for John and I to..you know. The problem is, I find out that John is more potent and I'm pregnant. Most girls would be upset, but I'm not. I've cemented my cash cow, the only problem is he's not earning any cash at the moment. In his defence though, at least he's a ten minute guy instead of a two minute guy so he's one up on Brandon for that, he just has to make it into the major league hockey like Brandon did.

My pregnancy doesn't go over well with John and he decides to move to Niagara where he's been asked to play hockey and as much as I want to go with him, he says the baby and I will be a distraction, so Carrie offers me her apartment in Toronto.

I leave Edmonton to set up in Toronto when the unthinkable happens, I lose the baby. Medical staff don't know why, they just tell me it's gone. I'm devastated and John flies into Toronto to be with me, but he's distant. I'm thinking he see's this catastrophic event as an out. I don't know if I'm crying more over the loss of the baby or the loss of him but I'm depressed, and that's where we left off.

1

I hear a tap at the door, "Come in," I call out. My private nurse Misty backs in carrying a tray of tea and sugar cookies, "I made them myself," she says proudly. I manage a smile but it quickly turns to a quivering lip. "Don't be sad," she encourages. "John will be visiting soon."

"He doesn't care about me," I confess miserably. "He didn't want me coming with him to Niagara when I was carrying his baby, why's he going to want me now?"

"Did I hear you correctly that you're filing for divorce?" Misty asks.

"Heck no, I was just threatening him, but it didn't phase him, on the contrary, I think it delighted him. It's the last thing I'm going to do."

"Good! Good on you," Misty takes my side. I like her. Not just because she's been taking my side, but because she's good company since Carrie's been gone. Carrie is in Europe with Hunter Hot Pants. (Two Minute Marzipan) came up with that name in a fit of jealousy and it stuck.

I leave the king bed and rifle through my bag for new pyjamas. I don't want him seeing me in the same clothes I wore at the hospital and I take a shower so I don't feel self-conscious for his visit.

I reward myself with a sip of tea and tiny bite of Misty's cookie. It's savoury and melts in my mouth. Come to think of it, I can't remember the last time I ate. I take another bite and I realize I'm not eating for two anymore, how sad is that! I started developing feelings for my tadpole. She was going to be my ally against John, my shopping buddy, my mini me. Now I feel hollow. Maybe I should take Carrie and Hunter up on their invite to watch Hunter's brother Slasher in concert. It beats staying here feeling sorry for myself. Nothing will bring my shopping buddy back. I'll just wait for John to go back to Niagara before I do it.

There's a knock on the door and I hear Misty saying to John she's going to step out while he's here. I haven't heard any other voices so I'm hoping he didn't bring Two Minute Marzipan with him. He taps on my door before waking in, "Hi Rita."

John's a head taller than me and completely defined with muscular ripples in all the right places.

"Hi," I reply in monotone.

It's important to me, he knows how upset I am over losing his baby. I'm bracing myself thinking he's going to tell me he's returning back to Niagara with Brandon now that I've been discharged. I sit quietly waiting in anticipation for news I don't want. He doesn't say anything.

"Is Brandon or Alex with you?" I ask him making conversation.

"No, Brandon had to go back to Edmonton and Alex left for Niagara without me, I told him I'll meet up with him later," he explains. John and Alex are inseparable, playing on the same team (pardon the pun) and they came together when they heard about me losing the baby.

I'm surprised, knowing John doesn't care about me. I don't get why he didn't leave when Alex did, "You stayed behind?" I'm completely baffled.

"Can I join you," he asks without waiting for my reply. He appears unhappy and toe/heels his shoes off before sliding in under the covers on the other side of the bed.

He snuggles close to me as we face each other. I'm aghast, "Your upset?" I ask. "You cared?"

"What do you think," he says sarcastically. "You peg me as some insensitive sod," he accuses me.

"You said yourself we were just a distraction to you," I repeat his own words to me back to him.

"Everything I did was for us, securing a strong future for you and the baby. I wanted to do well in Niagara so I could get a contract like Brandon. (The guy who used me, a.k.a. Two Minute Marzipan.)

"I was under the impression you didn't care," I tell him.

"You're wrong," he says pulling me in closer. My anger towards John (my Ten Minute Man) dissipates and I start thinking maybe we'll have some sort of future together. I stroke his chin and kiss him tenderly on the lips. It feels better to be sad with someone, then alone.

"I'm glad I'm wrong," I admit to him. He stays in bed with me for a very long time. Misty has already returned and asked us if we want anything before leaving us alone again to turn the television on for herself in the living room.

"I want to move with you to Niagara," I tell him.

"I want a divorce," he advocates. "We're young, there's nothing keeping us together anymore, I'm not in love with you Rita."

"I am in love with you! You get into bed with me while I'm mourning the loss of our baby, and ask me for a divorce?"

"When you put it that way, it's just that we're so young," he backs off.

"Just go," I tell him.

"I'm sorry," he says. "I just thought that with the loss, there's nothing keeping us together."

"Except my feelings for you," I tell him, "You might not have any for me, but I do for you. Be with as many girls as you want, treat me like crap, I will stay here waiting for you. One day you're going to realize I love you more than anyone else ever has and if it's not too late, you will come back," I forecast.

I'm suffering raw emotion and he has the maturity of a twig as he disregards my fragile state and gets close to me one last time, tears are streaming from my eyes, "I'm going back to Niagara, you can visit when you're feeling better," my husband says to me, as he walks out the door. I never felt as distant from him as I do now.

A few minutes later Misty timidly taps on the door, "Are you okay Rita?"

I'm not, I feel used but I'm not ready to talk about it, I get up, "Never better," I lie as I start packing a bag. I text Carrie telling her I want to go to Europe, I need to go. She says she'll have Hunter arrange everything, I have to sit tight and she will give me a time to be at the airport, as simple as that.

2

I tell Misty my plan to go to Europe and we exchange numbers with intentions of keeping in touch. The cab ride is quick but I find myself moping and feeling sorry for myself. Did I really want to be a mother at such a young age? Hell No, it would have been scary, and John didn't make it to the big leagues yet, maybe this was a blessing in disguise.

I check in and wait for my flight, reflecting the entire time on what I told John, I gave him the green light to do whatever he wants. Maybe, I should do the same. It's not like he cares and it's better then following him around like a lost puppy.

I arrive in Paris two days before Carrie and Hunter. They are still working out kinks with Carrie's publisher who's located in Manchester. A man waits for me at the airport with my name on a sign, "Hi, Rita? Hunter instructed me to take you to your hotel," he says pleasantly.

He picks up my bag, and I follow him to the car. I'm in Paris the city of love! Sadly, I wish John was with me to enjoy it. As quick as he enters my thoughts, I shove him out, remembering how awful he made me feel before leaving me to go back to Niagara. I'm just an outlet for him. I admire the sights as we drive through a portion of Paris to get to the hotel they've booked me in.

The Hotel is six star, five just isn't good enough. My room is two levels. I have two bathrooms, two bedrooms and an office. My view of the Eiffel Tower has to be the best view in Paris. I realize I've set my sights too low with John. THIS is the life. How Carrie managed it I'll never know.

I put on my new designer jogging suit I bought before I found out I was pregnant. I never jogged before but it's as good a time as any to learn. I lock up the room and take the lift to the lobby.

I stretch my calves and start with a brisk walk then an all out jog. I have my wireless ear buds in and I'm jogging to the beat of the first song, I don't get half way through and I'm starting to feel winded. How the heck to people do this? Setting a goal, to last one more song, I struggle through before I slow my pace to a brisk walk. I can still see the hotel, I haven't gone far at all. Oh well, not bad for a first time. I see a patisserie and stop for an almond croissant and a cappuccino to reward myself.

The next day I do the same, but chose a different direction, (the other side of the hotel). I don't get much farther and curse myself for changing directions because now I'm twice as far as I was yesterday from that delightful patisserie where I got that Almond croissant and cappuccino. I slow down from a super slow jog to a brisk walk and redirect back to that cafe.

I sit on the patio, and people stare passer-byes as I sip my coffee and take baby bites of my heated almond croissant. I notice a guy sitting at the next table with what I suspect are his parents. He's wearing a grey beret and a hideous pant suit and sunglasses even though it's not sunny out. His parents are dressed way better than him. I don't realize I'm staring until he says with a British accent, "Pictures last longer. Would you like one?"

His sarcasm is offensive so I don't apologize for staring, "You really should teach your son how to dress the way you do," I direct to what I think are his parents.

His mother chuckles and his father grins, "We've been trying dear, I've ask him to cut his hair for years," she confides in me.

"It's no use," his father says. "He's trying to maintain an image," they explain. You can tell he's using his son's words. They seem super friendly, his parents are way more personable than him.

I shake my head and sip my cappuccino, "Sorry for staring. Sometimes I don't realize I'm doing it."

"No worries," the father says, "we're sorry our son was rude to you."

"I'm here you know," he reminds his parents.

"Our son usually evokes a lot of stares, we're used to it," his mum adds.

"Let's go," he hurries his parents with irritation.

"Take care," I say to them as they begin to leave. They were nice even if he wasn't.

I go back to the room and wait for Carrie and Hunter, who said they would arrive by dinner.

Carrie texts me to meet her in the lobby of the hotel. I take the lift down and see her and Hunter waiting for me, "Carrie!" I gush. I know it's only been a few days but it feels like forever. We hug and then I greet Hunter.

"I'm starved," Carrie complains, "how are you feeling Rita."

"Better, where are we eating?"

Hunter does something on his phone, "Do you want to go out or eat in?" Carrie asks.

"I don't care, I'm hungry too. There's a patisserie not too far from here," I suggest.

Hunter looks at Carrie, "I promised my parents I will have dinner with them when we get here. They're staying here," he informs us.

"Sure, I'd love to meet them," Carrie replies.

The lift door opens and two people step off, they look so familiar, oh! It's the couple I met yesterday at the Patisserie with that rude dude!

"Hi!" Hunter greets them, wow, it's his parents. He approaches his mother kissing both her cheeks and then shakes his fathers hand.

"Elliot's not coming?" Hunters mum asks.

I automatically assume they're talking about the rude dude, "He's busy," Hunter explains.

That's when they notice me, "Hello!" Hunters mum greets me happily. She instantly recognizes me.

The father appears confused, "Yesterday at the Patisserie," the mother places me for him.

He nods remembering, greeting me with a smile, "Hello, you are?"

"Rita," I say shaking his hand, "A friend of Carries' and Hunter."

"Pleased to meet you" he says.

"You met?" Hunter asks surprised.

"It's a small world," the mother comments.

Hunter and Carrie look at us confused, "We did, yesterday at a small cafe," I explain. "You were with someone else though."

"My other son," Hunter's mum explains.

"Elliot," the father adds.

Hunter nods.

"Their other son was so rude," I whisper to Carrie.

She smiles weirdly at me, "You know Elliot is Slasher right?"

Oh My God, I didn't make the association. He must have been in disguise, "Of course I did," I lie.

"You didn't!" Carrie laughs. "A rockstar right under your nose," she teases.

"Mum, Dad, I see you've met Rita, this is Carrie," he introduces them. "The only writer who's ever attempted to fire me," he proudly announces.

"You what?" I ask shocked.

"I'm going to marry her," he tells his mum and dad.

Carrie beams and his mother embraces her, "He's never been fired before, and he's never brought a girl to me. You must be the one," she says into Carries hair.

The father gives her a brisk hug, you can tell he's not comfortable with public displays of affection.

All I can think is I met Slasher and didn't even realize it. 'He said take a picture it lasts longer,' was he sarcastic or was he offering for me to take a picture of him? The car pulls up and Hunter leads the way. We sit in the limousine facing each other.

"It's so nice to see you dear," Hunters mum says to him.

He grins, not his usual sneer, "I wouldn't have known you were here, if I didn't see Elliot a few weeks ago."

"We were busy," she explains. "Your brother flew us down, I wish you made as much of an effort to spend time with us as he does," his mother complains.

I love her, just so cool.

"If he doesn't make enough time for his mother, what's to say he will for you?" I ask point blank to Carrie.

"He's very doting," she defends him.

"Probably the same way he is in every new relationship he enters," I argue.

"Are you really saying this to Hunter's parents in front of Hunter after he flew you out here?"

Then the reality of my behaviour slams into me, "Oh my, I'm so sorry, it must be hormones. They told me I might not feel like myself," I explain to his parents.

"You are too much yourself," Carrie bites.

"She just lost a baby," Hunter explains to his parents. "I'm sure she doesn't mean what she's saying."

"Ya, I don't," I say apologetically. "Can we start over?"

"Sure," they say in unison.

The car pulls up to a restaurant that resembles a mini castle. I decide to keep my trap shut after upsetting Carrie in front of Hunter's parents. We are shown to a very

private room, it's quite impressive how they cater to Hunter, you would think he's the rockstar. I guess he received a lot of press before Carrie or I ever met him.

Hunter pulls Carrie's chair out for her, the waiter mine, the father for his mother. It's all very polite. I want to live like this too. I don't think anyone's ever pulled my chair out for me. Suddenly there's commotion at the front of the restaurant. I strain to see what's going on without making it look obvious. The maitre-d walks towards us, someone following close behind, it's Elliot.

Heads turn with each step he takes. People scramble to get their cell phones. He's not in disguise, if he looked like this yesterday I would have known who he was. I do now, and I'm really excited that he's coming to OUR table.

He says hi to his mum and dad kissing her on the forehead, then he greets Hunter and Carrie before his eyes land on me, "What are you doing here?" he asks aghast, "Aren't you that girl from the Patisserie?"

I don't know how to respond to that, "Yes, I'm friends with Carrie," I explain wondering if it's a good enough for him.

"Leave the poor girl alone," the father says as though Slasher is about to pick on me. "Hunter said you were too busy to come."

"Things opened up" Slasher responds.

People are recording us with their phones, "For fuck sakes, you couldn't get a more private table?" He complains to Hunter.

"You said you weren't coming," he grinds.

"Boys stop it," mum says as though she's talking to two children. "Are you dating anyone honey? I hope you've stopped screwing those cheap whores and staying off the drugs like I told you too."

"Yes mum," Slasher clips, he gestures for a waiter, "Another table please."

"Right away," he scurries.

"Why don't you take this lovely girl out," she's referring to me. Slasher flashes a look of disgust.

"He wouldn't be able to handle me," I tease. He's a real blow to a girl's self-esteem, I handled it well on the fly. I'm not liking him the way I thought I would. He's nasty to me.

Mum addresses Carrie, "So tell me about firing Hunter," she chuckles. "I'm going to love this story."

Hunter sneers.

"There's not much to tell, I wasn't the easiest person to work with," she explains.

"I'm sure Hunter was also being Hunter," his dad says.

"She tried firing a world-renowned editor. They deemed her a troublemaker and let her go." Hunter explains.

"So, you decided to marry her, makes a lot of sense son," his father makes a valid point.

"The boys have never been one to have someone else call the shots," his mum informs Carrie. "You don't know what you're up against, when you manage to see him."

"Stop," Hunter warns his mum.

"A chip off the old block," Slasher pats his dad's shoulder.

Hunter's mum carefully places her wine down on the mahogany table, "So if you're not writing for Hunter, what are you planning on doing, you don't strike me as the stay at home type?"

"I'm going to school in Toronto for Physiotherapy."

"She dated a hockey player who made it into the major leagues for Edmonton, but when it meant her not going to the ivy league school of her choice, she dumped him too," I painted a cold picture of Carrie. She glares at me, her eyes starting to appear angry. "She was going to meet back up with him in three years time to see if they still are in love with each other, until she met your son," I tell mum. "You aren't going to do that now, are you?" I ask because, "The circumstances are all different now."

"That's news to me," Hunter studies Carrie.

"And you?" The mother tries changing the topic.

"I planned on marrying rich," I joke. "I hooked up with a good minor league player. He hasn't made the majors yet. The pregnancy cemented the relationship until I lost the baby, now everything is up in the air. He doesn't want me."

"Wise choice," Slasher says sarcastically. "He never wanted you."

"See what women will do," Mum uses me as an example to Slasher.

"I don't think you have to worry about your son," I tell her, "he's nowhere as nice as any of you are. He'll be alone for a very long time with the exception of the floozies that throw themselves at him."

"Better than being with the likes of you," he looks at me angrily, "I'm losing my appetite looking at your face," he tells me.

I start laughing.

The father is stunned, "Have I missed something?"

Mum grins, "I think Elliot finally found his match, I never thought I'd see the day."

Hunter is still stuck on Brandon and Carrie having a date in three years.

Carrie shakes her head, "You are acting very abnormal," she says to me.

Rita looks at Mum who turns to Carrie, "The number one rule for getting a guy, is never let them think there's no competition. I think your friend Rita here, is looking out for your best interests. If Hunter is absent all the time like his other girlfriends have complained, maybe him knowing that, if he's not around, Carrie might just get snatched up. I think both of you are lovely, just not for my sons."

"That's why you don't bring girls to meet Mum and dad," Elliot tells Hunter.

"Crystal!" Hunter's dad stops her.

She looks at me, "You have proven you will stop at nothing to get a guy with no drive to make something of yourself. Carrie will stop at nothing for what she wants, no matter how selfless Hunter is." She looks at the father, "Neither of the two girls are good for either of our sons, why not tell them now before it's too late?"

Carrie looks at Hunter, "I get why your still single," she grins.

"Let's just go," Elliot says irritably, throwing money on the table. "Normally mum, I would go against what you say, just out of spite but I quite agree with you on this bird." I take it he's referring to me.

"You never had a chance with this bird," I growl. "My name is Rita, not bird, jackass, I mean Elliot."

3

Dinner didn't go well, so when we returned to the car, I don't participate as much. We drive to the biggest venue in Paris and are escorted back stage with Elliot, only now he's Slasher and the six very husky guards are surrounding him.

Carrie was chewed up and spit out at the dinner table, his mother came off as nice at first. It didn't matter to me what she thought of me because I'm not with nor will I ever want to be with any of her sons. Especially, not after the display I witnessed first-hand. Who are they to judge me, although they kind of hit the nail on the head with both Carrie and myself.

We sit in a green room of sorts and have wine before the concert starts. Some girl escorts us to our seats a few minutes before the show. There has to be twenty or so thousand people here to see Slasher perform. He has two groups opening for him. I'm still not feeling perfect since the hospital, so I sit down while everyone is on their feet with the exception of course of his mom and dad.

The opening bands play six or seven songs each and then the lights go down and its sheer pandemonium waiting for Slasher to take the stage with his entourage. I'm familiar with most of his songs and we are front row, so I try to put the night behind me and enjoy the concert.

Slasher nods to one of his Goons and suddenly I'm being escorted up on stage. What the heck! is all I'm thinking when I'm brought up and he points to a chair, I sit and girls are freaking out and screaming with jealousy. "Take me, take me" is what they're all calling out. Candles and lighters set the background, I sit down where he points and he literally serenades me a capella. I fake being touched by this beautiful love ballad but as he's wrapping it up, I'm already getting up from the chair.

Thunder applause as I walk down off the stage. The girls are screaming again for him to take them. If they only knew what he is really like, I think to myself. What a turn off.

Hunter's eyes are hooded as he wears sunglasses even at night. Him and Carrie seem better, he's kissing her deep throat while standing next to his mother, who looks very annoyed. The father is oblivious and proud of his son on the stage. You can tell,

Elliot's the apple of his eye. I'm looking forward to returning to my small life in Canada than being with this loopy family a second longer, Carrie can have them.

The concert ends and we get whisked back stage. Slasher a.k.a Elliot is showered and disguised. There are no further plans for the evening, it's back to the hotel and not a moment too soon.

The limousine ride is strained, Elliot is seated next to me and his father. Carrie, Hunter, mum are across from us. Elliot starts stroking my hand. It startles me, "What do you think you're doing?" I ask.

He looks at me stunned, like nobody in his entire life has ever rejected him no matter how he treats them, "Nothing," he says.

"Good, because I'm not one of your admirers," I clarify.

"Oh please, what girl doesn't want Elliot," the mother challenges.

"Crystal," the father warns.

Hunter is playing with his goatee and holding Carrie's hand, you know what they'll be doing tonight. Elliot is now looking at me, like I'm dessert. I stare out the window ignoring him. I'm closed for business.

I have my own room, Carrie and Hunter walk me to it, "I'm sorry Carrie, I think my hormones are out of whack."

"Don't worry about it," she reassures, "you've been through a lot."

"Nobody gets along with my parents," Hunter informs us.

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Once I'm in my room, I go to turn off my phone but there's a text.

Elliot: Come to my room 1112

I ignore it, and text Carrie instead.

Me: STOP giving my number out!

Carrie: I didn't

Me: Elliot just texted me.

Carrie: It must have been Hunter. What did he say?

Me: For me to go to his room.

Carrie: Are you?

Me: Absolutely not!

I turn my phone off and take that warm shower before sliding into bed.

4

The next morning Carrie and I meet up at the Patisserie, my new favourite place.

"You suck!" she says to me.

"I suck? His mother sucks!"

"Both of you!"

I bite my croissant, nothing tastier on the planet, the almond paste just melts in my mouth, "No guy should stop you from making your dreams come true." I tell her.

"Brandon didn't want me to go to the best school, and Hunter had me fired," she sips her coffee. "The mother never once said what she does for a living," Carrie points out.

"She's a doctor specializing in infectious diseases," I tell her.

"How do you know?" Carrie asks.

"A tablet, you have to be really smart to do that."

"I guess," she agrees. "I guess that's why her sons are so driven for success, what about the father?"

"Stay at home dad," I tell her.

"That makes sense, he seems more maternal," Carrie points out. "Hunter asked me to marry him last night."

"Last night?" I'm surprised.

"Ya, your promise to Brandon made him insecure."

"You think?" She asks.

"Yup, he will never show you insecurity though, you can tell how important it is for him to depict confidence, that's what makes him so sexy. So, you're marrying him?"

"Yes!" Carrie squeals. "Brandon proposed but I had to live under his terms, Hunter lets me live my life as I see fit."

"You should have a long engagement, make sure his mom isn't right about him never being around. Tell him you'll marry him in three years plus a day."

"Oh! That will get him so mad," Carrie predicts.

"If he wants you badly enough, he'll wait," I advise.

"Maybe she says biting into her scone."

Couples drift passed us, holding hands, I can't help feeling jealous, "You really need to be in a relationship to be here," I say unhappily.

"Your time will come," Carrie says with confidence.

Hands unexpectedly cover my eyes. I feel them, I can't see it being Hunter, he would do it to Carrie, the father isn't that playful, it must be Elliot, "Elliot" I guess with a monotone voice. I don't want him thinking that seeing him will elevate my mood.

I guess correctly and his hands lift from my face. He's clean shaved, wearing a woman's blond wig pulled back in a ponytail. He has on rose coloured sun glasses and of all things, a sundress with a bra that you can see the straps on his shoulders, "Really?" I laugh. "Nice disguise!"

Carrie chuckles too.

She joins our table, "Do you want me to get you something?" I offer.

She snatches my croissant and takes a huge bite, huge!

"You stole my croissant Slasher!" I say really loud, and then suddenly girls from every direction, come running towards him. He's taken off guard and sprints away.

"You shouldn't have done that," Carrie says.

"He shouldn't have taken my croissant," I grin. "He's fast! Where do you want to get married?" I ask.

"We don't know yet, but we want you to be the Maid of Honour."

"I'd be delighted," I accept, "you need to tell Brandon."

"I see no need," Carrie says stubbornly, "he's with Sheila now." I type into my phone. "What are you doing?" Carrie demands.

"I just texted Brandon your news!"

"Jesus Rita! I wish your hormones would go back to normal, I told you he doesn't need to know."

"It looks good on him. He's so quick to hook up with another girl."

"I encouraged it," Carrie emphasizes.

"Doesn't mean he had to do it," I point out.

I keep typing into my phone, "What are you doing now?"

"I'm going to give John the divorce he wants."

"What?" Carrie asks in disbelief.

"Slasher's mom is right. No guy is worth putting myself on the line for the way I did for John. I would have done anything for him. I was so stupid." I say seeing the light.

I buy myself another croissant, it's my last one, I'm going home on the first plane out, I decide. It's time to focus on myself.

5

I land in Toronto on a mission, Its late so I pick up groceries from one of those twenty-four hour stores before heading back to the apartment. I pop a frozen dinner in the microwave and check my messages. It's quiet and kind of lonely.

I'm not sure what makes me do this but I get into my car and drive to Niagara, John's address. The closer I get to his place, the more sombre my mood gets, but I have to do this.

It's quarter past eleven and I know, everything is uncharted. I knock on his door and wait. A few minutes later he answers, "Rita!" he says. I know instantly he's been caught red handed but I weather the storm of emotion brewing internally. This second hardest event in my life, next to losing the baby.

"Can I come in?" I ask.

"It's not a good time," he says nervously.

"You're going to want to hear what I have to say," I encourage.

He rolls his eyes and opens the door.

Before he has a chance to explain I tell him, "Please send her home."

He goes to where I assume is his bedroom and comes back with her. She's a few inches taller than me, dressed with the bare minimum of clothing, and really, she could be me. I'm even sadder. He walks her out and then returns almost immediately, "Am I blocking her in?" I ask not remembering whose car I was parked behind.

"No," he says.

We're alone now, and I tell him point blank what I think he wants to here, "I'll give you that divorce you asked for."

His eyes are bewildered, "You're divorcing me?"

"No! Yes. You told me you want a divorce, you're obviously moving on whether I give it to you or not," I refer to the girl who left.

"She's nothing to me, you were in Europe," he explains, like that's reason enough.

"It's okay John, seriously, it's okay." I get lost in his eyes for a second. "I hope you're happy. Good luck with your hockey too, you're so talented," I tell him. "I loved watching you. I love you," I admit sadly.

My tear ducts betray me, "Don't cry," he pleads.

I know it's okay to cry, it's part of healing, "I'll be okay," I tell him, "it's just been a very hard time for me."

"I don't want a divorce," he blurts.

"You were with someone who could be my twin John. I didn't want a divorce at first. I have feelings for you and wanted to be with you forever, but I can't force you to return those feelings and you've already been unfaithful."

"I'll stop," he insists.

I shake my head, knowing he won't, "Friends?" I offer.

"You're ending it with ME?" he says in disbelief. I'm astonished at his conceitedness. "Friends."

We give each other a hug, "I'll go Monday and file," I tell him.

"There's no rush," he says.

"There is for me," I disagree.

I make it to the car before I really cry. It takes me a minute or two to be okay to drive. I don't have my baby, and I don't have my husband but I have my pride.

6

By the time I get home it's late so I wait until the next morning to call Carrie.

She answers on the first ring, "Hi Rita! You made it home okay?"

"Yes, when are you coming back," I forgot to ask before now.

"Tomorrow night, I want to make sure I get back in plenty of time to get ready for school."

"That's good, I can't wait to see you," I tell her, she's really determined to do this physiotherapy thing. I should be figuring out what I want to do, general courses are a waste of time, when I could be working towards a major or minor. "I drove to John's and told him I'll give him a divorce. There's nothing keeping us together since I lost the baby, I know he doesn't love me. He had a girl in his bedroom when I arrived."

"You're kidding, what did he say to you, did he have an excuse?" she asks.

"I didn't make him come up with one, I was kind of sad before I arrived. The girl looked exactly like me. When I told him I'll file, he was taken aback, almost like he didn't want me to divorce him."

"Was it because of Hunter's mom?" she asks.

"Partly," I admit, "I deserve to have someone who loves me," I tell her.

"You do, by the way you'll never guess who's been asking about you! Elliot was stunned when I told him you went back to Canada without saying good-bye to him. I think he took a liking to you, to be honest," Carrie tells me.

"That's all I need," I say sarcastically. "I liked him before I met him, now I can barely stand the guy."

"I think that's just the way he is."

"I have no interest," I cut her short. "I'm not into womanizers, it's time I consider my feelings and my future, everything else will fall into place."

"You're making a lot of sense Rita," Carrie compliments me.

"What time will you be home tomorrow night?" I ask.

"Ten-ish."

"Call me from the airport I'll pick you up."

"Don't bother," Carrie says, "Hunter always arranges for my transportation, but we can have dinner when I get home, I'll be starving."

"Should I order or cook?" I ask.

"Whatever you feel like doing," she says pleasantly, "I'm really proud of you Rita."

"Thanks," I smile. I can't wait until she gets home.

~~

I spent the afternoon cooking for Carrie's return home. She loves my mac and cheese casserole, so I do it extra creamy for her and pick up a quart of her favourite ice cream. I've been looking forward to her return all day.

I hear the door and go running to it, opening it before she manages to put the key in the lock.

It's not her, I'm startled by the realization and slam the door shut in the person's face.

"Rita," Elliot calls out, "open the bloody door."

I'm still shocked, "Where's Carrie?" I call out through the door.

"She's coming with Hunter the day after tomorrow, she gave me her ticket, it was my idea, I wanted to surprise you," he calls through the door. "Open the door," he calls out again.

I open it and he looks ticked. He's in another disguise, he's a guy this time, it's better than the girl.

"Why are you here?" I ask perplexed.

He removes his sunglasses and hat, shaking out his hair, "I wanted to see you, don't be daft."

"She told you I'm giving John a divorce," I surmise.

"Maybe," he admits. "I have to be in Dublin the day after tomorrow," he tells me like it matters or something. Then I wonder if he thinks he's staying here or not.

"Where are you staying," I ask out of curiosity.

"Here?" he asks.

"I only have one bed," I tell him

He claps his hands together, "This just keeps getting better!"

"You'll have to get a hotel."

"No, I want to sleep with you," he insists, I won't try anything.

"I made her favourite food, I'm going to kill her," I threaten.

"She had your best interests at heart, don't be mad at her," he defends. "What did you make?" He asks interested.

"Mac and cheese casserole, ice cream for dessert."

He rubs his palms excited, "I'm in!"

I role my eyes, "Seriously?!"

I text her:

Me: You just wait until you get home!

Carrie: Couldn't resist, have fun or kill each other, see you in a few days.

Me: If you're lucky!

I grab the oven mitts and pull Carrie's dinner from the oven. "This looks delicious," Slasher says watching me.

"You want me to believe with all the fancy restaurants you and your brother go to, THIS looks appetizing?"

"For sure, nothing beats a home cooked meal, mum hasn't cooked for Hunter or myself in years, I pour two large glasses of milk and we sit at the dining table across from each other.

"Do you want some music while we eat?" I offer.

"Sure," he says.

I program my phone to play and his number one hit comes on. Slasher looks displeased, "No! Play anything but me," he says like hearing himself is going to drive him crazy.

"Sure," I pick the phone up again and switch it out for someone different. "Is this better?"

"Yes," he relaxes into his chair. "It's just weird listening to myself on downtime."

I dig my fork into dinner and blow on it to cool it, before putting it in my mouth. It turned out good this time, Carrie would have enjoyed it. I sip my milk. I consider what it was like before he came, and I'm glad if Carrie isn't here at least he is.

"Carrie told me you went to John's and you said you will divorce him."

"There's nothing really keeping us together anymore and I kind of listened to your mum."

"She said he was with a girl that looked like you," Slasher continues.

"That hurt," I admit. "I figured he was probably cheating on me but so quickly after losing our baby, I don't even care that the girl he's with looks like me."

"It must have sucked," Slasher empathizes. "Carrie didn't want you to be alone."

"So, she sent you?"

"I wanted to come," he admits. "It's a great getaway, even if it's just for a couple of days."

"If you would have told me even as little as five days ago, that I would be hanging out with a Rockstar," I comment. "I'd say you're having me on!"

"I'm just Elliot," he corrects.

"Oh ya, that rude dude I met in Paris."

"You don't have to go that far," he stops me. "You came off as the same as the rest of my fans at first, but you tried getting me mobbed and you left without saying good-bye. You're just as rude!"

"Why would you expect me to go out of my way to say bye to you when I'm Carrie's friend?"

He shrugs, "I guess I shouldn't have. This is so good," he compliments my food, closing his eyes to savour it.

"Sure," I say in disbelief. He takes second helpings of dinner but isn't interested in the ice cream. "You really want to stay here?"

"Wouldn't mind if I do," he takes it as an offer.

"What now?" I ask turning off the late dinner music, "It's too late to start a movie, are you watching any series on television?"

"I don't get much time," he admits. "Can we shag?"

"Sorry, I'm not a groupie and you are kind of old, or were you kidding?"

"I guess I was kidding," he's unaccustomed to rejection from the looks of it.

I maintain my modesty and change in the bathroom, and we go to bed.

7

Elliot wakes up at the same time as me, I check my phone for messages and then the calendar. "Is there something you'd like to do today?" I ask.

"We can go to tonights hockey game and act like a couple in front of John," I suggest childishly.

"Sure!" he says.

~~

We pick up tickets at the window, the seats are good because it's only minor Canadian hockey league. They warm up and some guy approaches Elliot whispering something into his ear.

He looks over at me, "Come," he says.

I have no idea what's going on but I'm following Elliot and a stranger. He brings us down to ice level just as the announcer asks everyone to stand for our national anthem. The stranger opens the door to the rink and shakes Elliot's hand before giving him the mic, "Thanks, this is great! I can't believe you're here and on top of it, you agreed!"

Elliot clutches my hand because he knows if he doesn't, I'm out of here. On the ice both teams including John are lined up for the first game of the season. Slasher and I stand on a carpet in the middle of the ice and he proudly sings our Canadian national anthem holding my hand. I think John's eyes are popping out of his helmet.

His voice along with my appreciation for him soar above the clouds. He takes it one step further, too far, if you ask me, and gives me kiss that should only happen in marital bedrooms. When the song is over, as tempted as I am to smack him for taking liberties, he's doing me the favour, upsetting John. I pull away to breath and thank him for everything he's doing. "I'm still not shagging you," I say in his ear.

We go back to our seats and watch John lose 4:3. He contributed nothing to the game.

We drive home and a good part of our evening still exists. I don't suggest doing anything, because I know Elliot probably never gets quiet time.

He parks his butt on the couch and turns on the television. I cuddle into him while I wait for my dough to rise. Tonight, we're having homemade pizza.

"I quite like you," I inform him.

"You're not so bad," he smiles.

We don't talk, silence and no expectations are golden.

~~

The next morning, we have breakfast together before he has to go to the airport. "It's too bad, you have to leave before Carrie and Hunter return."

"I had a good time with you Rita," he says.

Surprisingly, I feel the same, "It's mutual. If you ever need to get away, my door is open," I let him know.

"But you won't consider shagging me?" he questions.

"No, I won't," I grin. "It's a shag-free zone."

8

Later that day, I'm cleaning up when I hear the door. I rush into the living room, this time it is Carrie, but Hunter's not with her, "Hi! Where's Hunter?"

