




PRU SCHUYLER

FIND ME

under the stars

THE  NIGHTHAWKS SERIES BOOK THREE

**FIND ME
UNDER
THE
STARS**

PRU SCHUYLER

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About the Author

OTHER BOOKS BY PRU SCHUYLER

For my Tree, Joe, you really were bigger than the whole sky.

This book is dedicated to the badass warriors who go to war with cancer. You are incredible, and I am forever in awe of your strength, your bravery, and the battles you fight in both the light and the dark.

TRIGGER WARNINGS



May contain spoilers; proceed with caution.

Cancer

Cancer diagnosis

Parent death not depicted,
but mentioned multiple times

Death of a child

PLAYLIST



“Bigger Than the Whole Sky” by Taylor Swift

“All I Ask” by Adele

“Dancing With Your Shadows” by Phillip Phillips

“LOOK AT YOU NOW” by Gabriela Bee

“Cruel” by VOILA!

“Dead Man” by David Kushner

“exile” by Taylor Swift, featuring Bon Iver

“What Was I Made For?” by Billie Eilish

“Haunted (Taylor’s Version)” by Taylor Swift

“you broke me first” by Tate McRae

“Breakeven” by The Script

“You’re Losing Me” by Taylor Swift

“Work Song” by Hozier

“The Night We Met” by Lord Huron

“Love Should Be Easy” by Zoe Wees

PROLOGUE



CHARLOTTE

TWO YEARS AGO

Social sleuthing is a skill I think all women are born with; we are basically unpaid FBI agents when we want to be. For the last hour, I have been doing some deep digging on Mr. Reed Larinski. After Cam set me up with his friend, of course the first thing I did was find all of his social media pages. He's a professional hockey player for the New York Nighthawks. *Hot*. He barely posts on any of his pages, but I did find a few people he had tagged in his posts, including his sister and mom. I found most of my information on his mom's page because it was public.

She is so proud of him, and they appear to have a really sweet relationship. I love a man that loves his family. His mom dotes on her children, both Reed and his little sister, Abby. Abby loves Barbies, their fluffy white cat named Bella, and Disney *anything*. Abby has Down syndrome, and their family seems to be huge supporters of National Down Syndrome Society. She looks like the happiest teenager I've ever seen. Endless photos of Abby, Reed, and their mom are plastered on his mom's socials, but I didn't see a single one of his dad. I'm guessing he's not in the picture, or perhaps he passed away.

I can't believe how cute of a baby Reed was. Like, he could have been a kid model if he wanted to. He had the fullest and most luxurious head of hair I've ever seen. Same with Abby. She is gorgeous! What is in this family's genes? They are all good-looking.

After I finish completely digging through his family's pages, I decide he looks like a decent guy, and I shoot him a

text at the number Cam gave me.

*Me: Hi. Is this Reed? Cam gave me your number.
This is Charlotte.*

Perfect. Simple, short. Not too desperate.

Text bubbles appear immediately, and a response comes through not a minute later.

*Reed: Hey, what's up? Yeah, he told me about it,
LOL. You're coming to Fireflies tonight, yeah?*

Me: I sure am!

Reed: Good. I want to meet you. ☺

My heart begins beating erratically, and my palms start sweating as I answer his text.

Me: I want to meet you too. ☺

He doesn't answer as fast this time, and I worry that maybe the smiley face was a bit too forward.

Reed: Tell me about yourself. What are you into?

Oh my God, the smiley face was not too much. Thank God.

*Me: I love rom-coms, hanging with my nephew,
occasional reading, chocolate croissants, and sloths.*

*Reed: Sloths? LOL, that's a fun fact, for sure. Have
you ever met one?*

Me: No, sadly. One day, I hope.

Reed: Attachment.

I click on the image and see the cutest thing imaginable. Reed is sitting on a bench at what looks like a zoo exhibit. But the best part is the fluffy, soft sloth hanging from his arm. Reed's smile ... God, it is beautiful. It makes me want to melt and has me feeling all hot inside.

Me: No way! I'm so jealous!

Reed: Maybe I'll have to take you there sometime.

Oh, he is a little flirt. And I am totally falling for it.

Me: I would like that. ☺

Reed: I'm excited to meet you tonight.

Me: Me too.

As I hit Send, my lip is pinched so hard between my teeth that I think I might break skin. I feel so giddy that I want to run around the room and squeal. I hope our banter and communication are just as good in person as they are in texts.



Fireflies is always a good time. The music is blaring, the lights are pulsing to the beat, and everyone is having a blast. The floors have sensors in them that light up with every step you take, creating an insane light show all night long. The atmosphere is perfect. On top of the aesthetic, safety for everyone is their number one priority and they take it very seriously. They offer a bag check in where you can check your bag in with the bar and pick it up before you leave with your digital ticket. They also have free tester sticks that you can stick in your drink at any time that tests for the drugs most commonly snuck into people's glasses.

Laura and I are waiting at the bar for the guys, and we check our bags in with the stunning bartender who has the automated system text us our digital ticket for pick up, before storing them in the locked boxes.

Turning around, I have to physically keep my jaw from falling to the floor. Is this a goddamn dream? Because that is the most attractive human I have ever seen. He literally looks like a Greek God.

His smile pulls at his lips, revealing pearly-white teeth. "Hi, you must be Charlotte."

Is it wrong if I jump him right here?

He stalks up to me, and my gaze shifts nearly straight up in the air to hold his stare. Is this a prank? Is he a hologram? I

literally cannot grasp that this man exists and is standing in front of me.

Oh my God, I haven't said anything yet. I've just been staring at him.

"Hi!" The word comes out far too forced and excited. Calming myself, I answer normally, "Yes, I'm Charlotte. You must be Reed."

He nods and says, "Yes, ma'am."

Peeking to the side, I see Laura deep in convo with Cam. As I turn back to tall, blond, and, handsome, I begin to ask, "Do you want to d—"

"Care for a dan—shit, sorry. I didn't mean to cut you off," he apologizes with a shy smile.

"Dance? I would love to," I coo.

He stretches out his hand, and I take it, letting him lead us into the chaos on the floor. His hand is softer than I pictured them being. His fingers intertwine with mine as we come to a stop.

"You are so fucking beautiful, Charlotte." His voice is deeper now, and it causes tingles to run down my spine.

My face is on fire, and I know my cheeks are redder than they've ever been. "Thank you."

He smiles, and I can't take my eyes off of his lips. They are so plump and juicy. I want to feel them on mine so badly.

As we slowly dance to the music together, we drift closer, and soon, his hands are on my waist, and my hands are on his chest. His firm, muscular chest that I would like to use as a pillow.

Batting my eyelashes up at him, I lick my bottom lip.

He clears his throat, and his fingers hook into my side, pulling me ever closer to him. "Is it too forward if I ask for your permission to kiss you right now?"

I think I might screw him on this floor if he asked me.

“I don’t think it’s too forward. And, yes, please kiss me.” I chuckle.

He lightly grabs my jaw and tilts it upward as he lowers his head down.

“God, you are stunning,” he whispers against my lips right before pressing them gently into mine.

Oh my God, I think I might have died and gone to heaven.

Is it too soon to want to marry this man? Because the way his lips fit perfectly with mine has me feeling like we might be soulmates.

The tip of his tongue slides along the seam of my mouth, and I part them slightly, granting him access. His tongue strokes mine with precision and skill. Enough to pull the softest moan from deep within me.

He deeply chuckles as he pulls away, blushes, and says, “Sorry, I might have gotten a bit carried away. I don’t know what came over me.”

Holding my hand up against his chest, I purse my lips. “Please don’t ever apologize for that. In fact, if you want, do it again and again.”

A real laugh leaves him this time, and he brushes his thumb along my bottom lip. “Like right now?” he teases before bringing his lips a mere centimeter from mine.

“Yes.” My voice is barely a whisper, vibrating against his lips in the deafening club.

He smiles as his kisses me again, and I know that however this night ends, I’m screwed. Because I am going to fall head over heels for this boy.

CHARLOTTE

As a little girl, I always dreamed of meeting Prince Charming, falling in love, and living a real-life fairy tale. But no one warns you about what can happen after you check the first two boxes.

What happens when life gets in the way of your *happily ever after*? What happens to all the plans you made? Do they live on with someone else, or are they gone forever?

I want answers because I think my biggest fear is about to come true, and I need to find some way to cope.

“Can you repeat that, please?” My voice is a mere whisper as shock rocks my body back and forth in this uncomfortable plastic chair.

I must have completely heard her wrong. I know what I think she said, and with every fiber of my being, I pray to let it not be true. Blood pounds in my ears, her words a haunting echo in my mind. It doesn’t matter how hard I plead and beg. My prayers go unanswered.

“I’m sorry, Charlotte. The tests didn’t have the results we hoped for. It was determined that the cells are cancerous and have spread to nine of your lymph nodes. You have been diagnosed with Stage 3C breast cancer. There are treatment options, and I want to discuss them with you so that we can get started as soon as possible,” Dr. Benson says.

The room around me spins, and my vision goes blurry. She has to be wrong. The tests *have* to be incorrect. There’s no way this is real.

As if it’s even a possible explanation, I question if she’s playing a prank on me. Obviously, the chances of that are low, but part of me hopes that maybe she thinks this is funny. But

the concern and seriousness in her eyes kill all the hope I have left.

My heart starts to race, and my breathing quickens with each passing second.

I pinch my arm—*hard*. I need to wake up from this nightmare. I try again, pinching myself hard enough to bruise. But the nightmare only continues.

This can't be happening right now.

It was only a couple of weeks ago that I went in for a routine checkup, and now, I'm sitting in an oncologist's office, about to lose my goddamn mind. It was just supposed to be a *stupid* checkup. That's it. My doctor was going to do an annual examination, like they always do, give me shots that I need, and tell me to go on my way. I supposed they did all of that. It just didn't end there.

I feel like no one prepares for that appointment to go poorly. Maybe it's because it becomes so routine and normal throughout the years. But not this time. At the exam, the doctor finds a lump on my breast, and then it's like everything around me starts falling apart.

Old feelings that I sealed in a bulletproof box inside of my heart are beginning to fire themselves against the walls I worked so hard to build, creating little cracks. It had taken a long time to trap them in there, and I never wanted to feel *this* again. The emptiness of absolute dread. Feeling like I have no say in my fate. *Defeat* isn't a strong enough word to encompass the way I feel right now. I feel like I'm staring Death in the face and waiting for him to either walk away or drag me with him.

I convinced myself a long time ago that this would never happen to me. I did all the right things. I've stayed active and fit. I've limited my drinking, aside from a handful of times a year. I've never smoked or done any drugs. I have always taken my vitamins. I did everything I physically could to make this very moment impossible. And it was all for fucking NOTHING!

I want to *SCREAM*.

Images of my mom lying in that dreaded hospital bed flash in my mind. My beautiful and strong mother fought this battle before—this *exact* one. She is the source of my cautious behavior all these years.

I watched her wage a war against cancer. She gave it everything she had. Each day seemed harder on her than the last, and although she tried to hide it behind shaky smiles, my dad and I both knew how much pain and discomfort she was in. That feeling, being unable to help the one you love when they need it most, is *torture*. It's like a wall exists between you and them, and no matter how much you try to tear it down, you never can reach the other side and pull them back to you.

I wanted to do that so desperately for my mom. I wanted to trade my life for hers or take her pain as my own even though I know she would never want that. Even after she accepted that fighting was no longer an option, I never stopped, not until her last breath.

It was equally detrimental, seeing my dad watch the love of his life disintegrate before him. He had never been a very emotional man, but that changed the minute she was diagnosed. He cried every day leading up to her passing, and it seemed like he never stopped afterward.

My dad wasn't the same after she died. He was distant, always moving through life without any passion. I truly believe his happiness died with her. He lost his spark the day we lost my mom, and he's never gotten that back. He doesn't laugh or smile. I can barely even remember what his laugh sounded like.

This is going to *kill* him, and I have to deliver the deadly blow. I can't even think about that right now. I won't be able to do that to him. I won't be the final nail in his coffin.

The doctor's lips move, but I don't hear anything.

My hand fists my shirt, and I realize I'm hyperventilating, clutching my chest.

What the hell? When did this start?

“Deep breaths.”

That’s what the doctor said, I realize, my brain finally registering it. I force myself to inhale deeply and fill my lungs slowly.

My throat and eyes burn a blazing fire that I can’t put out. But I fight it as best I can, not wanting to break apart in here, in front of her.

My ears seem to be working again as I hear the doctor say, “There we go. Slow exhale and repeat.”

I focus on my breathing, trying to block everything else out. I exhale, counting in my mind for eight seconds, then expelling it.

One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight.

Although I’m still quivering, I can feel my breathing beginning to even out. But the second I shift my focus back to the doctor, I feel like all progress I made goes out of the door.

“Fuck!” I whisper-shout, needing a release before I explode. *I can’t do this.* My head snaps up to the doctor, and I immediately apologize, slightly embarrassed at my outburst. “I’m sorry.”

She smiles kindly with pity in her eyes, which stings more than I’d like. “Don’t apologize, please. I understand.”

“I’m guessing this isn’t the part where you say *just kidding?*” My voice begins to tremble, and a lump forms in my throat. I scoff at how ridiculous that probably sounded.

She sits forward in her chair, smiles softly, and says, “I wish that were the case. But I think that would probably be deemed unethical if I told patients fake test results.”

A haunting chuckle leaves my throat, and I do my best to hold the pooling tears in my eyes from falling down my cheeks. Taking another shaky breath, I exhale, and my body seems to cool. For just a split second, my mind zones out.

The sadness and anguish coursing through me quickly boils into anger, and my fists clench in my lap. This isn’t fair! How is this even real right now?

The audacity of cancer to strike both my mom and me nearly identically is almost humorous, in the darkest of ways. In a fucked-up way, I feel close to her again. But that is the smallest sliver of a silver lining.

I know logically that cancer can be treated. There are options to help eradicate it, options to heal you. But I also know that my mom's cancer was Stage 2. They caught it fairly early before it spread too far. They did all of the best treatments. But it didn't matter; it took her anyway. And now, it's come to take me too.

My doctor's calm voice pulls me from the spiral of dread building in my chest. "We are going to want to start treatment right away. I know this is a lot to process. It's overwhelming and scary. But I will walk you through everything every step of the way."

She attempts to assure me and calm me down. I know it's not her fault. I know she didn't give me cancer. She is simply the messenger, but I can't help but shoot her anyway.

"How soon is right away?" I snap, immediately checking myself back into my lane. "Sorry."

Take another deep breath.

She glances at the floor and back up, meeting my gaze with another soft and friendly look, saying, "Monday."

"Monday?!" I shout. "It's *Friday*."

"I know. But the sooner we begin the treatment, the better the chances are at ridding your body of it. You would have your port installed and then immediately begin your first treatment." She reaches into her desk and pulls out two folders full of papers before continuing, "I have some reading material here for you. Please read through most of this prior to Monday. The nursing staff will help explain more on Monday as you begin your first round of chemotherapy and answer any of your questions. What does your schedule look like on Monday? You are going to want to take about ten days off from work and any activities to rest and recover after your first time."