"He had to go back to New York," Carrie says disappointed.

"That's too bad," I tell her. "Slasher was a big surprise."

"I thought you might like that," Carrie searches through the fridge grabbing a water. "What did you guys do?"

"We went to John's game, he lost 4:3."

"Did John notice you guys?"

"Oh ya! They asked Slasher to sing the national anthem."

"And did he?" She asks sipping her water.

"Yes, then he kissed me in front of everyone." I giggle.

"Rubbing John's nose in it," Carrie describes. "It must have felt good."

"Great," I correct.

"Slasher asked me if I wanted to shag."

Carrie chuckles, "Did you?"

"No way, I told him our place is a shag-free zone. He's too old for me. We had fun though. I told him if he ever needs to getaway, he can come here."

"Have you and Hunter set a date?" I ask.

"I joked with Hunter and went with your idea of three years plus one day and that ticked him off. He accused me of having feelings for Brandon. That's why he went back to New York early."

"Tell him you're sorry, and that you were kidding, if you don't, I will."

"No, you won't," she says stubbornly. "We're still young, and what if I am still in love with Brandon. If Hunter really wants me, he can wait the same way Brandon would have had to. I'm finishing school first."

"Okay, but you're going to lose him," I warn. "Let's focus on something more important, I want to pick my career."

"How are you going to do that?" Carrie parks on the couch.

I open my computer and sign in, "I was thinking of searching up top paying careers for woman and then just picking."

"That sounds precise," Carrie teases.

"Okay, I have the top fifteen careers here, I'm just going to close my eyes and pick." I close my eyes and point to the screen. My finger lands on an ad. I close my eyes and try again, this time it lands on pharmacist. "I guess I'm going to become a pharmacist." I tell her. "Think of the make-up discounts I'll get from the drugstores," I daydream.

"Do you have any idea what's involved in becoming a pharmacist?" She asks me.

I look at her clueless, "No! I'll just search it up," I tell her.

"You do that," she grins.

"Simple," I say, "a university degree and an exam. I'm going to the registrars office tomorrow and changing my courses to reflect what I need."

"You're going on the first day of school? Expect to stand in a ridiculous line."

"Sure, I'll pretend I'm camping out for a Slasher concert," I tease.

Later that night, I text Slasher because I like him more now than I did in Paris:

Me: Hi Elliot just wanted to find out if you had a good flight.

S: Not bad. Carrie and Hunter with you now?

Me: Just Carrie, Hunter flew back to New York early.

S: Why?

Me: Carrie said she doesn't want to get married for three years.

S: Oh, Hunter always has to be in control, he's not used to that.

Me: When she sets her mind to something.

S: He's the same way.

Me: That's not good:-) I also wanted to tell you I had fun during your visit.

S: Me too. I'll be back.

Me: Stop threatening!

S: Ha ha, t'ra for now!

9

Carrie and I eagerly drive in together for our first day of University. She finishes two hours later than me, but I'm sure I'll find something to do while she's in class.

We park in one of the last spots, ridiculously far from the buildings. It's hard to believe they can charge so much for parking when it's this inconvenient. We carry our laptops in our backpacks, "We have half an hour before school starts, you want to go to the bookstore and pick up our books?" I suggest.

"Sure," she agrees. We enter the main building and follow the signs for the bookstore. The entire place is a buzz, students rushing everywhere to get to class, professors dressed nicely walking with an air of sophistication, I can smell the literacy off the walls!

We arrive at the bookstore to be faced with a huge, line. Did I say huge line, I mean unimaginably huge, "We don't have time for this," I tell her. "Give me your list and I'll come back later for our books."

"Are you sure," Carrie asks gratefully.

"Positive, I have two hours to kill anyway," I tell her. Today's classes can constitute my electives to get into the pharmaceutical program so I don't worry about dropping or changing today's courses. I don't bother with the registrar's office if the bookstore is any indication of how busy it will be.

I attend my two classes, each two hours long and then reattempt the bookstore. The line seems to have increased rather than decreased. Resigned to getting it over with, I work diligently through both our lists, before finding my place in line. Two hours later, there are five people ahead of me when I spot Carrie looking for me in the store, "Over here!" I wave.

She smiles and joins me in line, "Did you come right after class?" She asks.

"Yup!"

"And you wanted to go to the registrars office?" she chuckles. "You thought the walk to the car was long!"

"Move up," orders the guy behind us.

We both look at him, "Rude," I say under my breath.

He hears me, "Sorry, I'm just tired of being in line and my girlfriend just texted a break-up."

Carrie who is too forgiving says, "Oh that sucks," to him.

He shows us his phone:

Ashley: Ted?

Ted: Hi

Ashley: Hi, I tried in person, but I just can't do us anymore.

Ted: What do you mean?

Ashley: I'm breaking up with you.

I gasp, "That's so nasty, but at least you didn't walk in on her when she was with another guy, which pretty much happened to me, I went to visit my husband and he was with another girl who looked like me." I divulge information to a complete stranger in a lineup at the bookstore...liberating.

"And she, this is Rita by the way, was in love with him," Carrie adds to the drama. "My name is Carrie."

"Okay, you don't have to go on about it," I tell her.

"And you were carrying his baby," she continues.

"You look to young to be a mother," Ted comments.

"She lost the baby," Carrie speaks for me.

I laugh at the ridiculousness of the conversation, "Can we go back to not knowing each other?"

"Impossible," Ted says.

"Right!" Carrie says, "You're our new friend. Why don't you come to dinner and I'll tell you how I fired my future fiance, it sounds like a book!"

"There you go, a new story idea! Write the Carrie/Hunter love story, and get it published by a different publisher, and a different editor, I hope it flies off the shelves, it will show Hunter you can do it without him!"

Carrie considers it, "I might as well, since I got fired from writing the rest of the trilogy," Carrie decides. "Sure! Why not!"

"She's a published author," I tell Ted.

"That explains it," he says like nothing in this conversation can shock him.

Carrie gives him our number and address. The dinner date is on.

Before we know it, it's our turn to check out. Time goes by so fast when you're distracted. We get walloped with a two-thousand dollar bill, nice way to start off the year. I'm more relieved than ever that I picked a high paying profession, I'm going to need it to pay off the student loans.

We lug our books to the front of the building, and I volunteer to walk the forty-miles to get our car, that I almost forgot where we parked. By the time I return, it's starting to get dark out. We have to rush home and make dinner for our new companion.

Carrie and I work together in perfect harmony, we're finishing off when we hear the buzzer. We allow him entry and wait for his knock. "Hi Ted!" I greet answering the door. He's changed into different clothes and he's come with a bottle of wine. We have two leftover bottles ourselves so it should make for a fun night!

"Hi," he smiles. He follows us into the kitchen, "You guys really made me feel better today," he says.

"Right!" Rita agrees. "Did you hear back from what's her name since we left you?"

"No, do you think she'll text me?" He asks innocently.

"Probably not," I say not meaning to get his hopes up.

"How long did you go out with her," Carrie asks stirring the sauce.

"A few months. We hooked up at our high school graduation, I liked her for a long time, just didn't have the nerve to approach her."

"Too bad you did." I say. "But what's come from it, you've seen her true colours, and pretty shades they are NOT!" I choose the bright side.

"True," he says. I take his wine and pour three very tall glasses, handing him one.

"What are you taking in school?" asks Carrie.

"I'm thinking of business, probably an MBA in Economics, how about you guys?" he asks.

Carrie strains the water from the pasta, "I'm going into physiotherapy and she's pharmacology."

"That's great," he says encouragingly. We sit at the six-seater table across from each other. Whenever I look at this table I think of when we first all hung out together and it was Landon, John, Alex, Brandon, Me, and Carrie. Now we're lucky if four chairs are taken. Life changes so much in so very little time.

I finish my wine kind of quickly and pour the rest of the almost empty bottle in my glass. Both of them look at me, "We've got more," I reassure.

"Can I crash tonight?" He says referring to the amount he can drink.

"If you don't mind the sofa, it's only a pull out but it doesn't have any broken wires," Carrie offers.

"It's cool," he shrugs, finishing his glass off. He nods asking to get more wine.

"In the fridge," I tell him. He gets up and helps himself to our fridge bringing both opened bottles to the table.

"Thanks," Carrie says topping up their glasses.

"I know this is crazy forward, and I just met you but if you're looking for a third flatmate let me know, I can help out with the rent. We could get a bigger place, be like the t.v. show with the sassy brunette and the dumb blond.

"I know that show! I think my grandmother used to watch it," I say excited.

"Let's get through dinner first before we make life altering decisions, but we do kind of need a bigger place," Carrie says.

"I need a job," I say, "It's bad enough Carrie's paying for almost everything. A two or three bedroom will be more expensive than what we're already paying."

I don't mind paying a bit extra until you find something," Ted suggests, "I need to get away from my parents."

"Between the three of us, we should be able to find something bigger," I suggest.

"You look for a job, we'll find a bigger place," Carrie suggests.

"They're always hiring where I work," Ted offers.

"Where do you work?" I ask.

"The Toronto Sports Centre."

I never thought of a job like that, "Do you get to see all the hockey games?"

"And concerts!" Ted brags. "You never have to pay for another venue!"

"You so have to get us hired there." I plead.

"It's amazing, last year I got to see Toronto lose a seventh game play-off against Boston: the biggest hockey game ever, and Slasher live in concert, if you calculate how much each ticket cost, it's like I'm working for mega-bucks."

"Great! Let's apply after dinner," I say enthusiastically.

"Before or after we finish our wine," Carrie reminds me. "I want to work there too; I want a regular income."

“What about writing?” I ask Carrie.

“I can do that during my free time if I have any, we’re going to need me to make a regular income. I don’t want handouts.”

I look at Ted, “Maybe tomorrow morning we’ll do it.”

He chuckles, “Sounds like a plan,” he sweeps the sauce up with a dinner roll. “Dinner was great.” he compliments.

The dishes are a group effort before we settle down in front of the television to stream a movie. We finish off the wine and eventually call it a night.

10

The next morning, we open our laptops and work on our resumes while eating assorted bagels and drinking bitter java. Once our resumes are finished, we search up employment opportunities at The Toronto Sports Centre and apply. We select openings for security and coordinator positions but avoid food booths because they won't give us the opportunity to watch any events which is the whole purpose of finding employment there.

We plan on sending our resumes in daily, so they hire us just to stop getting their inboxes filled with our spam applications. Ted has class before us, microeconomics or something like that. I think I'd rather watch paint dry but I guess someone has to like it.

Carrie spends an hour on the phone with Hunter, I hear her side of the conversation. He's not waiting three years and he's demanding she reconsider. She tells him that she's not making life altering decisions about their relationship when her focus has to be on school. Then she brings up how we met Ted at the bookstore and how we're finding a place with him and he loses his shit because Carrie's in mid-sentence and then suddenly saying, 'Hello? Hello?' He's hangs up on her, and then she turns to me telling me her side.

I hold my hands up, "that's between you and Hunter."

It's the first time I appreciate not having to answer to anyone. There are definite advantages to NOT having a boyfriend. I'm start realizing it now.

"We should go," she says frustrated.

I grab my laptop and shove it in my bag, "Okay, I've got class until six how about you?"

"I finish at five, I'll meet you at the coffee nook on campus when you're done."

"I wish we were in the same classes," I tell her wistfully.

"You know!"

She locks the apartment and we're off to our torture.

Today I have Pharmaceuticals 101. The monotoned professor who looks in desperate need of a haircut drones on about what he expects from us, and how this is going to be one of the most difficult courses we've ever taken.

I think the hardest thing is going to be looking at his face let alone listening to him. I wish this course was offered online. I look at the student next to me who has a shared bleak expression on her face. We feel each other's pain and I start giggling because she doesn't have to say anything.

"What did we get ourselves into?" I whisper.

She nods in agreement.

The teacher notices and then calls on me, "Do you have a concern?" He asks.

I shake my head adamantly while I think to myself about how hard its going to be to stay awake in his class, "No! Sorry sir!"

He redirects his attention back to the board. I don't take my eyes off him, but I stop listening and I'm able to daydream about Slasher. It was fun when he came over. He's probably getting ready for his concert in Dublin. I pull my phone out of my backpack very quietly without taking my eyes off the teacher, and I ensure it's on silent mode before texting him:

Me: Hi Bud! Ready for tonight's concert?

S: Ya

Me: Good! What's after Dublin?

S: Belgium, you want to come?

Me: When?

S: Sunday

Me: This Sunday? I've got class Monday!

S: Skip it, you never learn much in the first week or so.

Me: I shouldn't miss class this early on.

S: It's the best time to miss.

Me: Where will you be the next Saturday?

S: Denmark

Me: Can you have me back by Sunday night?

S: Even if I have to fly you home myself.

Me: You own your own plane?

S: Is my name Elliot?

Me: Better than Hunters?

S: Is my name Elliot?

Me: I'm in for Denmark if you're sure.

S: I'm sure.

Me: Ok, great! See you Saturday Bud!

S: What's with the Bud thing?

Me: That's what you are, it's a good thing.

S: Shag friend is a good thing; bud is a dog name.

Me: ha, ha, ha.

A few days later, we land our dream jobs, Toronto Centre security. Fourteen bucks an hour with perks of free hockey games and concerts. We tell them we can start after my trip to Denmark. I decide not to tell Slasher so when he's booked for Toronto, I can surprise him. I convince Carrie not to divulge it to Hunter, it's a facet in her life he doesn't need to know about.

11

I tell Carrie I'm visiting my parents. It's just weird telling her I'm going to Denmark to hang out with Slasher before his concert. She's cool, anyway, Ted's there to keep her company. We really need to find a bigger place. Maybe when I get back.

I arrive at the airport and there's a ticket to Denmark paid for and waiting for me in the boarding area. I bring Meadow's book *What Happened in Vegas, Didn't Stay in Vegas* for reading material. I love her character, "Nick," he reads really hot. I'm a hot mess when I get to the Denmark airport stopping during one of the many lurid love scenes.

There's this homeless guy checking me out, his hair is ratty looking, he's unshaved, and he's not carrying any bags. For goodness sakes, it clicks, another disguise. I run up to him and give him a hug and the people in close proximity look at me like I'm crazy for hugging such a smelly guy, I jump backwards off him, "What did you use?"

"Rita! Over here!" Slashers croaky voice is coming from a different direction.

I look at the vagabond, "Oh! Sorry!" I can't believe I mistook him for Slasher.

Slasher's about ten meters away laughing hysterically and I walk up to him quickly before I start beating up on him. Security starts following me and they pull me off him. Six guys all of a sudden come out of the woodworks along with two more airport security. I back off Slasher. He looks up at the unfamiliar guards, "I'm okay," he reassures them, "I know her."

The homeless guy is staring us down now, and I can smell him on my clothes. It turns my stomach knowing it's not a disguise from Slasher. Slasher is dressed like a fourteen-year-old kid with high cut sneakers, jeans, t-shirt and sunglasses. His hair is eighties retro, but the package looks good.

"You will never tell anyone what just happened," I threaten.

He grabs my bag and my hand and we leave the airport. Six goons circle us, I look at him, "I'm popular in Denmark, this is a must," he explains.

We get into a sports car alone and his goons vanish. "This is your car?" I ask

"Ya," I have a vacation villa here.

"Oh!"

He takes us back to the Villa which has to be the size of a Los Angeles movie stars home, "This is all yours?" I ask.

"Ya, I'm thinking of selling, maintenance is high and I hardly ever come here."

"Right? Let's swim!" I say spontaneously.

"Sure," he says.

I was kidding but apparently his villa has an indoor pool and hot tub. He parks the car in his eight-car garage, "Why so many spots?" I ask.

"Security parks here too, but I gave them the night off. It's just you and me for now, they'll come here before the concert tomorrow evening," he tells me.

He opens the huge wooden door and lets me walk in before him, "The pool is at the back of the house."

"Do you have a bathing suit for me?"

"Is it really necessary," he asks.

"No, but I just read, 'What Happened in Vegas, Didn't Stay in Vegas,' so I can't be held accountable for my actions.

"You need me to shag you?" he asks.

"Since you're offering," I say lightly not expecting him to take me even a little bit serious. I don't get a chance to analyze what's happening, one second, he's kissing me, the next we are in the pool, then again in the hot tub, finishing off in his king. Satiated, I realize I'm starving. "Hungry!" I complain.

He brings my suitcase into the room so I can dress and to my surprise he has dinner warmed in the oven, "Mac and Cheese soufflé, I learned how to make it after having it at your house," he smiles proudly.

He dishes out two bowls and pours red wine for both of us. I take a bite and its way better than the way I make it, "What did you do, it's delicious."

"I had my favourite cheese flown in from Pakistan," he explains.

"Wow," I laugh. "So, what's new with you?" I ask making dinner conversation.

Slasher shrugs, "Nothing, just work. Spoke with Hunter the other day, he was saying something about your friend wanting to wait three years before marrying him. I wouldn't advise that she does that, he might move on."

"I'm not saying anything to her. I know she was crazy over her boyfriend before Hunter. She doesn't listen to anyone but herself."

"Strong minded," he comments.

"That's why I love her," I tell him.

"So, you and Carrie are staying in that small apartment with the king bed?"

"And Ted," I tell him.

"Who's Ted?" He asks.

"A guy we met at the school bookstore, it's kind of a long story but his girlfriend broke up with him over a text and we felt bad for him, so we invited him over for dinner."

"That was nice of you," he comments.

"So, Ted said he wants to get out of his parents place and suggested we find a larger apartment and go in on it together. He helped us find jobs and everything."

"That's great! It sounds like that T.V. show my grandmother used to watch with that guy whose artery burst on him."

"Ya, I know the one," I say. "He's a nice guy and Carrie and I get along with him, but Hunter doesn't know Carrie's living with Ted yet, don't tell him."

"Eh," he hesitates.

"Seriously, tell him and our friendship is over," I warn.

"Okay, okay I won't say anything," he promises.

I avoid telling him what the job is and he forgets to ask so that works out well. Eventually we tire and he offers me a room. I thank him and grab my bag. He leaves me alone for the rest of the night and I sleep like a baby.

I wake up the next morning to Slasher's employee bringing me breakfast in bed, from pancakes to croissants. I'm famished. The entire tray appears appetizing. I take a piece of bacon and it's so crispy and salty, I savour it like it's the last piece on earth. The rest of my breakfast is the same.

I straighten up my bed, like it was never been slept in before and head for the shower. With the press of a button, I can change the jets I want to use and the water pressure. I press one button out of curiosity and all of a sudden, my stomach gets blasted. I press another button next to that one and the jets pulse. It's super cool and I spend more time pressing buttons then washing myself.

I dry off before returning to my room to dress for the day. I have no idea what we're doing but the small bag I brought restricts my choices. I pick jeans and a Slasher concert shirt I brought for tonight's concert, blending me with his fans.

He catches a glimpse of me before I leave my room, "You look wretched," he comments, "Please take off that lame shirt."

I'm kind of offended, "I'm going to your concert tonight, it makes sense to wear your concert shirt, everyone else will be."

"You're not everyone else bud," he says exasperated. He types something into his phone and then looks up, "I'm having the girl who brought your breakfast to you pick out an outfit. I don't like associating you as a 'fan' you're my 'bud' there's a difference."

"Do fans get treated better?" I ask.

"No, buds do," he assures.

"You shag both," I compare.

"Bud's repeatedly," he lets me know.

"How many buds do you have?"

"You're my only bud. I can forgo the fans if I have you."

"So, you're telling me I'm your bud, you only have one, and that you are forgoing the fans."

He thinks about what I said and then agrees immediately, "Ya."

"Cool" I say in disbelief. "You're being EXCLUSIVE to me."

"Ya," he says like what's so hard to believe type of attitude.

I just laugh like it's the most ridiculous thing he can possibly say. His feelings are hurt, I feel like I have to explain why I'm laughing, "I believe you can be exclusive, but to me?" I can't even finish the sentence because I start laughing again.

"Why not to you?" he asks.

"I've got zero going for me, I'm not tall, or beautiful, I'm not overly smart, I don't have money, nothing sets me apart from the masses!"

"Then I don't have a bloody idea," he admits. "Maybe it's: your crazy black hair, those rosy red lips, you read a book and then want to shag afterwards, or you leaping at a beggar in the airport thinking it's me, you tried having me trampled, you tell my mother you trapped a hockey player into marrying you, the look of disinterest on your face when I serenade you in front of twenty thousand fans. It could be all of that! You are the farthest thing from boring."

I smile, "put it like that and I've put you through a lot!"

He laughs now, "You think? Let's stop wasting time and go sightsee now so I can rest before the concert."

Today he's dressed in a business suit, his hands and face painted brown and a full out turban on his head. If I didn't know him, I would swear he's from India on his way to work.

~~

Later that night we go to the concert. He pulls me up on stage. I'm supposed to sit gazing at him in the chair, with love in my eyes, I don't though. I catch him off guard and snatch his microphone away. That will teach him to pick on me. He looks frantically behind stage making a gesture, and someone comes running out with another microphone for him. Lighters and flashlights are all ablaze and I sing my heart out. It becomes an impromptu duet. The song ends and the crowd roars. Elliot looks stunned, "You're a songbird!" he says, "a true bloody songbird!"

Elliot drops me at the airport after the concert so I make class the next morning. Little did I know I made every tabloid from Denmark to Canada about an unidentified fan stealing the show!

12

"You said you were visiting your parents!" Carrie shows me an article. "You were in DENMARK?"

"Just hanging out with my bud!" I say casually.

"You KNOW Slasher?" Ted's agog.

"His real name is Elliot," I tell Ted.

"Wow that's so cool," Ted says.

"The novelty wears off after a while. Carrie's dating his brother who's a dead ringer, but bald."

"Hunter got tired of being chased by Elliot's fans," she explained, "so he shaved his head. He's mucho cute!"

"Oh," Ted said.

"So how was your trip that you didn't tell me about?" Asks Carrie.

"Fun. I read 'What Happened in Vegas Didn't Stay in Vegas' on the plane which was such a hot book, I told Slasher about it and he offered to shag me. So, we shagged all night and then went to his concert the next day. Then I flew right home."

"You and Slasher?"

"It was no big deal," I tell Carrie. "I expect nothing to come from it, it was just a bit of fun. We're friends, 'buds."

"It's just you've been through a lot," she says concerned.

"Ted and me both," I agree. Ted nods vigorously. "I'm not hooking up with anyone any time soon," he agrees.

"Right! Me too! I like being single," I admit.

"Do you want to," Ted propositions me.

"Ya okay, no,' I tease.

~~

Our first day of work is exciting. No training involved. Carrie and I are given two sections to secure as a security guards, a more experienced person is assigned in between us. We are at the lowest level in front of the Plexiglas. Tonight, is a hockey

game. We are instructed to guide people to their seats and not let the fans go right up to the ice. Other than that, we have a perfect view of the game. Toronto is playing Montreal. I can practically touch the players, it's so much fun. I have to stay calm and not cheer with the audience in case someone is watching me.

Carrie and I are allowed to leave once our sections are void of people. We rush home to go to bed so we're not tired for class in the morning. Toronto plays Montreal again tomorrow, so we have to get our homework done, eat dinner before we're expected back to the stadium for our next shift. It doesn't leave us any spare time until there's a lull between venues.

The second game, Carrie told me she thought she saw Alex and Melody but she wasn't sure. They were two levels up but in her section. I haven't spotted anyone yet, and I don't care, I'm spending every free second peaking glances at the game. I can't wait until there's a concert! This is the best job ever; I never would have even thought of applying for something like this if it wasn't for Ted. We don't see Ted; he's working near the players change rooms.

We have a couple of days off and then Edmonton plays Toronto. Carrie's acting all cool, but I know it's going to be hard for her to see Brandon. I've cyber watched him and he's still with Sheila. She hasn't asked, so I haven't said anything.

~~

Carrie and I get sections together when Edmonton comes to Toronto. The players come out onto the ice for warm-up. Brandon looks amazing in his Jersey. He recognizes me when he starts circling his half of the rink. Toronto is on the opposite side. He waves to me and I wave back. That's when I sneak a point. He glances over and spots Carrie.

"Carrie!" I shout out. She turns to me; I point to Brandon. They lock eyes. The chemistry is so strong, it's amazing the ice doesn't melt. The next thing that happens is gob smacking. She snubs him to do her job. She pretends this isn't bothering her, but I know it is.

Edmonton wins.

Everyone eventually vacates our sections and we go home. She doesn't mention it again. Later that night she calls Hunter and they plan a visit. Her mood picks up along with multiple text messages that she doesn't share with me.

Toronto travels to Edmonton so we have a break. Carrie takes off to New York to see Hunter, and I'm left alone with Ted. We decide it's time to search for a new apartment. We have go-sees lined up: a building and a basement. If I get to choose I would much rather live in a building that has in indoor and outdoor pool, than a stranger's basement but that's just me. We check out both and then pick the apartment. Obviously, we text pictures to Carrie making her believe she has a choice. We fail to exclude the huge closet and new kitchen in the pictures of the basement apartment ensuring she picks what Ted and I want which are the pools at the building.

Ted drives us home and we search for our gazillion year old landlady who's planting daffodils in front of our place, "Hi," I say brightly.

"Oh, hi dear," she doesn't bother turning around to look at me. I have some rather unfortunate news," she tells me yanking on a weed that doesn't look all that difficult to get out, "I'm going to need you to move out at the end of the month, I can give you an extra month if you need it to find a place. I have a new stud-muffin who's asked me to go steady with him."

"Oh, that's nice, where did you meet him?" I ask.

"We met at the Plan You're Own Funeral place just down the street from the cemetery. That's usually where I take my walks, I decided to drop in. He was making his final arrangements when he said if parked next to me, he might rise from the dead. (I think she's referring to his weapon!) I thought such a smooth talker, I should give him a chance while we're alive!"

"That's so sweet," I smile. Ted nods in agreement. "Did you shag?" I tease not sure what that means.

"Well of course dear," our landlady smiles, Ted kicks me.

"We'll be out at the end of the month," I reassure her.

"That's great dear!"

We go inside, Ted looks at me shocked, "You asked her if she shagged, do you even know what that means?"

"No, what does it mean, it sounded good."

"Have sex without being married."

“Ha, ha, ha! She said she did. I knew all along she’s cool!”

I ditch Ted to go to class. He said he’s going to start packing and I’ll help him when I get back. I don’t tell him how long class is though, I decide to treat myself to a drink before walking home.

I text Slasher from the bar.

Me: Ted and I found a new apartment with a pool!

S: Cool! What’s the address, I’ll search it up?

Me: 123 River road

S: Is the road near a river?

Me: No

S: I don’t get that. Isn’t Carrie in NY with H

Me: Ya, I just sent her pics.

S: Why didn’t you go?

Me: Third wheel.

S: Fourth.

Me: ?

S: I’m here with them. Ha, ha, ha. Not leaving them alone either. You should hear the excuses they’re making. He hasn’t had one chance to shag her yet.

Me: Troublemaker. How are they getting along?

S: Hunter’s complaining about you living with Ted. I have to see this guy, Hunter has him pegged as a buff god-like creature, every woman’s fantasy.

Me: He’s charming, and nice. I like him.

S: Do you want me to bring you to NY to hang?

Me: I should help Ted pack, it’s not a good time. We have to be out at the end of the month. Our hundred year old landlady has a new stud muffin as she puts it, so she wants to put him up in our apartment.

S: That’s too bad, I liked your little apartment.

Me: You’ll like the new building more, I’ll have my own room and there’s pools there, we can swim.

S: I can buy the building and kick everyone out.

Me: ah no.

S: I have a concert here Tuesday and then Wednesday up by you, can you come, I'll leave a ticket for you and passes.

Me: Sorry, I'm working.

S: Pull a sicky

Me: I can't :-(

Me: I gotta run, have to help Ted pack. Cheers Bud!

~~

The Slasher concert is sold out. Ted, and I switched places with two other security guards who didn't care where they went so we could have the floors. Carrie is already assigned to them. The lights go down and he has two opening bands before him. They are chanting Slasher! Slasher! People are stomping their feet and clapping their hands. The excitement is difficult to contain. He comes on stage with his band and the lights focus their beams on him.

My back is turned to him because I'm watching the people. I can't have them rush the stage. This is only my second concert and the floors are the most difficult to control. The number of screaming girls waving and trying to get up on stage is surreal.

He starts singing one of his slow songs. Cameras, lights, all come on. The Centre looks amazing. He doesn't pull anyone up on stage. Twenty or so minutes later he sings our song, the one I took his microphone away from him. He doesn't pull anyone on stage. It's endearing that he didn't pull anyone up. I text him figuring he won't feel the vibration, "I'm in floor section to your right!" The song finishes and the stage darkens and he comes out in a new costume. He sings a few of his more popular songs and then slows it down.

I see him shade his eyes, "Bud!" he calls out. Everyone waves their hands. I know he's looking for me, but I can't stand out when everyone is doing what I would do. His six guards jump down into the audience, fanning out. The search is widened until one of his goons spots me. He drags me up on stage even though I'm working.

"Get her a microphone!" he calls out.

A stage hand throws one to him and he hands it to me. "You know the words to 'This Should Be Us?'"

I nod and then the band takes off, "This is my friend who sang at my Denmark Concert," Slasher introduces me. People hoot and holler.

I pretend I'm in the shower, Slasher and I sing together, soaring over the clouds. Nobody has ever commented on my singing before, but judging from Denmark, I might be a little talented. We finish the song and the crowd goes apeshit crazy.

It takes a while but the crowd quiets down so Slasher can talk, "Does anyone want her to sing another song?" He asks. The crowd cheers. "I think she'll need more convincing than that," he encourages. The crowd cheers more than before.

"I have to go back; I'm going to get fired!" I plead.

"Just one more song," he begs.

"I'm sorry," I say into the microphone, "I have to go back!"

I return the microphone and I take my spot close to the stage again, watching the fans. Fans are touching me now, trying to get close to me. I'm starting to get swarmed. The goons jump out again and rush me away from the floor fans and bring me back onto the stage.

"Just one more," Slasher encourages.

"Okay!" I say just relieved not to be back on the floor again.

"Loving You," he says.

We sing his number one romantic single that's topped the charts for weeks and weeks. Lighters and Phones light up and we sing our hearts to our hearts content. It's time for me to leave the stage, I know I can't return to the floor so I go back stage. There's pounding coming from the audience. They are beating on the backs of the chairs, stomping their feet.

One of Slashers staff says, "They want you back onstage!"

I spend the rest of the concert with Slasher, back up, lead singer, all depending on the song. The fans seem to like me. It's crazy.

I expect to get marching papers from the Centre for leaving my designated section but that doesn't happen. I'm in a state of euphoria at my popularity and the sheer fun of singing with Slasher on stage. He leaves me in his room to take a shower and then we sneak to the limousine waiting for us out back wearing baseball hats, and hoodies with six goons circling us.

"That was fun," I tell Elliot.

"Finish the tour with me, your talented," he says in the car.

I blush, "Your biased bud!"

"Your voice is amazing, you're a little songbird. They love you onstage. You can go back to school when your popularity fades out, I'll salary you."

"YOU are going to pay ME to sing with you."

"All over the world," he adds.

"I don't want to take money from you." I tell him.

"Why not."

"We're friends."

"Then I'm asking you as a friend," he advocates.

"You want me to drop everything I'm doing to be with you, tour all over the world with you? Sing in your concerts,"

"With me," he completes.

"Hell! Sure, why not!" I say sarcastically.

"I'm serious Bud!"

"That means dropping out of school, leaving my family and friends."

"Think about it," he encourages, his arm around me. The driver pulls up to my place.

"Ted and Carrie are here," I warn him.

We get out of the car and the limousine shuts off. Slasher stops by the driver's window, "I'll be about an hour," he informs the driver.

The driver turns the car back on and leaves.

I open the door and Ted is star struck, "Hi Elliot," Carrie says. "Your concert was great!"

"Awesome," Ted says.

"Who would have ever known how talented Rita is!" Elliot tells Carrie and Ted.

"All that shower time is finally coming to use," Carrie chuckles.

"How much?" I'm still weighing my options.

"Does 50K work for you? I can go up to 75K more than that I have to talk to my manager."

"A year? That's great!" I cluck.

"No, a concert," he says.

"Oh, my beJesus!"

"That's amazing money Carrie advocates!"

"You'd be an idiot to turn it down," Ted agrees.

"90K and you have yourself a deal," I play along with the joke.

Elliot types into his phone, waits, types more, waits.

"100K per concert is the most I'm allowed," Slasher says dead serious.

"You're serious?" I'm grinning so wide it hurts.

"Serious."

"Okay!" I tell him.

"For someone who's only ever sung in the shower, you drive a really hard bargain," he chuckles.

"When do I start?" I ask.

"You'll get paid for tonight," he says.

"You're paying me 100K for tonight?" I'm jumping up and down, ecstatic!

"Bring some of that excitement over here," he wants to cash in.

"I don't shag coworkers," I tease, "especially employers."

We order food and Elliot's manager sends documents via document signing app offering me exactly what Elliot said, it was more than a dream come true, because I never dreamed, I had the talent to be a singer let alone sing duets with Slasher.

"Give me your phone," he says.

I hand it to him "What are you doing?"

"Downloading a calendar app I use. I'm putting in this year's concert dates and where they are."

"How many do you have left?" I ask.

"Ten or eleven," he guesses.

"I'm going to make a million bucks?"

"You have to pay taxes, closer to 750K."

"Just to sing with you?"

"Yes."

Then I tone my excitement down. I do not want to be tied in with those other fans, "Remember I don't shag co-workers and employers. Are you sure you don't want me to just be your Bud?" I give him the option.

"You already signed the papers, you we're joking about,"

I shake my head adamantly, "No I'm not joking. A girl has to protect herself," I grin. "You're not shagging this songbird!" I strut.

“What have you done?” Carrie groans to Elliot.

“I’ll shag you,” Ted says as a joke.

“I’ll continue paying rent to keep my room in your new place, I’ll come home whenever I can,” I tell Carrie and Ted.

“We wouldn’t have it any other way,” Carrie says sweetly.

13

10 Months Later

We finish our last concert in New York City. Carrie has an apartment below Hunter's Penthouse, so we visit them after the tour. There are no more concerts booked for a long time, so this is the end of the road for Elliot and myself for a while. He has to go back to the drawing boards and make a new album. He likes to do that in Los Angeles, he likes Mexican food. I'm not sure what I'm going to do with myself but I don't want to follow him around like a lost puppy. I'd rather spend the rest of the summer with Carrie and Ted. Maybe I'll even go back to working at the Toronto Centre when I'm bored. People still don't really know me, so I won't have to worry about betting trampled or anything.