Gulping, I try to remember everything she said, but I can still only focus on one word—*Monday*.

I have *three* days to tell Laura I am going to need time off of work. *Three* days to get myself mentally ready to start this. *Three* days to tell Reed—

Oh God, no ... not Reed.

Mustering all my strength, I block everything out. All my worry, grief, and anger.

“What time on Monday?” I force the question out, biting the inside of my cheek hard enough to break the skin.

“Would one in the afternoon work?” she asks, typing into her computer.

“Yes. One p.m. Got it.” The words taste like acid.

I am just going to pretend this is some weird role-play with an oncologist. I don't have cancer. I'm not sick. I don't have to tell Laura, or Reed, or anyone. I am in one long role-play.

Eventually, everything will be back to normal. *I can do that*. I can pretend. Right now, I think that's the only way I'm going to get through this.

“Okay. Got you down here. Please read through what you can this weekend.” She pulls out another slip of paper and adds it into my pile. “This will give you all the instructions you need to find the treatment center. But if you have any issues or questions, you can call the number in the top-left corner.”

“Okay. Thank you.” The words are almost robotic as they leave my lips.

“Please don't hesitate to call my office if you need anything, okay?” she offers kindly, a shy smile pulling at her lips.

She rises from her desk, signaling me to do the same.

I mirror her, standing up from my seat and stepping toward the door. “Thanks again.”

She smiles politely and opens it for me. “Thank you, Charlotte. We’ll be in touch.”

The second I’m through the doorframe, tears are pooling in my eyes. I want more than anything to run to Reed right now. But that is the last thing I will let myself do. All I can picture when I think about him right now is my dad and how losing my mom absolutely broke him.

I can’t do this. I can’t be sick. I just can’t.

Questions and what-ifs begin running through my mind as I’m walking to my car, and before I know it, I’m sitting in my front seat and wringing my hands on the steering wheel until my knuckles go white. So much for role-playing. I think I can cut myself some slack though for having a break of character.

Is this feeling my new *normal*? Feeling somehow checked out while also acutely aware of the horror of my reality.

Trying to take another deep breath, I start my car and attempt to clear my mind so I can at least get back to Reed’s house in one piece.

As I drive toward his house, I begin counting the trees that I pass, people, signs, cars, anything to take my attention off of myself. As long as I keep doing that, I’ll be okay.

It doesn’t take long for that strategy to fail before I can’t stop thinking about Reed, my mom, Laura, Josh, and my dad—a torturous cycle, where thinking of one only makes me think about another and the pain this will cause them.

What will they think? Will they feel the same way I did with my mom?

When my mom first passed, I couldn’t picture her without seeing the image of her in a hospital bed, weak and frail. It took me a long time to replace that image with one of my favorite ones of her—where she is wearing this oversize sun hat and a flowery, colorful dress. She was glowing that day.

Since then, I have trained my brain to picture *that* image instead of one of her last moments. But as hard as I try right now, the only vision of my mom I can see is one of her in pain

and misery. I can't help but think that everyone I love will soon have that experience when thinking about me.

The memory of my mom's last days brings intense feelings of sorrow back—for my loss, for my dad's, and for anyone who was blessed enough to feel my mom's love.

My parents had a love story that everyone dreams of having. They were *so* in love and only seemed to fall more and more so with each other as time went on. They were the inspiration behind my obsession with happily ever afters.

Did they have a perfect marriage? No, of course not. No one does. But they worked at their relationship every day as a team. It was always them versus whatever the problem was, not them versus each other.

I grew up watching fairy tales in cartoons and movies, but seeing theirs in real life was so much more impactful. Then, I watched it burn to the ground, witnessing the joy and happiness drain from my father. I learned that happily ever after doesn't always mean *forever*. But it never stopped me from wanting to find love like they had, and I did. I found that happiness with Reed, and now, life decides to ruin it.

How can I ask him to be by my side through this? How can I ask him to follow the same fate as my father?

By the time I pull into his driveway, I am in the same state of insanity and chaos as I was before. But somehow, now, being at Reed's home, a place I'm in almost every day, makes the last hour and a half feel like a horrible fever dream. For now, I'll take it. Any moment of reprieve is welcome.

Reed is gone for today and gets back tomorrow from an away game. As much as I want him to hold me, I'm thankful he's not here right now. I don't think I could handle telling him, and I know he would be able to tell that something is obviously wrong. On top of it, I'm not ready to even fully admit it to myself yet, let alone say it out loud to him.

He knew I had to stay back from traveling with the team for their game because I had an appointment. But he thought it was just a checkup with my gynecologist, not my *oncologist*.

I just didn't tell him about the real issues leading up to this appointment, I hoped everything would work itself out, and I would never have to. Honestly, I thought it was going to be okay. I didn't think it would reach this point.

We see how well that fucking went.

I wish I could have skipped the appointment and gone with the team, like I was supposed to. I would be with them right now, getting ready for the game, probably laughing at something the guys are doing, and having the time of my life. Instead, I found out that all the plans I made for Reed and me might never come true.

Opening his garage door, I park inside and close it behind me, immediately overwhelmed by Reed's scent. I've been so good, or at least moderately decent, at keeping myself together, but being surrounded by the smell of the one person who has my entire heart is weakening my resolve.

My eyes well with tears as I enter his house. That glass cage in my chest is beating, vibrating ferociously, and I know what's about to happen. An inevitable moment that I tried to prevent. Without any thought, I kick my shoes off, walk into the living room, and grab my favorite blanket. I wrap myself in it like a burrito and throw myself on the couch right as the cage shatters into a million pieces and tears pour down my face.

The worst thing about this diagnosis isn't fighting for your life; it's watching the light fade from the one you love. And I refuse to subject Reed to that.

REED

Gearing up for a game always gets my heart pumping. Knowing that we are minutes away from the puck dropping on the ice has goose bumps rising up on my arms. We're playing the Washington Wild tonight, the top scoring team in the league. That doesn't mean they are automatically going to win; it just means that they're really good at offense, and our defense is going to have to be fucking *on it* tonight.

It would be a bit easier if they had just one sniper that we had to watch out for, but their team is stacked across all lines, this season especially. They seem to be melding together and flowing like never before. On top of it, they're undefeated so far this season. It's intimidating sometimes to go up against a good team like this. But nothing is more satisfying than beating an undefeated team and ending their win streak. Which is *exactly* what we're going to do tonight.

"Let's go, boys!" Jency—Jensen Donnelley—shouts over the blasting music in our "wet" locker room as we get ready.

Every NHL facility has a wet and a dry locker room for each team. A dry locker room is where we leave our arrival clothes and belongings. We use the wet locker room to get ready, between intermissions, et cetera. We're sweaty, and we don't want our hockey stench to leak into our normal clothes, so we use a wet room while we're in our "wet" gear.

All the guys shout along with him, the energy in the room rising until it's almost palpable.

"All right, guys. You know what we're up against tonight. Play your game, do your jobs, and let's head back home with a win." He takes out the starting lineup sheet. "Kos."

Kos—Alec Kostecky—springs out of his seat and snatches the paper from our coach, Nathaniel Carrington.

Coach Carrington is our head coach and relatively new to the team, taking over after the idiotic one we had previously got involved in Kos's personal life by trying to run his girlfriend and son, Laura and Jack, away.

Coach Carrington has quickly become one of the best coaches I've ever had. He can be a hard-ass, but the best ones usually are. But what's most impressive is the way he sees the game before it happens; it's crazy, like fucking psychic-level crazy. He can read players and what they are going to do far before they even make the move.

Coach Carrington stands in the middle of the room and says, "We've studied the Wild. We know their game, we know their lines, and we are a better team than them. They play offense heavy, but don't underestimate their defenders. They know when to strike and are good at staying out of the penalty box. We need to do the same tonight. Play every second as if it were the last in the game and we were down by one. Let's kill their streak, huh?" He smirks and nods at Kos, who takes his place in the middle.

Kos starts the beat with his hands, clapping to the same rhythm we use every game to announce our starters in the locker room.

"We got ME," he yells over the clapping.

The team and I all respond on beat with various cheers.

"Yeah!"

"COSTY!" Cam Costello.

"Yeah!"

"BURNSY!" Brett Burns.

"Yeah!"

"D man number one, Goldy!" He announces one of my hockey nicknames, although starting isn't a surprise, as I'm always on the same line as Costy, Burnsy, Kos, and Jency.

Not all lines usually stay the same. Of course, if a player is out, underperforming, or injured, lines shift and shuffle to see what else will work. Thankfully though, that's almost never happened to our line.

“Yeah!”

“JD!”

“Yeah!”

Everyone on the team has nicknames. Some that are used in moments like this, where we are with a bunch of staff and coaches. Then, there are a few nicknames that are used more between just us players. Not saying that we never use those in front of coaches because we do, just less frequently.

The most common nicknames the guys use for me is Goldy. A few seasons ago, when I grew my hair out for playoffs, a couple of the guys started calling me Goldilocks, and it stuck.

Kos announces the starting goalie. “And between the pipes is MACAROONIE!”

Matt MacArthur is our main goalie, and a rockstar on the ice.

Macaroonie, Mac and Cheese, Macaroon, MacArthur, King Arthur, Macky, Mack Attack—the list goes on.

“Yeah!”

The team cheers and grunts and huddles together as Kos continues to shout over us all, “Let's go, boys! Play smart, and let's get another fucking win!”

The locker room erupts, somehow even louder than before, and we head to the ice, following our starting goalie, Macky.

The arena is barely alive as we step onto the ice, which quickly changes the moment we knock the puck pyramid from the top of the board and skate out.

The cool breeze drifting up from the ice feels so good as I grab a puck and skate toward the goal, snapping it and dumping it into the top shelf of the net.

There are a bunch of fans against the glass with signs. As I skate around, I try to read some of them. There's a fifty-fifty chance that the sign is from a kid, asking for a puck, or it's a puck bunny, shooting her shot.

I read the first one.

Costello, you don't need to commit a penalty to get in my box.

Jesus. I laugh to myself and read another.

Alec, you can score in my five-hole.

Honestly, the lack of shame is impressive.

But then I see a sign made for *me* and it's a little boy, holding up a handmade sign that reads, *When I grow up, I want to be just like you, #42.*

That kid's getting a puck.

My next skate around the wall, I scoop up a puck and glide up to the glass in front of the kid. His smile takes over his face, and he claps his hand against the glass. He's gotta be, like, eight, maybe nine years old, if I had to guess.

His mom lifts her phone and shows me the camera is open, and I know she's asking to take a pic of her son and me. Of course, I smile and nod, posing behind him. His mom takes a few pictures, the flash nearly blinding me before she realizes and shuts it off.

The kid is practically vibrating when he turns back around. With my stick, I toss the puck over the glass, and an adult jackass tries to ruin it by catching the puck before it gets to the kid. He holds it up with pride, showing it off like it was meant for him.

"Hey!" I scream at him and smack the glass hard. "Not your fucking puck!"

The guy looks at me with annoyance and hesitates, like he's deciding whether or not to have a little human decency.

I skate sideways, away from the now-pouting kid, and smack the glass as hard as I can with my hand first, then my

stick.

Jensy skates up next to me, probably just checking if everything's okay. But I don't tear my attention away from that prick.

I shout, knowing damn well it's loud enough for him to hear, "I will hop the glass and beat your fucking ass if you don't give that kid his puck!"

At this point, the crowd has caught on to what's happening and begin booing the guy.

He holds his hands up, as if saying, *Okay, okay, fine.*

He tosses the puck down to the little boy, whose eyes are now red from crying. A moment that was supposed to be nothing but perfect was ruined because of this jerk's ego.

Nodding to the mom, I lift my stick up and fake throw it so she understands my plan. She nods in response, and I take a quick look at everyone around her. They're watching carefully. I don't want to smack anyone with it because they aren't looking.

Now that everyone's ready, I toss the stick up and over the glass, and the mom catches it with one hand before tossing a mean glare at the puck stealer, who is now sulking in his chair.

The little boy looks over the moon as his mom hands him the stick. I push my glove on the glass, and he bumps it with his own fist, sporting the world's biggest smile.

His mom shouts, "Thank you!"

Her son does the same. "Thank youuu!"

Nodding at them once more, I skate off to grab another twig to finish warm-ups. We finish running little drills, stretching, and hyping each other up before heading back to the locker room before the game.

I can't help but think of that little kid as we wait for the minutes to tick away for the puck drop. He kind of reminded me of Jack. I fucking love that kid, and I love that he has fallen in love with hockey. He's a goddamn natural. Seeing a

kid become obsessed with the same thing as you ... I don't know ... it's heartwarming, I guess.

It just reminds me of me being a little boy, doing that exact same thing. Similar to Jack, at least for the first part of his life, I was raised by a single mom. I have the best mom in the world. She was the reason I started playing in the first place.

She worked hard my entire life to be able to provide for my sister and me, sacrificing her wants time and time again for us. Hockey isn't a cheap sport to play, but she made sure I never went without everything I needed.

She worked as a hairdresser. She didn't love it or probably even want to do it. I know, more than anything, she wanted to stay home with Abby more than she was able to. Which is why, the second I could, I gave her enough money to retire for good at forty-eight.

Abby is my sweet little sister. She is funny, charismatic, and incredibly empathetic. She has Down syndrome. She's one of the most amazing people in this world. She loves art, crafts, any kind of project she can be creative with. She's the reason for my own liking of it.

I swore for the longest time that I just liked it because I got to spend time with her. But it's actually fun to sit down and bring something to life with your own two hands.

My mom and my sister mean everything to me. The fact that Charlotte and them are so close makes it even more meaningful. She is so good with my sister, and Char and my mom have such a good relationship too. They text all the time, sending each other memes or just talking to each other.

There is no fucking doubt in my mind that Charlotte will be my wife. I love her more than I even knew was possible.

I've had girlfriends before, of course, and a few flings, and I thought I had been in love before. But that wasn't anything compared to what Charlotte and I have.

I would die for Charlotte in a heartbeat, I would kill for her, I would do *anything* for her, and I can't wait for her last name to be the same as mine.

About two months ago, I, with the help of my mom, designed a custom diamond engagement ring for Char. I am going to ask her to marry me, and I'm so excited. My mom helped me look through thousands of examples, hand-picking each aspect of the ring, before I finally decided on the perfect one. Hopefully, it ships sooner than later. I'm dying, keeping this from her.

I've been a bit anxious about it—I can't hide that. The chance of her saying no is obviously there. I just can't imagine that even being an outcome because we are in such a good place and we always have been. We've had little fights or bickers here and there, but nothing that would ever make me question that we are meant to be together.

“Goldyyyy!” Brett Burns, forward and number seventy-two on the team, sings as he bumps into me, dancing awkwardly as we wait to take the ice again before the starting lineups.

Getting into it, I dance along with him to some pop song blaring around us. Soon enough, all six of us are dancing, and I can't help but laugh at Brett's intentionally bad moves.

The music quiets.

It's game time, baby.