We try Carrie first but there's no answer. I'm sure Ted told me she's in New York so we go to Hunters. The elevator brings us to the penthouse but we don't buzz his place because we already got access into the building. They are arguing. We can hear it from outside. Elliot looks at me like 'should we go'. I put my finger over my mouth to keep him quiet while I try figuring out what they are arguing about.

We hear a noise and then what sounds like a slap. I knock on the door rather loudly to stop whatever's going on inside. Carrie answers the door with a big smile on her face. I instantly think it's phony. "Hi! How are you?" I gush.

She wraps her arms around me and we hug each other tight, "I missed you so much," she tells me.

"Did he hit you?" I whisper into her ear.

She looks stunned, "No! It's Netflix! Ha, ha, ha."

I'm not convinced her cheek looks pink. "Let's stay at your place downstairs, I steer. Elliot can stay with Hunter, Elliot that's okay, isn't it?"

He's not quick to think, "But," We're already half way out the door.

"What are you doing?" She asks.

We step onto the elevator, "I heard a slap and I know it's not Netflix," I tell her.

"It was just a play slap, Hunter's a bit frustrated with his writer." Carrie explains. It's lame really.

“Play slaps aren’t play if frustration is involved,” I clarify. “Why did he hit you and why are you staying with him?”

Carrie looks at me frustrated, “You’re so quick to think the worst. I’m the last person in the world who would let anyone hit me or abuse me, you should know that. I hate that I even have to explain myself, but Hunter and I were playing around. It’s something we have fun doing.

Rita smiles with understanding, “You were naughty?”

“Very,” Carrie giggles.

“Okay, enough said,” I stop her in her tracks. “How is everything else going? Are you still working at the Centre?”

“Sure am, I love it.” Carrie informs me.

“Ted?” I ask.

“Seeing someone but it’s not serious. He talks about you a lot,” Carrie comments.

“I doubt that,” I tell her. “Did you and Hunter set a date?”

“Two years plus a day,” Carrie chuckles. “You and Elliot?”

“Best buds! No shagging the boss,” I declare.

“He must hate that!”

“Yes, and he’s been sulking because he has to go to Los Angeles to record a new album and I’m not following him there”

“What are you doing?” Carrie asks.

“Staying with you and Ted!” I say simply. She squeals with delight. “Did you write your story about you, Brandon and Hunter.”

“Working on it, I’m not sure how it’s going to turn out,” she says interestingly enough.

“In real life or in your book.”

“Both,” she tells me.

“He’s still seeing Sheila,” I’ve been cyberstalking them.

“I’m still seeing Hunter. It doesn’t mean that I’m going to commit to him entirely. I want to wait until the three years are over.”

“I think you’ll end up with Brandon,” I say confidently.

“Why do you say that?” Carrie asks totally shocked with my pick.

“I think you were more ‘in love’ with Brandon and with Hunter it’s just sizzling chemistry. It won’t sustain your relationship into a lifelong commitment.”

"You sound pretty sure of yourself," Carrie observes.

"You'll make the right choice," I have confidence in her.

"Would me telling you I'm pregnant change your opinion on anything?" Carrie asks.

"I know you're not. You're too wise to get pregnant while you're in school, the whole point of you breaking up with Brandon was so you can achieve your dream, you're not going to have any accidents."

"Wow, you really do know me," Carrie says impressed.

She starts changing into her pyjamas and I glance over at her and she is developing a slight belly. "If I didn't know any better, I'd say you have a slight bump happening," I kid but at the same time, it wasn't there ten months ago. "Have you changed your diet or anything?"

"You think I gained weight?" She asked shocked as she glances at her profile in the mirror.

"It's a bump, you're SURE you aren't pregnant?"

"Positive! (Pardon the pun!)" She glances at herself in the mirror, "I think. Oh my God Rita, what if?"

"There's only one way to find out, and if you are, it's no big deal, Hunter wants to marry you. He doesn't even want to wait."

"I might have hooked up with Brandon the last time he was in Toronto," she says hesitantly.

"Little slow giving me that info," I complain. "You know he's still with Sheila, they're all over social media together."

"He loves me more," she says.

"He could be playing you, maybe paying you back for breaking his heart. Sheila and him look tight online. So, when did you?"

"Sleep with him?" she finishes, "Three and a half, maybe four months ago. If you're right and I am pregnant, seriously either guy could be the father. I'm not going to let a mistake ruin my life!"

"You'd abort a love child?" I ask.

"100%," she says.

"Stay in Toronto away from Hunter and Brandon until you have the baby. I'll stay in hiding too, when the baby's born I'll say it's mine, and raise it. I have more than

enough money to give the baby a great life. I'll have papers drawn, and you'll get a chance to see your own child grow up. If you agree, you can never change your mind, it will break my heart if I raise a child to have him or her taken away from me. I will never stop you from seeing the baby.

"Your idea is crazy," Carrie complains.

"Crazy enough to work, as long as we remain hidden for the duration of your pregnancy."

Carrie takes a minute to consider my idea, "Okay, say we go with your idea, if I tell Hunter you're pregnant, he's still going to want to see me."

"Good point, you have to break up with him. It doesn't matter where you go, he will fly to see you, you don't have a choice."

"Great," Carrie says sarcastically, "that's the last thing I want to do."

"I don't see an alternative, without him finding out your pregnant. Hockey season is over but Brandon knows you're with Hunter so he's not even a concern. Now about me. I just avoid being seen by Slasher"

"Are you going to wear a bump?" Carrie asks.

"Uh No! I wasn't planning on it."

"What if you're out somewhere and you don't look pregnant. You're not immaculate, I think you should wear the bump," Carrie strongly suggests.

"What a pain, you should make sure you're pregnant, this plan could be for nothing, I advise Carrie."

"What if they look for me at the school, Brandon or Hunter," Carrie asks.

"We'll take it day by day, for now, let's confirm whether or not we even have a problem."

An hour later and two pregnancy tests confirmed, "Houston-we have a problem," Carrie calls out from the bathroom, "How am I going to break up with Hunter. We were getting along perfectly, I adore him."

"If that was the case you wouldn't have cheated on him. Just tell him the truth."

"You want me to tell Hunter I cheated on him with Brandon?"

I nod, "Yes, it will keep him away from us at least the duration of your pregnancy. Use my phone," I hand it to her.

"I have my own. This is going to be so hard," Carrie's all teary eyed. "I'll come in and watch you do it."

"I don't need an audience," she trudges off to her room. An hour later she returns with her face all blotchy from crying, "He wants to see me."

"You can't! He's just going to persuade you to stay with him. Don't answer the door. Pack! We have to go back to Toronto, now!"

We packed our bags and raced to the airport.

"What did you do with the pregnancy test?" I ask Carrie once we're on the plane.

"I tossed it in the garbage," she's not connecting the dots.

"In your apartment?" I ask.

"Yes."

"The boys will find it; the test is mine. Slasher will assume the baby is his because we were exclusive, he's going to want to see me. I have to stop that from happening, I have to tell him I was with someone else. Ted!

"Wow, so now you have to call Slasher who you are getting along perfectly well with and lie to him that you had an affair with your flatmate, just to keep him away long enough for me to have the baby." Carrie runs it down.

"In a nutshell," I say.

"Here's my phone," Carrie says, almost like it's funny to her.

"I have my phone," I say with irritation. "I'm not doing this for you, I'm doing it for the innocent baby you're carrying. That life inside you shouldn't be snuffed out for your dreams.

I don't text Slasher, I call him. He picks up on the first ring "Hi"

"Where are you?" He asks. "Hunter's boiling over with rage."

"I'm on a plane to Toronto with my sad friend, maybe if he paid more attention to her." I toss the blame.

"We found a pregnancy test, was she going to tell him?"

"You guys are in her apartment? Has she no right to privacy, you're trespassing."

"Hunter OWNS the building, answer the question," demands Slasher. I've never heard him talk this way before.

"It's mine!" I twist the plot. "I'm pregnant."

"Bud, we're pregnant?" He seems happily surprised.

Oh my God, he's going to be a standup guy, already taking fatherhood in a positive light. This really sucks, "I'm sorry, but when I went back home, Ted was lonely and,"

“We were exclusive, I trusted you Bud,” he says disillusioned.
The phone goes dead.
So many lives affected by this pregnancy.

14

We arrive back in Toronto to find Ted watching television in the living room. Carrie gives him a hug and goes right to her room. I sit next to Ted. I have a lot of explaining to do.

“How are you?” I ask.

“Great” he says.

“Is there anything I can get you?” I lather on the butter.

“What do you want?” he asks cautiously.

“I need you to pretend I’m pregnant with your kid for the next six or seven months.”

Ted’s eyes are glued to the screen. He puts a few kernels of popcorn in his mouth like he’s engrossed in what he’s watching.

“Are you?” He asks scared of tearing his eyes from the screen.

“No, but if Slasher thinks it’s his, he’ll find out I’m lying.”

“Is Carrie Pregnant?” He tries to piece the puzzle together.

“Yes, but she doesn’t want to be, it could be Brandon’s or Hunters.”

“She told me I walked in on them massaging each other.”

“After they shagged,” I chuckle.

“She cheated on Hunter? Girls suck!”

“Did you cheat on Slasher?”

“No, but he has to think I cheated with you, or he’ll find out I’m not pregnant and that Carrie is, and Hunter knows Carrie cheated on him, sadly she doesn’t even know who the baby belongs to.”

“She’s in such a mess,” he comments.

“So, we supposedly shagged,” Ted completes. “What do I get out of this, with the exception that you’re a great reminder why it’s nice NOT to have a girlfriend.

“Thanks,” I smile. “Isn’t that enough?”

Everyone knows what to do, hopefully everything would go according to plan until the baby is born.

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We go about our daily lives Hunter-less, Slasher-less, Brandon-less. Carrie gets bigger and bigger like we shoved a basketball under her shirt. Along with her size comes innumerable hormonal complaints. Too many to list. 'I can't breathe, I'm fat, it will be nice to not be pregnant in class, I can barely fit in the desk, what is everyone saying about me... on and on. It's reached the point where I want to shut her up so badly, I want to take the baby out myself, with my own two hands!

Finally, her water breaks, and her labour begins. We take her to the hospital, quite obviously pretending we are a gay couple and Ted waits in the apartment for us. I get yelled at, sworn at, my hand squeezed to the point that my knuckles are white. I watch half her guts come out of her with the most beautiful slimy creature I've ever seen. They take the baby right away and its cry is nicer than any ballad Slasher and I can sing. They close Carrie up but there's a distance that's palpable between her and the baby. "You're going to have to find another place to live with the baby," she tells me, "I need some distance."

"Okay, this is unexpected but okay. I'll have Ted find you somewhere else to live. I need the space of where we are, are you sure you don't just need time?"

"YES!" she snaps.

"Do you want to hold her? Will that help?" I ask unsure of what to do.

"No!"

"I'm going to call her Holly!" I say lovingly at the cute pink baby sleeping in the bassinet.

"That's a great name," Carrie tears up. "My mother's name was Holly."

"I know," I wink at Carrie. "When you start feeling more like yourself, you can spend time with her."

"I'd love that she says."

I text Ted asking him to search out a flat for one person and then I take a picture of Holly and send it to him.

Me: Our baby Holly!

Ted: She's beautiful.

15

They don't keep mothers in for long. Carrie is discharged the following morning.

We drive her back to the flat in silence. The baby is sleeping peacefully next to her in the new car seat. Ted found a one bedroom in the same building as us, not necessarily as far as Carrie would have liked it, but better than nothing.

We bring Holly into her new room, painted pink, with a beautiful white crib. Ted has economic and mathematical equations painted all over her walls. Her baby mobile has whole numbers dangling overhead, playing rock-a-by-baby in three different languages.

I wisely kept Misty's number so I can have assistance with the baby. I just swore her to confidentiality so nothing gets back to Hunter. Misty said she will do the nights; I manage during the day. It's a balancing act, because I try hard to keep it quiet for Ted to get his rest and study.

Ted's taken quite the interest in the baby, playing with her, feeding her, changing her brief. He almost treats Holly like his own, it's amazing. If I need a break, I go see Carrie and we hang out together, the odd time she'll ask me how Holly is doing and express caring, but overall, I think everything is working fine.

Holly is four months old to the day when I get my first call from Slasher, "Hi Bud," he says quietly.

"Hi Bud," I say hesitantly. I miss him so much it hurts.

"My album's done," he tells me.

"Congratulations," I'm pleased for him, the baby starts crying in the background.

"My manager wants to invite you back on tour," he tells me.

"Do you want me back on tour with you?" I ask.

The baby starts crying louder in the background, "How do I know it's not mine?" He asks.

"Its name is Holly," I inform him, "and sadly, she's not yours'," I say truthfully. I want to tell him the truth so badly, but I can't because if he says something to Hunter, then I can lose both of them.

"I'd love to tour with you again, but now I come with an entourage," I warn him.

"If you're bringing Ted, I don't want you on my tour." He puts his foot down.

“No, just Misty the nurse, and Holly.”

“Okay, I’m good with that,” he says. “The manager will pay you 102.5K this year, but you’ll have more concerts.”

“That’s more than generous,” I tell him.

“We start next month, North America first, last leg will be in Europe.”

“That works, see you soon Bud.”

He hangs up. Now I break it to Ted that I’m going to be gone for ten months or so. I expected him to be upset, but Carrie surprised me more with her disappointment. “You can drop in on our tour, all you have to do is pick a place and we’ll see you,” I reassure her.

She hasn’t really been herself lately. She complains it’s the pressure from school and that she’s working really hard but I get the impression she misses the baby way more than she’s letting on. I love her and want to help her, but selfishly, I can’t give Holly up anymore, she just means way too much to me.

The first concert is in Vancouver, British Columbia. We land and Slasher has a car waiting for us at the airport. He booked my nurse and I into two adjoining rooms. He ensured a crib was provided. Her name is painted on it, so I’m assuming it’s coming with us wherever we travel.

He makes no effort to contact me or see me, so I give him his space and wait until I see him backstage. If I could do one thing, it would be to tell him that I never cheated on him, but that one string could unravel the entire story.

I say Bye to Misty and kiss the baby, before I head to our first concert. A car is waiting for me downstairs, Slasher’s inside.

He hands me a drink, “Hi,” he says quietly.

I take the drink and down it, “You’re not breastfeeding?” He asks suspiciously.

I remember breastfeeding mothers don’t drink, “I’m bottle feeding,” I explain. “You should come up and see the baby.”

“I don’t have an interest in another man’s baby,” he spits.

“How insensitive of me, sorry,” I say, “It’s just that she’s so cute.” He honestly looks heart broken, “Can I have a hug?” I ask.

He abides by my wishes and slides closer to me before engulfing me in his arms. He doesn't let go. It's a very affectionate embrace, "I've missed you, Bud," he says into my hair.

"I've missed you so much too," I admit.

We arrive at the concert and are escorted by his goons to the change rooms. I let the staff dress me, poke me, paint me, do whatever they want all the while imagining telling the truth to Slasher.

I would start with, *'I never cheated on you, and I never will.'*

*'The baby?'*

*'Carrie's'*

*'Why didn't you tell me'*

*'She wanted to terminate the pregnancy, it might be your brothers, or it might not'*

*'So, you're taking care of a baby that's not even yours and you didn't sleep with Ted'*

*'Yes.'*

Total fantasy! If I don't tell him he'll be with someone else in no time. He might already be. "Are you dating anyone?" I ask.

"No just shagging, nothing serious," he says.

"So, you've moved on," I clarify.

"Did I have a choice," he asks with edge to his voice.

I feel wronged.

"It's been six months and you cheated on me, I don't know why you're so shocked," he replies self-righteously. I want to blurt out the truth so badly I can taste it, tell him he shouldn't have moved on, that it's not my baby and I never cheated. I did come up with this hair brained idea but I saved Holly's life and I love her every bit like she's my own.

"Good, I'm glad you moved on, I feel better knowing you're not mooning over me." I say with every little molecule of strength I can muster.

I join him onstage for his older songs, he's going to review and give me the lyrics to the new songs so I can practice with him after the first batch of concerts. We are strictly business and it hurts. I hate seeing groupies coming and going from his room. Every girl hurts more than the last.

We have a break between concerts and I travel home to be with Ted, he's the closest thing to a father she's got. He gives me a hug when I walk into the door. "How's Carrie?" I ask.

He picks up the baby and snuggles with her, "She's grown so much," he comments. "Carrie's doing better, she asks about Holly every time I see her. I showed her your most recent picture, and she thinks for sure it's Brandon's."

"She won't know unless we DNA test Holly. I still need to go find a lawyer to have something drawn up so she can't take the baby from me in case she changes her mind."

"Do you really think she would do that?" Ted asks. "You think she's going to try to take the baby from you?"

"I don't know," I say honestly. "Her feelings might change."

"Where's the nurse?" Ted asks.

"She's off for a bit spending with her family before we go back on tour."

"That's nice, have you seen your parents?"

"I visited them earlier, I just dropped her and Misty off at an indoor playground before seeing them."

"Tell me your parents know about Holly," he says suspiciously.

"Not yet," I say guiltily.

"You're in way over your head," he suspects.

"Maybe, but Holly is worth it. I was hoping you would come with me to visit my family, real secular,"

"And act like a couple," Ted finishes.

"Yes," I say, glad he predicted it.

"No, this is as far as I'm going with the lies. I'm not staring point blank into your parents faces and telling them we had a baby together."

"I'll pay off your student loans?" I offer out of desperation.

"What do you take me for?"

"I'm begging you!" I plead with him. This is so important to me.

"Okay, I'm only doing it because it will take me years to pay off this student debt and for you, it's like blinking your eye," he admits. "I'm not the kind of person to take advantage of them just because they have money, I liked you broke and penny-less too."

"I know that. I don't blame you, and whether you take the money or not, I really appreciate you doing this for me."

I hug him and he kisses me on the lips, 'What did you do that for?' I wipe them dry. "Might as well start pretending now," he says with a smirk. "Are you sure you don't just want to go with the truth?"

"Okay," I consider his suggestion, "You think I should tell my parents that my friend got knocked up, she's not sure who the father is, and since she was about to have an abortion I decided to save the baby's life and raise her as my own, or should I just say you knocked me up and this is my baby and leave Carrie and her drama out of it?"

"I don't know," he looks confused. "It's too many lies, too many people are getting involved, inevitably people are going to get hurt."

"I don't think anyone's going to believe that I was pregnant all this time and kept it a secret. Let's go with the truth and tell them that I took the baby from Carrie, and you and I are raising it as our own."

"Fine," Ted agrees.

We call Carrie to see if she wants to visit with Holly. She's at our door in seconds. I hand her the baby and she cradles her like it's second nature. I chill on the couch opposite Carrie and watch television while the baby sleeps restfully in her biological mother's arms. The slight break is nice and I start feeling the fatigue of having a newborn in the house without the nurse helping me.

Ted way too loudly places a beer on the table near me, "How's it going on tour?"

"It's terrible, Slasher thinks I cheated on him and he's been shagging any chick that shows interest," I complain. It doesn't feel better saying it out loud either.

"Do you say anything to him?" Ted asks. "Tell him it bothers you?"

"What can I say, he thinks I've cheated on him, so he's going to do whatever he pleases. It would be hypocritical of me to make comments on his loose behaviour when I was apparently with you."

"Tell him we made it up?" Ted suggests. "Maybe the two of you will get back together."

"Carrie, are you back together with Hunter?" I ask.

"He won't talk to me," she admits.

"How about Brandon," I ask. "Are you back with him?"

"No," she says.

"Okay that's 0:2. This has broken up me and Slasher, so 0:3. At this point there's nothing to lose. You and Hunter haven't reconciled, I might as well tell the truth," I reason.

"You told me to tell the truth that I cheated with Brandon, so he didn't go looking for me while I was pregnant," Carrie says softly.

"If it's okay with you, I'm changing my mind, let's stop with the lies and tell everyone the truth," I suggest. "This is getting out of hand."

"Are you fucking kidding?" She asks shocked beyond belief. "You want me to tell Brandon and Hunter that I had the kid with one of them and not TED and I have no idea who the dad is."

"Yes, I shouldn't have to pay the price for your mess, I'm happy to have Holly, but I shouldn't have to pay with losing my relationship with Slasher over it. There's a minuscule chance we might get back together."

"You said yourself he's shagging everything in sight, why do you want him back?" Carrie's miffed.

"I don't even know if I want him back but he was so quick to believe that I got pregnant again with Ted of all people, I would just love it if he knew the truth that he was wrong about me."

"Then tell him, trust me it's the least I owe you, Holly wouldn't be here today if it wasn't for you," Carrie says, "You have my blessing."

"Are you sure?" I ask.

"YES," she says without hesitation.

I call him, he answers on the second ring.

"Hi," I greet. "How are you?"

"Good, you?"

"I'm okay, I have something to tell you," I say gently. "You might want to sit down."

"Okay," he answers cautiously, "you have my attention."

"Holly is not my biological daughter, she's Carrie's, so actually she might be your niece."

"So you didn't have a baby, Carrie did, and it could be Hunters?" Elliot asks.

"In a nutshell. Holly is either your brother's or Brandon's, we're not sure. I offered to be her guardian because Carrie wasn't ready to have a child."

"Why didn't you tell me," Elliot sounds like he's processing what I told him.

"Like I said, I couldn't have you see me not pregnant. You were so quick to believe that I cheated on you with Ted, and that hurt me more than anything else you ever did. The countless girls I had to watch you with was devastating to me, while we were on tour. I was loyal to you, and your behaviour filled me with regret."

"Does Hunter know," Elliot asks almost ignoring everything I just said.

"Carrie told Hunter she cheated on him with Brandon. Your mom was right, she felt neglected being with your brother. He never made time for her, so she didn't tell him she was pregnant. He would have felt obligated to stay with her. I couldn't say anything to you for fear you'd tell Hunter."

"What's changed," asks Elliot.

"I guess Carrie feels like her relationships are disintegrating, so it doesn't matter who I tell anymore. Honestly, Carrie was going to end the pregnancy, but I managed to talk her into keeping it, offering to care for Holly. I told her it sucked losing you over lies, and she said after everything I've done, I should be able to tell you the truth. So, there you have it, the truth."

I fall into a peaceful sleep when Carrie carefully places Holly back into her crib.

Ted later tells me he went to check on Carrie and see if she was okay when he noticed ambulance attendants leaving her apartment. He waited until they were completely gone and then let himself in, that's when he found her hand written suicide note, in a state of shock he wakes me up, and gives me the note, before notifying Hunter.

Holly sleeps through my Armageddon.

16

I'm hollow inside, it's like someone scraped my insides out.

We started by visiting her family. We knock on Will's door and unable to hide our shattered expressions he invites us in, "What's wrong," he asks worried.

"Carrie, she," I can't continue.

"Ended her life," Ted finishes.

"That's crazy," Gwen says looking up at Will, "When did you last speak to her?"

"A week ago, maybe two at the most," replies Will.

"Was she depressed?" Gwen asks.

"She didn't seem to be," he says reflecting back. "She hasn't visited us in a long time."

"She was pregnant," I say miserably. "She wasn't telling anyone. She wanted to terminate the pregnancy but I talked her into keeping the baby."

"She had a baby?" Will asks dumbfounded. "That makes me,"

"A grandfather, Yes Carrie had a baby," Ted confirms.

"I'm a grandfather," he repeats in shock.

"Her name is Holly and she's four months old," Ted informs him. "She held the baby for a while and then I'm assuming shortly after ended her life."

"Sounds like postpartum depression," Gwen diagnoses. "You guys didn't get her any help?"

"She was studying and seemed to be doing better, I never suspected it" Ted explains. It's almost like he has to defend himself.

"Where's the baby?" Will asks.

"We managed to contact Misty our nurse who is watching her right now. I've been her sole guardian since her birth. Carrie and I had an agreement that I would care for her with no restrictions regarding visitation, she could see her anytime. She was happy with this," I explain.

"Very happy," Will says in sarcastic disbelief. I can't help but feel defensive. "Was your arrangement legalized?"

"Not yet," I start panicking.

"You're not family," he points out. "We will take the baby," he insists.

I know I have no legal rights at this point. I could kick myself for not cementing everything before this travesty happened. "You can't!"

"Find a court in this country that will stop me," he thunders.

Ted looks at me, "You have to give him the baby. What about the funeral?" He croaks.

"We'll arrange it and give you the details once you've brought the baby," Will says. He pales in appearance, like he might faint. Ted ushers me out the front door, we'll be back.

I know we are doing the right thing by giving the baby to her family but everything is so unfinished. We don't know if the father is Hunter or Brandon's, Carrie hardly ever spent time with her father, they were only united a short time ago, it's like we're giving Holly up to strangers.

We arrive back home and I start packing up her stuff. "What are you doing?" asks Misty.

"We have to give Holly to Carrie's dad, he's the closest living relative and he's demanding to have her."

Misty is shocked but helps me pack. I'm crying the entire time, it's more than just losing Carrie, I'm also losing Holly. Ted drives me back, knocking on their door. Everything happens so quickly. They take the bag and they pull her from my arms. I'm choked up. Ted escorts me back to the car. I sit there while he plucks the car seat from the back, it might as well have been my heart.

Ted returns to the car with a slip of paper that has the funeral arrangements on it. He says, "I spoke with Will, he might consider visitation for Holly, he said he'll be in touch."

Hardly any consolation, my body turns to lead. We go home and make calls to all of her friends, Manchester publishing company, anyone who knew her. It's going to be a large funeral.

17

The standard funeral does no justice for our friend. It's like we were all going through the motions but that's it. The sky is dark, but there's no thunder or lightening. Am I the only one angry at her, for giving-up? She could have come to any of us for help, we would have tried. Now I've lost Holly, my life will never be the same, I won't let that go. It's time to fight fire with fire.

The guests of the funeral are invited to Will's house. Brandon's here but he didn't come with Sheila. he's standing with John and Alex, "Can I have a word?" I pull him aside.

"How are you doing?" He asks concerned.

"Not well," I say honestly. "Are you still with Sheila?" I ask. "In a year," I remind him.

"No, we ended it, I guess I always imagined my life with her," he says referring to Carrie.

"She had a gorgeous baby girl named Holly, she told me that she cheated on Hunter with you, and that it could be yours. The last time she saw her, she said Holly looked like you. I kept her because Carrie wasn't ready to be a mom. Will confiscated the child from me. I think Holly should be with her father, you."

His eyes ignite. "I want to see her. How will I know?"

"Right now, it's just a hunch, it could also be Hunters, you don't know unless you test her. I just think she should be with her biological dad over Will, who is a complete stranger to Carrie until recently."

"Does Hunter know?"

"I'm sure Slasher's told him, we kept it a secret from everyone, passed the baby off as mine."

"You must miss her," he empathizes.

"You have no idea," I tell him.

"We'll work it out no matter who the baby belongs to."

Brandon and I approach Hunter who's standing next to Elliot, who I haven't spoken to for obvious anger issues on my part, "Hunter, can we have a word."

Hunter follows Brandon and I into an office, “I don’t know if Elliot told you or not, but Carrie confessed to cheating on you with Brandon, do you remember that?”

Hunter’s eyes are black cesspools of anger, “Go on.”

“She intentionally told you she cheated on Brandon to get you angry, because she wanted to hide her pregnancy from you. She didn’t want anyone to know. We passed the baby off as mine, allowing me complete guardianship.”

“One of us has to be the father,” Brandon finishes.

Contempt is all over Hunter’s face, “Where’s the baby?”

“Holly is with Will,” I inform him.

“What are you instigating,” Hunter accuses me.

“A custody battle, Holly’s biological father should care for Holly, whichever one of you that might be!

I see Slasher standing outside the French doors to the office waiting in line to speak to me, “If you’ll excuse me,” I leave the room to talk to him.

He takes my hand and guides me to the backyard, “I’m sorry about Carrie,” he says to me.

“I feel like I can’t breathe, I lost Holly too. Will took her from me.”

“She wasn’t yours,” he points out wrapping his arms around me.

“She might as well have been,” I answer irritated. “Holly should be with her biological father.”

“Who is?” Slasher asks stroking my hair.

“I don’t know,” I admit, “It might be Brandon or it could be your brothers.”

“Are you coming back?” he asks referring to the tour. It’s all he seems to care about right now. I get even more angry.

“Of course,” I tell him.

Ted and I leave the funeral.

Our sadness for her loss bonds us together, and we stay in the living room consoling each other. She was well loved, but Ted and I were her family. I feel like I failed her. I express these emotions to Ted and he says he feels the same way, “There should have been more clues that we could have picked up on. We were so stupid!”

“The majority of your time was spent touring with Slasher, you can’t read emotion through emails and text messages. Don’t blame yourself.” Ted insists, but I’m not

completely blaming myself, I'm blaming Carrie for not getting help or coming to us before it was too late.

18

We arrive back at our place and Carrie's pacing in the living room floor, "Did it work?" she asks.

"Oh my God! Carrie you're alive?" I freak.

"Of course, I'm alive!" She shakes her head. "I'm not going to kill myself!"

"What the fuck?" I'm reeling with emotions.

"Ted helped me orchestrate everything!"

He looks at me sheepishly, "Sorry, I wanted to tell you earlier. We had to sedate you a bit, we're sorry about that too."

Carrie's smiling, "I'm writing my own romance, the best way to do that, is live it. This will be the true test of who really loves me."

"You should have seen it," Ted's excited. "Rita played right into it by talking about the baby to Brandon and Hunter. The ferocity between the two men was unnerving."

I turn to Ted, "Why didn't you tell me? What about your poor dad? He just got you back," I ask.

"He helped, he's more than happy to spend time with his granddaughter while we figure out who's in love with me more." I hold on to Carrie hugging her. I don't care what she did, I'm just glad she's okay.

"So, nobody except, me, Ted, and your dad's family know you're alive?"

"Yes!" Carrie exclaims.

"What about school?"

"No problem, Hunter won't have a reason to travel to Toronto and if he does, he won't be going to the University, and Brandon is here only during games. I'll finish my final year with no distractions."

"They are going to be pissed," I predict.

Carrie sits on the couch, "What did you say to Hunter and Brandon?"

I grab a cooler from the fridge and join Carrie, "First of all Brandon is single again, he broke up with Sheila which I would have been happy to hear if I knew you were alive at the time."

"Okay, that's good," she says excited, "and then what happened. I wish I could have been a fly on the wall."

"Brandon said, 'I always imagined my life with her.' So, I told him about Holly and how she could be his. I said the last time you saw Holly, you thought it was Brandon's, but that you just weren't ready to be a mom yet. I complained about Will taking her away from me, and said that Holly should be with her biological father. It's like Brandon's eyes lit up. He wanted to see the baby. Then I asked Hunter if I could have a word with him. I told him that you confessed to cheating on him, because you were pregnant and didn't want anyone to know. I pounded into their heads that one of them has to be the father and then Hunter asked me what I'm instigating and I said a custody battle."

"Perfect," Carrie laughs. "Hunter's mom was right, he neglected me at times, but both men are amazing, and I hope the man who's going to love me and be a great father to Holly will win. In the meantime, I can visit Holly whenever I want to. I can ditch the old apartment and move back with you. I'll finish school and I won't have to choose. My decision will be made for me."

"You don't think Hunter or Brandon will catch on?"

"Not in a million years," she says confidently.

"What if both move on?" I go for worst case scenario.

"Then neither were meant to be. I'll find out before it's too late."

"Well I would have liked to have known earlier, but at least you didn't let me go on believing that you were dead for too long."

"I wouldn't let her," Ted said. "I felt terrible for you."

"Thanks."

"How did they look," Carrie asks.

"Brandon was in a black suit, he looked gorgeous, and Hunter, just as sexy as ever, dark suit, black tie, shiny shoes."

"I hope Hunter forgives me for cheating."

"He might forgive you for cheating, but not faking your death." I advise.

"You don't know," she says. "I'm surprised Brandon broke up with Sheila. If I had known that, I don't know if I would have planned this whole thing."

"Well you're in deep now," Ted says. "A year from today we'll see who's left standing with Holly."

"You can still go see hockey games Brandon's playing in, or go out, just do what Slasher does and wear disguises if there's a chance you might bump into either of them."

"It's amazing how I can live out the ending to my own book."

"At a cost," I point out, "you're going to anger both men, you give up seeing Holly on a regular basis. You can still change your mind."

"I'm all in," she says confidently.

"Hanging out with you two is more entertaining than singing with Slasher," I admit. "I'm going for a swim."

"I'll come Ted volunteers," he disappears into his room. It's late afternoon, so the pool is going to be deserted, hardly anyone uses the pool. I go into my room and change into my bathing suit, looking forward to that submerged feeling once you dive in.

"Are you coming?" I call out to Carrie.

"No thanks, I'm going to lay low for a few days in case you get any unexpected visitors."

"That's true," I never considered.

Ted and I venture into the underground parking lot. It's dark even in the day, so it's good being with him. We go down a few dingy corridors until we find the pool. He has his entrance and I have mine. When we meet on the other side, we find we're alone. "This is nice," I tell him. I walk to the deep end and dive in, the cool water skims my body and I surface pushing my hair back. Ted's submerges coming in my direction. He surfaces and we float on our backs, "Who's idea was all this?"

"You have to ask," Ted's sarcasm is justified.

"I can't believe you went along with her."

"She's in a weird spot and had some good points, I'd do the same for you if you needed me to."

"I don't think I'll be faking my own death anytime soon."

I glance out the window that overlooks the on-ground parking lot, "Look there's a limousine. Is there anyone in there?" I squint.

Ted looks over, "I can't see anyone, who do you think it is?"

"I have no idea, it could be Slasher, Hunter, unlikely Brandon, he drives a Mustang. I hope she doesn't answer the door."

"She's not stupid," Ted reminds me. "Are you going to get back with Slasher? You did lie to him, he sort of deserves a second chance."

"No way, you should have seen the number of girls he was with after me, they were streaming in like wildfire. He didn't miss me."

"You two have something," Ted disagrees. "That's probably just his way of dealing."

"Well I'm tired of getting cheated on, my heads not in the clouds anymore, I don't care what the guy makes or what he does for a living, I just want him to love me for who I am," I analyze.

"You've changed," Ted says flipping over and swimming away.

I follow him into the deep end, "How so?"

"You just have, for the better. You have a good head on your shoulders now."

"Thanks," I say, swimming to the shallow end. When I get there I flip around and go back to the deep end. He's still there. He leaves me in the deep and swims to the shallow, to return the way I did. "Did you date anyone while I was on tour?"

"No," he clips. "Not interested."

"Do you still miss your ex?" I ask.

"No, I'm pretty much over her, such a chicken shit, how she broke up with me."

"You can say that again," I agree. "I think I'm going to let Slasher believe we've become a couple if you don't mind. He was so quick to believe me the first time I told him. If he asks me I'm just going to say that we eventually hooked up and I'm happy, that way I don't look like a loser who's still stuck on him."

"Oh my God, you and Carrie are real pieces of work," he says doing the front crawl. "It's enough to make me not want to go out with any girls."

I chuckle, "I guess I would feel exactly the same way as you if I was in your shoes."

"Right!" He emphasizes.

"If you had to pick between Carrie or me, who would you go out with?" I ask for fun.

"Jeeze that's tough, the two of you are real winners," he says sarcastically.

"If you had to pick," I make him choose.

"There's no other girls on the planet?"

"None," I confirm.

"I can't answer that, it's not like you aren't both attractive, you're just very different from one another. If I have to choose, I think I would pick you."

"What made you go in that direction," I ask excitedly.

"Because you're the only one here," he smiles.

I splash him.

He gets me back with a huge splash, so I splash him more. We swim back to the shallow end, "Hot tub?" I suggest.

"Sure," he follows me out of the pool.

We step into the hot tub, now we have a perfect view of the parking lot where the limousine is still parked. I settle in front of a jet pumping water against my stiffened lumbar region, "This is soothing," I say.

He's quiet looking at the car, "It was Slasher," he says as we see the last of his goons getting in. "I guess he was coming for you."

"I'll check my phone later," I say unconcerned.

I close my eyes and enjoy the hot water massaging me. This is the life. "When I buy my own house, I want a hot tub and a pool," I confide to him.

"What's stopping you from buying one now, you don't need to be in a relationship to make a big purchase like that." Ted suggests.

"I'm touring around too much with Slasher, the house will be vacant for a large part of the year. It doesn't make sense to buy one until after our next cluster of concerts or if I stop working with him, whichever comes first."

"Where would you like to settle down?" He asks me.

"I don't know, I can't see myself living far from either you or Carrie. I'm in Toronto I can visit my family anytime but the weather is so crappy here."

"I know, I hate the cold," he agrees. "They're gone," he says referring to the limousine.

"Wonder why he came by? He's such a slut, I can't believe he managed exclusivity with me when we were together."

"How do you know he was faithful?" Questions Ted.

"I just know," I had no doubts for some reason. We were buds.

19

We joined Carrie back at the apartment, she was engrossed in homework when we arrived, “Slasher dropped by, I couldn’t answer the door but check your phone in case he sent you a message.”

“Thanks, I know, we saw his car from the pool. When are you moving your stuff into the spare room?” I ask.

“I was thinking midnight so I don’t have to worry about bumping into anyone.”

“How long do you have the downstairs apartment for?” I ask.

“A week and a bit,” she tells me. “We can move me back in stages.”

“I’m leaving before then but I’ll help as much as I can. Ted and I can do the big stuff together during the day, and you can do the smaller stuff at night,” I organize.

“Sounds great, I appreciate all your, you guys have done so much for me already!” she say.

“Your welcome,” I answer

“It will cost you,” Ted teases.

I disappear into the shower and come out smelling like roses before I dress in my favourite silk pyjamas. Ted follows suit taking a shower after me while Carrie continues studying, “How’s your schoolwork?” I ask out of curiosity.

“It’s going well, the last year is harder than the first two, so having no other pressures on me is going to benefit me in my final year.”

“You have this all planned out,” I appreciate the thought that must have gone into this, “and your book?”

“Twenty-thousand more words, so it’s almost done. I just need it to play out in real for me then get it down on paper.”

“Do you have an ideal ending,” I ask wondering if theres more of a spark with one over the other.

“I don’t, I love both of them for different reasons, when I’m with Brandon it’s like time never passes and I’m still in love with him, and when I’m with Hunter, he’s sexy, exciting, and just amazing. There’s never a moment that goes by that feels dull. He has this joy of life that never seems to get old. He’s good at everything he does, it’s remarkable.”

"If I had to pick, I think I would pick Brandon," I imagine growing old with both. Brandon seems more like the kind of guy that will settle down with older age, whereas Hunter will always take everything to the limit.

"Sometimes I feel Brandon would be the best to settle down with but his ethics and that possibility of him cheating on me makes me hesitate." Carrie looks disheartened, "You know their code, I don't know if he will ever do that to me or not."

"I don't think he will," I say but immediately I think about Sheila and how it didn't take him long to hook up with someone else. If she meant that much to him, then wouldn't he have stayed single? "He know's what you've been through and he even asked you to marry him. The only reason he hooked up with Sheila is because YOU ended it. You told him not to wait around for you."

Carrie shakes her head, "That could have been the biggest mistake of my life. I just got so swept away by Hunter. He's so cool."

"Right," I agree with her, "but he's domineering and those are the guys who are difficult to marry, because they want everything their way. You sound like you're leaning towards Brandon." I judge.

"To be honest, I think I am, but in his grief, he could return to Sheila's open arms and then Hunter will be the best choice."

"Hunter could find someone too," I comment. "You think he's going to go an entire year carrying a torch for you?"

"Yes, I do," she admits arrogantly.

"I wouldn't," Ted comes out of the bathroom towel drying his hair. "You sound a little full of yourself," he says honestly.

Carrie snubs him a bit, "Whatever Ted, you don't understand."

"Life isn't a fictional romance," he tells her, "that's why they call it fiction. You might end up with nobody."

"You should listen to him, maybe call this off before you lose both of them," I suggest.

"No, I thought this out and I'm willing to live with whatever happens." She says, "even if it means living alone."

I grab my phone to see if Slasher texted me:

*S: Hey bud, I wanted to see you, hope you're okay. I'm not okay with your lies but I understand why you did it. You must miss Holly terribly, but at least she's with her grandfather. Call me anytime you need to talk.*

*Me: I'm sure you felt betrayed but it was the best thing to do at the time. Unfortunately I feel like if you cared about me at all, you wouldn't have flaunted all those other girls in front of me when we were touring together. I obviously don't matter to you.*

*S: You're so wrong, I was angry.*

We don't write anymore. He calls me instead. I hesitate answering , but I swallow my pride and pick up, "Hi," I say motioning to Carrie to not say anything while I'm on the phone.

"Hi," he says, "we need to talk, face to face. Texting is stupid."

"Are you still in Toronto," I ask.

"Ya, I'm going to spend a week with Hunter before I meet back up with you on the tour."

"How's he doing?" I ask.

"He's not talking, absolutely miserable," Elliot admits, "he refuses to admit he misses Carrie. He says she's selfish for taking her life. He's obsessed with her. He wants custody of Holly, but I'm scared it's not for the right reasons."

"She always had a power to get people to fall in love with her," I'm unable to hide my jealousy.

"Bud, she's not the only one," he says referring to me.

I hate that I showed him weakness when he doesn't deserve it, I don't want to keep you from missing your plane.

"Come to New York with me, we'll talk," he pleads.

"I have to much to do here," I explain. "I have to pack up all of Carrie's belongings and donate it, and I want to be here for Ted, he's taking it really hard to be honest with you. We are really close friends and I need to be here for him."

"Okay, Rita." He says. I hate that he's about to hang up. I want to speak to him longer, hear his voice, imagine being with him, but I do get off despite how I feel. All this stuff with Carrie is affecting my life too and it's hard for me to ignore my growing resentment. She wouldn't have kept Holly if it wasn't for me. Slasher and I are no longer

together but maybe that would have happened anyway. I need a nice guy who doesn't just run to the first girl he see's when there's a problem, some like Ted.

Carrie, Ted, and I embrace our time together. Late night multiple trips packing up Carrie's belongings and transporting them. Days by the pool swimming and watching the parking lot wondering who would try to drop by and support us. Sneaking around in disguises when we want to go out so Carrie doesn't get recognized. I learned a lot from Slasher. Our week together was over in the blink of an eye. Our heart to heart discussions are what I will miss most when I go back on tour. I pack my bag and Ted drives me to the airport but not before I give Carrie a huge hug good-bye.

20

I take an international flight to meet up with the tour, booking into the same hotel as everyone else. I message Slasher telling him I'm back before soaking in my hotel room's hot tub. I'm excited to crawl under the covers and put on a great movie to fall asleep to.

That's when I hear the proverbial tap on the door just as I've picked my movie. I roll my eyes before dragging my butt out of bed to peak out the peep hole. I expect to see Slasher standing in the hallway, but to my annoyance the hole is covered forcing me to open the door.

Slowly I open it ready to slam the door shut if I'm not familiar with the person outside, "Slasher! I was just about to watch a movie," I start closing the door on him.

He puts his arm out stopping me, "Just a few minutes of your time," he demands before stepping in.

"Can't it wait?" I ask.

"No, I want a second chance, you're the one who lied and your treating me like I've wronged you. You let me believe that you and Ted hooked up and he impregnated you, how can you think I won't be angry?" he complains.

"Nothing justifies your countless girls, so your conscience intentions to hurt me haven't gone unnoticed. I have zero interest in getting back together with you," I shoot him down.

"You're deflecting your sadness over losing Carrie on my behaviour during the tour. Let me be there for you," he advocates for himself. "We can at least be friends."

I think about it, he was a great friend, "okay, friends," I shake his hand. "Now if you don't mind, I'm so looking forward to this movie."

"You want company?," he asks sheepishly. "I'll sit in that cozy looking chair over there," he points.

I roll my eyes, "Okay." I crawl back under the covers and resume the movie that is still on the opening.

"You're not eating any munchies? No drinks?" He asks very needy-like.

"Seriously?" I complain. "What do you want? Popcorn, pizza, chocolate? I'll just call room service," I say sarcastically.

He ignores my sarcasm, "I'll call for you," he offers like he's doing me a big favour. He phones the number on the little booklet and orders everything I mentioned and more.

"Are we good now?" I ask.

"I would be more comfortable in bed," he says with nerve.

"Don't let me stop you from going back to your room," I counter offer, but I move the comforter so he can join me. When our snacks come we pig out while watching the movie. At one point, I must have fallen asleep because I open my eyes and it's morning. I half expect him to be gone, but he's there, "Good morning," I chirp.

He stretches out completely clothed, "Hello!"

"You know it's ten o'clock?" I slide out from the queen bed and walk to the oversized bathroom. Eight hours until we have to be on stage. The water is beating down on me when I realize I unwittingly left my phone on the bedside table next to Slasher. I cut my shower short and quickly dry off praying I haven't received a text message or a call from Carrie.

Slasher is standing in the middle of the room holding my phone, "Do you want to explain?"

My heart thuds in my chest, don't assume anything, I tell myself, "I don't know what you're talking about, can I see?" He passes my phone. I release the breath that I didn't know I was holding relieved it's Ted rather than Carrie, "Ted and I are flatmates, he can't text me? Unhand my phone!"

He whimpers handing it back. I reach for it and scan the screen: Call me

I dial Ted's number, I can hear the faint ring of a phone in the hallway, that must be a coincidence. No answer, I hang up and try again, I hear the phone in the hallway again. I walk over to the door and open it, Ted's in the hallway, "Oh My God!" I say aloud.

Slasher grimaces like it's the last person in the world he wants to see at my door. I open the door wider so Ted can see Slasher and doesn't say something he'll regret. "Hi," he greets casually.

"What are you doing here?" I usher him inside. He's carrying a bag with him and dressed super casually.

"I had to leave the apartment, she's everywhere," he says referring to losing Carrie. He's very convincing.

"I know, it's awful," I relate. "She must have been so depressed, to end her own life like that and not get help," I play into it.

Ted drops his bag, "I didn't book a room, kind of expensive here, can I stay with you?"

"You don't have to ask," I tell him.

"I'll book him a room," Slasher volunteers, not wanting us to stay together.

"That's so nice of you," I say sarcastically enough for Slasher to pick up.

"I couldn't," Ted being the nice guy that he is, feels bad because he doesn't want Slasher to think that he would take advantage of him.

"I insist," he offers.

"Have you eaten?" I ask. "We have some leftover food from last night but it's junk food. We can go out for breakfast," I suggest.

"The two of you can take my limousine," Slasher says, "I'm going take a shower in my room. I'll catch you later." He leaves, letting the door drop heavily behind him.

"That was nice of him," Ted comments.

"He wants me again," I grab my purse. "Is Carrie here?"

"No, she's studying right now, she's got a big exam coming up. Nice of Slasher to book me a room!"

"He wants you to be in a different room from me so we don't hook up in our grief. She knows not to text or call me in case someone sees my phone doesn't she?"

"I should think so," he says. "I can't wait to see you in concert tonight, but if you can't get me in I don't mind waiting for you here," he offers.

"Backstage baby!" I tell him.

"Great," he exclaims.

The driver takes us to a bistro close to our hotel. It's a quaint older building with brown lines on it, resembling something you would see in Sweden. The driver lets us know to text him, and he'll be back for us.

We enter the quiet serve yourself style restaurant and study the menu on the wall behind the waitress, "What do you feel like?" I ask Ted.

"Bacon! You?" He asks.

"The same." I agree. We order two sides of bacon and coffee before grabbing a booth in the centre of the restaurant. "Have you heard anything from Brandon or Hunter?" I ask out of curiosity?

"I think Brandon's been in touch with Will, but I don't know any details, I had to rush to catch my flight."

"I wonder how Hunter's doing," I stir my coffee that our busty waitress just dropped off.

Ted sips his coffee, "I hope they both let her down," he says with bite.

I'm taken off guard, "What do you mean?" I ask.

"I'm into Carrie," Ted confesses.

"Don't tell me you're joining her line up?" I'm unable to hide my nausea, I didn't realize it's been festering.

"She's pretty, smart, and has a strong head on her shoulders."

"With Brandon and Hunter out of the way, and the fact that you're rooming with her, gives you an advantage," I tell him.

"I know," he smirks, "I just wanted to okay it with you first."

"You don't have to run it by me," I respond irritated. "You and her can do whatever you want, I have no say in it."

"I care about you, of course you have a say in it," he pops a piece of bacon in his mouth.

"You have the go ahead from me," I tell him. "You aren't proposing to her are you?"

"What makes you think that," he pats his lips with a napkin.

"It would explain why you came to see me in person."

"The two have nothing to do with each other," he crosses his heart. I take my last piece of bacon and savour it. It's my favourite food.

My phone goes off. I pull it from my bag and glance at the screen, it's Slasher:

S: Hunter's here.

Me: How's he doing?

S: Drinking.

Me: Kinda early.

S: He wants to talk to you 'alone', I'm sending the driver for you, are you ready to come back?

Me: Just finished.

S: Thanks. Ted can get his key from the lobby. I'll send Hunter to your room a few minutes after you arrive.

Me: Sure.

"The front desk will have your key," I tell Ted as we get back into the black limousine. "Hunter's in town and he wants to talk to me alone," I inform Ted.

"I wonder what he wants," he says buckling his seatbelt. He starts looking out his window thinking. I do the same out mine. I like Ted ever since the bookstore as a friend, it's not like I ever considered him as anything more, but it irks me that he's into Carrie along with everyone else. The only reason Slasher probably doesn't like her is because his brother already staked his claim.

I approach the front desk of the hotel with Ted to find out what room he has before returning to mine. He's a floor down which is convenient, "I'll see you in a bit," I tell him.

"Text me what you talked about when he leaves," Ted asks.

"Ya, I'll get right on that," I say sarcastically. I take the lift to my room wondering what Hunter's here for. I'm sure it's to get information. I slip the card into my door and then text Slasher that I've returned. A few minutes later Hunter knocks on the door.

He's dressed in an expensive suit, wearing shades, "Where is she?" he asks.

"Pardon me?" I'm astonished at his forwardness. "Where is who," like he can't possibly be talking about Carrie, she's dead to him.

"Carrie! Where is she?" He demands.

"She's gone Hunter. What do you mean, 'where is she?', how can you talk to me like this, don't you know how upsetting you're being to me."

"She's alive! Admit it!" He insists. "You're in on this."

"What makes you think that?" I ask hesitantly.

"I would feel different if she's dead, and you wouldn't be able to sing tonight, I just know," his confidence is eerie.

"Get out of here," I yell at him. He's freaking me out and I don't know what to say to him or how to act, I'm caught off guard, 'Oh my you are right? She's faking it to see which one of you love her more.' His suspicion is bang on, he should get her just for this alone, but I say nothing. I open the door and wait for him to pass through. I can't text Ted fast enough after slamming the door shut behind him.

Me: Hunter just left.

Ted: What did he want.

Me: He suspects Carrie is still alive.

Ted: What did he say.

Me: He said he doesn't feel like she's dead. He just knows she isn't.

Ted: Wow. You better warn Carrie.

Me: Could it be denial?

Ted: Intuition?

Me: Okay I'll send her a message.

Ted: You denied it right.

Me: Ya! How can you ask that?

Ted: Sorry.

Me: Be ready by five.

Ted: Okay!

I let Carrie know:

*Me: Hi! Ted and Hunter showed up.*

*Carrie: Oh that sounds fun! (Glad I'm here.)*

*Me: Ted's into you.*

*Carrie: He isn't!*

*Me: Confessed this morning.*

*Carrie: I don't like him that way, he's just a friend.*

*Me: Be gentle.*

*Carrie: What did Hunter say? Did you see him?*

*Me: Came to my room. He thinks your alive. (Intuition)*

*Carrie: Seriously?*

*Me: Yes.*

*Carrie: Wow, what did you do?*

*Me: I told him you're dead and to get out. I kicked him out of my room.*

*Carrie: You might have made it look more suspicious.*

*Me: He said if you were dead, I wouldn't be able to sing tonight.*

*Carrie: Good point. Fucking asshole is a genius!*

*Me: Is he winning your heart so far?*

*Carrie: So far. Seriously frustrating to go out with a mentally challenging man like him.*

*Me: Your following is ridiculous.*

*Carrie: I'm just minding my own business trying to study for a test, the drama has followed you.*

*Me: I'm tempted to send it back your way.*

*Carrie: What's happening with you and Slasher?*

*Me: We're just friends. He's pushy.*

*Carrie: Probably gets it from his brother. Let me know if anything else happens.*

*Me: Will do. Delete this thread.*

*Carrie: You too.*

I take a nap before getting ready for the concert, I never imagined singing for a living, I thought showers were as far as I would ever go. Mom used to compliment my voice, but I thought she did that only because she was my mother and that's what they do, not because I'm talented. The day I stole the microphone from Slasher changed my life, now I can never imagine doing anything else but singing.

As I rest in bed, I imagine having a solo career. Maybe I can do it without Slasher, but then the burden of all that comes with being a superstar would rest on my shoulders. Arranging everything, working with an agent, a manager, the tours. I think I have it good right now, I don't want to stir the pot.

I think I drift off because the first time I check the clock it's just after four. I text Ted asking him what he's doing, he informs me he's playing video games with some of the crew members in the lounge downstairs. I pack up what I need and go down to meet him. People don't recognize me the way they do Slasher, so my life is still essentially normal. I can't imagine having to wear a disguise all the time.

Ted's playing a game of billiards with a cigarette dangling from his lips and a beer in close proximity. I don't think I've ever seen him so relaxed or happy, "How's it going?" I ask.

He smiles at me as he gets ready to take a shot, "Eight ball corner pocket," he calls his shot like an expert. The crew members place their money on the table. Ted slides the pool cue on his knuckle, smoothly tapping the ball, it hits the bank before dropping into the corner pocket. He high fives his new friends and grabs their money off the table, "Thanks for doing business guys!"

They start leaving him shaking their heads in disbelief, as they walk by me saying, "Watch out he's a shark."

I grin at them reaching for Ted's beer, taking a large gulp, "That's not mine!" he calls out stopping me.

I glance at him with a shocked look on my face, I just drank someone's beer? Gross!

"Psych!" he taunts me. "It's mine, you can finish it!"

"Jerk!" I say finishing his beer, "Are you ready to go?"

"Sure am," he says taking one last drag of his cigarette before stubbing it out.

"I didn't know you smoke?" I comment.

"I don't, it's disgusting, I just wanted to be cool," he admits.

"That's so nerdy," I tell him.

The last limousine is all ours.

21

Backstage is normal organized chaos, the only guests are Hunter who's in Slasher's change room and Ted who's in mine. It's a sold out crowd, "I can't believe you sing for all these people," Ted's flabbergasted.

"If you had told me this two months ago, I would have thought you were having me on."

"No voice lessons or anything," asks Ted.

"Notta," I reply.

"It's a gift," Ted informs me. "Like that magic mushroom one of the guys slipped me. Everything looks so different since I took it."

"You took drugs? Ted!" I'm disgusted. "How do you feel?"

"Exactly the same," he explains, "except you're beauty is way more enhanced after taking it than before."

"Are you going to be okay?" I ask trying to gage whether he can be left alone or not.

"Of course," he replies coolly, but I'm having serious doubts.

"Three more minutes," a stage hand calls out.

"I have to go, come with me, I lead him to his spot next to Hunter.." Ted follows me and takes a seat. I go on stage with Slasher and the crowd roars with excitement. In the corner of my eye, I see Ted getting up and walking towards the stage. I casually try stopping him giving him a hand signalling for him to stay back but he doesn't listen or understand the gesture and before I know it he's walking towards us waving and smiling at the crowd. The goons swoop in, and they are struggling with Ted who suddenly has super human strength. They pin him down to the ground and then it takes four guys to carry him off stage. He's swinging his butt, making it hard for them to hold him, then a rush of fans try jumping onto the stage, the crowd is difficult to control, security, on top of security have to threaten the crowd to get back, Slasher grabs my arm and we leave the stage until it's no longer chaotic.

"What the fuck," complains Slasher.

"One of your crew, gave him a magic mushroom, he's never done drugs before," I explain.

"Tell me who," he thunders. "I'll fire him."

"I don't know, and I wouldn't trust him to tell you who it was," I say referring to Ted.

"Can they control the crowd?" I ask.

"I don't know, we can't go out there with them like this," he tells me. "One of my 'goons' as you put it is bringing YOUR FRIEND back to the hotel, where's Hunter?"

"I haven't seen him since we were on stage." Then the worst thought strikes me, what if Ted in his drugged up state says something stupid to Hunter who's already suspicious about Carrie being alive? I have to find Hunter or Ted and "I have to check on Ted to make sure he's okay!" I blurt quickly.

"My GOONS will make sure of that," Slasher reassures.

"I need to see for myself," I say untrusting.

He gives me a strange look, "What about the concert?"

"Nobody will care if I'm not there, just if you don't go back on stage, doc me, I don't care," and I desert him rushing off to the parked limousines.

I open the door to the first one who doesn't appear to be blocked in, "Take me back to the hotel please!" He nods and waits for me to get into the car, then pulls out and I just hope that Ted isn't saying anything stupid, and if he does, I can't guarantee that he's going to tell me what he said, maybe I should text Carrie just in case:

*Me: Hi Carrie? Ted took a mushroom (drugs) at the concert and started acting all weird. He was sitting next to Hunter, God only know's what he's said to him.*

*Carrie: You can't be serious! Did you ask him?*

*Me: I'm on my way back to the hotel right now to look for Ted. I haven't seen Hunter. I'm scared he might be on his way back to Toronto, he suspects you're still alive which really freaks me out.*

*Carrie: You know!*

*Me: I'll keep you posted, but this isn't good.*

We arrive back at the hotel and I head straight to Ted's room. I knock on his door and wait. It opens, and I see a goon, "Hi, I need to see Ted," I demand.

He opens the door all the way and makes room for me to step in. Ted appears to be sleeping on the bed, "Ted," I screech.

He startles and sits up, "My head," he rubs irritated.

I turn back to the goon, "You can leave now," I insist. He casts a look of doubt but listens, I let the hotel door slam shut behind him, "Did you say anything to Hunter?" I interrogate.

"At the concert?" he asks as dumb as a cow.

"Where else?" I growl.

"The song you sang was romantic, I couldn't help it," he starts getting sad.

"What did you say," I growl.

"I said that I'm into Carrie but she still loves him," he admits pathetically.

"She's supposed to be dead!" I remind him.

"I know," he weeps.

"Oh for goodness sakes, you're pathetic," I shake my head. I pull my phone out to text Carrie.

*Me: Ted told Hunter you're still in love with him. I'd put money on it he's on his way to Toronto as we text.*

*Carrie: What am I going to do? When he sees my stuff is here.*

*Me: He crazily knew, Ted just confirmed it. You aren't going to be able to keep up the charade as far as Hunter is concerned.*

*Carrie: He's going to be so mad.*

*Me: With every right to be.*

*Carrie: I'll let you know if I see him.*

*Me: And all the juicy details I would hope.*

*Carrie: Of course.*

"I have to go," I desert Ted, and rush to the front lobby asking what room Hunter is staying in. The lady is hesitant, checks her computer, and then tells me he's checked out. Just as I expected.

*Me: He's on his way*

*Carrie: Holy shit!*

I warn Carrie, that's all I can do. I would so love to be a fly on the wall for the big confrontation. I check my calendar to see if there's enough time for me to fly home and

be back to the next concert. Once that's confirmed, I pack my stuff, check out, and take the limousine I took from the concert to the airport.

Not surprising, I don't have to tell Slasher, the driver's informed him of our trip to the airport.

*S: Did you see Ted?*

*Me: Yes, he's fine.*

*S: You took the limousine?*

*Me: Decided to drop in on my parents before the next concert. Obviously you stopped the concert.*

*S: Not worth taking chances.*

*Me: I'll see you soon, stay safe.*

*S: Very soon*

I wonder what that meant by, 'very soon', unless he's planning on following me to Toronto. This is turning into a circus. My limousine pulls up to the airport drop off, and the driver hands me my designer bag and I book the first flight out to Toronto which I apparently haven't missed. Hunter already checked out, so I suspect that when he couldn't get a flight to Toronto quickly enough he must have chosen NYC and then connect to Toronto. I text Carrie telling her what I suspect he's done. It's anyone's guess, who will make it back to Carrie first. A few minutes later I see this old man in clothes you would only wear in Hawaii approaching me, friggin Slasher.

"You mind if I join you missy?" he says to me.

I can't help but laugh at the sight of him, "I have to go to the bathroom," I inform him, remembering I haven't deleted the thread between me and Carrie in case she can still pull off her death. I think the gig is up though, I just want to see this play out.

I return from the bathroom and Slasher is standing on guard making sure I don't escape, "You left Ted behind?" He asks.

"Sure did," I said without explanation. "You're get up," I point to his disguise, "is so eye catching, you stand out more than if you just looked like yourself." I chuckle. "Where are you off to?" I ask.

"Like you have to ask," he grins.

"Hunter?"

“NYC then Toronto. She’s alive isn’t she, he’s right?” Slasher asks.

Is the gig up, do I answer him? “No,” I lie. I don’t know whether she’s going to manage to continue the farce. I have no choice but continue to go along with it.

We board the plane, “You just happen to decide to visit your parents now? This isn’t a frantic dash to Toronto to help your friend out of a huge mess?”

“It wasn’t my idea,” I confess.

“Carrie’s alive?” He says with disbelief. He pulls his phone and texts Hunter. I don’t see what he’s typed but it took him all of three seconds, probably one word. ‘Yes’ “Care to explain the thought process behind all this?” He asks m.

“I would if I was the mastermind,” I tell him, but really all I know is her generalized reasoning, I shouldn’t have to be the one who explains this to everyone. Let him find out, through Hunter and Carrie, it’s not really any of Slasher’s business. I can’t help feeling angry towards Ted, it’s his fault for acting up at our concert that’s led to us chasing down Carrie. She probably would have pulled it off if it wasn’t for him.

It’s a long flight and unfortunately not a busy one, so sitting next to Slasher has restricted any chance of talking to Carrie or Ted. I’m in limbo wondering if Hunter’s there yet or not.

The stewardess delivers food trays. I don’t realize I’m starving until I see the Salisbury steak with soggy potatoes with asparagus tips dipped in cheese appearing unfathomably delicious. I can’t imagine what they’re eating in first class. I remove the lid and open my utensils. “You’re famished,” he observes.

“What gave you that impression,” I go for his tray. He slaps my hand.

I pout in response and then he passes his tray to me, “I don’t know why I’m giving you my food,” he questions his own intentions.

“Because you’re in love with me,” I snicker. Men are suckers! I eat all of my food and all of his.

He looks at me guffawed, “I didn’t think you were really going to eat my serving too!”

I chuckle. He motions for the nearby airline stewardess who casually strolls our way, “She ate my tray,” he complains.

“There’s no extra’s,” he politely explains. “We had two but you booked last minute, so those were the extras.”

I feel a bit guilty, scanning my tray, there's a packet of crumbled soda crackers, "Here, you can have these," I offer chuckling.

The stewardess smiles, "Sorry sir I'll check back in later to see if I can find you anything."

"Thanks," he says dismally.

"You're making me feel guilt ridden," I complain, "you shouldn't have offered me your tray if you were that hungry."

"I didn't think you'd be a gluten!" He answers incredulously.

He takes liberties, and kisses me. My body caves to his magnetism, "Back off old man!" I squawk as he remembers he's in costume. I wipe my lips as though his kiss disgusts me.

I wave my hand in the aisle and the male steward closest to us comes to our section, "Can I help you?"

"This old man kissed me," I gag/spoke. "I need to be moved."

"Right away," he says. "Come with me."

I unbuckle my seat and hand him my dishes so I can put my tray back in the upright position, "Here."

My butt literally almost rubs Slasher in the face as I pass him. I grab my carry on so I don't have to back track to second class. He's got this stupid look on his face like he can't believe what I've just done. I grin at him and follow the Steward to first class. The rest of the time I sit in luxury while Slasher sits squat up with his legs pressed against the back of another person's chair. I also get to leave the plane first, hopefully in enough time to ditch him and get back to Carrie on my own.

The plane proceeds to land an hour or so after my escapade with Slasher. I text Carrie the second I'm off the plane. She texts back that she's still at our place, there's no use in hiding because he'll just find her. She said he's not there yet. I grab the first cab I spot and give him our address.

I watch behind our car to see if another car is following me, in particular Slasher. I feel like we've lost him, but who am I fooling as he know's my destination.

We pull up to the apartment and I give the cab driver a handsome tip, rather than wait for change. I press the button repeatedly for the lift, impatient for it to come. I step on and head to our apartment. The lift lands and I grab my carry on. I place my bag next to the door while I search for my key. Frustrated I knock and say, "It's Rita."

Carrie opens the door right away, "Thank God, nobody's here yet. What am I going to do?" she asks.

I step inside with my bag and purse and close the door behind me locking it. "Ted's such an asshole for doing that. If he hadn't taken that magic mushroom he probably wouldn't have been so stupid."

"It's too late to think about that now," she says logically. "I can only plan my next move. Where's Slasher and Ted?"

"I left Ted in Europe and Slasher kissed me on the plane in this old man tourist getup so I pretended to be offended and got moved up to first class, ditching him. Hunter flew to NYC and I think he either connected or took his own plane. I thought he would be here before me," I tell her.

Her eyes dilate, "That means he'll be here any second."

There's a sharp knock at the door shortly after I've unpacked my bag and helped myself to a bagel and a drink, "Showtime," I tease Carrie.

She opens the door without looking out the peephole to find Slasher standing there with an angered expression on his face, "Nice to see you resurrected from the dead Carrie, Hunter's pissed. What's the big idea ditching me at the airport," he growls at me.

I shrug my shoulders, "A bit of fun."

"I'll show you what fun is in your bedroom!"

"I don't like public rides," I reject him.

"Fuck you," he says.

"Fuck you too," I reply back.

"Kids," Carrie tries stopping us from arguing.

There's another knock on the door. Carrie answers it, "Hello?"

It's Hunter, he reaches inside the apartment grabbing Carrie by the neck and swallows her in a kiss that would have any girl begging for more. She doesn't get to talk, no explanation necessary, she just wraps her arms around him and hangs on for dear life because he's taking her to the moon and back. I'm so jealous.

The kiss ends, "I wasn't going to wait a year," he tells her.

"How did you know," she gasps for breath.

"It was the ending I never would have suspected, the ending everyone wants."

"A little full of yourself," she feebly challenges him.

They disappear into the bedroom and I'm sure the police department got multiple noise complaints from the neighbours to the left, right, on top and bottom of us. Slasher and I have to leave before I lose the contents of my stomach. We end up booking a suite with two beds and stay overnight because there was no way we were getting any rest in my apartment.

The next morning I wake up and start playing on my phone out of boredom. I type John's name in the search engine and hit the news button. To my surprise his name pops up to an article written fifty-nine days ago. He's been called up to Florida. Strange he never mentioned anything to me at Carrie's funeral, funny that. I guess I'm so insignificant to him, he couldn't be bothered informing me of a major life event. I find myself disappointed by his lack of consideration. It was bad enough that when I went to visit him he was with a different girl that resembled me, but he gets called up to the major hockey leagues knowing I'm one of his biggest fans, and can't even be bothered telling me. I start feeling depressed.

I search up Florida's schedule and coincidentally they played here last night. I text Carrie asking her if she wants to meet up for dinner at the Clogged Artery tonight. There's a faint chance he may still be in town, and if there's anywhere we can accidentally on purpose bump into him, it will be there. I can only imagine the look on his face when he finds out that Carrie's still alive, it'll be priceless, and then I can confront him about not mentioning to me that he got called up to Florida when he was at her alleged funeral.

I decide not to invite Slasher, it will be weird. I start brainstorming how to get rid of him, and it dawns on me, I shouldn't have to do anything to get rid of him, he's like an unwanted appendage, bordering on needy.

I poke him, he jumps startled, "I'm up!"

"I'm visiting my parents, I'll see you at our next concert."

"Wait, what the F? Where are you going?"

"I'm visiting my parents," I tell him.

"Can I come?" He asks annoyingly predictable.

"Uh, no! Hook up with your brother or something," I suggest.

"Why can't I come with you?" He sounds like a jilted child. I don't even acknowledge his question, instead I go into the bathroom and shower and change before I leave Slasher to his own accord

22

Some things never change, and the Clogged Artery is one of them. I hug Carrie and we take our old table. It's the first time we've been back here in a long time, so I order my favourite dishes: Quad bypass, with Septal Defect on the side. She of course gets the same. I'm literally excited to eat here, because I haven't had a meal this good in months!

She starts biting into her onion ring, "Where did you and Slasher go last night? You could have stayed in the apartment."

"No thanks, totally uncomfortable." I tell her. "How was last night with you and Hunter."

She rolls her eyes in delight, "Unbelievable. He said he knew all along I wasn't dead."

"That's surprising," I bite into my hamburger.

"So what's happening with your relationship?" I ask her, "Is he still pushing you to commit?"

"Beyond that, he's just assuming he's my final choice. He hasn't mentioned marriage yet, but I'm sure he will before you know it."

"He's not your final choice?" I'm dumbfounded.

"I don't know," she says indecisively.