We take the ice as the announcer says our names. The majority of the crowd must be rooting for the Wild. Aside from a few sporadic cheering fans, the arena is almost quiet as we skate out.

This immediately changes as the announcer begins listing off the Wild's starting lineup. Individual voices meld into one overwhelming noise, surrounding us, growing louder with each starting player that comes onto the ice.

The announcer says a few more things that I tune out, and then the anthem begins. By the time the singer finishes, my heart is pumping hard, and I'm practically bouncing on my skates from anticipation for the puck drop.

Bright light floods my vision as we skate into place on center ice. The ref holds the puck up, the centers ready their stick, and the chaos begins.

Kos wins the face-off and kicks the puck between his legs and backward to me. With a one-touch pass, the puck flies off of my stick and toward JD. We take off toward the Wild's zone, and JD dishes the puck to Costy. Costy passes it to Kos, who catches the puck, dekes—or fakes out—their defenseman, winds up, and shoots.

“That’s what I’m talking about!” I scream at Kos as the puck bounces off of the inside of the net.

Nighthawks—1. Wild—0.

Nothing like scoring on the first play and within the first fifteen seconds of the game. Now, we just have to keep this momentum up.

We are able to clench the lead through the entire first period, the score ending 1 to 0. The intermission flies by, as well as the second and most of the third period. Aside from number 73 on the Wild trying to get his ass beat by jabbing his stick into my ribs, nothing much has changed. We are still up by one with four minutes twenty-two seconds left in the game.

“You’re fucking trash, dude.” Number 73 makes an attempt at a chirp ten feet away from me.

“It seems like it since none of you can score on me,” I calmly say back with a smile as the puck is dropped and we take off again.

Costy wins the face-off, and we fly into their zone. We’ve got numbers. Three of us and only two of them. Costy to Kos, then back to Costy. I skate past the defender. Costy rips the puck between the two defenders, and I use my stick to deflect it ... right through the goalie’s five-hole and into the net.

Pumping my fist out, I skate out to celebrate and lock eyes with number 73.

Pressing my glove against my face, I blow him a kiss. “That one was for you, baby girl!”

Only a few feet stretch between us, and he erases that distance almost instantly, flicking his gloves off in the process.

He throws his fist, and I dodge it. There is nothing more I would like to do right now than to beat his ass. Well, I suppose there is one thing—winning this game and, if possible, for Macky to get a shutout. I'm not going to risk a penalty right now. He swings again, and I block it with my arm, swiping his arm away. It's almost more embarrassing if he can't land a punch while I'm not even fighting him.

“You're a fucking pussy! Fight me!” He seethes.

Refs separate us, and I smirk at him.

“How's that winning streak going?” I shout at him with a full and menacing smile.

He says something, but I can't make it out as he steps into the penalty box. There is a pro to not fighting when a hothead comes at you—they get penalized, and you don't. The best part? It makes them even madder.

He earned a two-minute minor for roughing. Now, we're on a power play for basically the rest of the game. After a few shift changes, Burnsy is able to add a goal to the board from a breakaway, and the game ends 3 to 0.

The second the buzzer sounds, the shutout is official. Our team and the few Nighthawks fans in the crowd celebrate. We rush Macky and take turns bumping our helmet against his.

“Monster Mack out there tonight. Great game, buddy,” I tell him as I pull away from him.

“You too, *babyyy!*” Macky whistles at me, and I laugh.

Unfortunately, wins during away games don't end with a party at The Penalty Box, the bar we go to after every home game win. Away games usually end with a night in a hotel room, if not an immediate flight to either home or a different city for our next game. But since we have a few days off before our next one, we are staying in a hotel tonight and heading home tomorrow.

Once we get to the locker room, we quickly shower and change, heading to the hotel right away. I'm so relieved when I can finally crawl into bed and chill.

Opening my messages, I shoot Charlotte a text, as she's been pretty quiet today.

Me: Hey, baby. I miss the fuck out of you. I can't wait to see you tomorrow. I hope you're feeling better. I love you.

She's probably sleeping, but I hope the doctor gave her some good meds today—or at least found out what she's got. Is it the flu? A virus? Regardless, I hate seeing her sick and don't want her to be in any discomfort or pain.

I wish she would just move in with me already. Hell, she practically lives there and pays for her lease with Josh at the same time. I have nothing against Josh—he's a great guy—but I want *my* girl in *my* bed every night, simple as that. We've discussed her officially moving in before. But for some reason, we've just never pulled the trigger on it. What we have now is working great, and I think she just doesn't want to mess with that. Hopefully, the surprise I have for her might help that decision. As long as she says yes.

CHARLOTTE

I don't know how many times I can go through the roller coaster of my mind trying to convince myself that having cancer isn't real and then remembering the conversation with my doctor like I'm there again.

But the worst moment so far was waking up this morning. Because for *just* a second, my life was normal.

A normal day would go something like this: Reed would be getting home, and we would hang out all day afterward, although at some point, he would want to go to the arena to get a skate in because hockey players rarely go a day without being on the ice. Then, we would make dinner, maybe watch a movie and cuddle.

Instead of that, I woke up and remembered that the normal version was far from what would actually happen. In the blink of an eye, my mind cleared, and my world crashed around me.

I don't think I'm going to be able to bring myself to tell him. *I can't fucking do it.*

Most of the morning, I was zoned out, trying to escape reality.

I feel like I'm in a permanent daze.

Have you ever had a day where you felt like you were outside your body, like you weren't even in control, just moving through the motions? That's how I feel right now. *Trapped.*

Ripping Reed's laptop off of the coffee table, I throw it open and enter his password. I forgot my damn laptop last night when I came over here. But he lets me use his whenever I want or need to. I'm going to try to focus on work; maybe

that will help pass the time, although I'm not quite sure what I'm waiting for. Thankfully, I don't have to memorize all the passwords for my logins because I already saved them on his laptop from a previous time I used it.

One of my favorite parts of my jobs as a social media manager is making photo edits for our social media pages. Playing around with graphics and creating something beautiful from scratch always feels so satisfying and fulfilling—something I am desperate to feel right now.

It doesn't take long for me to get lost in the groove. Before I know it, I have ten posts ready to go and saved in the Drafts, and almost four hours have passed.

Shit.

Reed is going to be here soon, and I have no idea what I'm going to do, whether I'm ready to tell him or not. Maybe I should leave before he gets home, and I can avoid it altogether for just a little while longer.

Setting the laptop back down on the coffee table, I sigh and contemplate everything and *nothing*, all at once. I'm just *stuck*.

Ding.

The laptop sounds, and I recognize the noise immediately as an email notification. Without even thinking about it, I read the screen and see it's from Zales. Reed occasionally gets himself nice watches or jewelry for gifts for me or his family, so that's not totally out of the norm.

What's completely and absolutely strange about this very email is the little snippet I can read from the preview.

Reed, your order for the custom engagement ring is ready for pickup. We are so happy to play such an important role in your big day ...

The email trails off, and my heart fucking bursts. My mind starts racing.

He's going to propose? He ordered a custom ring? He wants to marry me? How long has he been planning this? When does he plan to ask me?

Before I can even gather my wits, I hear the garage door opening, and my heart sinks. Glancing at the computer, I make sure the notification is gone before I shut the screen.

Dammit.

My dad pops in my mind, and the second he does, I feel like time slows. I wonder if he would have chosen to love my mom if he had the choice again, knowing how it would end.

I always thought he would bounce back after some time, heal and move forward. But he never did. I don't want to do that to Reed. I don't want to be the downfall of his happily ever after.

If he were to propose under a different circumstance, I have no doubt that I would say yes.

He's my Prince Charming, but I'm not so sure I'm his Cinderella. I will break my own heart to save his, and I would do it a thousand times over if it meant he got to be happy in the end.

The door opens, and my eyes well up with tears before he even takes a step inside the house. The second I know he's within earshot, I prepare to say the hardest thing I have ever said and probably ever will say.

"There's my favorite girl," Reed sings and walks in, shutting the door behind him.

I can't even bear to look at him yet. It's going to be too painful.

"Hey," I say, trying to keep my voice steady, but I fail miserably.

"What's wrong? Did the appointment go okay?" he asks with such concern in his voice that my chest hurts.

"Can we talk?" I ask him quietly.

Walking over to where I'm sitting on the couch, he hands me a bouquet of white and purple tulips. I wish my hand didn't instinctively shoot out to grab them. Because now, I'm holding a beautiful bunch of my favorite flowers from the man I love, and this only seems harder.

“What’s going on?” he asks solemnly.

I take a deep breath and rip my heart from my chest. “I don’t think this is working for me anymore.”

“W-what? What do you mean?” he asks.

Rip the Band-Aid off, Charlotte. It’s never going to get easier.

“I’m breaking up with you, Reed.”

He reaches out and takes the bouquet of flowers and sets them down before holding my hands in his. “Look at me, please.”

Stay strong. You can do this.

Hesitantly, I lift my gaze to his watery eyes.

He strokes my hands with his thumbs, and I wish he would stop trying to comfort me right now. I don’t deserve it.

“Whatever you’re thinking or feeling is probably normal. We’ve been together for a while now; it’s okay to have doubts. But we can get through it together. Don’t let that tear us apart. We’re stronger than that.” His words stab my heart.

Sighing, I force my next words through my teeth. “I don’t want to get through it together ...”

“Are you being serious?” he asks, his tone sharper than before.

I nod. “I just don’t think I can do this anymore.”

He laughs, “Charlotte, you have got the best poker face. Because you really had me there for a second.”

Looking him dead in the eyes, I yank my hands from his and shout, “Reed, I’m not joking. I’m being serious!”

He stares at me, looking over every inch of my face. “I can’t believe this ... why? Two days ago, we were doing great. And now, all of a sudden, you don’t want to be with me anymore? It doesn’t make any goddamn sense!”

“There’s no easy way to do this. I’m sorry ... I’m just not happy anymore ...” I trail off as my throat burns, and I push

away the sensation.

“You’re really being serious right now?” Reed asks, his desperate voice shredding my heart.

This is for him. This is for his happiness and future. It will be your fault if you die and he ends up like your dad.

“Yes.” I grit out the word between my teeth. “I’m sorry.”

His voice is but a whisper, rapidly growing with each syllable. “You’re sorry?! I can’t fucking believe this. I can’t believe *you* right now.”

That’s it. Get mad. Be angry with me. Hate me. Do anything but love me.

“Will you take a day and think this through? I won’t text or call you. But take a day and think about if this is really what you want.”

He reaches for my hand again, but I pull away.

“I don’t need a day. I know this is what I want.” I bite my cheek, drawing blood.

I must be dying at this very moment. That’s the only thing that would explain the utter agony ripping me apart. At least now, I can focus on the pain in my mouth instead of the despair in my chest.

“*Just like that?*” he murmurs. “You can toss us away just like that? How is it *so* easy for you to be *this* cold to me? Who even are you right now?”

He is the most perfect man anyone could ever ask for. He is the love of my life and always will be. I’m helping him find the same. Which is why I need to be as cold as fucking possible. Otherwise, he will just try to talk me through it, to be logical, patient, and understanding.

“Reed, I don’t feel the same about you. I don’t love you anymore ...” *I love you more than life itself*, is what I want to say. “I can’t do this. I’m sorry.”

Storming to my feet, I grab my purse and head to the front door. I’m two seconds from breaking down.

“Charlotte! Just wait!” Reed begs me, and I hear his voice thicken with emotion.

“I’m done, Reed. *We’re* done,” I say flatly, using every ounce of strength I have to not burst out in tears right now.

“You don’t love me anymore? And you’re just done? *Huh*, so when you said *forever, always*, you didn’t really mean that? I guess I didn’t realize not loving each other was ever a fucking option,” he snaps, and I hate that I’m the one causing him that anger and hurt.

“I’m sorry.” I force myself to continue through his front door.

I’m a split second from turning around and running straight into his arms. Thankfully, he doesn’t follow me through the threshold.

Thinking he’s letting me leave without chasing after me, I take a deep breath. But then I hear the front door opening behind me.

“Don’t ever talk to me again!” he shouts. “You’re right. We are *done!*”

The door slams shut behind me as I race to my car and crash onto my seat. Starting the engine, I pull away, desperate to be home so I don’t risk telling him the truth.

He was wrong. I did mean forever. He will always be *my* forever. I just won’t be his.

REED

This has to be a joke. This *cannot* be real.

I can't stop shaking my head, waiting for Charlotte to walk back through the door and say that she was just kidding.

“Fuck!” I shout and kick my hockey bag. “What the *fuck?!?*”

My chest caves in, my breathing quickening and heart racing. I pace back and forth in my living room, trying to grasp what the hell just happened.

Grabbing my chest, I crash to my knees and slam my eyes shut. It *hurts*. Everything *fucking* hurts.

She wasn't ever supposed to become an *ex*. She was supposed to become *my wife*. I'll never feel the same way about someone else. She's *it*. That fucking simple. Now, she's gone.

My eyes open and land on the flowers that she left behind. Her favorite—purple and white tulips. They lie limp on the floor, and I wish I could do the same. I wish I could feel nothing, become nothing.

It looked so easy for her to walk out, as if she were just casually leaving my house—what was supposed to become our house—and didn't just break my fucking heart. I've never seen that side of her, so heartless and cold.

Has she been thinking about this for a while? Did she wake up this morning and realize she didn't want to be with me anymore?

My throat tightens, and my eyes burn. I rest my head in my hands and do my best to calm my breathing. As I take a deep breath, her scent overwhelms me, invading every part of my

body—the same way she has since I met her—and it tears me apart.

I can't be here. I can't walk through my house and be kicked down every time I smell the slightest remnant of her.

Forcing myself to my feet with my chest rising as rapidly as ever, I dig my phone out of my bag and call one of my best friends, pacing back and forth in my kitchen as it rings.

Jensen answers with a calm and collected voice, "What's up?"

I can't manage to get a single word out, my bottom lip quivering as tears fall from my lashes.

"Reed? I can hear you. What's going on?" His voice immediately becomes concerned.

I slap the countertop in my kitchen, gasping for air. "She left me, man. She *fucking* broke up with me."

Sobs break free from my chest, and I drop back to the ground, unable to hold myself up anymore. The pain is overbearing.

"*Oh God*, Reed. I'm so sorry ..." He trails off before adding, "Be outside in ten minutes. I'm on my way."

I sigh. "Okay. Can I crash at your place? I don't want to be here right now."

Anywhere is better than here, surrounded by her scent and all the memories we made together here.

"Not even a question you need to ask. Of course you can. I'll be there in a few." He hesitates. "I'm really sorry, bro."

"Yeah," I mumble before hanging up and slapping my phone against my leg.

A scream inside of me begs to be released, but I keep it in. Instead, I throw my phone across the room and watch it smash against my wall, leaving a decent-sized dent behind.

Ignoring my phone on the floor, I rise to my feet and storm off to my bedroom, quickly throwing together some clothes, chargers, and shit to stay at Jency's house.

A few minutes later, I've managed to semi-calm my breathing, although my heart is still threatening to break through my rib cage and plummet to its death.