Jackpot, John and Alex stroll in and his jaw drops and hits the floor. He elbows Alex in the side and points to Carrie. They both head in our direction. Carrie quietly says, "Look what the cat dragged in!"

I glance at them, "Hi!"

Their eyes are huge, "You're alive!" John says to Carrie.

"Get out!" she smiles.

"We thought," Alex starts.

"I know, it was stupid, I never should have let people believe I was dead," Carrie says apologetically.

"Does Brandon know?" John asks.

"No! Don't tell him," she says to John. "Just give me some time, I promise I'll come out."

He gives her a funny look, "Why do you want him to think your dead, he's really upset," he advocates for his friend.

"I wanted to gage who would be more distraught between Hunter and Brandon because I'm having a hard time deciding who I wanted to spend the rest of my life with," Carrie explains.

"So you faked your own death," Alex gives her a dirty look, shaking his head, "Despicable."

"Yes," she admits.

"That's ignorant," Alex complains. "You shouldn't be playing with peoples emotions like that, what if the tables were turned and some guy did that to you, tell me you wouldn't be mad at him," he gives a very valid point. I'm sure she didn't consider that when she was coming up with this ingenious idea.

"Speaking of ignorant, John, you know I'm one of your biggest supporters and when you got called up to Florida, you couldn't even be bothered telling me when you saw me at Carrie's funeral."

"It wasn't the time or the place," John says.

"You're right," I tell him.

Alex is quiet, "Carrie, you never struck me as someone who would play around with peoples emotions to benefit yourself, you've acted very selfishly."

John's staring at her, disillusioned, "Alex is right, what were you thinking." He pulls his phone out and you know what he's doing without asking. He's texting Brandon. "He filed for custody of Holly," he tells Carrie, "and I hope he gets it because you don't deserve her." He literally slapped her in the face with his words.

"Congratulations on getting called up," I try changing the subject, "I hope it keeps you warm at night," I say spitefully. Carrie and I get up together, pay the bill and start leaving.

"Wait," John calls out. I turn, and he nods in my direction. I freeze waiting to hear what he has to say for himself, "Can I have a minute alone with you," he asks.

"I'll meet up with you at the apartment," I tell Carrie, and she leaves.

"You're mad, I get it," I tell John.

Alex starts to leave us, "I'll wait for you in the car."

"Why did you help her, I thought you changed," John' asks disappointed.

"She persuaded me that this was the only way she was going to be able to decide which guy loved her most. Carrie said that the one who fights for her child is the one she wants to be with," I explain.

"Brandon thought Holly was in the best place, with her grandfather. Brandon watched first hand as Carry accepted Will into her life. He would have been her obvious choice to raise Holly while Brandon's travelling. He couldn't give Holly that stable life she needed. It doesn't mean he loves Carrie or Holly any less, it means he put their needs and wants before his own. In my book, that makes him a stand up guy."

"I'll talk to Carrie," I offer.

"Brandon, will talk to her," John corrects.

"Is that all you wanted to say?" I ask.

"No, I want you to visit me in Florida, send me your schedule so I can plan it."

"Why," I ask defensively.

His eyes lock onto mine, "Just come, you owe me at least that," he says.

"Okay," I don't argue with him. It won't hurt me to spend time with John in Florida. It will also give me some much needed distance from Slasher. I pull my phone out and bring up my schedule, to show him. "You're on a break right now until the end of the week?"

"Yes," I tell him, "I was going to get some rest and relaxation between concerts which doesn't seem to be working out."

"Fly back with me tonight," he suggests impetuously.

"Sure, why not," I say sarcastically but then seriously consider it.

"I'll make all the arrangements, just meet me at the airport for ten tomorrow morning."

He escorts me out of the Clogged Artery with his arm around me, "Presumptuous." I comment.

"Pearson, ten o'clock, departures," he reminds me.

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Ten o'clock, Pearson airport, he stands out in a crowd. 6'3 in stature, gorgeous blond hair and those dreamy blue eyes. He's dressed in a suit, signing some little boy's

Jersey as he spots me walking towards him. He grins at me before standing erect. The boy shakes his hand and is escorted away from John by his father.

I approach John embracing him, "Hi," I say into his shoulder. "Where's Alex."

"I thought you knew, he's moved back to Toronto after injuring himself. He's coaching the minor leagues. He married Melissa."

"Oh, that's nice, not that he's been injured but that he married her," I comment. "Do they have any kids together?"

"She's pregnant with their first."

"Good for them," I tell John sincerely. I pick up my bag but he takes it from me, leading me to the booking desk. He hands his ticket to the chubby lady with glasses halfway down her nose and purchases mine. She manages to place us together and expects us to be over the moon by it, like she's performed a miracle. I give her a quick smile and ignore the pause as she waits for us to tip her.

We board the plane and put our overhead bags up before taking our seats. I'm window, just over the wing. I admire John sitting in his seat, almost too big for the area provided to him, "What have you been doing since you left me," he asks.

"I've been touring with Slasher singing. Apparently my shower voice is good enough for duets. I'm popular in Europe and the United States but still manage to not have fans chase after me the way he does, so I guess I'm experiencing the best of both worlds."

"You enjoy it?" He asks.

"It's been fun," I admit.

"I'm asking if you can see yourself giving it up," he has a very serious tone to him. I'm suddenly excited to see where he's going with this line of questioning.

"I haven't had to consider making that sacrifice, and it would have to be something huge to draw me away from making 102K per concert. I haven't had to rely on anyone for anything," I boast.

"Does THAT keep you warm at night?" He asks.

I don't hear sarcasm in his voice so I'm not sure where he's going with this line of questioning, "Of course it is," I answer without hesitation.

"I'm not referring to the money," he tells me. "I'm trying to determine if you are truly happy."

I glance out the window, food for thought if nothing else. Am I happy? Before I was always looking for a talented boyfriend who could provide my future. Every time I get close to someone, they manage to hurt me with their indiscretions. I stop looking and fortune and fame find me, and now the big question isn't whether I'm happy or not, it's whether it's enough.

I turn back to John and stare point blank at him, "I'm not searching for the talented guy who can provide me with a desirable lifestyle the way I was before. My needs have most definitely changed. I can provide my own future, or never work again if that's what I want. Is fame and fortune enough to make me happy, that's the key question. I reflect on my current state, and no, I'm missing something. It's almost like I keep reverting back to Carrie's dramas to keep myself preoccupied from my own."

"Why?" He asks.

A one word question so difficult to answer and I know the reason why, just my pride is getting in the way, "I still don't have you, and I don't want you if you can't be everything to me and nothing to everyone else."

"That's all I needed to hear," he says. The plane lands and we grab a cab that brings us to the address he's given. It's beautiful outside, no humidity or clouds in the sky, it has to be at least eighty degrees and for this time of year a welcome change from the sweaters we were wearing in Toronto.

We pull our luggage from the boot of the car and bring it to the porch. John pulls a key and opens the front door. It's a Bungalow with Mexican roof tiles in a quaint suburb where people are into presenting their houses with the prettiest little gardens, almost like a gated community.

The front entrance is impressively decorated, mirrors, beautiful tiled floors, cathedral ceilings, "Would you like a tour?" He offers.

"Sure," I smile. "It's a cute house." He brings me into a beautifully furnished living room, "I didn't realize you were so good at decorating," I inform him.

"I had a decorator pick everything," he admits. "Check out the bedroom!"

I guess the direction and point, he confirms. I open the double door and there's a huge king bed with a puffy quilt on it, "You always loved Carrie's bed, so I got you your own."

"For me?" I choke.

"All I ever wanted to do was give you the life you wanted for us. I resented your pregnancy and pushed you away from me when I moved to Niagara, but I was young and stupid. Then when you lost the baby I thought it was a chance to start over again instead of considering your feelings, a chance to move on. No matter what I did after that, the joy of reaching my dreams was watered down by our loss and because you weren't around to share it with. It was at Carrie's funeral I figured out what I needed to do to complete me, and that was to have you in my life."

He takes my wrist and walks me around the house. Two more bedrooms, a beautiful kitchen, an office, a pool with a hot tub. I'm speechless because I know it's for me.

"My concerts?"

"I'll never stop you from doing something you enjoy. If I can go, I will, just as you will come to my games when you can."

"We'll hardly ever see each other," I argue.

"It won't be forever," he points out, "and we'll always come home to each other."

"So you're not asking me to quit singing?" I clarify.

"Asking you to stop singing would be like you asking me to stop playing hockey. I'm doing all of this for you Rita, I'm tired of living a watered down life."

I leap into his arms, my legs wrapped around his waist. I dig my fingers into his hair and fist what I can, kissing his cheeks incessantly until his lips land on mine, "Will you marry me," he asks between kisses.

"Where's the rock?" I tease.

"In the flower bed," he jokes releasing me. "Will you make me the happiest man alive?" He asks again, this time more seriously.

"That's a cheesy line," I snicker, "About that!" I start backing away fearful he might have a fit when he hears what I have to tell him.

"What now Rita?" He demands.

"It's sort of what I haven't done yet," I begin. "After our shotgun wedding and losing the baby, I wasn't really dating anyone, and the urgency of ending our marriage dissipated. Then I just seriously forgot."

"You FORGOT to file for our divorce," he repeats.

"Forgot," I giggle.

"So we're still married," he asks.

I shrug, "I guess so!" I admit, "yes!"

He reaches in a cabinet in the kitchen and pulls out a small red box, getting down on one knee, "Then lets do it right this time, for the right reasons," he proposes.

"About that," I stop him again.

"What now," he asks impatiently.

"I think you should know, Slasher's in love with me too. I don't come without competition," I chuckle nervously.

"Do you have feelings for him?" He asks.

"I haven't explored that," I tell John. "Say I pick you over Slasher, can we do the whole wedding thing all over again?"

"Do you want to do the entire ceremony all over again?" He asks.

"A fresh start sounds good to me," I comment.

"Okay, if you pick me, we'll get married again. The way you want it," he tries enticing me. "Since I'm married to you, do I get any perks over him?" he asks.

"He's a rockstar, you're lucky you're getting a chance at all," I admit to John.

"When will I know if you chose a life with me over a life with him?" He asks.

"I'm sure you'll know," I tell him. "Do I get to wear the ring now?" I ask.

"No, only if you chose me, as your final choice."

I make a whining noise, "That's not fair," I complain.

"It's very fair," he says.

There's a knock on the door and John looks as surprised as I am, "Who could that be?" I ask.

"I have no idea, maybe the decorator?" he guesses.

He opens the door and to both of our surprise, it's Brandon.

He walks towards me kind of aggressively, "Is it true, Carrie's still alive? She allowed me to believe she died, faking her own death?"

I cower a bit behind John, "Yes, she wanted to see who would still be single a year after her death, who was more affected by losing her."

"So she's testing me and that other guy. I was fucking mourning her!" He says angrily. "I'm so mad I don't even want to confront her now because I can't be held accountable for my actions when I actually see her."

"Who does the baby belong to?" He demands.

"I don't know, but by looking at Holly, I would guess it's yours." I admit to him. "She's such a pretty baby," I say with obvious bias.

He fists his own hair, "What did she think I would do, file for custody of Holly when she's with her grandfather? Someone who loves me isn't going to play that kind of head game on me."

"You should file for custody," John encourages. "Her father can give the baby back to her anytime and she doesn't deserve to have that baby if she can pretend to be dead and give Holly a way for an indefinite period of time."

"She does love you," I tell him. Brandon's points are definitely valid. "I get why you're angry, she never should have done that, but fight for her," I encourage him.

You can see the anger in Brandon's face, "I could see you doing something messed up like this but not her."

"Don't fight for her then, I think I like Hunter more anyway," I say spitefully. That was really mean of him since I had nothing to do with HER decisions.

"When was she coming back to life?" he asks.

"I guess after her graduation," I growl, "get her to answer your questions for you, not me."

"You better go," John sides with me.

"She's at my apartment in Toronto, Hunter's already there," I say just to upset him more. "He caught on that she was faking her own death way before it became pretty much public knowledge. I hate his comment about how he could see me playing games but not her, it was uncalled for, if he's so mad, he should take it out on the person who angered him, not me."

Brandon storms out, his destination, Toronto. I don't bother warning Carrie. I'm tired of her games too. I spend some quality time getting reacquainted with John.

23

John and I catch up over the next few days, he told me how he was called up to the major leagues but Alex had more than one concussion and the possibility of him getting picked over other less injured hopefuls are slim so he opted into a coaching career instead, a wise choice John told me.

John said he never got seriously involved with any other girls because he didn't want distraction from the game. He worked really hard, and when he wasn't on the ice he was at the gym doing strength training exercises. I don't think I ever saw him look this big, I would almost suspect he is using steroids, but I'm not asking him. If he wanted me to know, he would tell me.

John said he planned on paying this house off quickly and then he was going to start investing in real-estate. He's aware that his career isn't going to last forever, so he needs income for when he's going to retire. He considered gyms and restaurants, then houses. He isn't sure which way to invest his money, so he's decided on a diverse portfolio for protection.

I explained to John how Hunter is related to Elliot, and how I stole the microphone at the concert I was at and started singing duets with him. I even told him some of the funnier stories when I thought Slasher was dressed up as a street person and I hugged him, and it turned out really being a street person, and he saw the entire fiasco and laughed at me. I never wore those clothes again, because no matter how much I washed it, wearing the outfit gave me hee-bee-jee-bee's.

It great getting caught up with him again, we talked for hours. I have my old friend John back. I'm just not sure there's enough to base an entire marriage on, it's something I'm going to have to consider. We need more time, maybe he can come to a few concerts and I can go to some of his games. With the thrill of the chase is gone, now it's whether his company is suitable for me for the rest of my life, or do I want to spend the rest of my life with Slasher.

Every time I think of Slasher, I remember when we had the disagreement and he had multiple girls coming in and out of his change room which really upset me. Could someone like Slasher, be a one woman man? I wonder if even John can be a one woman man. I tend to pick the kinds of guys that hoards of girls lining up to get with them.

Nobody has ever bothered proving themselves to me until John actually said, that making the major leagues without sharing that moment with me felt watered down, that's a huge first step. I can't say Slasher made any gesture along those same lines, not even close. After three days with John, my mind was made up, I promised him fidelity, before going back on tour.

24

It's the first concert I'm singing with Slasher in for over a week. I tap on his dressing room door half an hour before we're expected on stage. His opening band can be heard everywhere, but the room he changes in, is pretty soundproof, at least enough to hold a conversation in.

I'm dressed in a gown, and applied my makeup early. I knock on Slashers door and he calls out, "Come in!"

I open the door slowly and walk in, "You look beautiful," he says.

"Thank you!"

"Where did you take off to?" he asks.

"Florida, I needed to get away, speaking of," I hesitate.

"Speaking of," he encourages.

"I'm back with John," I admit.

"He treated you like shit," Slasher reminds me.

"He plays for Florida now, he bought a house with me in mind. He's asked me to move in with him. He's not getting in the way of my singing, he said he won't stand in the way of my singing, I can still do it if I want to, just like he assumes I would never get in the way of his hockey."

"Isn't that wonderful," his tone is filled with sarcasm.

"I promised him fidelity," I finish. "We're still married, seeing as I forgot to file for divorce."

"This just keeps getting better," Slasher sears.

"I can't see you ever being monogamous to me," I tell him the truth, he must know I've considered it.

"You think John will be, you saw him with a girl who looked exactly like you," he argues.

"He put a ring on it," I point to my ring finger.

"I didn't know that's all it takes. I'll get you a bigger one! I brought you on tour, gave you your own financial independence and freedom, what's he done for you?" Asks Slasher.

"He loves me," I argue.

“And I don’t,” he fights back.

We get called up to stage, taking it by storm. Slasher starts our duet, he literally sings his heart out. I struggle to find the emotion to match his, after, the crowd are on their feet. The lights go out and I disappear off stage like I always do, then the spotlight lands back on him.

He doesn’t start his next song which is unusual. He talks to the crowd, “It’s with deep regret, this will be my last concert with the amazingly and talented Rita! Everyone give it up for Rita!” A stage hand pushes me out and I run onto stage and take a bow. He just terminated my job and our relationship in the most public forum of all, in front of a live audience, I can’t believe it. As quickly as I’m discovered, I get knocked down because our relationship isn’t going the way he wants it to. I’m furious but apparently it’s mutual.

I remain professional and stay for the rest of the concert, performing the last of our scheduled songs before I pack my belongings and leave forever. His reaction is beyond harsh but I can’t contemplate the fairness of it, because I’m subjectively in a state of tears right now. I knock on his door after the concert, “Come in,” he calls out.

I’m streaked with tears and speechless. He walks over to me and kisses me dramatically on the lips, I quiver in response to the passion I feel, “I wanted us, to be your idea not mine, for you to trust me, for that beautiful body of yours to belong to me, a relationship. I needed it to come from you, instead you go back in time to a guy that took you for granted, treated you like garbage even when you were pregnant with his child. You should have been treated like a queen, he should have supported you during your time of loss, instead he left you the second he could.”

“If you continue touring with me, and the two of you see each other only occasionally, it will take you longer to realize how much of a jerk he is. I’m cutting you loose to be with him. Every time you go back to him it’s wasted time we could have been together, he’s going to hurt you over and over again.”

He holds his door open for me to walk out of his life. My hands are full of my belongings, my heart feels hollow.

25

I take one last look at the stage before grabbing a cab to the hotel. I check out of my room in the morning. I contemplate updating Carrie and figure I'm in this too deep, I might as well. I book a flight at the desk and wait by my gate texting Carrie an update:

*Me: Hi Carrie.*

*Carrie: Oh My God, I've been so worried about you, I thought you were following me back to the apartment. Where did you go.*

*Me: John wants to get back together with me. He took me to Florida, (He plays hockey for Florida in the major leagues now) and he showed me a house he bought, for us.*

*Carrie: So you and John are getting back together?*

*Me: We never really divorced. He loves me and yes, we spent a few days catching up and getting to know each other all over again, and we decided to make a go of it*

*Carrie: What about Slasher and your concerts?*

*Me: John was okay with letting me continue the concerts, but when I told Slasher that we got back together, he announced on stage that I was leaving the tour.*

*Carrie: He fired you in concert?*

*Me: Literally! Yes, he said I shouldn't take John back because he treated me like garbage, and if he keeps me on the tour, it's going to take me way longer to figure out how much of a jerk he really is, so he freed me from the concert.*

*Carrie: How do you feel about that?*

*Me: Devastated.*

*Carrie: Are you in love with John?*

*Me: Yes.*

*Carrie: Are you in love with Slasher?*

*Me: Yes.*

*Carrie: What are you going to do with yourself whenever John's away?*

*Me: I haven't figured that out yet. How are you and Hunter doing?*

*Carrie: Great!*

*Me: BTW Brandon came by John's when I was there (In Florida)*

*Carrie: And?*

*Me: He's furious. He doesn't know how he'll react if he sees you but he knows you're alive. He said he was really sad over you.*

*Carrie: Do you think he's coming to the apartment.*

*Me: Brandon? No. He's trying to get a level head. I'm going to send for my things. I want to move in with John right away. I can't wait to move into our house. He asked me to marry him again.*

*Carrie: Did you say yes?*

*Me: Technically we were not divorced, so technically we're still married.*

*Carrie: That's good isn't it?*

*Me: I asked if we work out can we get married again, this time properly.*

*Carrie: What did he say?*

*Me: yes.*

*Carrie: That's sweet.*

I board the plane to Florida. Life's really thrown me a curve ball, now I have to decide what to make of it. I text Slasher from the plane while we wait for the rest of the passengers to board:

Me: Good luck buddy, I'm going to miss you.

Slasher doesn't respond to me which is weird, he always does. I check all his social media accounts and he's removed me from every single one. It's like he erased me from his life and he couldn't do it fast enough. I feel completely dejected.

When the plane lands, I make a resolution to put the past behind me and make a life with John, it's what I've wanted all along. I knock on the door and he answers immediately, "Hi Rita! What are you doing back so fast, I thought you were going to be on tour for a while."

I place my bag down, "I told Slasher about us getting back together and he made a big announcement at last night's concert saying that I wouldn't be touring with him anymore. He doesn't think I should have got back with you after you treated me like garbage a few years ago."

"I'm not like that anymore," he says.

"You don't have to convince him, and if I thought you were, I wouldn't be here," I reassure him. "Can I put my stuff away?" I ask.

"Sure, is there more out in the car?" He asks looking over my shoulder.

"Everything's at Carrie's, I have to send for it."

"We can pick up some essentials if you need anything that can't wait," he offers. "So if you aren't signing with him, do you have any plans on how you're going to keep yourself busy?"

"I guess, I'm going to look for an agent, and see if I can do it on my own, I was thinking the entire flight about what am I going to do with my spare time, and that's all I came up with."

"I'll ask my sport's agent if he knows anyone who's in the entertainment industry for you," he suggests.

"I'd appreciate that," I say grabbing my bag and leaving him to go into the bedroom to start unpacking.

"Have you spoken to Carrie," he calls out.

"Yes, I just told her what Slasher did to me and that I'm moving back with you."

"What did she say?" He asks.

"She's supportive, and then she asked about Brandon. I told her that he's angry. She's very self-absorbed lately."

"I don't blame Brandon for being angry," John empathizes.

"Do you think they'll get back together," I ask.

"Before the stunt, yes, now, not a chance."

I look at my new ring, shining on my finger, picking up every bit of light reflection from all angles, it's stunning. Then I peak out my room to John who's in the kitchen fixing himself a snack, his shaggy blond hair kissing his shoulders, his six pack just waiting to be touched. My high school wish come true, the husband, the house, the income, everything, but for some reason, I still have a slight hollow feeling inside that I can't put my finger on.

Later that evening, John and I consummate our relationship like a true married couple. We don't plan for this to happen so quickly, so we don't properly protect ourselves and it's with trepidation that I proceed hoping I won't have any future regrets like the one I experienced when we were younger. If I ever get pregnant again, it will be

planned and wanted by both parties. In this particular instance, our relationship although old, is too new.

He picks up on my hesitancy, "What's wrong," he asks.

"It's just that we didn't, we did the same thing when we were younger and that turned out all wrong."

"I'm ready for it now," he assures me. "You're my wife, the one I want to spend the rest of my life with and, I want you to carry my baby more than anything else in the world."

"You mean that?" I ask skeptically.

"Of course I do," he says cuddling with me. "There's nothing I want more." A few years ago I would have been so quick to believe him, now I'm filled with doubt that's tainting how I should feel.

Later that night, I get a text from Carrie:

*Carrie: Hunter proposed!*

*Me: And?*

*Carrie: We're getting married! (After I graduate of course)*

*Me: Does everyone know?*

*Carrie: You're the first.*

*Me: What about Brandon?*

*Carrie: I don't want to string him along. Do you want to break it to him?*

*Me: Let me think about it..NO, Maybe John will.*

"Hunter proposed to Carrie and she said yes, you don't mind telling Brandon do you?"

"Seriously?" He asks.

"He might deal with it better if it comes from you."

"I'll text him," John pulls out his phone and sends his best friend a message.

A minute later the phone rings, John answers it, "She just texted Rita. Carrie asked her to let you know. I don't know, she's probably scared of your reaction and didn't want to string you along again, just get over her already, she's not worth it." John advises.

“I’m so tired of her drama too,” I complain to John once he’s hung up with Brandon. “I know she’s my best friend and everything, but her actions are impacting everyone negatively.”

~~

The next day I send for my stuff from Toronto. I text Ted telling him I’ve been fired and that I’ve moved out of the apartment with no intentions of returning and I write a cheque for two months rent so he’s not left in the lurch.

26

A month later:

John breaks it to me during breakfast that he's expected to fly to Toronto to play two games there, and then one here.

"I'll be right back," I decide to hide my disappointment and go check the mail. I open the box and inside is a fancy envelope, a wedding invitation from Carrie and Hunter. I return to the house, John's in the exact same spot he was in when I left but his bacon is gone, "We have an invitation to Carrie's wedding," I tell him.

"When are they getting married," he asks.

"July, right after she graduates," I smile. "They're getting married in New York, it's going to be great!"

"Why are you grinning?" he asks.

"They're getting married in the New York Public Library! That's so romantic! Just think about it, Carrie writes books and Hunter's an editor, there isn't a more perfect or romantic place for them to get married!"

"I'm going to lose my breakfast," he kids.

"You are so unromantic," I complain. "I could only imagine where you might want to marry me, somewhere cold like an arena, or a field out in nowhere," I complain.

"If I HAD to remarry you that is! Why repeat the same mistake," he jokes.

I'm dying to find out who chose the venue so I hit social media and find Carrie online. I ask who picked it, and she said Hunter did, he's always wanted to get married there.

"When do we leave for Toronto," I ask as I start putting the morning dishes away.

"This afternoon, but I don't have a ticket for you," he says apologetically.

"I want to come," I say disappointed.

"We can try," he says, "I'd love it if you're there."

I go into our bedroom and pack a bag. Worst case scenario, I don't get on the plane and cab it back home, not a big deal. Once I'm confirmed, I text Ted from the airport telling him I'm going to be at the Florida game. I'll screenshot my ticket for him when I get that too.

~~

Florida walks all over Toronto, but that's expected because they're one of the weakest teams. John is elated because he scored twice. Ted was working tonight but really far from where I was sitting so we didn't get a chance to connect. John was interviewed and signed a few autographs before we could make our way back to the hotel. I didn't want to impose on Ted and stay at the apartment although I'm sure it would have been okay.

I'm starting to realize that a hockey players life and a singers life aren't that different at all, and it gave me a sense of self-worth I don't seem to have anymore. I also kind of feel lonely in the stands without Carrie. This life isn't as fulfilling as I pictured it to be, living in someones shadow. My inner social goddess is clamouring to get out. We call it an early night because John plays again tomorrow.

~~

The next day well before the game, John takes me back to my old apartment so I can pack up my belongings and make sure everything gets shipped properly to Florida. I use my key rather than knock. I swing the door wide and sitting in the living room is Hunter, Ted, and Carrie, "Hi guys!" I greet everyone, John's standing behind me.

Carrie quickly glances past him, "Brandon's not with me," he answers her unspoken question.

Carrie can't really ignore his comment in front of Hunter, "Brandon? I wasn't looking for him, I was just making sure the door was closed."

John snickers, "Of course you weren't."

"You remember Hunter," I reintroduce. The two men shake hands, "and Ted." John nods sitting next to Hunter.

"Can I get you something," I offer John.

"No, I'm good, you need help packing?" He asks.

"No," I respond glancing at Carrie, "We got the invitation, thanks!"

"Did you like it?" She asks.

"Very nice," I compliment. (It's no better than what you would expect an invitation to look like, but I play up to it anyway.)

"Good game, last night," Ted compliments.

"Thanks," John says, "Playing again tonight."

"Sucks, I'm not working tonight," Ted comments. "I would love to watch you play."

"I can get you a ticket next to Rita if you want to go, just let me know," John offers.

"Serious? That's sick!" He says.

John doesn't offer Carrie or Hunter, I'm not sure if it's an oversight or intentional. He glances at Hunter, "Not sure if I can get three, I can text Carrie if I can."

"I'm going back to New York tonight, but thanks for the offer," Hunter says because he has to. You can tell he's straining to be polite.

Carrie's quiet, staring at John. I bet she's wishing Brandon was behind him. She's not arrogant or self-centred, I think her problem is that she's a die-hard romantic and if she lived in the stone ages, she would want them battling with swords over her and then and only then would she be without a doubt sure, who she should chose. It's almost like she doesn't trust her own judgement when it comes to the romance department and when you have two different and amazing guys going after you, how do you pick?

I don't have her unfortunate problems. I have philanderers always after me, ones who don't understand the word monogamous. My decision is based entirely on who will cheat on me less? Then I pick that guy, the one who might only have one or two affairs, as opposed to ten. I don't get the cream of the crop, or loyal ones. They go for the Carrie's of the world. I will say that although Slasher will probably never know what loyal means, he was fun as hell. Never a dull moment, and singing with him was a blast, but at what cost? It's not like I could ever see him settling down in one town to start a home life. That's more of a Hunter or John thing to do.

Packing my stuff doesn't take as long as I expect and I join everyone back in the living room after I crack a cold one and sit at John's feet on the floor. "Kind of early to drink isn't it, we can make room for you on the couch," he offers.

"It's not that early," I defend myself. "I'm good down here."

"You could learn from her," Hunter jokes to Carrie, because of where I'm seated.

"I will never be subservient to a man, not even just sitting," she differentiates herself from me.

"I'm hardly subservient," I defend myself, "I just don't want other's to get uncomfortable on my account. It's not all about ME," I emphasize.

"Are you saying I'm self-centred?" Her feathers are tethered.

"If the shoe fits," I snap.

"Okay kittens," Ted tries lightening the mood.

"Fuck off," Carrie puts him in his place. He didn't like that and leaves the room.

"Leave it to him to bud in, if it wasn't for him you'd still be dead," I rub it in.

"You can stop with that," Carrie growls.

"You're comment angered me," I explain. "I didn't mean it." I tell her.

"Don't worry about it," Carrie sweeps it under the rug. "I had it coming but from Hunter and Brandon, not you."

"Obviously Hunter isn't too bothered by it," I observe directly in front of him.

"He gets the reasoning behind it, and knows I'll never do it again," Carrie explains.

"Does Brandon get the reasoning too, was he given a second chance as well, or were you really looking for him when we came in."

"You can leave now," She hisses.

"Just sayin," I comment.

"Don't come to the wedding if you don't support our relationship," she warns me.

"Maybe you should resolve a few things before the day comes so I can go to the wedding."

"Rita!" Warns John. He gets up, "We better go," he suggests.

"Not a minute too soon," Hunter comments.

"You can fuck off," John takes offence.

"Good luck tonight," Hunter sneers.

We leave.

27

"That didn't go well," I try lightening the mood.

"What were you trying to instigate," John asks me.

"I don't know, she does things that gets on my nerves."

"I hate that dude, he is so old." John comments. "He could pass for her father."

"They're eleven years apart."

"What does she see in him?" He asks, "He's so arrogant."

"He's sexy, mature, a brilliant editor, has his own plane, Slasher's brother, I could go on."

"Please don't," he stops me. "I wanted to tell him where to go when he wished me luck for tonight."

"It's kind of your fault, you were quick to offer Ted a ticket and not them."

"It's not easy getting tickets this late for tonight's game." He explains. "If it was I would have offered everyone right away."

With the way Ted stormed off, I'm not sure if he's coming to tonight's game so I text him while we're in the car:

*Me: Are you still coming to tonights game?*

*Ted: Wouldn't miss it. I'm not mad at you, I'm upset with Carrie.*

*Me: I'm sorry about that.*

*Ted: Glad you spoke up to her today, it's what I've been thinking but not saying.*

*Me: You have to live with her, it's better to stay out of everything if I were you.*

*Ted: Agreed.*

*Me: Meet me at the box office, there will be a ticket there for you.*

John and I take a cab to the game. It's nice that we agree on one thing, Carrie didn't give Brandon a fair chance. He kisses me good-bye and I wait for Ted who shows up ten minutes later. He's got a big smile on his face, "This is better than working the venue! Where are our seats?"

"We are sitting just behind the Florida bench." I grin. The only better seats would be on John's lap but I don't feel Ted would agree.

Ted's really grateful for the seat, so he insists on buying the popcorn, he knows I love popcorn at games and gets a huge bucket and two drinks that we can share as we watch the game, "These are great seats! Thanks Rita."

"Thank John," I inform him, "I had nothing to do with getting them."

Ted shoves popcorn into his mouth, "I never seen you and Carrie fight like that before."

"We don't fight very often," I tell him nursing my coke. "I just think Hunter got the upper hand."

"Most definitely, Carrie doesn't think Brandon's made an effort to see her."

"He hasn't has he?" I start thinking Ted knows more than he's letting on.

John scores, and we're on our feet hooting and hollering. His stick is in the air, his leg raised, he's happy.

"You have to promise not to say anything," he warns.

"Promise," I lie.

"I was checking the mail and Brandon came by last week to see Carrie, I told him she was in New York and he left," he admits.

I smile going along with him, "And was she in New York?"

"No," he chuckles, "She was in her bedroom. I told you I was into Carrie, the last thing I'm going to do is help another dude get her. It's bad enough I'm competing for her affections against Hunter, I don't need a hockey superstar in the mix. I'll never win."

"You have got to be kidding," I cackle. "Thank goodness she didn't hear you," I remark. I thought he was on the up and up until now. He's playing around with her, and preventing her from being with the possible father of her child. She hasn't been an angel but that doesn't give Ted the right to insinuate his way into her life on false pretences.

"I said it really casually, I even believed myself," He tells me.

"So you haven't dated anyone since your ex-girlfriend?" I ask.

He takes a sip of his drink, "I don't like anyone except Carrie. I don't want to settle," he says casually.

"No you shouldn't settle," I say more under my breath than to him.

John doesn't score anymore but the game is close. Florida wins 5:4 and now we go back home.

I'm not sure if John wants me to invite Ted out for a late bite to eat, so instead, I fake a headache and ditch him before meeting up with him after his shower.

"That was a great game," I tell him once he's returned to our meeting point. He's dressed in a suit and his hair is still damp. "Now we can go home!" I say excited. He cloaks his arm around me, his muscle bulging into the back of my neck, I miss this.

"Ted's gone already?"

"Ya, he loved the game but couldn't wait to go home. He told me to tell you congratulations. Have you spoken to Brandon very recently?"

"No, why?"

"Ted told me he tried visiting Carrie, but when he answered the door, he lied and said Carrie was in New York."

"Why'd he do that?"

"He's into her."

"He literally told you he lied to Brandon?"

"Yup! You should tell him." I suggest. "I don't want to have anything to do with it."

"Either do I," he agrees. "I guess if he wants to see her badly enough, he'll try to see her again. I just want to go home."

"Me too."

The honeymoon stage of our relationship ignited. He pays more attention to me now than he ever has.

28

Home hasn't started feeling like home yet. Furniture is sparse in all of our rooms, none of it picked out by your's truly and I hardly ever talk to Carrie or my parents. I sneak out when John is exercising to put my stamp on our place and check out the local shops for decorative pieces to scatter throughout our place.

A shop yielding decorative posters and rock memorabilia catches my eye, it's different from the Florida shops directed to the senior population that seem to live in our neighbourhood.

I get all excited and push the door open embracing the smell of incense that first hits you as you walk in. A bell rings telling the salesman someone's entered his shop. I acknowledge him by directing my gaze at him, before I become engrossed in all his knick knacks that are hung from the ceiling, hidden away on overfilled counters. I've invested well over twenty minutes in the store when a wave of austerity hits me. I've stumbled into a cheaply framed poster of Slasher singing to me onstage. I flash back to the crowded concerts, the songs we sang, the cheering of the fans.