Fuck. I gave her every goddamn piece of me I had. How could she do this? I don't understand ...

A car pulling into the driveway thankfully takes me out of my thoughts. Jensen drives up, and relief overtakes me that I can get away from here for a bit. I love my house, but right now, everything I look at reminds me of her. The bed that we shared that still smells like her, the couch that she napped on almost every single day, and the flowers I got her that were supposed to bring a smile to her face but now lie crumpled on my floor.

"Hey," I mumble as I open his passenger door and slide into the seat, tossing my duffel bag in the back in the process.

"Down for some ice time? Get some anger out on some pucks?" Jensen asks as he backs out of the driveway and pulls away from my house.

"Honestly, that sounds perfect," I sigh, grateful that he's here for me.

"Sweet," he says and turns up the music, knowing I'd rather not talk.

Jensen is my best friend and knows me better than almost anyone. Thanks to him, I don't have to be alone right now because if I were, I would lose my mind. Far more than I already have.

Staring out of the window, I do my best to get lost in the upbeat tunes on our way to the rink. It doesn't work very well, but I continue to try nonetheless.

Silence continues to consume us as we make our way through the pretty quiet arena. Normally, I would be chatting up staff as we pass, but I can't even manage a half-assed smile anyone's way. They definitely notice my coolness, but I hope they know it's me, not them. Although it's kind of hard to care about their reactions when my mind is utterly consumed by Charlotte and what the fuck just happened.

By the time we are geared up, slipping our skates on and stepping onto the ice, my sadness and agony are morphing into an all-consuming anger like I've never felt before. How could I have felt this before though? No one has ever possessed as much of my soul as she has and then tore it apart from the inside out.

Hooking my stick on one of the loose pucks, I dribble it and skate around lazily. Almost nothing beats being on the ice. It's calming. It drowns out the world. It makes me feel centered and refreshed, like a cleanser. Unfortunately, I don't know how much it is going to be able to do right now. No matter how much I try to clear my mind, I can't—Charlotte refuses to fucking leave it.

Jensen rubs the back of his head as he gives me a look that twists my stomach.

I stop dead in my tracks, asking, "What?"

"Don't be mad ... " He trails off and avoids my eye contact.

"Jensen," I warn, scared of what he could possibly be avoiding saying.

He glares at me. "My full name, really? That's how it is?"

I can't help but chuckle. "Sorry. But if you don't hurry the fuck up and spit it out, I'm going to kill you."

"But then you'd never know what I was going to say." He laughs and holds his hands up in defense. "Okay, okay. I kind of invited the guys."

"What?" I snap, my voice sounding more desperate than I'd like.

"Just Kos, Burnsy, Costy, and Macky," he says casually listing out our entire fucking line, although maybe I should be thankful he didn't text the whole team.

I was okay, feeling vulnerable with Jency, but I'm not prepared to face all of them. My chest tightens and pulses as I hear skates hit the ice behind me.

"Our poor Reedster," Brett sighs and skates up behind me, teasing me slightly.

Kos smacks him on the back of the head. “He will kick your ass if you keep it up.”

“My bad,” he apologizes sarcastically.

“You’re good,” I say genuinely to him, moving the puck back and forth with my stick.

“We’re here for you, dude,” Costy joins our semicircle, followed by Macky. “I can’t even imagine what you’re going through. I would lose my fucking mind if Morgan left me. Whatever you need, we’re here to help.”

I nod in gratitude and say, “Thanks, and thanks for coming, guys. I know we just got back, and you guys probably have better things to do than be here right now—”

“We don’t want to be anywhere but here,” Macky interrupts me.

“Well, let’s fucking do this then.” I huff out and skate forward, pushing the puck through Mack’s legs and picking it up behind him as I skate past him.

“Three on twos?” Kos asks, unable to shut the captain switch in him off.

“I’m down,” I say, digging my stick into the ice enough to spring the puck with force into the net.

Mack Attack gears up and gets between the pipes while we break into offense and defense. This drill is one we all grew up doing—it’s practicing your skills when you outnumber your opponent.

Three players on offense go against two players on defense. After the offense takes a shot, scoring or not, we rotate counterclockwise by one person. This switches up the teams constantly and lets everyone practice their game from different positions and places on the ice.

JD and I start on defense—it’s an easy call really since we are the defenders of the group. Kos, Burnsy, and Costy are on offense.

Kos starts in the center. He skates forward and passes the puck to Costy, who dive-bombs toward me, dragging Jency

closer to us before Costy kicks the puck over to Burnsy, who swings back to slap the puck. But Jency isn't falling for that move and slides back in front of Burnsy right when he releases his shot, flinging the puck at rocket speed. Jency drops a knee and twists, blocking the shot perfectly.

"Woo!" I cheer and skate over to J, patting him on the back of the head.

After a few seconds of chatter and Brett saying he got lucky, blocking that, we rotate one spot, moving into our next position. We continue to run this play over and over, along with a few other fun drills until our legs are aching and begging for a reprieve.

"All right, guys, I gotta head home. Laura's making dinner, and Jack wants to shoot some pucks later, so I'd better get going," Kos says as he skates over to me and daps me up before adding, "I'm always here, man. We all are."

Somehow, my heart breaks all over again at his words, tearing every inch of temporary healing that I gained from this skate session.

My eyes burn, and I can't manage to get a single word past my lips. I nod and bite the inside of my cheek.

We've already been here for over an hour and a half, but I don't want to leave. I feel like the second I step off of the ice, I'll have to face reality again, and I really don't want to do that.

But I'm not sure I have much of a choice. Brett, Cam, Alec, and Matt all say their brief good-byes and condolences for the death of my love life, leaving Jensen, who is ready to go home, and me. I drag my feet to stay on the ice as long as I can.

"You hungry?" JD asks, slowly skating backward.

I follow him, forcing my feet to push into the ice, propelling me toward the open board door.

An appetite doesn't exist for me right now, but I know I need to get some calories in after tonight's bonus workout.

“What are you feeling?” I ask him as he takes a step off of the ice.

“Whatever works for you. Are you craving anything?” he asks as I linger for a moment longer before joining him on the other side of the boards.

As my skates hit the rubber floor, I have one request, “Whatever we get, can we get it to go?”

My chest is tightening more and more, and as I become aware that my breathing is quickening, I force slow and deep breaths in and out of my mouth to stop whatever spiral is trying to tornado inside of me.

“Yeah, of course. Qdoba?” he asks, as if anyone can ever say no to Qdoba.

“I’m down,” I answer, feeling myself start to dissociate and zone out.

“Sweet,” he says.

We quickly change out of our sweaty gear and throw on the spare clothes we brought with us. Luckily, I packed more in my bag earlier than I thought I would need. JD and I leave moments later and grab Qdoba on the way back to his house.

As we pull in the driveway, I can’t help the burn igniting in the back of my throat, knowing why I’m here and not at my own house. The same reason that my stomach has a twist in it that I worry won’t ever come undone.

My annoying level of self-awareness is a blessing and a curse. I am well aware of *what* I am feeling and *when* I am feeling it *all* the time. I owe that trait to my mom, who from a young age taught me how to deal with my emotions and process them.

The downside of this is that I am somehow too aware of my feelings. Because when I just want to sink into the pain and anguish I’m facing, I somehow mentally talk myself down from it. Self-awareness also means that I am oftentimes hyper-logical and analytical. I am aware of what is causing the surge of emotion, and once that understanding kicks in, everything else seems to shut down.

I guess, for right now, shutting down is better than crying, screaming, or punching. Maybe I need to shut everything off, as much as I can at least, and feel nothing at all.

If only it were that easy.

CHARLOTTE

I used to love surprises and the rush of being caught off guard with something exciting. But now, I would be okay if I was never surprised again in my life.

The day I was diagnosed plays over and over in my head far more than I would like. I wish I could forget it altogether, but that's an option I don't have. I can't run from this. I can't pretend it doesn't exist and hope it just goes away. I have to face it head-on and pray that in the end, I come out on the other side, and it doesn't.

Time to go to war.

The air has a crispness to it as I open my car door and step into the quiet and sunny hospital parking lot.

My body quivers, and it's not from the coolness against my skin; it's from the absolute fear that pulses through me each time my heart beats. I read all the material Dr. Benson gave me last week. I did research of my own. I packed a blanket for if I get cold. I packed headphones and a portable charger so I don't get bored. I even packed snacks and drinks in case I get hungry or thirsty. In any way that I could prepare, I did. But I'm not worried about the things I know about. I'm worried about the things I don't. I have no idea how chemo is going to affect my body, and I won't know fully until there's no time left to anticipate what it could be like.

Will I be able to act normally? Will my symptoms be overwhelming that I can't get out of bed? The answers haunt each step I take, my rib cage rattling louder and louder from the drum beating inside of it.

I wish Reed were here with me.

He would be so amazing today. He would kiss my head, take deep breaths with me, make sure I stayed hydrated and fed, hold my hand, and tell me everything was going to be okay. And I would believe him because he's never lied to me. Not like I have to him.

He would go to the ends of the earth to make sure that I made it through this. But even the ends of the earth wouldn't be far enough. As much as Reed would hope, he wouldn't be able to love the cancer out of me.

Opening the hospital door, I'm hit with the scents of stale chemicals, medication, and sadness. The nurse at the intake desk greets me with an automated smile.

I return as much of a real one as I possibly can.

"How can I help you?" she asks and looks back down at her computer.

"I, um, have an appointment for port placement and chemotherapy today. My first one, pretty nervous ..." I trail off, annoyed with myself that I overshared with the first person I came across today.

Although maybe it's just my mind's response to being so bottled up that I might explode, and oversharing to random people takes some of the pressure off.

She looks up at me, and her robotic smile shifts to something more genuine. "Don't be nervous. We are here to help you every step of the way. What's your name and date of birth, please?"

Taking a shallow breath, I say, "Charlotte Winters. April 20."

"Okay, perfect. I've got you checked in. Feel free to grab a water. I'll have you sit in the waiting room to your right, and a nurse will be out shortly to grab you."

She points to my right, and I follow her directions, stepping toward the room without hesitation.

After a brief wait in the empty room, a nurse comes and takes me to a private room. We cover my medical information

and verify any allergies. Then, it's showtime. Everything moves really fast. I'm brought to a surgery room, given some meds to help me relax and a local anesthetic, and am prepped for the short surgery. Not an hour later, I'm done, and heading to the next waiting room to await my first chemo treatment. It was all rather quick and not as bad as I had anticipated, but that could be the meds talking.

I come to a halt for a brief second as I walk through the doorway. Tearing my gaze to the floor, I find an empty seat and sit down, tucking my tote bag between my legs.

The few people sitting in the chairs, waiting to be taken back, must have started chemo a little while ago. The side effects are showing on their faces, their hair—or lack thereof—and their bodies in general. I know the side effects happen. I know it's going to happen to me too. It's normal. But now, seeing the other patients makes it feel so much more real.

I am a patient. I have cancer. I am starting chemotherapy today. Even saying the words in my mind feels fake, like I'm reading out a script or text from a book. They don't feel like my words or my truth.

“Where's your teddy bear?”

A girl's lighthearted voice rips me from my thoughts, and I'm thankful for it.

Turning to the source of the question, I find a girl, maybe seven or eight, if I had to guess. She has light-brown hair and soft brown eyes. She is wearing a cute beanie with purple and white stripes and a big purple pom-pom on top that bounces as she moves in her seat; it looks like it was handmade. In her lap is a mousy brown teddy bear that looks like it has been very loved.

“My teddy bear?” I ask her playfully.

She hops out of her seat and stands in front of me, jutting her arms out with the worn-down teddy in her hands, “This is Cocoa. She makes me feel less scared when the scaries come. You need a teddy bear of your own to help you feel safe.”

“Why do you think I’m scared?” I reach out and boop Cocoa’s nose.

“Because you’re shaking. I do the same thing when I get nervous. My legs just bounce and bounce and bounce and boun—”

“Ella, please stop bothering this sweet girl,” a woman, who I imagine is her mother, cuts her off and waves her over back to her seat one down from mine.

“It’s quite all right. I really don’t mind,” I assure her truthfully.

Ella is the only person keeping me from running out of here right now.

“Your name is Ella? I love that name.”

Ella lights up with excitement. “Yeah, thanks! What’s your name?”

I stick out my hand to her, and she places her small hand in mine and shakes it.

“My name is Charlotte. But my friends call me Char.”

“Can I call you Char?” Ella asks with the biggest smile on her face. “Then, we’ll be friends too.”

“I would love to be friends with you.” I smile at her.

“Yes!” she cheers and rushes back to her mom, who smiles at her daughter endearingly. “I made a new friend, Mom!”

Her mom cups Ella’s face in her hands and swipes her cheeks with her thumbs. “Good job, baby.”

A nurse walks through a closed door and glances over the room before stopping at my new friend. “Princess Ella, you have been summoned to the throne room.” The nurse’s voice is jolly and sweet.

Ella begins to pull away from her mom, but she stops her and says, “Kisses, El.”

“Mwah, mwah,” Ella, or El, says exuberantly, placing two kisses on her mom’s cheeks before spinning around and taking

off toward the nurse, who is beaming ear to ear.

Apparently, meeting Ella is electrifying to everyone, not just me. She is like a living beam of sunshine. She is so strong—and so young. My heart twists.

“Sorry if she came on a bit too aggressively. She doesn’t know any other way.” Her mom chuckles softly and turns my way.

I reciprocate the behavior. “Truthfully, I’m thankful she bounded over here and introduced herself. I was getting a little lost ... in my head, and she pulled me out of it.”

Her mom smiles, but her eyes still hold such a dark sadness in them. “Well then, I’m glad she bugged you. You said your name is Charlotte?”

“Yeah.” I stick my hand out to hers like I did with El. “It’s nice to meet you.”

“Harper,” she says and takes my hand. “You too.”

“Do you mind if I ask how old she is?”

“Seven. But if she asks, I told you seven *and a half*,” she says.

Laughing, I respond, “You got it.”

The door that Ella walked through with the nurse opens again, and the same nurse scans the room and says, “Charlotte.”

My heart plummets, and any serenity Ella granted me vanishes.

“Is this your first appointment?” Harper asks me as I rise to my feet shakily.

“Yeah. Is it obvious?” I hauntingly chuckle.

She grabs my hand and pats it soothingly. “You’ll do great. This is the first step in beating it.”

Or the first step toward the casket.

“Thank you,” I tell her and pull my hand out of her soft grasp. I walk toward the nurse waiting for me.

I read her name tag as I get closer, Jackie.

She greets me with a gentle smile and I follow her through the door.

“How are you doing today?” She asks nicely.

“Alright. How about you?” I ask in return.

She turns left and I follow as she says, “Doing great. It’s hard to have a bad day when I get to see all of my favorite patients.”

Chuckling, I think I can guess who she’s referencing, as the little girl, Ella, has become the favorite part of my day too.

We step into a big room, and I spot the princess right away. With oversize headphones on, Ella is playing on a tablet in a hot-pink case. She’s hooked up to a bunch of tubes and machines.

She looks up for a brief second and notices me beside her, and she flings her headphones off and gives me her full attention as I sit down in the chair next to her.

“Charlotte!” she squeals.

“Princess Ella.” I address her by the royal title the nurse, Jackie, used and smile.

She scratches her head through her beanie and says, “Do you need to borrow Cocoa?”

My heart fucking clenches at her sweet and selfless offer. “I’m okay right now. Thank you though.”

She scratches her head again, harder this time, and I wonder if itching is a side effect.

“Are you okay?” I ask her as the most intense look of frustration flashes onto her face, then dissipates as she shrugs.

“Yeah,” she huffs, and her shoulders slump. “My mom got this one because it looks like my old hair. But it’s super itchy.”

“The hat?” I ask her.

“No, the hair,” she responds, tugging on the strands.

It’s a wig.

“Oh. Why do you wear it if it’s so scratchy?”

Her body sinks even more with her answer. “I don’t really like it, but I think it makes my mom less sad.”

Oh, my motherfucking heart is going to burst.

This little girl is so fucking brave, braver than I’ll ever be. She is battling cancer—of what kind, I don’t know; regardless, she is a child going through the same hardship as me, and look at her. She is a radiant and optimistic rock star. I aspire to be all that she is.

I respond truthfully, “That’s very considerate of you, Ella. But I bet above all, your mom just wants you to be happy. If you told her it’s itchy, I’m sure she would rather you not wear it.”

She shrugs. “I just want her to smile more than she frowns.”

“Princess Ella, you are incredible,” I whisper as the nurse accesses my new port and I officially start my first treatment.

“Thank you, Queen Charlotte,” she hums.

I can’t help but giggle at my newfound friend.

REED

“She’s here,” JD whispers as he skates up behind me.

Fuck.

Every day for the last week, I have been dreading this moment, seeing her again. I expected it to come much sooner, but I haven’t seen her around the arena. Typically, she is shoving a camera in our faces, taking photos or making videos for the social media pages. But she’s been MIA, and I can’t help but feel angry at her audacity. She breaks my heart, but needs to take time off for her own? She wanted this. She’s the one who pulled the trigger, and I’m the one bleeding out on the ice.

“You good?” JD asks, slapping a puck into the net.

Nope.

“Just fine,” I mumble and bring my stick backward.

Swinging with my full strength, I drive my twig into the ice, too hard apparently. My stick snaps in two, the blade sliding out in front of me, while the handle is still gripped between my white-knuckled hands.

Jensen kicks the blade of my broken stick toward me, and deep laughter rumbles out of him, uncontrollable and obnoxiously loud.

“Shut up,” I warn him, trying not to join in with his contagious bellowing.

His laughter continues. “Yeah, no, you seem *just fine.*”

“I’ll kill you.” I can’t help the laugh that escapes my clenched jaw.

“I’d like to see you fucking try, Larinski.” Jency feigns a menacing tone.

I know what he’s doing, and God knows I’m thankful for it. But I can’t avoid the reason behind *why* he’s trying to distract me for too long. I’ve never been one to hide from things that scare me, and I’m not going to start now. As much as I appreciate his effort to distract me, I can’t ignore her. I love her, and I fucking hate her.

JD skates along with me as I drift toward the bench so I can grab a new stick.

“If I wanted to, I could.”

He scoffs, “Lucky for you, we’re on the same team, so you won’t have to find out.”

I chuckle and grab a new stick from one of our equipment managers. We are just cooling down from a scrimmage session and playing around on the ice, waiting for either coach to call the next activity or for the PR team to skate on the ice to get some footage, or both at the same time.

My body fucking shudders at the thought of her being on the ice out here with me—the absolute opposite of what I used to feel in this situation. It used to be the best part of practice, having my girl alongside me. Watching her skate around, doing what she loves while being with me, doing what I love, was unbeatable. It was perfect. Now, our time on the ice together will be haunted from the memories of our past.

It’s impossible for me not to notice her presence the second she glides onto the ice.

With everything in me, I resist looking over at her. But I don’t need to in order to know what she’s doing—the click of the camera gives that away.

Coach Carrington whistles with his fingers, and we all hustle over to the bench, where he’s standing with the assistant coaches.

“Great scrimmage today, guys. Remember to keep that pace up every second of every single shift. When we start to slow down is when we lose all of that momentum and we

make lazy mistakes. Be better than lazy mistakes. Got it?" he demands.

We all answer in unison, "Yes, Coach."

Coach Carrington is a bit of a drill sergeant, but we all respect him and how hard he works for this team.

He finishes his wrap-up speech. "Morning skate tomorrow, scrimmage in the afternoon, and game on Friday against the Vegas Venom. They're good—not great, but good. Play the pace you guys practiced today, keep those line changes clean, and we'll have nothing to worry about. See you in the morning."

All the guys tap their sticks on the ice—hockey players' version of clapping—and Coach Carrington dismisses us by walking away, his assistants hot on his tail.

Thank God I don't have to spend any more torturous time being stuck on the ice with Charlotte. Her being here is honestly just pissing me the fuck off. I hesitate to turn around, hoping she is already gone by now.

But as I skate around, I see her set up outside the rink, filming the guys heading to the locker room and asking them a question on their way out.

I hang back at the end of the line of guys getting off of the ice, my fists clenched in my gloves, and my body starts vibrating with frustration and rage. How could she fucking do this to us? Tear us apart and then come here, acting like everything's okay, and go about her job as normal?

I'm afraid I might be melting the ice from how fucking hotheaded I'm getting, just thinking about her. JD and Burnsy sink behind me as we near the exit off the ice, and I'm about two people away from coming face-to-face with her again.

"Favorite rom-com?" Charlotte asks one of the guys ahead of me, and I'm going to lose my goddamn mind.

I guess we'll just pretend that she and I didn't watch every single rom-com we could find together. That's the question she chose for her first day back? Is it just to rub it in my face?

As the last person between us walks away, I'm boiling hotter than I've ever felt before. I want to give her a piece of my mind, I want to tell her how mad I am, how fucking betrayed I feel, how I feel like she's treating what we had as a joke. But my mom raised me to be respectful, and if I didn't have anything nice to say, I shouldn't say anything at all, and I definitely don't have anything even relatively nice to say to her right now.

I feel the second her eyes land on me; a warm sensation washes over me, and I cringe at the familiar feeling that now brings me nothing but disgust and anguish. I won't even look her way. I won't give her that satisfaction.

She stays silent, not even bothering to ask me the same question. Out of the corner of my eye, I see the camera lower in her hands. Not even a word. She doesn't muster a single one.

I step past her, and it takes everything I have left to not turn around and demand some answers—some real answers, not the bullshit she spewed at my house. The cycle of anger and sadness continues, causing them to swirl together, and I think I'm going to explode if I don't get this under control soon.

Don't look back. Don't look back. Don't look back.

My steps get faster and faster with each one I take as I near the locker room. My hands wring my stick, and I am a second away from smashing it into the wall when Burnsy steps in.

"Why don't we save that one for today, huh?" He grabs it, and I let him take it from me.

"Thanks," whistles through my clenched teeth.

"If it makes you feel better, I ignored her question too," Burnsy says as we get inside of the locker room.

Fuck.

"Don't do that," I snap, surprising even myself.

She doesn't deserve my defense right now. He holds his hands up in surrender, remaining silent, and I fill the void, still annoyingly protective of her.

“She can handle me not answering questions for her videos, but I don’t want the entire team to do it, and then she gets fired. Yeah, I don’t want to fucking see her right now, but she’s damn good at her job, and I don’t want to fuck that up for her.”

JD pats my back as he steps around me. “You’re a good guy, Reed. Better than me.”

“Eww, don’t make this moment sentimental by using my real name, *Jensen*,” I correct him.

“Is Bitch better?” Costy jokes, stripping his pads off.

“I swear to God, Costy, I will make you mine if you don’t watch your mouth,” I say with a straight face, although both of us know I’m playing around, just like he is.

“Message received.” Costy laughs.

We all go about doing our own thing, cooling off physically, but also *mentally* for me. After a quick shower, I’m finally ready to head out.

I need to give my mom a call. I’ve been avoiding calling her this past week because of Charlotte dumping me, but I can’t do that forever. To be honest, I miss talking to her and my sister. We’ve always been really close, talking almost daily, if not a couple of times a week at minimum. Regardless, this call is overdue.

I’m going back to my place tonight. I think Jensen is getting a little tired of having a roommate. I can’t blame him; living alone is pretty great. You can walk around naked and not worry about seeing someone. Once you have that freedom in your own place, it’s hard to give that up.

I wait until I get back to my black Chevy pickup to call my mom, and she answers on the first ring.

“Reed, about time you called your mother,” she says endearingly.

“Hey, Mom.” I chuckle, unable to resist a smile that tugs at my lips from her sass.

“How have you been? Busy week? I saw you guys beat the Wild. It was a good game!” she cheers.

I love my mom, and she's always been one of my biggest supporters, but to her, every game I play is a good game. That's okay, but I laugh a little every time she says it because nothing in her mind would be a bad game unless I were to get hurt.

"Yeah ..." I trail off, not wanting to say the inevitable.

"You're quiet," she says, calling me out.

Time to rip the ol' Band-Aid off.

"Charlotte ended things."

"What?" she shrieks. "Honey, what happened?!"

I sigh. "I don't know, Mom. I thought we were in a really good place. But maybe I was missing something or blind to something. I really don't know. I wish I did." The backs of my eyes burn, but I bite the inside of my cheek, fighting the tears that want to form. "She said she's done, and I don't think there's anything I can or want to do."

"Well, don't say that, sweetie. Do you love her?" she asks me, as if there is any answer possible other than yes.

"Of course I do." I slam my eyes closed and rock my head against the headrest of my seat.

"Do you want it to work out between you two? What are you thinking?" she asks, wanting to know where I'm sitting before she gives advice one way or the other.

"With the way she ended things, I don't know. Right now, I'm pissed off, Mom. For God's sake, I was going to propose to her!" I force a deep breath into my lungs. "I'm just confused more than anything."

She sighs, and it feels like a hug through the phone. "All I can say, Reed, is that you have to follow your heart. You have always known yourself very well. Let yourself feel that anger, pain, and sadness. Get all of it out and then reevaluate what you want. Don't do anything rash or out of passion—you might regret it later. But above all, trust in yourself that you'll make the right decision, whatever that might be. If you guys are meant to be together and you want that, then you will be."

Silence hangs between us after her final word, and we sit comfortably in it. I process what she said, and I know she's right. I have every right to be mad, sad, confused, or whatever the fuck I'm feeling without questioning it. I'll be better in the end to let it out than keep it in.

"Yeah, you're right. I don't know what I want yet," I admit.

"And that's okay. If you need to rant away or need anything, you know you can always call me. I know you're a big, grown man now, but I'm here for you if you need me."

My lips tip up at her offer.

"I know. Thanks, Mom."

"Anything else you need to get out?" she asks.

"That was it." I can't help but laugh at how not funny it is.

"All right ..." She trails off before changing the subject. "Abby's birthday is coming up. The big one-eight. We have to do something special for her."

My sister's sweet face flashes in my mind, and a welcoming heat washes over me, like the feeling of sitting in the sun on a warm day. "Yeah, we do."

Abby deserves everything she could ever want in this world. She is the kindest human on this earth and so selfless.

Abby has Down syndrome, and sometimes, people don't always show her the same decency and goodwill that she does. Oftentimes, we try to overcompensate for others' unfortunate behavior.

"Is there anything she's loving a little extra right now? We could do something, like a themed party. Do you think she'd like that? I know the guys would love to help and be there, honestly. They all love Abby." I volunteer their time because I genuinely know they would do that for her and for me.

"Oh! Barbie! We could do a Barbie theme. That is all she has been talking about." My mom's excitement builds with every word.

“Do you want me to see if I could get the rink for a night? I know they rent it out for dinner dates and shit to the public, so I’m sure we could rent it out for her party,” I say.

The arena is a venue we can easily, fully control. Who comes in, who comes out, et cetera. I can make sure my family and teammates are safe from any random strangers stumbling in. Abby is mostly who I worry about. She can be very trusting, and I love that about her. But not everyone deserves her trust, so I make sure that the only people that exist in her life are ones worthy of knowing her.

“I think that’s a brilliant idea, Reed. Find out what you can, and we’ll go from there, okay? I’m about to go pick her up from her yoga class though, so I’ll bug you later. I love you.”

“I love you too, Mom,” I hum into the phone before ending the call.

I’m not ready to go home yet. I don’t want to be there by myself, wallowing in my sadness. I wish I could drag one of my teammates to do it with me, but I know that it’s not their burden either. I wish I just had something to cuddle with.

An idea comes to life in my mind, and I make a quick search to find the nearest shelter to me. Maybe I could get a companion, a furry one.

After mapping out the closest rescue, Loving Paws, I make the short ten-minute drive, the anticipation building drastically as I pull into the parking lot. I’ve always wanted a cat of my own. I want dogs, too, but with my lifestyle, dogs are really hard, especially when you don’t have someone else to raise them with. Cats still need lots of love and attention, but they are fairly independent if their needs are met.

I hope I find one, but I also don’t have anything ready at home.

Fuck, I didn’t think this through.

Maybe I’ll just go in and walk around, get some free serotonin, and come back another day to actually adopt.

Shutting my truck off, I throw my keys in my hoodie pocket with my phone and wallet and head inside.

The walls of the entryway are painted with flowers and paw prints; it's cute. This is not what I thought I would be walking into. I expected it to be dark and dreary, and ... well, sad. But it smells. I mean, like, it smells like animals, but not stinky. It's decorated well and surprisingly clean.

"Hi. How can we help you today?" the lady at a desk to my left asks me.

I step toward her, setting my hands on the high countertop.

"Hi. I'm here to look at the cats. Maybe looking to adopt," I say, more unsure than I wish I had.

What if they question my dedication and deny my application or something.

Fuck. Did I just screw this all up?

"Absolutely. So, I'll have you just check in here on this clipboard." She taps the one on the counter in front of me, and I grab a pen, filling it out as she continues talking. "The cat enclosures are down the hall to your left. There will be staff and volunteers there. Feel free to speak to them and ask any questions or ask to meet any of the kitties."

My palms start sweating, and I have no idea why I'm so nervous right now. "Perfect. Thanks."

"You are welcome," she says, smiling, and returns to working on the computer.

Down the hallway, to the left—I follow her instructions and find what I'm looking for almost immediately. I slide one of the glass doors and step into a wide-open room that has full cages lining one of the walls. A few kittens are running around the room, chasing someone wearing a shirt that says *Volunteer*. I have a seat in the chair next to the door, wanting to observe first. The three kittens chase after the feather wand she is waving around, and it's so innocent and gentle. I laugh along with the giggles bubbling out of the volunteer.

"Are you looking to adopt?" she asks me, continuing to lead the kittens around the large area.

"Yeah, I think so."

“These little guys are great if you’re looking for a kitten. But don’t be afraid to walk up to the cages, and if you want me to take any of them out, I certainly can. I’ll just pop these guys back in their room,” she informs me.