"Lady, are you okay?" The attendant asks me out of concern. It takes a while to dawn on me he's addressing me, as I'm the only one in the store. "Lady?" He repeats.

"Uh ya," and I know I can't leave his store without this poster. I wedge it free from the others and approach the register. He rings it in and announces the price to me which is irrelevant, it could be every penny I have it's still coming home with me. The owner of the store doesn't make the association that I AM the girl on the poster, he's just happy he's removed another item off his shelf, it must be difficult maintaining a profitable business, when the majority of the patrons here are in their seventies, he would have been wiser selling various undergarments that stop them from soiling themselves.

With mixed emotion I carefully place my new acquisition in the back seat of John's car as I head back to our humble home. I find him in the kitchen preparing his lunch when I bring the bag inside, "What did you buy this time?" He asks.

I whipped it from the bag and displayed it in the air for him to admire, "What do you think?"

"Really?" He smiles. "Kind of narcissistic don't you think?"

"It's a keepsake from an amazing time in my life," I say defensively.

"You should be looking forward, thinking about what you want to do next," he advises like I've never considered that. I start walking around the living room looking for places to hang it.

"You're not hanging it in here," he complains. Offended, I start walking to our bedroom, "Or there!" He says.

"Why not? It's my place too, I live here now with you."

"You can keep it in a closet and take it out to look at it whenever you want, but I'm not letting you hang it on our walls. It's so, it's so childish."

I go to the fireplace and start collecting his hockey photo's and medals, "I guess these are childish and narcissistic too!"

"Stop," he says defensively, all up in my face. He tries taking them from me and we're struggling until one falls and crashes on the floor, "Look what you've done!" He growls. "That's when I got called up!" Then he's gone, storming from our place. I've never seen him that angry before, and he's got a game tonight.

I chose my spot, the front entrance, finding a beam to ensure sturdiness, I hammer my anchor into the wall, ensuring it's straight, ahh! I'm happy. Every time I come home, it's the first thing I'm going to see. I change into my swimsuit and go into the back for a bit of rest and relaxation. I drift off to a happy place, the late afternoon sun beating down on me, my damp suit drying, when I hear the door. He's back, "Hi John," I call out, "I'm back here."

He doesn't join me, I hear wrestling around, "Aren't you coming to the game?" he asks, collecting his stuff.

Still groggy, I remove my shades and rub my eyes, "You don't mind if I sit this one out do you?" I ask. Now most of the time, I do go, so I'm sure he's not going to have a problem with it.

"Why aren't you coming, what have you been doing all day?" he asks.

"I'm just tired, I think it's the sun," I complain.

"I hope it's not going to be like this all the time," he gripes.

"Really? I can't have a quiet day?"

"Whatever," he ends it. He grabs his bag and slings it over his shoulder when I'm walking back in from outside, "I'll see you later!"

That's when his bag hits my poster and it too goes crashing to the ground, "You did that on purpose," I accuse.

“No I didn’t,” he says, “I don’t have time to argue with you,” he opens the door and slams it behind him. It’s the first time we’ve fought since reuniting. I pick up the shards of glass with the torn photo of a time in my life I’m proud of and I promise myself, it’s not going to be the only amazing time in my life and he’s never going to knock me down when that time ever comes.

I dry off, and watch the Florida game on t.v. in the comfort of my living room. They manage to beat Toronto and he comes home victorious.

29

John doesn't arrive home until after midnight. He opens the door quietly, and once he see's I'm up, he stops sneaking around, "Hi," he greets me.

"Great game," I compliment him.

He goes back to the front door and reopens it, "It's okay guys!"

I watch as he lets four strangers I assume are his teammates into the house, "Hi," the first one says coming through the front door. I'm stone clad in my nightgown, no bra or underwear slightly freaking out now.

"Hi!" I say reaching for the blanket to cover myself.

John notices me scurrying, "Hope you don't mind that I invited a few of the guys over." I know by his demeanour he doesn't care if I mind or not, otherwise he would have warned me.

I grin at the players who are undressing me with their eyes, I back away, using the blanket as my shield until I get to the bedroom. The fridge opens, "Beer?" John offers his friends.

"Sure man."

"Thanks."

"I'll have one."

"Do you have anything Canadian?"

"Was that your old woman?"

"Ya," he chuckles.

"Heck! She looks familiar! Doesn't she sing with Slasher? I was at his concert a few months ago, I could swear."

"Ya man, the butt hole fired her when she got back with me!"

"And she didn't break up with you? If it was me I'd take Slasher over you any day."

"Me too," another friend agrees. "He's worth way more than you, and your girl has great boobs and bootie! She can really carry a note."

"Wife, she's my wife," he lets them know.

"She won't be for long, once an agent gets his hands on her. She literally stole the show from Slasher from what I can remember."

“Seriously?” A different voice says as I start changing and putting on a coat of makeup.

“Let me see if I can find them singing online.” There’s a pause, “Ya, I found them, check it out.”

I hear myself and Slasher singing. My eyes water, I guess I’m still trying to get over it. I haven’t spoken to anyone about it, but it’s not easy living in a shadow when you used to soar above the clouds. I just never considered myself good enough to sing alone let alone be better than Slasher. I sit on the bed and check his concert schedule before going back out to John and his friends.

I do a once over in the mirror and then join them. “Beer?” One of John’s friends offers me.

“Thanks,” I say. He pops the cap before handing it to me like a gentleman. The television is on a sports channel, playing highlights of the game. They do a two minute interview with John when he’s all hot and sweaty before he joins the rest of the guys in the locker room.

“You are?” I ask the athlete who handed me the beer.

“Ryan,” he smiles shyly.

“Nice to meet you,” I say very friendly. He’s very handsome, “What’s your position?” I ask referring to hockey.

“On top,” he flirts.

John glances over to his friend with a tinge of hostility.

“I play the same position,” I flirt back.

He gets up so I can sit down, “No I’m fine,” I park on the floor between his feet and John’s.

John takes a sip of his beer and starts flicking between the sports channels.

On Top can’t bear me sitting on the floor, “Here, I’ll shove over,” he makes a spot for me on the couch.

I smile shyly, “Thanks,” I say getting up.

A different friend gets up from the recliner, “You got any food?” he asks helping himself to the kitchen.

“Snack foods are in the pantry,” I inform Rude Guy.

He comes back with his arms filled of everything we just bought from the grocery store including my favourite chocolates, “You can put those bars back,” I say sternly.

Rude guy looks naughtily at me, "Sorry," he says insincerely but he does go back and returns my bars.

John gives me a dirty look, like God forbid I'm rude to his friends.

On Top offers, "Do you want one of those bars?"

I consider, "Sure!"

On Top goes to the pantry and brings me back a bar. "You're a really beautiful singer," he says as I sink my teeth into my chocolate with marzipan.

"Thank you," I say for both the compliment and the bar.

"Can I have a bite," asks Rude Guy. I reach out and he takes a bite, "That is good!"

"Right!" I agree.

Quiet guy is staring at me, "And you are?" I ask trying to break the uncomfortable silence I'm getting from him.

"Fred, I'm the Florida goalie," he explains.

"You're amazing," I compliment.

"See, goalies get all the attention," On Top guy complains.

"You have my attention," I flirt.

"In the bedroom now," demands John.

He storms to our room. "Sorry," On Top guy says to me as I get up.

"Ya man," Fred says looking worried for me.

"Good luck, just stroke his ego he'll be fine," Rude Guy advises.

I follow John into our room. He's pacing, "Flirting with my friends isn't cool."

"Either is bringing them over without warning me, and catching me in my pyjamas."

"Sorry," apologizes John but he doesn't seem sincere enough for my liking.

I start for the door.

"Aren't you going to apologize to me?" He asks.

"No," I say.

He grabs my wrist and pulls me to him before kissing me, "You better stop," he warns.

I go back and I don't, not until they leave, because I want to get John really mad. I don't care, and I feel up to the challenge of his wrath. He needs to know he can't take me for granted, I can easily land any one of his friends should the mood suit me. I just don't want to, and he's not going to know that. (Although if I had to choose, it would either be

the goalie or On Top guy but not the Quiet guy even though he was nice. Definitely On Top Guy!)

30

**Two Months Later**

Carrie calls me for the first time in ages, "Rita!" She says excitedly yet quiet.

"Carrie!" I gush, "It's been so long! Why are you whispering loudly?" But the line is quiet and I don't know if she's distracted or contemplating telling me something.

"I think Hunter's cheating," she continues whispering into the phone, only more quietly now.

"Where are you?"

"I'm outside our bedroom door," she whispers. "I hear noises inside."

"You think he's with someone right now?" I ask.

"Ya," she murmurs. "I'm scared to open the door."

I hear it creek open over the line, a gasp, it's hard to tell if it's Carrie or another girl, "It's what you think!" a male voice challenges.

"Who's she?" Demands Carrie.

Scurrying and then a door slams. "Oh my God," Carrie cries to me, "I was right!"

A door opens again, "That's what you get if you don't attend to my needs," Hunter arrogantly tells Carrie. Obviously she's not giving him attention from what I interpret.

"Get away from me," Carrie yells at Hunter not me.

"Just come to Florida," I say into her ear, "Just come."

She doesn't hang up letting me listen in, "We're supposed to be getting married, how could you?"

"I have needs," Hunter spells it out for her.

"So you know I'm busy with school and writing, you're just going to stray," she says to him way more calmly than I would ever be.

"Why shouldn't I?" There's an intense moment of silence and I'm dying to hear what her response will be.

"So you're punishing me for studying and writing?" She clarifies.

"Interpret it as you will," he says casually.

My own blood is boiling right now, but I don't want to say anything into the receiver that he will hear.

Carrie is clearly crying, I can hear the other girl, and Hunter. "I don't, please no," Carrie whimpers, erogenous noises as my imagination gets the best of me, I hang up.

Two hours later she calls me back, "He cheated on me," she explains miserably.

"And that's okay? He can do whatever he wants with whomever he chooses," I question.

"He made me, he's in control," she explains.

"What did he make you do?" I ask.

"I had to watch her please him," she confides.

"Your' dignity?" I point out. Not that she has any.

"In the garbage," Carrie admits.

"Leave him," I advise.

"I love him, it's my fault. I spend too much time studying and writing. I don't make enough time for him," she self-blames and believes it, ridiculous! She's never been like this before. Where's her backbone, she never tolerated guys cheating on her.

"You're not married to him yet, you can still leave him. You should have chosen Brandon," I tell her.

"No, I'll make more time for Hunter, then he won't do that anymore," she places the burden on herself.

"Is that Carrie?" John asks.

"Yes," I answer. He leaves the house without telling me while I'm on the phone. "Bye," I call out after him sarcastically.

"How's John," she asks.

"He's okay, he just took off, at least he doesn't do crap like what Hunter does to you. He does smaller things like bringing the guys over late at night without telling me first."

"I don't want to talk about it," she sweeps under the rug, "Hunter gave me tickets to Slasher's concert in T.O. because he's going to be in Manchester. Ted can't come, he's working, I know it's ridiculous asking you, but do you want to go?"

I can't ask John because he left, but I figure why the heck not, it will be fun, "Sure!" We hang up soon after and I book a flight, coincidentally John happens to be playing in Carolina, so I tell him I'm visiting Carrie but I chose to leave out details regarding the concert we're attending.

## 31

Toronto

I smash into Carrie throwing her backwards, stumbling into the wall. She kisses my cheek and wraps her arms around me, "It's so great to see you!" she gushes.

"Right!" I kiss her cheek, smelling her. We don't let go, exaggerating our hug. I have a car bringing us to the concert. The driver will take your bags back to our place. We still have your bed!

"That's great!" I say releasing her. She leads the way to the car. I place my bag in the trunk and we're driven to the concert. "Where are we sitting?" I ask.

She looks at me agog, "Backstage of course!"

"You should have warned me! I'm not dressed," I don't finish my thought, I'm not dressed good enough to see Slasher, but she knows what I'm going to say.

"You look amazing," she says pouring me a drink in the back of the limousine, "Here, to loosen up," she offers.

I down it in one sip.

"Another?" she asks.

"Sure," I need liquid courage.

She pours me another and I down it as quickly as the first. We are there in no time flat, and the limousine takes us through the tunnel into the private area. We walk briskly because the concert is about to start and arrive just as the opening band takes the stage. There are two cozy chairs on the side of the stage with a table of drinks and food just for us, "Nice," I say.

We go to our seats excited to see the new bands Slasher's chose to tour with. "Do you want to go see him," she partially yells into my ear as the singers are performing.

"It's okay," I shy off. "Does he know I'm here?" I ask.

"No, he thinks it's me and Hunter," she confides. We enjoy two bands and the alcohol kicks in as I bop in my chair to the music. The lights dim and then Slasher is announced. He runs out on stage looking sharp as a tack, his hair is longer and he's buff, not a minuscule of fat to be found anywhere on his body.

The songs flow, the order the same. I close my eyes and let the sweet music of his gravelly voice sweep me away. I open them to see him see me. I swallow and give him a small wave, a serious expression washes over him. The concert continues but it feels like we're the only ones here. I grab Carrie's hand and hold it tight. She understands and squeezes me back.

"You need to talk to him," she says loudly in my ear.

"No," I say stubbornly.

The concert ends and my choice is removed from me, he comes directly to my chair and grabs my arm and pulls me into his dressing room. He doesn't give me a chance to speak, nor does he try, his lips cover mine and he consumes me. The excitement of the concert doesn't near to how I feel right now. We're inseparable. I hear the door behind me, must be Carrie, "What about John?" she questions shocked at our chemistry.

I can't bare to hear his name, I pull away for a fraction of a second, "Stop," I tell her and continue with Slasher, "I've missed you so much," I say in between kisses.

"I'll see you back at the apartment," Carrie surrenders, "then we're going to talk for a very long time," she threatens. I know she doesn't approve of what I'm doing but I don't care.

She was waiting up in her pj's, "What happened, did you guys talk?"

"Yes," I answer walking to the bedroom to get changed. She lies on the bed and watches me.

"How did you manage that when you couldn't separate," she asks sarcastically. I open my suitcase and put my pj's on.

"We stopped, we just missed each other." I explain to her. "He's still not seeing anyone Carrie, he said he's waiting for me, it's so sad and romantic, we're star-crossed lovers."

"What did you tell him?" She asks getting up and leading me to the kitchen to get ice cream from the freezer, our go-to comfort food.

"I told him I'm in love with John and I'm staying in Florida.

"What did he say?" she pauses scooping the ice cream.

"It's what he did, he's in denial, thinks I'm going to leave John for him."

“Are you?”

“No! Of course not! We’re just going through a rocky patch, nothing we can’t work out.”

“What’s the rocky patch,” she says delving into her dish.

“Well he thinks I’m being lazy because I won’t accept just about anything that comes my way, he says I’m being too picky.”

“That’s understandable considering what you did for the past while,” Carrie says sitting on the couch. I take the recliner.

“He doesn’t get it. So you and Hunter?”

“He’s just wild, but we’re getting along better now.”

“It’s unforgivable,” I put my opinion in. “You two are exclusive.”

“We are when I make time for him.”

“That’s no excuse.”

There’s a knock at the door, we look at each other like who could that be. Carrie answers it. I stay in the recliner spooning my dessert. She opens the door and Slasher is standing in the frame, the look of disapproval is apparent on Carrie’s face. We don’t say anything, just disappear into my room deserting her.

32

It's a beautiful sunny day shaded with guilt from the previous night. I try to put it passed me as I join Carrie in the kitchen for breakfast but it's kind of hard because looking at her makes me feel guilty, "When do you fly back?" she asks.

"I'm going to visit mom and dad, Slasher's taking me out tonight and I'll fly back the day after tomorrow."

"What about John? Has he even called you, does he know what you're doing?"

"John hasn't called, he has out of town games. Obviously he has no idea what I'm doing if you're referring to Slasher."

"No, I mean does he know how long your staying? What's he doing?"

I shrug, "He's busy with his games, bagel?" I offer.

"Sure," she says.

"What about Hunter? When do you see him again?"

"In a few days, he has work in New York and he's flying to Manchester, he has to meet with the publisher over a book he's working on."

"The rest of your trilogy?" I ask, the bagel pops so I dig in her very messy fridge for the butter.

"No, that's finished already."

"Your fridge is disgusting. Did you read it?" I ask out of curiosity buttering Carries.

"Not really, I peaked at it, but it bothers me too much."

"I don't blame you," I empathize biting into my bagel, it's stale tasting even after toasting.

"Brandon tried seeing you a few weeks ago," I tell her.

"You're kidding," she says shocked.

"No, I'm not. The last time I saw Ted, he told me that he made sure Brandon didn't get a chance to see you. Ted has it bad for you." I study Carrie. This doesn't appear to be news to her, "Did you know?"

She grimaces, "Yes, it's hard not to since I live with him."

"But you didn't know that Brandon tried seeing you?"

"I had no idea."

"You haven't done anything with Ted have you?"

"I haven't kissed Ted if that's what you're asking," Carrie reads my mind. She rolls her eyes, "Maybe a few times, when Hunter and I were fighting but it didn't mean anything."

"To you," I clarify, "Ted's in love with you." The stunned look on her face tells me she never imagined what I'm telling her. "John was so mad when I told him that Ted prevented Brandon from seeing you."

Once she digests what I've told her she finishes her bagel, "I can't believe him!"

"You can't say anything," I warn Carrie. "You're going to ruin your friendship. You were never going to get back together with Brandon anyway."

"You don't know that," she sips her coffee. "I'm not married to Hunter yet, so nothing is written in stone."

It dawns on me that I haven't seen Ted since I've been here, "By the way where is Ted?"

"Cuba, he said he needed to get away. He invited me." I nod knowingly, like see!

Carrie starts ignoring me and typing into her phone, "I'm texting Brandon right now, maybe he had something important to tell me."

"Ya, like about his undying love," I kid, but I'm probably not too far off from the truth.

Later that night:

Slasher comes to pick me up in a hired limousine. He's dressed in black leather chaps and I can't help but laugh. He offers me a drink in the limousine as the chauffeur drives off. He parks the car at the fanciest hotel and we make our way to one of the most exclusive suites.

He scans his key and there's a small table with a white tablecloth, two silver domes, champagne flutes, obviously with candlelight. "This is beautiful I gush."

"Anything for you," he admits. "Firing you is the biggest regret of my life," he confesses. "Sit, sit."

He gallantly pulls my chair out and I sit down, waiting for him to join me. I remove my dome and beneath is a plate of shrimp and caviar. It looks half delicious, half disgusting, but I pretend it looks completely delicious.

"To be honest, I miss singing with you Elliot."

"Music to my ears, consider rejoining the tour."

"You're offering my old job back," I'm surprised.

"And more," he says mysteriously.

"What do you mean more?" I question.

"I don't want to overwhelm you, just know that I missed you more than you missed me."

I know that this confession must be hard for him and I shouldn't be here, alone with him. Resisting him is near impossible. I make a resolution to not allow him to see me anymore after tonight. "We shouldn't see each other anymore."

"John and I were never officially divorced."

"We can rectify that," he offers.

"I don't want to," I tell him.

"You're lying to yourself if you think that you should stay with him or that you love him more than me. I can tell just by how we feel together."

"You don't know how I feel," I reply self-righteously.

We finish our dinner, and our conversation doesn't go well. I make it clear to Elliot, that this has to be our last night alone together. We cuddle sharing words that express feelings too deep for anyone else to understand, too personal for someone like me who is in another relationship with someone else.

We share a limousine to the airport where we kiss like star crossed lovers before he rejoins the rest of his tour in Manitoba and I return home to Florida.

33

They say bad news travels fast but in my case, not fast enough. The plane lands in Florida and a headline at the newspaper stand catches my attention:

**Florida Star Player John Recovering in Hospital After His Carotid Artery Severed in Freak Accident Last Night.**

I don't stop to read the article, collecting my luggage and hailing a cab to the local hospital, "Florida General please!" The cab driver puts my luggage in his trunk and waits for me to buckle up before he pulls out in traffic, "Did you hear what happened to that poor hockey player?" I start conversation.

"Did I hear?! I was there!"

"You were at the game?" I can't get him to speak fast enough.

"Sure was, nose bleed seats, glad I wasn't up close like a horror show," he drawls.

"What happened?" I ask eagerly, like it's going to help me somehow.

"They collided in front of Fred, his skate went up as John was coming down, slashed him right in the throat. His own teammate!"

"I'm sure it wasn't intentional."

"Sure wasn't," he agrees, "tragic, the poor guy almost died."

"Is he going to be okay?" I ask.

"No word except that they stabilized him. They didn't even finish the game, everyone was too disturbed."

"You're kidding," I'm in shock.

"Wish I was," he chews his gum.

He pulls me up to the Emergency department and I run out of the car forgetting my bags, "Hey, wait!" the Cabbie calls out to me.

I run back to the boot and wait for him to grab my luggage. He hands it to me, "Good luck," he says.

I approach the nurses station in a panic, "John a hockey player was brought in last night."

The miserable blond lady with a goitre shakes her head, "No fans, just family."

"I'm his WIFE," I tell her.

She doesn't appear to believe me, but proceeds to enter his name in the computer, "Intensive Care Unit, second floor, room three."

Looking at her in a state of confusion she points to the elevator, "It's there, take it to the second floor, follow the signs to the intensive care unit and he's in room three. Pick up the phone on the wall and talk to the nursing station, they'll let you in."

"Thanks," I say dashing off.

Pressing the elevator button repeatedly, it sure as heck takes a long time for the door to open. I press three and the close door button. I'm the only one on it. The lift arrives and I start seeing the signs I need, walking briskly, I then find the phone. Introducing myself, I'm buzzed in and a nurse stops me immediately, "You are?"

"John's wife," I blurt. "How is he?"

She's taken aback that I got here so late, "I was out of town!" I explain.

She looks at me with a little more understanding, "He suffered a severed carotid artery. They managed to apply pressure enabling his transportation here, he was brought directly into the o.r. He suffered a heart attack as a result of his hemodynamic instability. The next twenty-four hours are critical."

I'm sobbing, I should have been with him, "I think I'm going to pass out." I feel lightheaded and the room is starting to spin.

"Do you want me to go in with you and explain everything," she kindly offers.

"Please."

She moves the curtain and now I see him, he looks vulnerable. I'm barely able to contain my tears. She takes my hand leading me to him, "He's on oxygen, the arterial repair is here," she says pointing to his neck. "When he wakes up, his ribs are going to be sore, his heart stopped minutes after his teammate collided with him, but they managed to restart it by the players bench before transporting him. His blood loss caused him to infarct which will slow his recovery. Try not to worry too much, he's young and in amazing shape," she reassures me, "Hopefully the re-vascularization of his heart will repair any damaged areas and regenerate his heart muscle. I'll leave you alone," she offers.

I sit next to his bed clutching his hand, "I'm so sorry for not being there," I whimper while wondering how long he's been all alone, where's his mom and dad? Has anyone

informed them? They must know by now. He appears so vulnerable and I feel so useless.

Minutes turn to hours, I inform Carrie, but it's all a blur. I only go home to shower, and come right back. Later that evening, I notice the first sign of life when his grip on my hand tightens ever so slightly, but I can be mistaken, maybe it's a twitch. I stop leaving the room just in case, unless I have to go to the bathroom and for no other reason. By nighttime, his eyes flutter open and I trip out of his room calling for a doctor. That's when I see Carrie walking with Hunter towards me. She sprints to me wrapping her arms around me.

"He just woke up!" I say excited.

Her eyes harbour concern for us, "That's reassuring," she says darkly.

"No really, he's going to be okay," I persuade, but who am I kidding. I don't know if he'll ever set foot on the ice again, nor would I want him too. What if he wants to go back to hockey and I don't want him to skate? There's no guarantee he'll make a full recovery.

I picture myself walking back into his room, and I know I have zero time to prepare for the battery of questions he might throw my way. What I say is detrimental to the future of our relationship. Seeing Hunter is a reminder of my behaviour with Slasher. Guilt floods me until I'm red with shame.

"Are you okay?" Carrie asks concerned.

"Of course I'm okay," I loathe myself. Previous indiscretions can't be retracted, I can only move forward and forgive myself for my past sins towards John. I promise myself never to hook up with Slasher ever again, John never has to find out. But where have I been? What do I say? My biggest concern is that I'm not MORE upset. If I was completely in love with John, wouldn't I be a mess right now? We were having difficulties in our relationship right before all this happened. I knew we would get through it though. I didn't PLAN the torrid affair with Slasher.

"We'll find the doctor for you, go be with him," Carrie encourages.

I go back into John's room, his hand is resting at his side, "Hi!" I say meekly. His mouth is dry and he licks his lips, "I was so worried." I feel a tear slide down my cheek. *(Not worried enough, I never should have left him.)*

I check his table and find a cup of water. I put the straw to his lips, and he draws water.

The nurse comes in, "Hello! It's about time you woke up!"

"Hi," he responds, the loudness of a whisper.

The nurse takes a full set of vitals, checks his heart monitor and neck dressing before leaving his room.

"What happened?" he manages.

"Don't talk, save your strength," I tell him, "you collided with a teammate and his blade cut your throat, you're going to be okay, you're very lucky."

His eyes are solemn, like he knows the opposite, but maybe it's my imagination. I'm reading too much into his expression. His eyelids can't manage their weight, and they shut. I have more time.

"Go to sleep," I whisper stroking his hair.

Confident he's sleeping, I go back to Carrie and Hunter.

"Do you need anything?" They ask.

"No, I don't think so."

"Does he remember what happened?" Hunter questions.

"No, he has no memory of what happened," I feel so relieved about that. I'm sure they can see it in my face.

"Did you tell him what happened," asks Carrie.

"Just what I know."

"How did you find out," asks Hunter.

"I saw a newspaper in the airport when I landed." I admit.

Carrie's eyes widen.

"I know," I growl, "I should have been here."

She doesn't argue with me, and I can't help but think how self-righteous she is being, judging me like that. "I'm not going back to Slasher." I don't even know why I tell her that, especially in front of Hunter, I might as well have broadcast it on the news.

Hunter studies me, "You're in love with him," he disagrees referring to Slasher.

"I'm in love with John," I deny defensively.

"You sure are," Carrie consoles giving Hunter a dirty look.

"I need to be with John," I turn to go back. "Stay at our house, here, take the keys." I hold them out for Carrie, "22 Oceanside Road."

"Okay, call if you need anything," Carrie offers taking the keys. I open the door and a low buzz noise comes from John's room. I know the sound isn't good, but when I see a

flat line, I scream and my world unravels. People rush past me, Hunter is picking me up from the floor, I don't know if I fainted or just fell, 'Code Blue' is being called over the P.A. John's nurse is straddling him on the bed beginning compressions. Another nurse is pushing passed us with a crash cart, doctors come running. We're escorted away.

They bolus John and give him medications that should be lifesaving every two minutes. Their attempts are futile as they resort to shocking him. His lifeless body becomes airborne and then flops back down on the bed. Compressions restart by a different nurse, then another shock, no more effective than the last. They stop the shocks after three. Time passes but I'm frozen in it. He was fine twenty minutes ago, he just came too, what happened? They call it, 'Time of death'.

I scream, "TRY HARDER! THAT WASN'T LONG ENOUGH! KEEP TRYING."

They don't.

The next Florida game after the national anthem, a two minute tribute is aired in his honour. A rookie gets called up and it's all come down to a hockey card, that many collect, and few remember.

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John's parents never made it to Florida, it didn't make sense for them to come when there was nothing that could be done. I arrange for John to be repatriated by the Canadian embassy.

I pack a bag and arrange for everything else to be placed in storage. The house will be sold, there's nothing keeping me in Florida. We fly home in Hunter's private jet.

The brass handles on the side of his casket are replaced with hockey sticks on both sides. I drape the Florida Hockey Team logo on his coffin. His first hockey stick and the one used the day of the accident are made into a special cross for him.

He's donned in his Florida Jersey. Players from all around attend his funeral. I don't know how I kept it together, but when they're all gone, nothing's left of me.

34

Carrie offers me my old room back, and I graciously accept, it's that or my parents. I shut down, stop eating, stop going out, never leaving my room. Carrie and Ted respect that I'm in mourning and they leave me alone. Days turn to weeks, I'm gaunt, anorexic, a mere shell compared to the happy person I was not all that long ago.

There's a tap on my bedroom door, I assume it's Carrie, because Ted went visiting his parents. I swing the door open wide and standing in the frame is Brandon (John's best friend), "Oh my God!" I say in surprise.

"Rita!" His sympathetic eyes scan mine, "How are you?"

My body shakes, and I can't lie anymore, "I'm dying inside." He takes me in his arms and the warmth of his body disintegrates my resolve. He's the only person I know who understands my loss, he loves John too. "How are you Brandon?"

"Not good," his face is worn.

"Where's Carrie?"

"I asked her to give us time. She's worried about you."

"I know."

"She said you aren't taking care of yourself, barely eating, not showering."

"She told you I'm not showering?" I'm aghast.

"You don't smell," he grins, but his smile turns to tears and my heart breaks for him.

"I miss him so much," I cry.

"Me too," he barely murmurs. "The last time I spoke to him he was so happy to be playing for Florida. He was bragging because I was skating in Toronto, saying he bought you the most beautiful little house."

"It was beautiful," I admit, "my dream house."

"Are you selling it?"

"Of course." I grab an elastic and gather my greasy hair in a ponytail, "Can I get you a drink?"

"Only if you're having one," he bargains.

I shrug thinking he looks as pathetic as I do, "Sure. When's Carrie coming back?"

"She said she'd be a few hours. Rita, I need you to do me a favour."

"Anything," I reply without thinking, "as long as it has nothing to do with Carrie, please tell me you're over her. Ted said you tried seeing her."

"I was trying to save our relationship" Brandon says angrily.

"Do you still want her?" I ask.

"No, I want to see my daughter, Holly."

"She could be Hunter's," I argue. His eyes tell me he's not persuaded, "I think she's yours," I confess.

"Will you help me?"

"Of course,"

I take his hand and lead him to the kitchen. It's messy, normally I would be embarrassed, but he's seen the place much worse. I open the fridge while he starts searching the cabinets for drinking glasses. He places two on the counter and waits while I pick our beverage, "There's leftovers here, are you hungry?" I ask feeling pangs myself.

"You eat," he says selflessly. I divide it and grab a second plate, placing the first in the microwave, "What is it?"

I shrug, "Who knows, as long as Ted cooked it, it should be fine, if it's gross, most likely Carrie cooked it, just spit it out."

"All this time, and she hasn't improved," he smiles.

"It's for survival with her," I explain. I pull it from the microwave and place the other one in. Grabbing a spoon, I feed Brandon, watching his expression. It's my way of self-preservation.

"It's good," he tells me. I sigh relief and wait for mine to heat. He takes his usual chair at are six person table. Our apartment used to be the big hangout when the boys were in the Minor leagues. I reflect back to when Brandon and I were close and the next day he broke up with me, I'm glad I didn't harbour a grudge, he wouldn't be here right now if I did, "What are you thinking about?" he asks.

I give him a blank stare, "nothing," I continue chewing.

"Come on," he pushes.

"I was remembering you breaking up with me, telling me it wasn't there for you. If you hadn't done that, I wouldn't have had that precious time with John."

He considers it, "I guess you're right," he says appreciatively, "everything happens for a reason."

“Not everything, why did he have to..?” I begin, “Am I terrible for wishing this happened to a different player?”

“No, you’re not,” Brandon doesn’t let me continue, “it hurts to talk about him.”

“That’s for sure,” I agree.

We finish eating and then we sit on the couch, his arm around me, both of us inconsolable.

35

Carrie never talks about Holly, her own child (Fathered by Brandon of course. She gave the baby to her dad so she didn't have to drop out of school but then chose Hunter over Brandon who isn't even the father. Carrie should have her head read). I can't begin to understand why she doesn't visit or even talk about her. Is it too hard for her emotionally or has she rejected her? I would want to at least know how Holly is doing.

Soon after Brandon leaves I call Carrie's father and arrange a time to visit. I wisely choose not to tell Carrie in case she tries stopping me or talking me out of it. I don't want to side against my best friend, but it's a weird situation and I truly think Brandon's the father, so it's only right that he should be allowed to spend time with his own child. You can never have too big a circle of support and of all people Carrie should know that after losing her mother who was also her best friend.

I call Will and he's receptive to me visiting, so I let Brandon know when we're meeting so he can be close by.

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I take my first shower in I don't know how many days. Crazy, how a shower can make you feel a bit more human. The plan is for Brandon to park at our old high school which is a minute from Will's house in case he's permitted to see Holly.

I wait for Carrie to go into her room and then I tiptoe out so she doesn't have a chance to ask me where I'm going. I close the door behind me, coast is clear. A few minutes later, I find myself at Will's door.

I knock and wait. He opens the door and invites me in, "Hi Rita!" He looks great, grandfathering agree's with him.

"Hi!" I step in. "How are you?" I ask.

"Great, how are you Rita? I'm so sorry for John, he was such a talented, friendly boy. What a tragic accident," he shakes his head.

How could I have forgotten that Will knew him from school, "He was, it's been so hard," I admit.

"Are you getting help?" I see the concern in his face.

"No, I moved back with Carrie and sold our house in Florida, but I haven't sought counselling or anything."

"Maybe you should," he tells me. "The accident was tragic and John was so young, it's only understandable that you might have troubles accepting everything and might need help getting back on your feet."

"I'll definitely consider it," I tell him. "I did come for another reason," I admit not knowing how to bring it up.

"What's up?" Will waits patiently for me to continue.

I don't know how to put this, "Does Carrie ever ask to visit Holly or talk about her to you?"

"No," he says without hesitation, "It's weird."

"Right," I agree, "I don't feel like I can ask her this, so that's why I'm here. Holly seems to be a taboo subject."

"Maybe it's postpartum?"

"It has to be. Carrie and I think that Brandon's the father, and he came to me the other day asking if he can see her."

Will contemplates what I'm asking, "He wants to meet her?"

"Yes, please."

He nods, "They're in the backyard."

"He's waiting at the school. Can I text him, so he can see her?"

"Sure," he agrees. I pull my phone out and two minutes later, Brandon's knocking on the door.

"Hi Brandon," Will greets.

"Hi Will, they're out back. You can look at your daughter through the living room window."

"Thanks," he says gratefully.

We walk to the back of the house, Brandon's eyes lock onto his daughter, "She's beautiful," he says in awe.

"Isn't she!" Will says proudly. "Come on out, I'll introduce you."

"Would you?" Brandon says excited.

"Of course," Will says so understandingly. I would have thought that Brandon seeing his daughter would have been threatening to him, but he's taking it like a champ.