I follow her lead, walking over to the cages, taking in each one.

A lot of them aren’t kittens, and it makes me sad. I bet these guys have to wait a lot longer to find a home than the three furballs at my feet. I know they won’t struggle to find a forever home, so maybe I’ll see if I connect with any of the older ones.

A fluffy all-white one purrs against the bars in front of me. I read the card on her kennel. *Snowball. Two years. Loves cats, dogs, and kids.* She’s sweet, and she clearly likes to be pet. I don’t think she’ll struggle to find the right adopter. I don’t know at what point my goal became finding one that might not be as adoptable, but here we are. I think I’d feel guilty if I chose a kitten or something, knowing that an older one that just needs a second chance is stuck here without a home.

“Are you looking for a specific sex or characteristic?” the volunteer asks me.

“Umm, I don’t think so. Are there any that have been here longer than others? Or ones that have been overlooked a lot?” I question as I pet Snowball’s bridge of her nose through the cage.

Silence lingers for a moment. I turn and see the volunteer’s face etched with shock.

“I’m just used to being asked about kittens. It caught me off guard, sorry. Yes, so, thankfully, our cats and kittens don’t stay with us much longer than, like, six months. But we do have this one guy. He has his own private room. The rooms are usually used for special cases—like medical cases, nursing cats with kittens, litters of kittens, and stuff like that. When this little guy came in, he was recovering from an injury so we housed him over here; he kind of staked his claim, and we let him.”

She guides me over to one of the closed doors with a large window, and I peer inside. A gray fluff ball is curled up in a cat tree, fast asleep.

“He can be a bit timid, and it takes him some time to build trust with strangers, which is why he’s been here for so long. It might take days or even weeks for him to come around to you. But when he does, he is the sweetest and cuddliest boy.”

He must hear us talking about him as he stirs and begins yawning.

“His name is Harry, but he doesn’t really know it or answer to it. He just began learning it, but you could call him whatever you’d like really, and he’d adapt with time.”

I’m wondering what injury he was healing from when he came in. The question lingering on the tip of my tongue is answered before I can even ask it. As he stands up, I see his front left leg is completely gone.

He looks up at me, and the moment he does, I just know he has to come home with me. I can’t explain it; it just feels right.

And I know exactly what I’m naming him.

Harry sounds an awful lot like a hockey term I love.

Let’s go home, Hatty.

REED

“You got a cat?” JD asks with shock as if it’s the craziest thing imaginable.

Pulling out my phone, I open my Photos app and quickly locate one of the hundreds of photos of Hatty that I’ve taken in the two days I’ve had him.

“Yeah, isn’t he cute?” I ask, my voice higher-pitched and excited than I intended.

Swiping, I show Jensen a handful of photos, waiting for his reaction, which I expect to be joyful because how could you not love him?

“Is he missing a leg?” JD asks.

“Yeah, that’s why I named him Hatty, fucking obviously.” I chuckle. “Do you need me to spell it out for you, or can you figure it out from there?”

Hatty is a slang term for a hat trick, and a hat trick is when a player scores three goals in one game. Since my new baby only has three legs and his name was Harry, which I wasn’t fond of, it was easy to make a connection to rename him Hatty.

JD doesn’t dote on him as he should, which is disappointing. But I guess not everyone can be perfect.

“You are the proudest cat dad I’ve ever met, Goldy,” he teases me.

“Thank you,” I boast, puffing my chest at him.

He laughs and walks away, heading toward the locker room to get ready for practice. We have a quick skate this morning

to street warm up our legs and prepare for tonight's home game against the Vegas Venom.

They have one of the worst stats in the league right now with only two wins to thirteen losses this season and zero wins in overtime. Theoretically, tonight will be an easy win, and we shouldn't have any problems. But thinking like that is how you lose those games. You get comfortable and cocky, leaving you to easily slip up. You should also never underestimate an underdog. They have some good players, balanced out by some less good players, and a good coach. They have the tools to be successful, but they're not connecting somewhere along the way. Hopefully, we can lean into their weaknesses tonight and show off our strengths.

I follow JD into the locker room. We quickly get ready and take the ice minutes later. It feels good, stretching my legs out. It's surreal sometimes that this is my life. I can't believe I get paid millions of dollars to do exactly what I love. Not everyone gets to live that dream, and I know how lucky and fortunate I am, especially given my upbringing. Not that it was bad in any sense, but my mom worked paycheck to paycheck to provide for us. I know hockey isn't a cheap sport to play, but she never expressed stress or concern, being able to provide that.

Looking back now, I see things differently. She wore the same pair of worn-down tennis shoes for five years. Instead of buying herself a new pair, she bought me a new stick or new skates. She gave Abby and me every piece of herself, and I have the best goddamn mom in the world.

Now, I get to take away any worries she has with money. She never has to want again for anything. Neither her nor Abby will ever struggle again, and that's all thanks to my ability to play hockey.

The team and I scrimmage for about an hour before the coach wraps up practice and cuts us loose. When I'm heading out of the locker room, I see familiar, soft, flowing blonde hair. The hair that looks so perfect, wrapped around my fist and being gently tugged.

Fuck.

Don't think that right now. Get it together.

She broke up with you. She used you, probably to get the job she has now. Then, she just discarded you.

Anger floods me at the thought, but rationality quickly cools me off. If anything, she would have used Laura to get the job; she didn't need me to get a foot in the door.

I want to hate her, but no matter how many times my mind revisits the moment she destroyed us, I can't help but picture the girl who would sleep, curled in my arms, who would fall apart at my words, tangled in the sheets of my bed, or who would make me sit on her balcony to look at the stars with her when she was feeling overwhelmed by life. How can I forget those beautiful moments? Genuinely, I would love an answer to that question so I can stop this constant roller coaster of love and hate.

She is sitting crisscrossed on the ground, getting some photos of the guys walking out of the locker room. I know the moment that I come across her lens because she drops the camera just slightly and looks away. She can't even meet my eyes.

As I walk past her without looking at her, the hate is overpowering the love so strongly that I can't stop the smart remark slipping past my lips. "Look away and pretend I don't exist. Really nice, Charlotte."

A whimper comes from her as I walk away, and I can't help the sting of a thousand hornets that are attacking my heart.

I'm sorry, I want to say.

But I don't. I remain silent because as much as I want to console her pain, she doesn't deserve it. She threw us away. She deserves to feel just as bad as I do.

Catching Laura's stare as I stroll past some of the offices, I stop, remembering I need to figure out how to rent the rink out for Abby's party.

"Hey, I have a question," I utter.

“If it’s about Charlotte, don’t bother.” She flicks her eyes down and warns me, and part of me is happy that Charlotte has her, a good friend who defends her.

“It’s not. I don’t care about Charlotte anymore,” I lie, and by the doubtful gaze that shoots back up at me, she isn’t buying it just as much as I’m not.

I have to get better at lying. It’s never been a strong suit of mine. But I guess that’s a good thing.

“Uh-huh ...” She trails off. “What’s your question then?” she asks professionally, as if she were speaking with a random stranger.

I have an urge to give her a piece of my mind, but I bite it back down because that’s not going to help my little sister get her dream party.

“People rent the rink all the time for dinners, events, whatever. How do I do that?”

“What are you looking to do?” she asks curiously, probably assuming this is some grand gesture for Charlotte, but that is far from the truth.

“For my sister’s birthday. Ideally next Saturday since we don’t have a game here or away.”

She scoffs, “You think we have a Saturday booking available *next* weekend?”

Rubbing the back of my neck, I’m getting the idea that it was a dumb question. “Yes?”

“Let me see what I can do. I think we have an event going on, but it might be earlier in the day. What time of day are you thinking?” she asks, typing into her phone.

“Whenever, honestly.”

“The event team is going to hate me, and I’ll owe them big time, which means you’ll owe me big time. But I’ll convince them to do a double-booked day and have the rink ready for you by seven p.m., if that works,” she offers with disdain, and I know she’s only doing this for Abby.

It's not like I broke her friend's fucking heart; she could lighten up a bit. Charlotte did this, not me.

"Perfect. Thanks," I mumble and step back out of her office before the guard on my mouth crumbles and I speak freely.

"You're welcome," she hollers back at me.

Taking my phone out of my pocket, I shoot my mom a quick text.

Me: I got the rink for next Saturday at seven p.m. Is that good?

She answers almost immediately.

Mom: Perfect. You're the best! Abby is going to be so excited!

Me: Good. I can't wait to see her face!

Mom: She made me promise to ask you this. I'm sorry ... but she says she wants Charlotte there.

You have got to be fucking kidding me.

CHARLOTTE

There is nothing worse than being forced to work with the pro hockey player whose heart you just shattered. Well, there is one thing worse, I suppose—still being hopelessly in love with him while he absolutely hates you.

After pushing myself to go to work and take photos and videos of the team during morning skate and the home game, I thought maybe the side effects could be managed. That I could wear a mask and fool the world into thinking that I'm okay. But the fatigue and nausea are too much. On top of that, I don't have the strength to be around Reed right now. I know he's mad, and he has every right to be. But it doesn't make it any easier for me to deal with.

His play has changed too. He's harsher in every move he makes, angrier. The team and coaches seem happy with it, so at least that's a positive thing from this whole mess. After powering through the game, which they won against the Vegas Venom, while I was fighting absolute depletion the entire time, I knew I couldn't do it again. The treatments are only going to get harder and harder to recover from as they continue. I need to figure out how to keep Laura in the dark while also somehow doing my job so that no one asks questions that would raise suspicions that something's wrong with me.

I do my best to stop thinking about all of the what-ifs and things that could go wrong.

Rain is beating down on my car as I fight to find the willpower to go inside the hospital for my chemo treatment. Harper texted me and said that Ella had her appointment changed so we would be going at the same time. So, at least, if I can't do it for myself, I will do it for her. If she can be courageous enough, then, fuck it, I can too.

With feigned bravery, I throw my car door open and force myself to take the exhausting steps toward the front doors, each step seemingly heavier than the last. Ella's smiling face appears in the entrance behind the front doors, and my pain seems to fade ever so slightly.

She is the most incredible little girl.

She throws the door open and races the two short steps to me, embracing me in a tight hug. Warmth spreads through me. I catch the door right before it's about to slam into her.

She hugs me once more, and I wrap my arm around her, squeezing her gently back.

"Princess Ella, how are you?" I ask her.

Her honey-sweet voice answers giddier than ever, "Better now that Queen Charlotte is here."

"Is that right?" I laugh as she pulls out of the hug and leads the way inside.

"Yep!" she proclaims.

This whole thing would suck so much more if she and Harper weren't a part of it. I would one thousand percent be stuck in my head, overthinking every single thing and going crazy. I mean, to some extent, I am still doing that, but the point still stands.

Ella leads us to where her mom, Harper, is sitting.

"Good afternoon," I greet Harper with a soft smile.

"I see she found you," she teases, and I chuckle.

Ella is practically vibrating, jumping up and down with Cocoa in her hands. "Mom, do you have them?!"

Harper jerks in her seat and shoves her hands in her purse with urgency. "I sure do. One second."

What the heck does she have in there?

Harper's eyes flick up to mine, gleaming with excitement. "We came across these while shopping, and Ella thought you two *had* to have them for today's appointment."

Harper pulls out two tiaras, one bigger than the other, and hands them to Ella.

Turning my attention to Ella, I'm overwhelmed with emotion. This little girl has the biggest heart. The tiara might be made of plastic, but it's priceless to me.

Ella holds out the larger gold tiara. "This one's for you. Because, duh, a queen would have a bigger crown than the princess."

Sinking down onto my knees, I ask Princess Ella, "Would you do the honor?"

She squeals and springs toward me. Gently, she places the tiara on my head. I instantly feel more powerful, as one should when wearing crown jewels.

"How do I look?" I beam at her while I adjust it slightly so it sits further back on my head.

She claps her hands together. "Perfect! Do mine now!"

"I would love to," I tell her, taking the gold tiara from her tiny hands.

She closes her eyes and leans forward, tilting her head down. I glance at Harper, who I realize has been recording this whole time, and see her eyes filled with tears. The back of my eyes burn, my eyes watering along with hers. But I push it back down, not wanting Ella to notice.

Sliding the tiara onto her head and into the wig, I brush her hair back behind her eyes, then sit back.

"Beautiful," Harper coos, her voice thick and shaky.

"Don't cry, Mom." Ella's eyes fly open as she rushes over to console her mom.

"Happy tears," Harper claims, although I'm certain it's a mix of both happy and sad tears.

But at least Ella seems to buy it.

"You look so pretty!" I cheer.

Her smile grows even bigger somehow, and she is absolutely glowing from the compliments.

“Thank you.” Her voice is soft and shy.

A nurse walks through a door behind her, and I instantly know who she’s looking for, my girl Ella. I can tell from the playfulness she scans the room with. There is only one person in a place like this that can have that effect on others.

“Princess Ella! You have a tiara!” the nurse exclaims, and my lips pull into a huge smile at Ella’s reaction.

She jumps and twirls around to face her. “Yeah! And so does Queen Charlotte!”

“Queen Charlotte? I was not aware that we had more royalty in our midst.” The nurse curtsies with a warm expression.

I bashfully wave her curtsy away. In a posh and proper tone, I say, “Please, forget the pleasantries. We are all friends here.”

This earns a big laugh from Ella, and I want to bottle it up forever. I will do anything for that little girl to hear that again. Ella leaps and bounds toward the nurse and follows her, the door closing behind them.

“Thank you,” Harper whispers, and I hear the sadness in her tone.

Turning toward her, I rise to my feet and find a seat next to her. “You don’t need to thank me for anything involving her. Please. It’s my pleasure.”

She wipes a tear away from her eye and says, “Well, I’m going to thank you anyway.”

“Fine.” I laugh. “You’re welcome.” I remember the video she took of us, and it reminds me to ask, “Can you send me that video? I mean, if you’re okay with it, of course. I would love to have it.”

“Of course! But have your tissues ready for when you see how she looks at you. She adores you like the big sister she’s never had. Not to overshare ...” She trails off.

I cut in before she has a chance to say anything else. “Please overshare. I would love to hear whatever you’re going to say.”

She grins and continues, “Ella was my miracle baby. I wasn’t supposed to be able to have kids, especially at forty-two, and then a short time after my husband and I separated, I found out I was pregnant with her. He wanted nothing to do with us anymore, and I was just fine with that. She has always been my greatest blessing.”

“That’s beautiful,” I whisper, my eyes mirroring her own with unfallen tears.

The door opens again, and the same nurse comes out to get me. “Queen Charlotte, are you ready?”

Absolutely not. Charlotte might want to tuck her tail and run away forever. But Queen Charlotte has a duty to her princess, and that must be upheld.

“Yes.”



Before the effects really take me out of commission for days, I create a bunch of posts for the Nighthawks social media and schedule them to automatically post on certain days and times. I also email and text Laura that I’m not feeling well and might need to rest for a couple of days and won’t be able to travel for tomorrow’s game.