V (Will's step daughter) is pushing Holly in a swing and Gwen is worshipping the sun. "Gwen, this is Brandon and you remember Carrie's best friend Rita?"

"Hi," we say in unison.

Gwen gives him a knowing look, "I knew this day would come," she says clearly threatened.

"It's okay honey," Will reassures her.

V oblivious to everything offers Brandon her step-sisterly duty, "Do you want to push her?"

Holly's cheeks are pink and she appears to be very happy, "I'd love to," he says. He stands behind his daughter and lightly gives the baby swing a push.

After a few minutes she starts fussing, "You can take her out," Will encourages.

Brandon gets to hold his daughter for the first time and tears flood his eyes. Barely able to contain an outpouring he pinches the bridge of his nose with a free hand, "Do you want me to take her," Will offers.

"No, no, just a few more minutes," he pleads.

Will backs away, "Take your time."

The similarities between father and daughter are remarkable, "You can see her anytime," Gwen softens.

I touch his shoulder in support barely able to keep it together myself, "We've all been through so much," I tell them. "John and Brandon were best friends."

Gwen looks at us putting the pieces of the puzzle together, "The Florida hockey player?"

I nod, "I married him."

"He's my best friend," Brandon manages.

Then we're both crying and Holly looks at us like we're crazy, "It's okay," she says touching Brandon's face, "I'll be your friend." and then he hugs her, his daughter.

"I want to support to Holly," Brandon offers.

"You don't have to," Will starts.

"Let him help," Gwen suggests. "He needs to take responsibility."

"Thanks," Brandon says.

We stayed for a short while and promised to be back soon.

"That was great," Brandon says, "will you come with me again?"

"I'd love to," I tell him. The afternoon was good for me too. "Holly looks just like you. She's so cute."

"I wasted so much time," he's saddened. "I don't want to be away from her any longer than I have to."

"Are you thinking of filing for custody?"

"I'm considering it. What do you think?"

"She seems to have a good family, but little girls need their father."

"And mom," he finishes.

"You should talk to Carrie," I suggest.

"She hasn't even tried seeing her own daughter," he argues.

"You need to know why before you judge," I advise.

He pulls up to my place and waits for me to leave his car, "Do you want to come in?" I ask.

"I'm not in the mood to face Carrie again, how about you come to my apartment and we can hang out there?"

"You don't mind" I ask weakly.

"Not at all." He takes my hand in his.

36

Brandon's ultra modern flat with every bell and whistle known to mankind is close to the arena, which I half expected, "No girlfriend?" I ask.

"Not presently," he smiles. "I just sort of lost interest after Sheila and the whole Carrie scenario."

"Heartbroken," I interpret.

"Angered more like it. She deserts me at the pinnacle of my career for her education, I'm a good sport setting her free so she can focus on her school, instead of coming back to me when she finishes, she gets serious with another dude. We're the ones with a child together!"

Picture painted, anger is definitely understandable, "I don't blame you. I did advocate for you."

"It obviously didn't help, beer?"

"Sure," I say parking myself on his grey leather couch. "Love your place."

"Thanks. I appreciate you helping me see Holly, it meant everything to me."

"She's a cutie," I tell him, "she's so obviously yours."

"I know so too," he agrees. "I was a jerk to you when we were younger, if I had it to do all over again."

"Don't worry about it, I wouldn't have been with John and you wouldn't have had Holly. Everything happens for a reason. Come to think of it, I'm glad you were a jerk for both reasons."

His brows go up, "I haven't looked at it that way, guess your right."

"John was good to me."

"He always loved you," Brandon tells me. "I'll never forget the phone call I got in the middle of the night when he saw you on the cover of the entertainment section singing with Slasher, he was fit to be tied," Brandon chuckles.

"You're kidding?" I ask.

"Nope, I remember it like it was yesterday, 2:30am.. he was ranting, how could he possibly compete with a rockstar! I think he bought the house in Florida the next day for you."

I start weeping. Brandon squeezes me.

"He won hands down, I loved him so much," I manage to tell him.

"I know," his voice cracks almost in tears too. "You're more than welcome to sleep over tonight if you don't feel like going back to Carries."

"You don't mind?" I ask timidly.

"I wouldn't have offered if I did," he reassures.

"I'd like that," I tell him. "I'm so glad we're still friends."

"Me too," he agrees. "I just had a great idea," he peaks my curiosity.

"Go on," I encourage.

"I'm considering filing for custody of Holly but I can't take care of her alone. Would you consider moving in with me and helping me to raise her? I'll pay you generously of course."

"You want me to take care of Carrie's child?"

"You said she doesn't even talk about her to you."

"True. Are you sure you want me living with you?"

"I wouldn't ask if I didn't think it would work," he assures me.

I consider it, having nothing on the go, it will give me a purpose, and an income. Definitely not glamorous like singing with a rockstar, "Would we get to go to your games?" I throw in.

"Of course, great seats guaranteed," he offers.

"Deal!" I agree.

The rest of the evening is spent rehashing old times before we have a snack and turn in. We don't part the entire night as I fall into the first sound sleep I've had since John died in Brandon's strong arms.

**37**

Brandon files for custody, offering Will and his family very generous visitation rights that Will agrees to.

38

Brandon drops me off at my apartment, telling me he'll keep me posted. Not wanting a confrontation, I quietly pack up when I know she's going to be out and leave a note at the entrance to our apartment:

*Dear Carrie,*

*I want to thank you for all your support and for letting me move back in with you. Ever since I stopped travelling with Slasher and John's death, I've had no idea what to do with myself as far as work is concerned, until Brandon filed for custody of Holly.*

*He's offered me a live in nanny job for the time being while I contemplate the direction I want to go in. I'm sorry for ditching but he can really relate to me after losing John and he's been very supportive, enclosed you will see a rent check that should cover you until you find another roommate.*

*Hope you're okay with this.*

*Love Rita*

Deep down knowing I didn't face her, inevitably the shit will hit the fan, but hopefully when it does, I'll be ready for it. Brandon said that if she ever wants to see or spend time with Holly, he won't stop her. The troubling fact is that she doesn't. Her education and Hunter is all she seems to care about, so as far as Brandon and I are concerned, we are doing the right thing for Holly.

Brandon hasn't been awarded custody yet, but he asked me to move in early so we could toddlerproof his apartment before she arrives. We picked up the most beautiful lavender paint colour for her room and a princess bed with an elaborate canopy that every girl fancies. You can tell by the way he's doing her room, that he's going to spoil her. Will and Brandon decided on a gradual transition increasing time gradually until she's with her dad more than her grandfather.

"I love the bed," I tell him, imagining the room painted in lavender. 'Did you buy a sheet set for her yet?'

He has a dumbfounded expression on his face, "I forgot!"

"It's okay, it gives me something to do. When's your next game?"

"Tomorrow night, Denver. Would you like to join me?" He offers.

"I haven't been to a game since John was alive. I think I need you or Carrie by my side the first time I go. I think I'll just stay here and work on Holly's room."

"Are you sure?" He asks concerned.

"Most definitely," I respond.

~~

I worked on decorating Holly's new room when Carrie texted me:

Carrie: I hope you're okay with this? Seriously?

Me: Hi, maybe we should talk on the phone.

Carrie: You think?

My phone rings a minute later.

"How do you think I can be okay with you shacking up with my ex-boyfriend while he sues for custody of Holly. What part of all of this scenario is okay?" she huffs into the phone.

I feel defensive, "I'm not shacking up, I'm working for him and you don't ask about her, you never visit her."

"Don't judge! It's none of your business? Are you sleeping with him?"

I just want to explode, she has some nerve, it's like she doesn't even know me anymore. "Your heart may be made of stone, but mine isn't. There's no way I would shack up with anyone after losing John!"

"Rita seriously! You weren't in love with John, you were cheating on him a few days before the accident. You're lying to yourself. Why would you go from touring with a rockstar and almost becoming an overnight sensation yourself to become a NANNY? Who does that unless you're lusting after the father? So are you?"

"I'm not!" I snap ever so tempted to hang up on her. "Even if I was, what do you care? You love Hunter, or do you? You number one priority should be Holly not Brandon, what's wrong with you?"

"I have you as a best friend!" she spits, click dial tone.

She had me second guessing myself, whether being a nanny was the right thing for me, or not. Deep down, I know I should be more focussed in securing a job with a brighter future.

39

We finish Holly's room and baby proof the apartment in time for her first visit. We choose a day when Brandon doesn't have a game, Will brings her over for a short visit. It's kind of cute because Brandon is very nervous even though he doesn't admit it. He gets up crazy early, cleans the entire apartment until you can eat off the floors, makes a bunch of food he thinks Holly might like and blows up balloons leaving them all over the place. By the time it's done, it looks like there's been a birthday party planned for his imaginary friend.

"You don't think the balloons are going a bit overboard?" I cast doubt without trying to hurt his feelings.

He looks at me filled with it, "You don't think she'll like them?"

"I think she'll love them, but I just think if you go crazy on the first few visits, she might expect it all the time. You're setting her up with high expectations," I explain.

"You think?" He asks.

"I know," I tell him. "It's nice of Will to let you gradually transition her to you," I comment. "She should be here soon."

"Very," he agrees. "Can you grab the cake from the fridge?"

"You didn't buy her a cake did you? It's not her birthday," I admonish.

"Kidding," he grins, "but I am getting nervous."

"Don't," I encourage. "She can explore your apartment and then we can take her to the park. It will be a nice first visit."

"Okay, I'm glad you're here," he says appreciatively.

"I'm glad I'm here too," I admit.

The doorbell rings, "Here goes something!" I start towards it. I peak through the peep hole, and there she is a little person dressed in a cute pink dress with a ribbon on each shoulder and a flower belt.

I swing the door open, "Holly!" I greet. Will smiles standing behind her, "Hi Will, come on in," I encourage very welcomingly. Holly looks to Will for approval and he touches her shoulder. She shyly walks in and he follows her. "Can I get you something to drink?"

Holly doesn't hesitate, "I'll have a juice box."

"And you Will," I take his order.

"A water is fine," he replies easily.

"Soda or plain?"

"Soda if you have it." I'm ecstatic that I thought of juice boxes on our last shopping trip so I go into the kitchen and come back with a grape drink juice box for Holly and soda water for Will. I find everyone in the living room.

Holly is on Will's lap, Brandon is sitting ten miles away and I pick a spot close to Will, "Here you go," I hand Will his drink and then spike Holly's before giving it to her.

I can't tell if Brandon is still nervous, but he's staring at his daughter, its endearing but weird at the same time. Nothing is comfortable, except Holly who is slurping up her juice box in record time.

"Daddy can I have another one?" she asks, looking at Will. I can see the air deflate from Brandon's sail as she calls Will 'Daddy'.

"Sure," he doesn't correct her.

Brandon gets up to get another one from the fridge. He spikes the top and hands it to her, "Thanks mister," she says looking up at him with big doe eyes.

"You can call me Brandon," he says softly.

"Thanks Brandon," she smiles, "can we go play?"

I pop up from the couch, "Sure, would you like to go to the park?" I offer.

"Yes! Please!" She says excitedly.

Brandon's apartment building has a small swing set, a climbing apparatus and sand box. We take the lift down and immediately she charges in the direction of a little boy in the sandbox as we sit on the bench watching her.

"Does my daughter know your spending time with Holly?" Will asks Brandon.

"I informed her," I tell Will.

"How did she take it?" He asks.

They both look at me, "Defensively. She has no interest in her own child, Brandon's the bad guy, and I'm shagging him."

"That's uncalled for," Will goes against his own daughter.

"Don't pay any mind to it," agrees Brandon.

"Maybe if you spoke to her," I suggest to Will.

"I can try, but I think she needs professional help, maybe it's some type of postpartum," he guesses.

Holly walks up to the swing and looks at Will expectantly. He gets up and slides her in, starting to push her. She smiles as she begins to swing, first low and then a bit higher. When she starts complaining Will takes her out and she goes back to the sand pit. We stare at her in admiration..

“Do you still love her?” I ask Brandon referring to Carrie.

“Yes,” he says without a shadow of a doubt. “Eventually I want it to be the three of us.”

“Good luck,” Will wishes, but I know he has serious doubts judging by the tone of his voice. Once Holly displays boredom, our first visit ends abruptly, we all agree it went very well for the first time.

~~

It takes Brandon two weeks to talk me into going to his teams’ game on home ice. He took it off, to be with me. Carrie and I are still not on speaking terms. I dressed in jeans and John’s Jerzy. Brandon knows right away it was his, touching the shoulder and reflecting back on our friend, “You still miss him?”

“I think about him everyday,” Brandon confides.

“Me too, lets go, I don’t want to be late,” but really, I don’t want more time to think about him, because I don’t want to cry. He opens the door to his fancy sports car and waits for me to get in. I watch as he runs around to the other side. He’s really impressed me, not dating anyone and focussing on his daughter, he’s really growing up.

He straps himself in and turns to me, “Are you okay?”

“You turned out to be a really good guy, I thought John was the only one, but you’ve really changed,” I tell him.

He smiles, “So have you! You deserve to be happy,” he informs me.

“I will, one day.”

We arrive at the arena and park in the secret area with all the other players, “Do you want me to take you to the gym?” he teases.

I scrunch my nose, “Not in this lifetime.”

He escorts me to the snack bar before we take our seats, buying anything that tickles our fancy. With arms loaded, we make our way to our seats. The lights dim, and the players take to the ice for their warm up, “I can’t do this,” I shriek.

“You’ve got this,” he reassures.

"No I don't!" I start panicking. My heart is pounding, and my throat is closing up, "Get me out of here." He helps me up and quickly walk/pushes me away from the ice. I start catching my breath as I whisk passed the concession stand. Tears spurt from the corners of my eyes quicker than I can wipe them, I crumble to the concrete once we're outside the rink, "I should have been there for him, I wasn't there. I can't believe he's gone, what am I going to do?" I'm overwhelmed with emotion, sadness almost makes me throw up.

"It was too soon, you're just not ready," he analyzes.

"I'll never get over this Brandon, how do I recover when he's never coming back to me?"

"Baby steps, baby steps," is all he can say helping me up and walking me to his car. That is my last attempt at watching a hockey game even on television. I'll never get over John's injury or what happened to him, especially not being there.

I close myself off, hardly going out. I spend my time working, taking care of Holly and when Brandon goes to work, I treat it like it's the last time I'm ever going to see him. When he comes home, I hug him close to me, thankful he's safe. It's a routine we've both become accustomed to and even though it's bizarre, we both know the reasoning behind my behaviour and it's accepted. Every week Brandon and I are together, we become closer friends, inseparable. There is no communication between Carrie and Brandon, her relationship with Hunter is fulfilling and stable. If Brandon's bothered by it, he doesn't show it, but that's because I've never seen him come face to face with her, until one night Brandon and I decided to go out for dinner rather than cook. We went to a local chicken place for a quick easy dinner.

Will was babysitting Holly, Carrie was by herself at a table for two when Brandon and I walked in. She looked up at us, and our eyes locked on in unison. I froze on the spot, unsure of what to do. Brandon looks at me and then at her before approaching Carrie, "Hi Carrie!" he greets casually.

"Guys," she hisses.

She looks at my gut, "Are you pregnant or did you put on a few pounds," she criticizes.

I don't acknowledge her comment, walking away. I'm proud of myself, for not taking the bait, "I'll grab a table," I tell Brandon.

"Join me," she offers.

Brandon looks at me questioning, "Should we?"

I shrug, silently taking a seat, "How's school," he asks.

"Great, almost done," her tone is light, as though nothing is wrong with this picture.

"Have you spent any time with Holly?" He asks.

"I wanted to talk to you about that," She informs him.

"Why now?" I ask defensively but she ignores me like I'm not there.

"Why now," Brandon repeats.

"You know, I was depressed, I'm on medication for it now and seeing a counsellor. I didn't want to involve myself in Holly's life while I'm a mess. I have to fix myself first before I can care for her."

"You're not getting custody," he says defensively.

"That's not okay, but I'm not ready for that right now anyway, I just want to see her, I'm her mother."

"You gave up your rights, when you took zero interest in her.

"I didn't," she snaps. "Obviously you don't understand or you wouldn't be so quick to judge," she hisses.

"Let Will know when you want to see her, and we'll drop her off at Wills house," I offer.

Carrie smiles at me approvingly, "Thanks."

Brandon doesn't look too pleased, getting up he picks another table. "I better go," I say to Carrie, following him.

~~

"What's the big idea," he growls.

"It's her kid! Give her some slack, approaching you was gutsy," I can't even believe I'm defending her.

"I can't either, especially after she insulted you with that fat comment, he shakes his head in disbelief.

"And shagging you," I add. Makes me want to do it just to spite her!"

"Let's go," he challenges.

"Not in this lifetime," I taunt.

He looks flattened, "You weren't serious were you?" I'm doubting.

"No, no, of course not," he says quietly making me not believe him.

"We so can't go there," I tell him. "You didn't enjoy me when you were younger, nothings changed."

"How do you know, we've come a long way," he argues.

"I know you aren't serious and I don't mean to flat out reject you, but absolutely not. You might as well be a girl as far as I'm concerned."

Well that was the straw that broke the camel's back, "Let's go, I lost my appetite."

He's my ride, I have no choice but follow him or kiss Carrie's butt and I'm not doing that either.

40

Three weeks later I break down and text Carrie from the park, I suggest we go for coffee and talk but she does one better and agrees to meet up with me while I'm watching Holly. I keep it a secret from Brandon, I don't want this visit to make him feel threatened.

The sun is falling and it's bordering on blinding depending on which direction you're looking in. Few kids are left in the park, most have gone home for dinner. Holly is playing with three other children, content in the sandpit.

I see Carrie stroll towards me, "Hi!" I call out.

"Hi," she says approaching me. She sits next to me on the bench. "Holly's growing quickly," she comments.

"You bet, do you want me to call her over?" I offer.

"No, she's having fun, it's okay, I'm sorry for the way I've been acting, I believe you're not sleeping with Brandon."

"I'm definitely not," I reassure her. "It's a job to me, free rent and spending money until I decide what I want to do with the rest of my life," I explain. "How are you and Hunter?"

"We're good. He doesn't understand my attachment to Holly. He wants our own kids."

"You can't erase the past," I say insightfully.

"Are you still planning on getting married? We haven't talked in so long!"

"We're putting our plans on hold, Hunter has a lot of pressure from the company right now, sales are down."

I glance at the sand pit and four kids has whittled down to three. I squint to make sure one of them is Holly. I don't make out her tiny little figure. Quickly I glance at the rest of the park searching for her. Carrie catches on and starts looking too. I begin to panic getting up from the bench. I walk briskly to the sandpit, "Do you know where the little girl you were playing with went?" I blurt.

The kids look dumbfounded and one points towards the road. There are other adults in the park, but none close by. "You go this way, I'll go that way," Carrie suggests.

I don't really trust her but I have no choice, "Okay." I go in the direction the little boy pointed and pull my phone out of my pocket. Brandon's going to kill me but I have to tell him I lost Holly or he won't be able to help me. I quickly dial his number while scanning my surroundings, "Brandon! I'm at our park, Holly's missing. She was playing in the sandpit. I was talking to Carrie, I lost track of her."

"I'll be right there," he says before the line goes dead.

I keep searching, walking on the sidewalk, looking into peoples backyards. I check inside the variety store, no sign of her. I start looking under and around tree branches, in and behind cars, everywhere, until I'm so far from the park, I know there's no way Holly could be this far. I decide to go back to the park and try a different direction. That's when I see Carrie, "Have you found her?" she asks.

"Does it look like I've found her," I say angrily.

"You don't have to be like that!" she says defensively. I see Brandon walking behind her.

"You found her," Brandon says.

"No! We haven't," I say panicked.

Brandon smiles and I'm about to go apeshit until I turn around and see Will and Holly walking in our direction carrying ice cream cones. "You disappeared before I could tell you, I bumped into Holly," Will explains.

"No harm done," Brandon says forgivingly.

"You're not the one who had a heart attack," I complain.

"You should have been watching her better," Brandon scolds.

"You're lucky it wasn't a stranger," Carrie agrees with him.

"Who's side are you on!"

"My daughters," Carrie smiles. "Thank God she's okay," she says with relief.

"Chocolate!" Holly says happily pointing to her cone. I never let that happen again.

41

Brandon and I decided to throw a grand party for Holly's third birthday. Invites were sent out a month before her big day. We hired a princess from her favourite movie and invited Brandon's parents: Will, Gwen, V, Carrie, Hunter, and last but not least Alex. Brandon really impressed me by inviting Carrie and Hunter. I'm guaranteed some sort of drama at this birthday.

We cater it so we can spend the majority of our time doting on the birthday girl and drinking enough to get stupid drunk but ensuring that the birthday girl doesn't get into any of the spirits. She is going to be so excited when she see's the present Brandon picked up for her, guaranteed to be better than everyone else's. I have it hidden in my bedroom.

Brandon brought the cake out to Holly first and had her blow out the candles and then she was adorned with her gifts. Carrie bought Holly a keepsake mother daughter bracelet and of course Hunter had to think he was outdoing everyone with a life-sized castle that has to be assembled by Brandon, the poor guy. You just know he paid a small fortune judging by the box it came in, but that didn't impress me.

It's our turn, I go upstairs and I grab the gift, it squirms in my hands but I secure it, not having a name yet. We've left it up to Holly to name her new grey tabi kitten. It was love at first sight. Brandon holds the kitten while she pets it, "What would you like to call her?" he asks.

"Sparkles!"

"Sparkles it is!" He says to her. She kisses him on the cheek.

Holly starts playing with her new toys faster than Brandon can assemble them. Carrie walks up to me with a cocktail in her hand, "These are potent!" she comments.

"Enjoying yourself?" I inquire. It's not very often that Brandon and Hunter are ever at the same function together. Carrie's in her element with all the attention she's getting from them.

"Definitely! That's a sweet present Brandon got her, but he should have cleared it with me first! What if I'm allergic?"

"You don't live with her," I strike her with reality.

"For now, are you coming to the wedding?"

"I thought you were holding off for now, that's what you told me in the park," I remind her.

"We've decided to go ahead with it. I take it you'll be coming with Brandon?"

"I'm not on the market, so most likely."

She looks at me concerned, "You should get help if you can't move on."

"I don't NEED help because I don't want to be with someone, I'm okay not being in a relationship."

She shrugs indifferently, "I'm just suggesting you start dating, you've been mourning for quite some time."

"I'm good," I reassure.

"Did you hear about the singing competition 'So You Think You Can Sing Canada?'" She takes a different direction with our conversation.

It's a welcomed change. Now she has my attention! "No! Tell me more!"

"The winner gets a record deal with Slasher's label. It's going to take Canada by storm, they think other countries will copy the idea."

"Why wouldn't Canada use a Canadian label?"

"The Brits' wanted to tap into the Canadian market! Nifty eh?"

"Nifty," I mimic. She giggles and taps my shoulder playfully. "I'm seriously interested," I tell her sincerely.

"Good, you had me worried," she admits.

"I'm seriously okay," I tell her.

"Seriously okay, doesn't mean happy."

She has a point. It's time I start putting myself first, and stop hiding at Brandon's in this make believe perfect world I wish for like in high school, I'm not fulfilled. Now it's the farthest thing I want for myself. I know Brandon loves Carrie and they should be living like a family parenting Holly. What's going on right now is all wrong. I need to talk sense into him, stop him from giving up on her, before she ends up with the wrong guy permanently.

42

Grandpa Will takes Holly for a sleepover giving me the perfect opportunity to talk to Brandon. I make his favourite dish Shepard's Pie and pour a tall glass of chardonnay.

I decorate the table with fresh flowers I picked up from the market. Brandon comes out of his room after having a shower and sees the table, "Wow! Whats the occasion?"

"We need to talk," I take the lead.

"You're not leaving me are you?" He appears concerned.

"No, no, I want to talk about Carrie." I explain. "I think it's time you go after her before its too late."

He stops the conversation in it's tracks. I place his plate before him before taking my seat. I slowly sip my glass of wine hoping it'll instil courage, no such luck.

"Don't you want to be a family," I encourage. "You're still in love with her."

"How do you know I don't have feelings for you?"

"That ship sailed," I wave off.

"Can you say you don't have feelings for me?" he asks.

"Listen, you're a great guy, but being in a relationship with you would make me feel like I'm somehow being disloyal to John, and if you keep playing hockey, I'd be no different than a cops wife, hoping you come home safe after every game, and I don't want to live like that. I know hockey isn't nearly as dangerous as policing but after what happened to John I'd be post traumatic stressing every time you go to work."

He places his fork by his dish, "I get it."

"It's not that you're not gorgeous, most definitely you are, but you belong with Carrie, or someone you're in love with."

"I'll have to get over you first," he says making my jaw drop, if that isn't the sexiest thing I've heard in a long time.

"I do have some news for you," I change the subject although it would have been fun to enjoy the evening in a more sultry way. "There's a competition 'So You Think You Can Sing Canada,' and I've decided to enter! The winner gets a recording contract." I oopsy daisy forget to mention that it's with Slasher's record label.

"That's great! When is it?"

"A week after you've stopped Carrie's wedding to Hunter," I tease.

“So I’m breaking up the wedding..” He looks like he’s trying to recollect the date. “They’re having it at a library in NYC.

“The third weekend in August, so the tryouts are the fourth weekend of August but the show airs in the fall lineup. I just downloaded the application, you have to answer so many personal questions it’s ridiculous. The lineup is downtown, I’m probably going to have to sleep in the street for two or three nights.”

“I’ll pay someone to get you a spot,” Brandon offers.

“Can you do that?” I never even thought of something like that.

“Of course you can, I don’t want you sleeping on the streets of Toronto alone, it’s not safe.”

“Thanks!” I say appreciatively.

“How do you suppose I win Carrie back,” he asks.

“Gifting won’t work because Hunter is loaded, you have to have more day outings with Holly and her. I think you have to win her back with your natural charm.”

“So you’re saying I’m charming?” he smiles.

“Of course! Movie?”

“I thought you’d never ask,” he winks and I melt.

We put the dishes away and find a movie we both agree on. He takes one couch, I take the other. It’s a great night between two friends. I couldn’t have a better one. Sometimes it feels like our relationship is all I need. If he ever reunites with Carrie that might change, but for now it’s all good.

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**So You Think You Can Sing Canada**

Please include current profile photo, childhood photo

Name- Rita

Age- 23

Hair Colour- Dark Brown

Eye Colour- Brown

Height- 5'2

Weight- 122 pounds

Why are you here today? I want a record deal.

Previous Accomplishments? Vocal duets.

How long have you been singing for? A few years.

What song will you sing? Should Have Been There

Does the song have any special meaning to you? I was married to the hockey player who was in that horrific accident with his teammate where he was accidentally slashed in the throat. I know he's in a better place, but it hurts so bad, and I wish I could have been there, and say good-bye to him.

"What do you think?" I flash Brandon.

He takes it from my hand and starts reviewing my answers. He hands it back to me, nodding his approval before he turns his attention back to the television. "Do you think you'll be able to keep it together on stage?" He asks reaching for more popcorn.

"I doubt it, but as long as I don't go flat."

"You're right," he agrees, "you always see those tragic stories, and then the person is a real song bird with tears in their eyes, you're sure to win."

I chuckle, "Will you be there for support?"

"I wouldn't miss it," he reassures me.

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Carrie and I meet up for coffee, she's pumped because it's her final finals and then she's done. I'm psyched for her too. We're looking forward to spending some time together during the summer. I arrive at our regular coffee shop prior to her and order our drinks.

My latte is hot so I blow and stir it for a few seconds before giving up, staring out at the parked cars. I imagine being back at the Patisserie and meeting Slasher, it seems like ages ago. My life has changed so much, but I wouldn't trade my days in with John for anything, it feels like he's watching over me.

Carrie arrives a few minutes into my daydream, appearing war torn, "Are you okay?" I ask concerned.

"I just had an argument with Hunter and then time got away from me, I was going to have a shower after the gym but you would have been waiting too long!"

I sniff the air, "Some things are worth waiting for! She peaked my curiosity, I don't want to ask, but I can't imagine what the infamous Hunter and Carrie fight about. "What were you fighting about?" I ask cautiously, "If you want to talk about it that is."

"Mine?" she points at her coffee, "thanks, believe it or not, it was about you."

"About me? What could you possibly fighting about over me?" I ask skeptically.

"Your date to our wedding, I'm assuming you're coming with Brandon."

"Only as friends!" I tell her crossing my heart and holding up my right hand. "I swear."

"I believe you, just Hunter hates Brandon for obvious reasons."

"He doesn't strike me as insecure," I cast doubt even though I totally believe her and little does she know, he has good reason not to want Brandon at her wedding.

"Hunter's noticed I've been spending more time with him and Holly, to be with Holly of course." It's the first time, I start doubting her true reasons for their visits. Maybe it's not all about seeing Holly, maybe she likes spending more time with Brandon than she's willing to admit, possibly even regretting her decision?

"Of course!" I agree. So he DID take my advice, I smile inwardly. Hunter's a great guy, but I think she belongs with Brandon, her nastiness, is all water under the bridge, I attribute some of it just from the pressure of school. "I entered the singing competition!"

"Oh! That's great!" she gushes, "What song are you going to sing?"

"Should Have Been There, I'm going to pretend John's in the audience," I tell her.

"Oh my, there won't be a dry eye in the entire place," she predicts.

"Tell me you'll come and support me?" I plead, I'd love to have her there.

"You don't have to ask," she agrees. "I wouldn't miss it for the world."

"Brandon's going to be there," I warn her, giving her an out if she thinks she's going to be uncomfortable.

"That's okay," she shrugs sipping her coffee, "Hunter better get used to him, Brandon's Holly's father."

"Right!" I slurp my latte. "Do you have to be anywhere for the next couple of hours? I was hoping you'd help me pick out a dress for the contest."

"I'd love to," she agrees. We hit the mall and it's like old times, only we're shopping at the most expensive stores instead of the cheapest. I pick a conservative costume, nothing too glitzy or sharp, it won't jive with my true life story. I want to step on stage with the judges having little to no expectations that I can sing, and then I will give it all I have.

## 45

### The Competition

The line is crazy long, “We’ll never find him,” I complain to Brandon.

He pulls his phone from his pocket, “Let me try again!” He punches the number in on the keypad and holds the phone to his ear, his other hand is signalling for me to remain patient. I roll my eyes, and scan the crowd near us. Apparently he’s carrying a blue tent and he has a baseball cap with a Toronto team on it. Not the perfect day to wear it considering they are playing tonight and tons of people are wearing the exact same cap in support for their home team.

I see someone who matches the description and hold up a sign with his name hoping it’s him. He waves back at me, I nudge Brandon: “Jackpot!”

I casually stand next to him and he hands me my number and steps out of line walking over to Brandon, Brandon pays him the agreed amount and he takes off. “Must be nice the girl behind me complains, that guy stayed in line for you at least eighteen hours.” She looks vaguely familiar. I try to remember where I’ve seen her before and then it registers, Melissa! Carrie and I used to hang with her until she started fooling around with Carrie’s boyfriend at the time, the infamous Alex. I avoid eye contact hoping she doesn’t recognize me, “Rita!” she greets me enthusiastically. Doesn’t she remember what she did to my best friend? Should I forget all about it and consider it water under the bridge?

Melissa,” I snap, “you, can sing?” My doubt very apparent in my tone.

“Yesss,” she exaggerates.

“Even if you have talent they won’t want your fat ass on stage,” I mock. I don’t even know why I’m talking to her this way, it’s not like she was with John or anything. Carrie’s moved on, maybe I’m being an idiot? I can’t wait to text Carrie and tell her who I bumped into and where!

She pouts, “You’re such a bitch.”

“Cat fight!” Some guy behind us overhears our conversation, nothing better to do obviously.

Brandon shakes his head as warning to me, "I'll see you up on stage, good luck!" he smiles and turns to leave. He spots Alex walking in our direction, they greet each other with hugs and pats on the back. I'm surprised she's still with Alex and realize that not liking her doesn't benefit me in anyway, she was Carrie's fight not mine. If the two guys who fell in love with Carrie can get along after an extensive history with each other, I should be able to get along with Melissa. It's not like she took my boyfriend away. I glance at her and feel guilty for my crappy behaviour. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean that. You're ass is the farthest thing from fat, you look way skinner than when we were teens. You must be tired of waiting in line so long. Will you please forgive me?" I ask.

She notices my tune's changed, "I am and I do forgive you!" She swipes her bangs from her face, "I can't wait to have a shower and go to bed," she shares.

"We're only hours away," I tell her.

Alex hands Melissa a bag, "Good luck," he encourages before leaving with Brandon.

"Such a small world to bump into you here of all places," I comment.

"That's for sure," she agrees, "you want to share this sub?"

My stomach doesn't feel right, I'm not sure if I'm hungry or nerves, "I'd love to," I admit honestly. She opens the bag and pulls out the most amazing sub I've ever sunk my teeth into. Divided in half, I devour my side: hot peppers, assorted meats, mustard, lettuce, delicious! "This is amazing," I tell her.

Her mouth is full of food, she chuckles and covers it to prevent anything from flying out at me, "You know! So are you with Brandon married? I thought the two of you broke up a long time ago? I always thought you two should get together!" She admits.

"No, we're just friends, he's been very supportive since John died."

"I heard about that, I'm so sorry," she places her hand on my shoulder, "Alex was devastated when he heard the news, to be honest with you, he hasn't been the same since. John was one of his best friends and the accident really affected him and even the way he plays now."

I nod understanding, "I know, it was awful. I would never want anything to happen to Alex or Brandon, it's the worst thing I've ever had to deal with. I moved back to Toronto, I'm living like a nun. You have no idea."

"No I don't," she shakes her head and looks down to the ground, "I can't imagine."

I try to look at the bright side, "It's brought me closer to Brandon, and it's honestly nice seeing that you're still with Alex. Does he make you happy?"

"Very, and he's so supportive."

"That's nice," I tell her. Surprisingly, the rest of the time in the lineup flies by. We start talking about Carrie and Hunter who she's never met before and then right before I'm called up Melissa tells me she's expecting her first. It's kind of bitter sweet hearing their good news because it's something I wanted to share John. Maybe one day a different prince charming may knock on my door and I'll be able to have that proverbial baby and family with the man I love. Its when you realize that it's not in your cards that makes you want it even more. I push the thought to the back of my mind as the door opens and I'm herded inside the building with Melissa close behind me.

I need to focus on the task at hand instead of what ifs, and should haves. We are separated into different rooms that are empty with the exception of chairs. They are kind enough to count the people and ensure that we can all sit down. Each room has it's own bathroom and an area to put on makeup. Luckily I'm able to bring everything, so I take a place in front of the mirror and start applying movie star quality makeup. This is the biggest competition I've ever entered and I'm beginning to feel nervous. The hot peppers are finding their way into the back of my throat as my stomach contents threaten an unpalatable return.

The waiting game begins. Some cocky character walks in and chimes instructions with a British accent, "You are being televised, you will walk down a big hall, go onto the elevator, press M. You will walk down another corridor. At the end is a door, you enter it without knocking and you will be greeted by three judges. You take your mark on the x, they will ask you questions and then you sing the song of your choice, no instrumentation allowed? Any questions?"

I feel like I'm going to heave my stomach contents.

"Don't be nervous," he barks.

Tell that to my stomach, I think placing my hand on my abdomen. I look around at everyone else, and I can't possibly be the only one who's this nervous. I see another girl looking pale but maybe that's her normal colouring. I empathize with her. Our eyes lock for a split second and I mouth encouragement, "You've got this."

Her face takes on a look of gratitude and she gives me a thumbs up and mouths 'you too'.

I'm one of the last to be called from our room. I know there's many, because I can hear tons of people practicing through the cracks in all the doors. Cocky guy opens the door and says my number. I pass him and swallow, I'm going to be okay, I tell myself, but I'm full of self doubt. I hit M on the elevator button and wait. I wonder if I'm being watched even here. It's the longest ride of my life. I step off and walk down the longest hallway ever walked until I reach a door. I push it open and see the big x on the ground. I walk to it and look into the lights at my three judges. I see a music critic with an attitude bigger than the presidents, a young pop star, and Slasher. His face is stone, his expression doesn't change. He must know who I am, not even a wink or hint of acknowledgement. I find myself more nervous and wishing I can see Brandon, but this is a stage and the audience is hidden.

A voice from somewhere introduces me, "This is Rita, she was married to the hockey player who died recently from that accident with his teammate. She's going to sing, 'Should Have Been There.'"

Nobody asks me any questions. Slasher clears his throat, "Go ahead."

All the experience of singing with Slasher doesn't help me. No wink, no acknowledgement at all. I let their images fade as I see John before me in a ghost-like appearance. I know he can hear me as his image smiles the deeper into the song I get. Emotion runs through me as every beat of my heart gives me the strength to carry on with this song. I don't feel the tears but I know they are there, I don't feel the nerves because John's with me. We walk on water together. My emotion of guilt is heard in every note of the song, anger drives the hard alto parts and then silence.

I swipe my tears away and wait for crucifixion. It doesn't happen.

Wordlessly, Slasher gets up and comes over to me. He opens his arms and I'm embraced, engulfed in his empathy and he doesn't let go, "I've missed you so much," he says into my hair. Once he releases me, he gives me a ticket, and I've moved onto the next round.

I should be feeling joy, but I walk down the hallway drained of emotion, hollow. I'm reeling with shock, of all people to be a judge, it's Slasher! He hears me sing about John and then hugs me in front of the other two judges. I didn't want the hug to end, it was oddly comforting, guilt forces me to hate myself more for feeling solace in his arms.

I stand quietly in the elevator, stepping off and walking towards the room I started in. I'm released after having made it to the next level with a time and date to come back.

Brandon meets me at the car, "You were beautiful," he compliments, "What did Slasher say to you?"

"You could tell he spoke to me?" I ask worried.

"It wasn't too obvious, but I noticed," he admits.

"He said he misses me." I share with Brandon.

"You don't have to continue with the competition if you don't want to," he offers supportively.

I consider his suggestion but stay silent. "Thanks, but I think I'm okay," I tell him. "You've been so supportive," I place my hand over his, feeling very gracious for all he's done. We drive home with Brandon gushing about how much I knocked it out of the ball park.

I'm expected back on stage in just over a day, but video taping makes it look like we don't leave. I use my time wisely studying all sides of my pillow and retesting the ability of my comforter to keep me snuggly warm as I dream of singing before the judges but instead of Slasher being one of them he's sitting next to John and they are literally friendly with each other, I'm in total shock that they are getting along instead of fighting, making me feel insignificant to both of them and when I open my mouth to sing, nothing comes out.

"You have to get up! You need to start getting ready!" Brandon is sitting at the edge of the bed waking me up. I groan because my dream is being interrupted and the stark reality that he's not the one waking up brings his death back to me like it happened yesterday.

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The room is the same, but the people are different. This is my immediate competition. We are a step closer, ten rooms have dwindled to five, twenty people in each. Cocky guy comes in and dictates the rules, "Congratulations for getting this far! You will be going to the same room to sing, only this time in pairs. This stage is called the Duet of Death, whoever's name is called moves on, the other goes home.

I don't think it can get more intimidating than this. I'm partnered with a meek looking girl named Shawna. They give us our song, which luckily we're both familiar with and we decide to leave the room and find a quiet corner to practice in before we're expected back into our proverbial room.

Shawna unfortunately has the voice of an angel and I feel as though my minutes are now numbered. We practice the song, and she looks at me with a determination that I feel inside my own gut. She's nice I can tell, but right now she's my bitter enemy. If I want to get a record deal with Slasher's record label, I have to annihilate her. It's not going to be easy.

Time passes, and we return to our room. We're called up. We walk to our destiny holding hands, the illusion is that we're supporting each other, inside I want this more than her, more than anyone. My determination is palpable, but so is hers.

The judges ask us what we are planning on singing, but they know because they've dictated our song. This time we're given instrumentation in the background and the world is our stage. We don't just stand on the x, we seduce our judges, drawing them into our song. She's pitchy from nerves, my voice is more perfect than it's ever been.

They call my name and Shauna's reduced to tears. They pull her into a small room off to the side and glorify her loss. In the three minutes and twenty seconds it took us to sing our assigned song, her career has been obliterated. Another four minutes of interview with her as she weeps, and she'll never be seen on Canadian or American television ever again.

I quietly walk down the hallway back to my room. The rest of the room who has yet to sing, cheers me on although they have no idea what I sound like, or who I am and then I'm allowed to go home and come back the next day, I'm hollow inside and know

by tomorrow my competition will be cut in half. On television, the episode is over, they make it look like it's a week later but it's really tomorrow. Time is an illusion.

My anticipation increases as each tryout passes, the possibility of winning the competition becomes more of a reality as the numbers dwindle. Brandon's starting to look at me differently, his eyes star crossed. He's uncomfortably silent in the car, "What if you win?" He asks. He's scared of losing me and his attraction for me is increasing, I can't say the same about him, if anything, my attraction for Slasher is increasing when the spot lights aren't blinding me and they've stopped taping because a drop of sweat has dropped from my face, or the judges need to go to the bathroom.

I look at Brandon's handsome profile, "You actually think I have a chance?" I ask excitedly. It's the first time I've ever had animation hit my eyes.

His hand covers mine and I'm reeling. "I have no doubt in my mind. Your voice is unique, amazing. You have a natural gift," he analyzes.

I flip my hand over and squeeze his fingers with my own, "Thanks, that means a lot to me, you mean a lot to me." He tightens his grip on me and we have a moment, one we shouldn't be having but we are.

"I love you," I gasp shocked with my own confession, "but not the way you should be loved."

He nods, "I couldn't have said it better." When we get back to his place, we get out of the car and he comes over to my side and he holds me tight. Our bodies firmly pressed up against each other, we know this will be our most intimate moment, our only one. "John said if anything ever happened to him, I was to take care of you."

"You have," I reassure him, "You did good by him, and kept your promise," I know those were words he needs to hear and they are honest.

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Our next trial is different. Our competition is halved and we are now placed in groups of five. We are given a practice room for eight hours, one song, two meals, no sleep. Each part is fairly even and we are guaranteed to argue and get on each other's nerves. It makes for good television.

We walk down the hall together like any pop band would. Take the elevator quietly, fist bumping each other for good luck. We take our mark on the X and assign one person to speak to the judges unless they address us individually. Nobody is asked any questions. They announce our group name and wait for the music to begin. Our harmony is bang on but I'm not happy with my mini solo. I think I'm pitchy.

We await as the judges discuss our performance and hold up pictures of us and group them accordingly. Three people are asked to step forward. I'm not one of them. My journey's ended, scrunching my eyes for a fraction of a second longer than a blink before I brace myself. Me and the guy who haven't been called are clutching each other's hand. We know it's the end of the road for us.

Slasher says quietly, "The one's who've stepped forward, you can go home." Me and the other guy look in shock confirming to each other in the pandemonium that we're actually are the one's who've made it through to the next round. We embrace each other as the others have already walked away. After today, they too will never be seen on television again and because their background story isn't interesting enough, they don't get the four minute interview before being cast off. That's it for them. I want to run after them and tell them they weren't better than me, but I don't.

Brandon drives me home and he's glowing with pride, "I wish John could see you," he says excitedly.

"Me too," I admit.

"Do you want to pick up something to eat?" he offers.

"No, I'd rather just order in," I tell him. The rest of the drive I think about Slasher, I'm still surprised he's a judge and wonder if he caught on to me being pitchy and had the judges push me through or not. I decide to text him, asking him if he's giving me any sort of favouritism. He denies it completely which makes me feel better because I would

never want to win just based on knowing certain people, I only want to win if I have talent.

“Who are you texting?” Brandon asks shifting the car in park.

“Slasher, I was just wondering if he’s treating me differently, you know, because I was dating him.”

“You could have asked me,” Brandon says, “you’re the best one there, he’s not treating you differently, but I’m guessing he’s still in love with you.” .

“You think so?” I doubt Brandon’s intuition is correct when he can have anyone he wants.

“I think he transports to another time when he listens to you. the way I do. Things used to be so much simpler before,” Brandon says wistfully, “When I was with Carrie and there was nobody else in the picture.”

“She’s still in love with you, even though she doesn’t know it,” I tell him, “You’ll get your family back one day, I just don’t know when.”

“I wish I was as optimistic as you,” he says sounding sad. We get out of the car and walk to his place holding hands in an unromantic friendly sort of way. We are each others biggest supporters. When we get upstairs, we order our favourite Greek food. I give Brandon all my olives, because I hate them and we drink wine until we’re feeling warm and fuzzy.

I worry about Brandon, he’s taken time off from Hockey to sort through various issues, but deep down, I think he’s done it for me. The team keeps calling him, wanting him back, but he’s not answering the phone. He says he wants to be there for me, but I know there’s something else that’s keeping him off the ice, I don’t know if it’s losing John, his desire to have Carrie and Holly with him as a family. He doesn’t say much and I’m worried about him too.

He’s pouring the last of the second bottle of wine into his glass when I caution him, “Don’t get too drunk.” He looks at me and I feel like a roasted turkey dinner with all the fixings to a starved person. I better get out before it’s too late and we do something we’ll regret, “I think I’m going to call it a night,” I yawn.

“Wait,” he says stopping me. He hesitates. He wants to say something but he’s frozen.

I look at him but he doesn’t continue. There’s a knock on the door. We look at it and then each other. Neither of us are expecting anyone. Brandon advances towards it,

and opens it without looking through the peephole. It's Slasher. I'm taken aback. I wonder how he's found me but I remember the application for the show, we had to put our address on it, it would be easy for him of all people to find my whereabouts.

Brandon's mood drops further, I can tell by his facial expression. He invites Slasher in merely opening the door more for him, and turns to go to his room, "You don't have to leave us," I encourage.

"Let him go," Slasher orders me.

Brandon goes to his room and I feel bad, but my curiosity for Slasher's visit, trumps my concern for Brandon, "What are you doing here?" I ask losing my breath as my blood heats up just by his proximity alone.

"Stop feeling guilty," Slasher's referring to John's death, "it's not your fault." His words gut me and I begin breaking down, because it's so easy for him to say but he doesn't know how I feel. I can't even describe it. "You belong with me, you always have." Our eyes lock, he has no idea the magnitude of sadness or love I have for John, I cling to it not ready to ride waves of guilt that comes from being with Slasher.

I think of the competition, how this visit could jeopardize the legitimacy of possibly winning, "You better go," I encourage. "Maybe we can talk later, when this is all over."

He looks forlorn, "I'd like that."

I see him to the door. It's been an emotional night, I'm glad Holly's grandfather took her for the few days he's had her. Brandon comes out of his room and looks at me wondering what happened and why Slasher left so soon. He didn't have to ask or say anything, I can read his thoughts. "Will you," I ask, not finishing my sentence. He knows what I'm going to ask. I want him to lay down next to me until I fall asleep and then he sneaks back into his room. It's a ritual we've done on the tough nights, when one or both of us aren't doing well. Tonight it's both of us.

"Sure," he responds, following me into my room. We snuggle until I fall asleep and then he sneaks out. I hear him, but don't stop him, I'm afraid if he knows I'm still awake, we might do something I'll regret.

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We have a two day break, the show has twenty singers left, five get voted off and then the t.v. audience begins getting involved voting after every show. The judges are only responsible for reviewing the performances at that point but not sending people home. We have to sing an 80's rock song and a song created by a British artist of our choice. I've been humming and hawing over what songs I want to sing for hours and it's driving me crazy. I connect myself to my music app and search through my favourites trying to select ones that compliment my voice and haven't been overdone recently in previous competitions.

I feel hands cover my eyes while I'm sitting on the couch, "What are you doing?" asks Brandon.

"Picking my songs," I explain frustrated.

"That shouldn't be hard, you can sing the phonebook and make it sound good. I know! Sing a Slasher song, that's a ballsy move that will surprise everyone, nobody will have the nerve to try it, but if you fail.."

I smile at him, "I'll be voted off faster than you can shake a stick."

"Exactly."

"Fine! I will do it," I say up for the challenge.

"Don't listen to me, this could be your big break, you'll be destroying your chance before you get it!" Brandon looks worried.

"What happened to me being able to sing the phone book?" I smile. It's cute how he's self doubting his advice to me. "I'm inviting Carrie and Hunter, you and Holly plus my parents to the rest of the shows. Can you come to them?"

Brandon laughs, "Assuming you make them, I'll try. Only a game will keep me away."

"Thanks!" I say happily before deserting him to practice in my room.

The show is now in front of a live studio audience in a large amphitheatre, in the artsy part of Toronto. Finalists are allowed to have clusters of close friends and family to contribute to the individual stories of the singers. They know mine, about John, I signed a waiver for them to disclose my story to the television audience. Its not the way I want

to be judged but they explain it makes for good television and gets the viewers to relate to the singers.

I swear to myself I'll never watch the show, because I can't bare to hear John's tragic story being retold before every song I sing, the producers will remind the audience what I've had to endure to get to where I am now. Weirdly, I'm kind of proud of myself to get as far as I have with my voice, like Carrie, I had no idea I was skilled in anything at all let alone singing. Maybe one day, she'll write my biography. I should talk to her about it!

I disguise myself, so I don't look like me. My costume is underneath. I'm mimicking slasher in every way possible. He should get a kick out of it. While on stage as I start singing, I'll tear off my disguise and underneath, Im going to be wearing an elegant navy gown with sequence that catches the light no mater which directions they shine in.

My makeup is so dark its almost clownish but under the bright lights and with the evening gown, I think it will be perfect for the stage. Brandon, Carrie, Hollie, and my parents watch a screen backstage. They start my introduction with my John story. I approach the X blinded by the lights.

All the judges have a drink in front of them, an easy way of advertising. Slasher says quietly into his microphone, "What are you going to sing?" but he really knows because I gave him a list.

"'Bloody Hell'," by Slasher I announce.

"Kind of risky, don't you think," he pauses, "Go ahead."

There's a moment of silence before the music starts. I wait until the correct beat and imagine being in concert with Slasher, only he's not singing. I squint to my right and I see Hunter with his arm around Carrie, my parents who seem super proud, and Holly piggy-backed by Brandon.

Every note I do is spot on, I start low and by the middle of the song, I'm belting out the notes like nobodies business. Moms crying and oh my, so is dad. Holly's on the ground now and she's running towards me on the stage with tears in her eyes. I hold my arms out to her and she leaps at me, so proud.

You better go back I say into Holly's ear when the clapping deadens. She quickly scurries off stage and I anxiously await the judges comments. The first judge said its

people like me that make her job easy. The second judge just stands up and claps. Slasher takes a bow, speechless.

My final song, is the last song of the night. When I'm done, the nineteen other contestants get called back onto stage and they announce that five people will be going home. If your name is called, you leave. Mine isn't called. I've made it to the finals. The show has a surprise, this episode, the surprise isn't good, a sixth person is going home, the bottom two are having a sing off. My name is called. I have to pick a song and sing it off the fly. The judges pick me or the guy with the long hair and the gravelly voice. I'm screwed.

Long haired guy goes first. I tune him out picking a contemporary song that just made the top ten. I look at my mom's hands that are almost in prayer fashion and I sing her favourite song. I have a huge lump in my throat as I choke back tears that my dream is ending. John's death is happening all over again and the words come from my broken heart. Slashers shadowed out, but I sense a vibe of support that brings the power back to my voice. I'm crying and the audience is on their feet. Long haired guy comes to stand next to me and shakes my hand. We wait patiently while the judges discuss our performances.

Dead silence as anticipation mounts. Slasher repositions his microphone, "You both sang for your life, and should be very proud of yourselves, but only one of you will move on." A video pops up and long haired guy is cast off the show. He hugs me and I rejoin the others on the couches.

The show divides us into three groups of three and now, we are to go live with the judges for a week of intense training. I've been assigned to Slasher's group, surprise surprise. He shares his expertise and we come back to sing our final three songs. The television audience will pick the final winner which will be announced on the final show that brings back previous winners.

The lights cut out for a second and when they come back on, my eyes land on mom and dad who are so filled with pride, they are crying tears of joy. Immediately I get up and hug them, but I'm unexplainably drawn to Carrie. Hunter steps aside and watches as we hug. She speaks into my hair, "They're both in love with you." I know she's referring to Brandon and Slasher.

The thought of that possibility never crosses my mind, "You're mad!" I tell her.

Hunter's stance is commanding, like he owns the world, his confidence supersedes his brothers. Having Carrie, he has everything, he's complete, they are.

Slasher and the two other contestants stand there waiting for me, I take one last look at Brandon and Holly and that's when I know where I belong. He hands her to Carrie long enough for him to kiss me good-bye, wow is he going to be surprised when he finds out it's hello.

"You go on," I say to Slasher and the other two contestants, "This is where I belong." Brandon scoops me up into his arms and kisses me again, this time like one of those classical movies of all times. The producers are angry but know it just adds to their storyline how the one who was expected to win chose love over a lonely stage. I always knew I would be a hockey wife just didn't know I would be Brandon's. I would have to get help when it comes to my fears of the tragedy of John, but that's what brought me close to Brandon in the first place and we live happily ever after.

Someone grabs my dress and literally tears me away from Brandon, "I'm doing this for your own good!" Carrie's strained voice can be heard from behind me. "You're not thinking straight."

I turn around to fight her off, she's ruining my moment with Brandon, "Stop!"

"You're making a huge mistake," she advocates for me, "You're going to regret dropping out of the competition for the rest of your life!" Brandon appears shocked but nods encouragement to listen to Carrie. Slasher and the other two contestants wait for my decision. I look at Slasher with whom I've had some wonderfully fun times with and Brandon who I'm in love with and then I hesitantly join Slasher's entourage.

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I leave my loved ones behind as we're escorted to a limousine. A cameraman is hiding on the floor of the car as we slowly drive to Slasher's mansion where a portion of the show is to be filmed. The two other contestants are elated talking among themselves about how exciting this is, Elliot's hooded gaze remains fixed on me, "We're not done," he informs me quietly, but not quietly enough. The two girls and the camera man looks over at us. I shrug at them as though I'm clueless. I don't want to be left alone with him when we get there, I'll do whatever it takes. It seems like ages, but we finally pull up to the gates. The driver opens his window and speaks into the intercom and they magically open for us.

We drive up the curved stone driveway to the front majestic entrance, he is so rich. Cedars lining the driveway, woods behind the house, the grand wooden mahogany door, no expense spared, "I've never been here," I say awestruck.

"I bought it with you in mind," he whispers. The other two didn't hear, if they had I would probably be ejected from the show. I turn away from him and leave the car, I feel the cameraman's eyes on my butt. The next scene that's recorded is of us being welcomed to the mansion by Slasher as we sip champagne in celebration. We are showed our rooms told to act giddy and bubbly. The other two are sharing a room, I'm the lucky one with my own, but there's a reason, and I know why.

The nightstand table in the room has an agenda and a list of rules. You are pretty much a prisoner in your room unless they are filming. Luckily my room has it's own bathroom with a shower, and a mini fridge. I'm tired, so I turn the lights out and try to sleep. I know they can be recording me at anytime, I hope I don't snore or fart when I sleep, but I can't control that, so whatever. I hope to dream about Brandon but unfortunately it's John, he was never injured, he comes back to me while I live in my light blue siding bungalow with white picket fence. I answer the door assuming it's a Jehovah's witness or something and I see his face feeling Brandon standing behind me. The look of shock on John's face that I've moved on is destroying as I toss and turn. I sit up in bed startled at the immeasurable guilt I have just for that dream alone and I get out of bed and start pacing. That's when I hear the footsteps, slight knock on the door, and then Slasher's shaded figure.

I stand frozen in my see through nightgown, I know he can see my silhouette.

“Slasher!”

“Stop acting like we don’t have a history, I’m Elliot to you.”

I don’t respond, just return his stare.

“I’ve missed you,” he says advancing on me.

“I should have been with John when I was with you, you have no idea how much guilt I feel.” I confess.

“You love me,” he says confidently. “You always have, you never would have been with me if things were okay with you and John and you know it.”

“I was just starstruck,” I minimize.

“Bullshit!”

He goes to kiss me but I fight him off. I feel vulnerable, and weak. His presence fills the room, his musky scent weakens me more, “Get out!” I growl. “It’s not mutual, and I will never go back. You advance on me and I’ll make sure it becomes a complete media circus, now leave!”

He backs away from me like I’ve burned him, “You don’t know what you’re saying, you’re still grieving.”

“No I’m not,” I correct, “I’ve moved on!” Those three words don’t even convince me as he reaches the door and flees the room. I decide on a shower, like water is going to fix everything including my restlessness but it doesn’t and I try to go back to sleep but I’m ruined.

We are brought in one by one into a room that has a grand piano and microphones and lights everywhere. You can tell that it’s not normally this kind of room, it was converted for the show. Slasher is giving us a singing lesson, this is going to be recorded. His mood is flat and I can tell he’s angry. He plays a song and I’m expected to sing. Luckily he’s given me the words, because I don’t know this particular song by heart.

His advice is cutting, he’s being super-critical, “Try it again.”

He restarts the song and I try harder this time than the last. My voice sounds strained, I can tell he’s hearing it. He looks at me critically and then demands, “Again.”

My eyes are filling with tears, because every restart is worse than the last. He's getting angry, he gets up and throws the music sheets down, "We're done here, keep this up and you're going to lose the record deal."

"I never knew it was mine to lose," I call him out.

"It won't be," he barks and that's the last I see of him until judgement time. Unfortunately, I feel this is my second occasion for THAT.

We gather outside by the pool, it's evening now. We are expected to sing, they can probably hear us from Yonge Street, because we're using microphones. Neighbours are standing on their balconies listening to us. My heart isn't into it, but I know it has to be so Slasher/ Elliot is now John. I'm singing to the ghost of the love of my life, and what was pitchy earlier, is now pitch-perfect. My competitors eyes fill with tears, Elliot's eyes change to black cesspools of jealousy as I belt it out until then there's two, and I'm one of them.

Escorted back to our rooms, I stop dreaming:

Reality has become one.

It's obvious my talent is immeasurable even to the contender that's left. We sing three songs each, it's make it or break it. I've made it. They pretend we've stayed with Elliot a week but it's really been a day, they just show everything at different times, it's all an illusion.

The record deal is mine. They tell me how to act and I follow their instructions to the letter. In a little over a year, a new contest starts and a different singer is chosen. Soon, I'm a faded memory merely asked back to perform a guest appearance. My success is exaggerated when the stark reality is that it never really took off the way they portrayed it to.

Within a year and a half, my life has returned to some semblance of normal.

5 Years Later

Carrie and I manage to purchase mansions next door to each other on Bridal Path (the ritziest area in Toronto), it's been a dream of ours since we hooked up with our other halves making as much money as they do. Our houses look completely different, I live in an old Victorian style house which matches my more sophisticated taste

(although I would never tell her that), and Hunter and Carrie live in an ultra modern every gadget known to mankind incorporated into their beautifully styled home.

She came over to our house with angry tears, "You'll never guess what Hunter contracted out!" she said almost hiccuping.

"Come in the kitchen, Brandon is sleeping," I'm curious what has her coming over at seven in the morning, it's lucky I'm up.

Her face is red with streaks of tears, I hear a loud noise, "What's that?"

She notices, "Hunter's fucking helicopter, its not enough that he has a private plane but he had to buy a stupid helicopter and he wants a landing pad on our HOUSE!"

I consider what she's told me, "Holy! Hospitals have pads on their roofs."

"I'm sure the construction of hospital roofs is more reinforced than our minuscule house, to having helicopters landing on them! He's storming off right now!"

"I'll make coffee, is this your first fight?" I ask out of curiosity. She never comes over to complain about Hunter.

"The first one I've told you about," she shakes her head solemnly. "His mother is right, I never hardly see him and when I do, it's for one thing."

"I don't believe it," I say defending Hunter. "You're always working and flying wherever Brandon's team is playing, so you're not home just as often. I never see either of you."

Carrie shrugs, "He knew what he was getting into when he married me."

He didn't though, "That's not true, you said you wanted to be a physiotherapist, you never said you were going to be travelling all over North America with Brandon's team, he only flies between New York and Manchester England."

"You always take Hunter's side," she says bitterly taking a sip of her coffee.

"Because yours comes with a double standard," I admit honestly.

"Any food?" She asks. I search out the fridge, old brownies, better than nothing. I take the dish out and place them in front of her.

"Thanks," she says picking one up and biting it, then she taps it against the dish, "kind of hard. How are you and Brandon doing?"

"Not bad," I dwell on her rudeness over the brownie. "He's flying out to Tampa Bay this afternoon for a series."

"I know, are you going?" She asks.

"No, not this time." I admit.

"I'll keep an eye on him for you," she reassures.

I'm sure she will, it feels like she sees him more than I do. (We plan on getting married but we haven't set a date yet.)

She stays for a while and I make her breakfast. When her mood is better she goes back to her house. I spend the day cleaning mine and doing Brandon's laundry before he leaves for his games. I have three days of complete boredom to endure. No boyfriend or best friend, nothing but cleaning and taking care of Holly to fill my time.

Brandon's losing to Tampa Bay, it's the second game of three. The doorbell rings. I can't imagine who it can possibly be, so I look out the peephole before opening the door. It's Hunter, strange that he's here.

"Hello?" I greet.

"Hello," he responds waiting for me to invite him in expectantly.

I step aside and let him walk in, "What can I do you for? Carrie's not here."

"I know, I didn't come for Carrie, I want to speak to you."

My curiosity is peaked, Hunter Hot Pants is coming over to speak to little old me? "Can I get you a drink?"

"Scotch," he orders taking a seat in front of the television. "The teams not losing because of him," he tells me.

"Thanks," I don't know what else to say. "What brings you by?" I can't contain my curiosity any longer.

"Slasher called me, he wants to know if you've finished with the hockey jock, his words not mine."

It's been over five years, he can't still be thinking about me, I've totally moved on, "You've got to be kidding, he just called you up out of the blue and asked if I'm still with Brandon."

"For the most part, yes," he says.

"Does Carrie know you are here?"

"I haven't spoken with her in a few days," he admits, "we're disagreeing with a landing spot."

"I've heard, she doesn't think your roof is strong enough for a pad."

"It's more than that, will you see him if I can arrange it?"

"Your brother? I won't I'm with Brandon."

"Just talk to him," Hunter encourages.

"It's a waste of time, tell him thanks, but no."

Hunter studies me, "He's in love with you," he advocates for his brother. He puts the scotch to his lips and gulps it back. "He hasn't stopped going on about you since the show."

"I find that hard to believe," I respond self-consciously. "Do you want another drink?"

"Sure," he says handing me back his glass. He's made himself comfortable in Brandon's chair, his legs crossed, slightly reclined.

I go into the kitchen and pour him a taller whisky than before. He's obviously drowning something. I come back with two glasses, deciding to join him last second. I hand him his and then sip mine. It burns slightly going down. He smiles seeing I've joined him, "You sure your roof is strong enough to hold up a helicopter?"

"Most definitely, a jet no, a helicopter yes." He says quietly never moving his gaze from the television set.

"Then I'll talk to Carrie," I offer.

"How about Slasher," he makes another attempt. "Just meet up with him for drinks."

"I'm in a committed relationship," I argue.

"Where's the ring," he clips.

"It's coming," I answer defensively, "I'm getting another scotch, you want more?"

"Top her," he commands.

I leave and return with the bottle, filling his glass then mine, "Your parents didn't like me."

"Not true," he answers before gulping his entire glass again. "Does the player treat you well?" he asks.

"Yes," I blur the truth.

Hunter stares at me point blank, "Carrie told me, you caught Brandon flirting with a fan when you surprised him at a game."

"That was just one of the players sisters he was talking to," I explain.

"And you believed him," he says casting doubt.

"I have no reason not to."

“Get your head out of the sand,” he blasts. We watch the game in silence. I’m left with suspicions of Brandon cheating on me. He gets an assist but still ends up losing the game.

I nod off, Hunter’s gone and I’m magically covered with a blanket. I wake up alone, and remember what Hunter said to me. Maybe Brandon is cheating, they all do. Carrie can’t keep her eye on him all the time. She’s more of a threat to me than his fans are! Hunter is probably picking up on that.

Brandon’s looking out our window at Carrie’s house, “They’re getting something done over there.”

“A helicopter pad,” I tell him.

“Wow, must be nice to know how to fly,” he says tinged with jealousy.

“Carrie didn’t want it, she thought the roof would cave in, he came over asking me to talk her into it,” I chuckle. “We watched your game together!”

“How did you manage it, we played so shitty!”

“A lot of whisky,” I grin. “You’re not cheating on me are you?” I ask innocently.

“No! What did he say?” He asks defensively.

“He didn’t really say anything, just suggested that you weren’t with that players sister like you said you were.”

“He comes into MY house and accuses me of CHEATING? He has a lot of nerve!”

“Judging by your reaction, maybe you are,” I accuse.

I wish Hunter never implanted the idea in my mind, for five years I had no suspicions, I wanted to trust Brandon.. Now I look at him with furrowed brow and think there’s no way he’s gone five years travelling all over North America without having some sort of affair, “Admit it,” I drill.

“No I haven’t” he denies but his eyes give him away, he can’t even look at me. I don’t know what to do but walk out our front door and go to Carrie’s. I ring their doorbell sure someone is looking at me through their security cameras.

Seconds later Hunter is opening the front door for me, “Carrie’s at her fathers for a couple of days,” he informs me impatiently. “I have workers on the roof,” he explains.

“You were right,” I tell him.

He looks confused, “About what?”

"Your suspicion of Brandon cheating on me, it was spot on! That the players sister was more than just a friend, you were right." He still looks like he doesn't understand, "Tell Carrie to call me when she gets back," and I leave. I go back to my house but I avoid Brandon like the plague. I don't want to have it out with him, not now anyway. I always assumed he would probably cheat on me being away from home so often, but I was hoping he was different than the rest, I even ask myself why I think I'm any more special than all the other players wives.

I hear the weights smacking against each other from our home gym and know where Brandon is. I run upstairs and put my bathing suit on and go by the pool. When the sun hits my face I concentrate on the feeling and make every effort to relax. I feel oddly uncomfortable and squint against the rays of the sun, someone is staring at me. I glance in all directions slowly until I spot Hunter watching me.

I wave hello and he strolls in my direction. "You're too good to allow someone to cheat on you," he says casually, "Leave the sob and give my brother a chance."

"Elliot was a lot of fun, but I'm sure he's moved on." I groan. "Brandon's given me a good life, look where we live," I use as an example.

"Fucking guy doesn't stop going on about you," Hunter complains.

The french doors open and Brandon stands on guard in the frame, "What bullshit are you feeding Rita now?" he asks aggressively.

"Nothing that can't be validated," Hunter doesn't back down.

My gut is to get rid of Hunter so Brandon doesn't get irritated, but I imagine him in someone else's arms, and I don't want Hunter going anywhere.

"I think you better go," Brandon warns.

"Will you be okay," Hunter asks.

"I don't want you going anywhere," I tell Hunter.

"You heard her," Hunter says to Brandon coolly. He turns around and slams the door behind him.

I high five Hunter, "Thanks!" I say appreciatively. "I'm so disappointed in him." I confide.

"You can do so much better," Hunter reminds me yet again.

"Elliot?" I question.

"For one," he smiles with a hint of flirtation. He's never flirted with me before, it must be in my imagination, or Carrie's been gone too long, enough for him to get lonely, or the sun is hot on his head and he can't think straight.

"Are you flirting with me," I come right out and ask, like its completely impossible.

"What if I am," he says in a sexy tone.

"You better not be, you're with my best friend!"

He pulls his phone from his pocket and fiddles with it for a few minutes, "I think you need to see this."

He hands me his phone, it's a video. It's Carrie and Brandon, they're getting intimate. It's in a hotel room recognizable to me, the last one I remember visiting Brandon at, on one of his away games. "I haven't confronted her yet. I was suspicious, and I had them followed."

"How can they do that to us?" I ask aghast.

He plays with his goatee in thought, "They have an extensive history, obviously it's not over for them."

"I'll never forgive her," I hiss.

"Nor will I," he admits.

"What now?" I ask. That's when he kisses me. I slap him hard, "What are you playing at? I just found out something horrible about my best friend and Brandon who I was going to spend the rest of my life with, and you're taking advantage of me! I'm so angry!"

He kisses me again, and this time more aggressively. "You belong with me," he claims. I struggle pushing him away. He gets more assertive, deepening his kiss. "I want you."

"Just like that? This is coming out from left field," I say pushing him away.

"Just like that," he takes me back into his arms overpowering me.

"I was with your BROTHER," I remind Hunter. "You and I can never happen!" Every kiss feels better than the last, oddly more familiar. That's when I realize its not Hunter, "You're not!"

He pulls away long enough to grin, "Start a new life with me!" Elliot pleads. I barely need to consider it before saying YES!

It's Slashers best disguise ever! All done with the intentions of winning me back. We live happily ever after.

Brandon and Carrie's love was strong enough to prevent them from staying away from each other, so they got back together and raised Holly as a family. Hunter hot pants had no problems getting over Carrie who cheated on him, and secured a new relationship and has moved back to Manchester.

The End