Hopefully, she won’t question me too much about it. I’ll just tell her I have the stomach flu or something.

Thankfully, I have the house to myself for a couple of weeks while Josh is back home in Duluth, visiting his family and having a little vacay. So, at least, I can tear all the walls of my facade down within the confines of my own home.

If I’m not better in a few days or my symptoms aren’t manageable, I’ll figure out what the hell I’m going to tell

Laura. But for right now, I just want to take a fat nap and binge some shows.

Before I get too comfortable, I make myself do something that I've been putting off, but I know I'll be grateful for it in the end. If I want to keep appearances up, I need to order a wig. A really good one that will fool everyone that it's my hair. I've noticed it beginning to thin, even losing small chunks of strands when I shower. But thankfully, it's still full enough that I haven't needed to add in extensions or anything to thicken it up yet.

I manage to get through the first six episodes of *The Vampire Diaries*, uninterrupted, until my phone scares the crap out of me when I get a call from my dad, which I ignore and let ring through to my voice mail.

We usually talk, like, once a week, if that, just to catch up. I think it's more of a familial obligation we feel we must uphold and less of a desire we truly have. I would like to imagine that, one day, our relationship will once again be one of hugs and quality time spent together. But I don't see the likelihood of that being high. My dad just isn't really there anymore. I think he lives in his head most of the time. Maybe he replays memories of my mom and him together again in his mind. With that thought, I find it hard to be angry with him for his distancing. As long as he's happy, or at least as much as he can be, then I'm happy too.

My doorbell rings, and again, I jump. Mostly because I'm not expecting any company. Throwing my soft and warm blanket off of my lap, I hesitantly and very quietly walk through my living room and approach my front door with stealth.

Peering through the peephole, I have absolutely no idea who to expect. No one is there. What the heck?

I can see something sitting on the ground. I give it a few seconds before I unlock my door and pull it open.

Sitting on the ground is a bouquet of fresh flowers and soup from my favorite place in town. Laura must have done this.

But I can't deny the way my heart skips at the thought that it might be from Reed. But I know that's impossible.

My nose is filled with the aroma of the best tomato soup in the world as I pick up the bag and my flowers and turn back inside. My phone chimes as I kick the door shut behind me. Walking over to the kitchen island, I set everything down, then grab my phone from my couch. It's a text from Laura.

Laura: Feel better! I love you!

Guilt wraps around my heart like a snake and constricts it tightly. I hate all of the lies more than anything. Reed, Laura, and my dad are the most important people to me, and I'm lying to every single one of them. Well, I guess I haven't even talked to my dad, but the same guilt hurts at the thought of him anyway.

How bad would it be if they found out? Or just Laura?

No, I remind myself. Once one person is in on it, everyone finds out.

I also know myself well enough to realize that if I told one person, I wouldn't be able to close that can of worms back up, and I would continue to spill the truth.

My breathing becomes uncontrollable as my brain runs rampant with what-ifs, and I can't contain it. My chest rises and falls with ferocity. Fuck! I need air. I need to feel the world around me, to show myself that I'm not truly alone.

Racing toward my balcony, I slide the door open and step onto the worn wooden planks and grip the railing as tears begin falling down my cheeks. Darkness surrounds me, but I'm thankful for it so that no one can see me right now.

I focus on my senses, pushing everything else out.

The continuous noise of traffic fills my ears, and dogs bark in the distance.

Deep breath.

Inhaling deeply, I smell a campfire and hear laughter.

Deep breath.

The metal is cool beneath my fingers and I relax my grip before my fingers lose sensation.

Deep breath.

Now, the part that always seems to calm the storm in my soul. Gazing upward, I can see the faintness of stars lining the dark sky. For some reason, looking up at the stars always relaxes me. It reminds me that even when you feel like giving up, even when life is overwhelming you, you can look at the stars and know that the universe is infinite and that perhaps your worries aren't the worst thing out there. It puts everything in perspective for me. I realize how small I am in the galaxy, and it helps me remember everyone else out there who is also struggling. I don't have to scour for food or water. I don't worry where I'm going to sleep tonight. I'm not overseas, fighting on the front lines for our country, wondering if I'll live through the day. I don't have a daughter who's going through cancer while I silently fight my own demons.

I don't belittle my own problems or life. But somehow, by focusing on others' troubles, it helps me better process my own. If I'm ever panicking or scared, I look up to the stars, and as long as I can do that, everything else will be okay.

REED

Noticing Charlotte's absence from our game is out of my control. I wish I could stop caring, stop wanting to know where she's at, what she's doing, who she's with, et cetera. I can't shut it off. It's impossible.

We are going up against the Pittsburgh Sledgehammers tonight on their ice. They haven't won many games this season, but they have the potential to be one of the dominating teams in the league. This means that we are either going to have an easy time, kicking their ass tonight, or maybe this is the night they finally mesh together and put pucks in the back of the net.

Regardless, I'm excited to put some bodies into the boards, let off a little steam. As a defender, I have many jobs on the ice. It is my job to help my goalie by stopping the puck before it gets to him. Another part of my job is enforcing. Although Jensen is our big man on the ice, I'm the second. If an opponent is playing dirty, like jabbing their stick into our guys' ribs, if they're talking too much shit, or if they're at the wrong place at the wrong time, I'm going to light them the fuck up. Tonight, I am very grateful for that part of my job because I have a lot of anger to release, and doing it on someone who deserves it feels *so* good.

"Reed?" someone calls out for me in the locker room, and I look up and see JD looking at me with furrowed brows.

The fact that they used my actual name means they've probably been calling for me multiple times, using a nickname, and I didn't answer. I'm sure it's a big thing with other sports to mainly use nicknames or, at minimum, last names. But in hockey, last names and nicknames are all we really use.

“Shit, sorry. What’s up?” I ask, rubbing the back of my neck, hating that I was caught while zoned out.

“You good? Ready?” he asks, still studying my movements with concern.

“Yeah, of course.” I stand up onto the blades of my skates and finish getting my gear on for the game.

“You sure? Anything you need to get off your chest before we get out there?” he offers quietly, not wanting to draw the attention of the other guys.

While I appreciate the offer, talking about Charlotte for two minutes won’t change the storm in my mind.

“I’m good. Thank you though, bro, really.” I dap him up, shake his hand, and pull him into a quick hug.

He reciprocates and says, “All right.”

We look out for one another; we have to. We aren’t just teammates on the ice; we are teammates in life. If one of us is going through something, we make sure their worries are taken care of and they have people to talk to if needed. We have to be mentally strong to survive the grueling schedule that is professional hockey. To do that, we have to have strong support systems, on and off the ice, including being there for each other.

We finish getting ready and head to the ice for warm-ups. We run through our usual warm-up drills and hype each other the whole time, cracking jokes but still focused on the task at hand. We have to have fun with it.

After warm-ups, we have a final session in the locker room with our coaches to go over any final details—things we need to be conscious of improving, things we need to be reminded of about their team, and a good hype speech.

After that, we head back to the ice and go through the fanfare, starting lineups, and the singing of the national anthem before we finally line up for the puck drop at center ice.

My adrenaline is pumping as our sticks hit the ice and the ref blows the whistle, letting us know as long as everyone is lined up properly and not cheating, the puck is dropping. Thankfully, everyone does their job. The black biscuit slaps the ice, and our centers fight to control it.

Kos wins, kicking the puck between his legs backward to Costello, who quickly grabs it. We move into the offensive zone, Costy letting the puck move past the blue line first so that we are onside with it, and the Sledgehammers don't have a reason to challenge it if we score. Once Cam passes the blue line, we skate in after him. Costy dishes the puck to Burnsy, who quickly moves it around their defender and takes a shot. Their goalie manages to grab it, and he holds on to it, stopping the play.

Since the goalie froze the play by holding it and not dropping the puck back to the ice, we will face off in our offensive zone. We're probably nearing the time for a shift change, but we kind of get a quick breather and decide to stay on the ice for right now, probably switching out after this next attempt to score in our zone.

The puck drops, and we win again. Costy and Kos guide their players just where they want them to set Burnsy up. Burnsy is one of the most-talked-about forwards in the league. For God's sake, he's only twenty years old and dominating as one of the top scorers in the entire NHL. He's so fucking smooth with the puck, and he manages to find these tiny pockets that the goalie leaves open.

Their players fall for Kos and Costy's play, leaving a wide-open lane down the center for Burnsy. Kos slaps the puck to him. Burnsy picks it up, skates forward, and fires, the puck finding the top-left shelf of the net. We are already crashing the net, in case there is a deflection, Burnsy closer to the crease than anyone.

The lamp behind the goalie glows red, and the ref signals a goal!

"Fuck yeah!" I roar across the few feet of ice between us.

I see it happen before it does. The look on their defender's face is menacing, and his glare is honing in on our baby boy Burnsy.

Fucking try it.

He shoves Burnsy's back too hard, and I'm between them and in the face of this defender in two strides, our visors nearly touching as I restrain myself from beating his face in.

"Touch him like that again and see what fucking happens," I spit through my gritted teeth.

"You're a pussy. You're not going to do shit," he chirps back, and I clench my fists in my gloves.

A low and maniacal laugh vibrates through my chest. "I would absolutely love nothing more than to beat your ass tonight."

The refs skate between us and separate us.

"It's a date." He blows me a kiss.

Ignoring him, I turn around and crash into my teammates, giving Burnsy the celebratory attention he deserves.

"Let's fucking go, boys!" I cheer.

"Thought you were going to fight him there for a second." Burnsy laughs.

"So did I." I chuckle as we skate toward our bench and receive our high fives from the team, Burnsy leading the line.

We continue to dominate the ice throughout the first, second, and beginning of the third period. Which is amazing for us and not so amazing for them. With every goal and steal, they are growing angrier and angrier, and I am loving *every* second of it.

With only two minutes left in the third period, they have no chance of coming back, and they know that. They are pissed off and out for blood.

The same defender who has been begging to meet my bare knuckles is back on the ice for his line shift, and he has this look on his face that clearly says he is up to no good.

He skates out toward center ice, where we are now moving into their zone. Burnsy has the puck. He lights Brett up and smashes him into the boards in a dirty hit, and for a brief second, everything slows down. I flick my gloves off and they bounce off the ice. I guess he really wanted to find out what was going to happen if he did it again. I am happy to oblige.

Picking up speed, I dig my skates into the ice as hard as I can and take off after him. He must hear me coming because he turns around with a smirk on his face. I don't slow down as I approach him, on the contrary. I continue to get faster, and I barrel into him, grabbing his jersey and dragging him with me. Lifting him up, I slam him as hard as I fucking can into the boards. My fists find his jaw, his cheeks, his nose. Any part of him that I can hurt, I hit.

He's swinging but missing miserably, and I laugh at him.

"Where's the tough guy from earlier?" I scoff and continue swinging.

He manages to push his arms between us, locking me at arm's reach, but it doesn't matter. Switching gears, I punch him in the ribs and stomach.

"You fucking caught me off guard, you piece of shit!" He swings again and misses *again*.

I'm exhausted by this point, and I'm over giving this any more of my energy.

Pulling back, I hit him in the face one more time before kicking his skate out from under him and driving him into the ice. It's at this point that the refs come over and split us up since he went down. But even as I'm being pushed back, I land one final blow.

"You're done," the ref mutters at me but I ignore it.

"You up for a second date? Name it, and I'm all yours." I smile at the bloody player on the ice as the arena erupts with cheers and applause, as do my teammates.

"You all right, Brett?" I shout at him as I'm being escorted to the bench by the ref.

I'm definitely out for the rest of the game since there's less than two minutes left. I'm getting at least a five-minute penalty for fighting. And probably an additional ten-minute misconduct since I went after that dude without him dropping gloves too, and not stopping once he hit the ice. There's no point in putting me in the penalty box since I have more minutes to serve than there are remaining in the game.

"I'm good, I think. Thanks," he says with a nod, and I know he means it more than for just checking in on him.

Nodding back, I turn and step off of the ice onto the rubber mats and walk to the locker room to cool the fuck down. We end up beating the Sledgehammers five to zero. I guess tonight wasn't their night of finally clicking as a team.

What a shame.

After I'm changed and ready to leave, I pull out my phone and check it, seeing a text from my mom.

Mom: Abby and I were watching the game. Are you okay?!

Me: Yeah, I'm just fine, Mom. Ha-ha. Is Abby okay after seeing it?

Violence isn't Abby's favorite thing in the world in any form. Not in books, movies, and certainly not with her big brother.

Mom: You should have seen her actually. I've never seen her react like this. She was cheering you on, LOL. I'll send you a video I took.

Me: I would love that. Excited about the party? Is the events team taking good care of you guys?

Mom: Oh my gosh, yes. They are phenomenal. Abby is going to love it!

Me: Good! I've already got my Barbie-inspired outfit ready to go. Ha-ha. I think it'll make Abby laugh for sure, although the guys might never stop giving me shit for it.

Mom: I can't wait to see it!

Me: Need any help with anything for Saturday?

Mom: Everything is being taken care of. But I do have to ask if you've invited Charlotte. You know she means a lot to Abby.

Me: I know, Mom. I'll text her tonight.

Mom: You could at least call her, Reed.

Me: I don't want to hear her voice right now. She's getting invited via text. Please don't make me call her.

Mom: Fine. But I want to know what she says right away in case I have to prepare Abby and let her know that she won't be there for her party.

Me: Will do. Love you.

Mom: I love you too, sweetie. Get back home safe and sound.

My mom would definitely prefer if I asked Charlotte in person about the party, but I can't do it. I don't want to have a conversation with her at all, so if I can invite her through my phone, at least I don't have to look at her to do it.

Me: My sister's birthday party is Saturday at seven p.m. She wants to invite you. So, this is me doing that for her. It's at the arena.

Text bubbles appear immediately, then disappear, then reappear, then disappear. I'm sick of watching her make up her mind, so I lock my phone and shove it into my pocket. Of course, the second I do, it dings. My heart is racing faster right now than it was during the fight.

Charlotte: Are you comfortable with that?

My fingers rapidly type out my response.

Me: This has absolutely nothing to do with me. If you want to be there for her, then come. If you in any way are coming to toy with me, then don't bother. It's her night, and I need to see her enjoy it and be

happy. To her, that means having you there. Your choice.

She answers quickly with a short response.

Charlotte: I'll be there. For Abby.

A piece of me wants to leave out the part of dressing up so that she looks out of place. But I can't. I also don't want Abby to think she didn't care enough to try.

Fuck.

Me: It's Barbie-themed. So, at least wear pink if you can. Go all out or as little as you want.

Text bubbles appear, then disappear. She doesn't respond. Instead, she simply likes my message and leaves it at that.

Even just texting with her has my blood boiling and my heart fucking bleeding. I never thought she would ever be the reason I would feel this much agony. But I guess you never really know what people are truly thinking and feeling.

CHARLOTTE

As I wake up this morning, I feel the lowest I've ever felt. My body feels like it's dying and falling apart. My head is pounding. I'm bloated—a fun side effect of chemo that is definitely not talked about enough. And I feel like the worst person in the world. Reed is kind, gentle, and sweet, and I unlocked a coldness and cruelty in him that hadn't existed before. On top of all of that, my hair is now starting to fall out. Sometimes, it's only a few strands; other times, they're clumps. My eyes water almost every time as I watch my hair get thinner and patchier each day. I hate it so much. It feels like more of me is disappearing.

How can I continue to try to fool work and everyone else into thinking that everything is fine? I can't even fool myself.

So many things I didn't anticipate are changing about my body. My skin is blotchy, dry, and sometimes itchy. My scalp is sensitive and tender. I get fatigued so incredibly easily. I knew it would be difficult, but I didn't think it was going to be this hard. I don't think anyone can truly prepare for what chemo does to your body or your mind. I find myself forgetting to do simple things that were normal in my routine prior to treatment. My hands are achy, and typing for even short periods of time is nearly impossible. I don't know how I'm going to get through this in one piece. I really don't.

More than anything, I wish I had Reed. He would be the best person in the world to have by my side for this. He's so attentive and aware. I know he would help me in more ways than one. But I remind myself that I made the right decision by ending things. I can live with causing his cold side. I can't handle taking his life alongside mine.

My dad never healed or moved on. He never got the light back in his eyes. I won't kill Reed's light.

My dad has tried calling me twice this week, both of which I have ignored. I know I can't put him off forever, and I just need to call him and get through the conversation. I know talking to him and not telling him about what's going on is going to eat me up the same way it does as not telling Reed. It's not that they don't deserve to know. They deserve better; they deserve to live without my burden crushing their hearts.

Before I can talk myself out of it, I press Call on my dad's contact. He picks up on the first ring.

"There you are. I was beginning to worry," he answers, and I hear concern etched into every word.

"I'm sorry, Dad. Work has been really crazy busy. I'm sorry. I should have made time." I fight back the tears that are starting to burn my dry eyes.

"It's okay. I just wanted to check in with you. Work is going well?" he asks.

Wiping my eyes, I answer with a steady voice, "Yeah, really great."

"I'm glad to hear it." Someone interrupts him. "Hold on, Charlotte."

I didn't even think about the fact that he's probably at work. He's an accountant, and he's been with the same firm since I was a kid, including having the same schedule. I don't know how it slipped my mind.

"Sorry, sweetie. I have to go. I'll call again soon. Okay?" he asks, sounding distracted.

Honestly, the busier he is, the better. At least it takes the pressure off of me to answer whenever he calls.

"Okay. I love you," I mumble, keeping my voice low in hopes it won't crack.

"Love you too," he says before hanging up.

Short and sweet—perfect. Actually, it was terrible. Talking to him only makes me think of my mom. She went through this with an incredible support system, the best doctors, and still didn't beat it. How am I supposed to then?

I need to get out of the house, get some new things to distract myself, and try somehow to counteract these side effects. Never underestimate what some retail therapy, a new fuzzy blanket, and coffee can do for your mindset.

Quickly, I throw on my wig cap, followed by my blonde wig. Not wanting to fuss with it too much right now, I throw my favorite purple beanie on.

My mission for right now is to find a few things that bring me joy, however small they might be. I need to smile at something—*anything*.



When I get to Target, I'm already tired. But I force myself to walk inside and get a cart. I start strolling around the store, waiting for something to catch my eye. It doesn't take long once I get into the clothing section, specifically the pajamas.

I'm a sucker for anything cozy and soft. Target has shorts and button-up short-sleeved shirt sets that are my absolute favorite. I can't resist grabbing the lilac set with white stars all over it. It's cute, and I need it.

Remembering that I need some kind of Barbie-themed outfit for Saturday, I wander into the clothing section, scanning for anything hot pink or pink in general.

No clothing steals my attention right away, but a cute elderly couple sure does. The woman is holding up different sweaters, and the man is sitting on a display with his cane propped between his legs, watching her with the most endearing smile. He offers his opinion on each sweater she lifts up in front of her, his opinion never wavering. He says it looks perfect and would look great on her. They are so sweet. For a moment, I picture it being Reed and me, sitting here at

eighty, while I decide what color I want, and he can't stop telling me that each one looks better than the last.

My chest feels like an elephant is sitting on it as I picture a future we'll never have together.

Goddammit. I didn't come to Target to cry.

Forcing myself to stop staring at the adorable couple, I push my cart away from the fashion department and head to toys. I want to leave, go curl up in a cozy blanket, and stay there forever. But I can't. I have to keep going.

If Abby is having a Barbie-themed party, I feel that at least part of her gift should follow that too. Walking into the colorful aisle lined with Barbies of all shapes and sizes, accessories galore, and plastic pink mansions, I wonder what would grab Abby's attention first. I know from my time with Reed that she has quite the collection, so I'm looking for anything I don't recognize.

No way.

There's a Barbie hanging up that looks similar to Abby. Quickly, I read the packaging and learn that the Barbie doll has Down syndrome. Finally, a doll that she can truly identify with. But I can't imagine she doesn't already have this. Anyone that knows Abby and has any kind of relationship with her would know her love for Barbies and immediately buy this for her.

Pushing myself past my comfort zone, I pull my phone out and start typing a text to the one person who would know or at least be able to check—Reed's mom.

Me: Does Abby have this yet? If not, I am definitely grabbing it for her.

I attach a quick picture of the doll.

Waiting for a text back, I place the doll gently in my cart and search for more stuff I can get her.

My phone vibrates. Once it does more than once, tingles run down my back.

Flipping it over, I see Reed's mom calling me.

Fuck. Do I answer? I can't ignore it, right? Ahh! God. Okay, you got this.

Clearing my throat, I answer, "Hello?"

"Hey, Charlotte! I hope calling is okay. I'm driving, and it's just easier," she says.

"Yeah, of course," I agree.

"I cannot believe you found that. It must be brand-new because I know we would for sure already have, like, ten of them if it wasn't." She laughs. "Please feel free to get that for her, but also don't feel the need to go crazy on a gift. More than anything, she just wants to see you again."

My heart can't take any more pain.

Since I've known her, she has been like a little sister to me, and I love that girl. I would do anything for her. Which is also why I want to spoil her for her birthday.

"While I appreciate that, there is no way I can pass up the opportunity of watching her open a present." I chuckle, and the sensation surprises me.

"She sure does love gifts, doesn't she?" I can hear the smile in her words.

"Yeah ..." I trail off. "The doll is in my cart and coming with me, so the package is secured."

"Perfect," she says, and silence begins to eat me alive as neither of us knows what to say.

"Well, I will see you on Saturday. Thanks for getting back to me," I tell her, deciding I can't physically bear to hear her voice any longer.

"Can't wait to see you, Charlotte. Bye," she says, and I end the call as fast as I can.

Mrs. Larinski—Anna—is one of my favorite people in the entire world. She genuinely has the purest and kindest heart. In some sense, she became like a mom to me. Which I'm just now realizing that in the split from Reed, I lost so much more than just the love of my life.

Deciding that I have my limits, I finish grabbing a few things, including a new throw blanket, before checking out and heading home. I didn't find anything to wear that fit the theme, so I'm going to just find some stuff online on Zonama. I need so much goddamn rest this week if I'm going to be able to show up at the party.

My phone buzzes, and I check it.

Harper: Hey, Charlotte. How're you doing?

It's crazy how different that question comes across from different people. If a random Target employee asks me how I'm doing, I know it's kind of an empty question. They don't want the truthful answer; they are just making small talk. But I know that when Harper is asking, she genuinely means it, especially because she knows what I'm going through.

She is kind of the one person that I can be completely honest with right now without exposing my secret, so I answer truthfully.

*Me: Doing kind of rough ... but hanging in there.
How's Ella?*

When I finally get home and park my car, I crawl into bed and continue texting Harper until I fall asleep.



I don't think there's enough Red Bull in the world to make me feel energetic enough for tonight. But I am pushing myself to do it anyway.

I spent the last three hours getting ready. This might seem excessive, but most of that time was spent sitting on the ground and trying to hype myself to get back on my feet and finish. Finally, after nearly giving up, I was ready to leave.

My wig looks so natural; no one is going to be able to tell it's not my real hair. It also doesn't hurt that I'm wearing a hot-pink cowgirl hat with white rhinestones, which covers part of my forehead, including the hairline.

Once I found the hat online, the outfit came together rather quickly. For pants, I chose hot-pink flare jeans. And for my top, I went with a fairly basic white tank that ties in bows on the tops of my shoulders. I also got glitter spray for my hair. That way, if anyone thinks my hair looks different, the glitter will deter them.

When I'm finally ready and looking in the mirror, I feel like I'm looking at a snapshot of my old self, before my world fell apart. My skin looks even and healthy, thanks to the miraculous wonders of makeup. For a brief second, I pretend this is real. That I'm not sick. I'm not heartbroken. I'm not dying. That I'm still dating Reed, still planning our future together, and happy. I'm just getting ready to go to my boyfriend's sister's birthday party. We'll have fun. Maybe we'll dance the night away.

I want to hold on to that dream, but reality won't allow it as I look down at my bathroom counter, full of the tools it took to hide the truth.

You're protecting him, I remind myself as I gather my phone, wallet, and keys and throw them in my new bright pink crossbody purse and head out with Abby's gift in my other hand.

Tonight might be my toughest challenge yet.



My jaw is practically on the floor as I walk into the arena and see pink decorations *everywhere*.

I got this. I can do this. Deep breaths.

I'm a few minutes early, but I'm hoping that Abby is already here so that I don't have to awkwardly mingle with other people and I can go straight to her. Although that dream will be short-lived as I will know almost everyone here.

"Charlotte! I missed you!" someone calls from my right, and I instantly recognize Laura's voice. "Oh my God, you look amazing!"

As she approaches me with her arms wide, I put a block in my mind to keep myself from immediately breaking down the second she touches me.

I embrace her and pull her into a hug and say, “Thank you. So do you!”

She is wearing a hot-pink T-shirt dress that is slightly distressed, bedazzled tights, and stark-white knee-high high-heeled boots.

“Where are Alec and Jack?” I ask, wanting to immediately dissuade any attention from being focused on me.

“They’re already inside. I had to run back out to the car quickly to grab this. Alec forgot it—go figure.” She holds up the gift bag and laughs. “How are you feeling? Any better?”

She is concerned as my best friend, but also probably as my boss. I want to tell her the truth, to finally let it out, but I can’t. I love Laura to death, but I know that, eventually, she would probably slip up and make a comment to Alec. At that point, it would be uncontrollable, and then everything I have planned will be ruined.

I can handle Reed hating me. I accept that. But if he found out the truth and came to me, begging me to take him back, I don’t think I would have the courage to turn him away. He is my greatest weakness, yet the source of my strength.

“Yes, and no. Don’t let the makeup fool you. I almost didn’t come,” I say, teetering on the line of honesty and lying.

“I’m sorry you aren’t doing well, babes. You can work from home for as long as you need to get better,” she offers, and I know I will one thousand percent be taking her up on that.

“Thank you,” I say genuinely and spin the gift bag in my hand. “Should we go in?”

Laura nods and hooks her arm in mine. “Are you going to be okay in there?”

Nope.

But I lie.

Again.

“Yeah. It’ll be awkward for sure. But I think I’ll be okay. I probably won’t stay for very long. I’m exhausted,” I tell her.

“You showed up, and I can’t imagine how hard it is for you to be around him right now either. But you still did it, and that matters, no matter how long you stay,” she says, doing her best to ease my anxiety about the whole situation.

“Yeah ...” I trail off as we make our way to the rink.

The music is the first thing I notice, as well as the bright pink carpet leading to the large black carpets that cover the ice from blue line to blue line.

The rink is packed and practically glowing pink from everyone’s outfits.

I want to turn around and run and not look back until I’m in my house and under my comforter, blocking out the world.

Is seeing Reed ever going to be anything less than agonizing? He hasn’t seen me yet as we walk across the pink carpet toward the party. He looks good—*so* good. And he’s smiling at something Brett said.

I can’t tear my gaze away from him, and while he’s happy and chatting, I don’t want to. Even if this building was burning to the ground, I couldn’t look away from him. Seeing him like that is all I want. Part of me starts to pretend everything is fine and I’m walking over to my boyfriend. But I quickly shut that fantasy down.

I’m going to ruin that happiness—I know it. The second he sees me, his smile will drop, and his demeanor will turn cold.

Brett looks at me and mumbles something to Reed, who doesn’t hesitate to turn my way. The second his eyes land on mine, my body freezes and stops in place.

Any ounce of joy that was pulsing through his body moments ago is instantly replaced by the most intense hurt. All because he *looked* at me. My eyes drop to the floor, unable to watch his walls go up right in front of me.

Maybe I can’t do this. It’s too much.

I love him—*I fucking love him*—and he hates me to the core right now. That hatred is more damaging to my soul than anything else in the world.

“Char?” Laura whispers, her arm still locked in mine.

I didn’t even realize she had stopped with me. My body is quivering and starting to shake as her fingers brush the back of my hand. My eyes well with tears, and my throat burns like I swallowed embers.

Someone speaks through the mic, and I immediately recognize Reed’s mom, Anna’s, voice. “Hello, everyone! Thank you so much for coming out to celebrate Abby’s birthday! We are going to kick tonight off with dinner, dessert, and then our birthday girl’s favorite part—presents and mingling!” She laughs. “Please feel free to find any seat available at the tables, and dinner will be served in just a few minutes.”

“Can I sit with you guys?” I instantly ask Laura.

“Yeah, of course. We already claimed a spot over here. Come on,” she tells me and walks us over to a table.

I sit down in the chair right next to hers. I feel so aware of everything happening around me; it’s overstimulating. As long as Reed doesn’t sit over here, we’ll be fine.

The round table seats six. Alec. Jack. Laura. Me.

I catch flowing pink hair in my peripheral vision right as Morgan sits down in the chair to my right. “Charlotte, it’s so good to see you!”

“You too! You look amazing!” I tell her genuinely.

Clearly, I’m not the only one that thinks so because Cam can’t take his eyes off of her as he walks over and sits down in the last unclaimed free chair.

“Hi, Char!” Jack sings as he wraps his arms around the chair and me.

Grabbing his clasped hands, I say, “Hi, bud! Missed you!”

He pulls away and steps between Laura's and my chairs. "I missed you too!"

"I like your shoes," I tell him excitedly as I look down at his hot-pink tennis shoes.

He lifts his foot up to show them off. "Thanks!"

"Come on, Jack. Get in your seat. They're about to bring food out," Laura says, and he hustles over to his seat.

Biting the inside of my cheek, I can't tear my gaze away from the centerpiece. I'm scared to look up and meet eyes with Reed. I'm barely hanging on as it is.

A ton of servers bring out a plate for each guest—a tasty and moist chicken breast, mashed potatoes, and asparagus. It is seriously good. Thankfully, everyone else agrees because the table remains silent as they devour their feast.

Once the plates are cleared, Anna gets back on the mic. "Thank you to the Nighthawks nutrition team for making such a delicious meal for everyone. We are going to start Abby's favorite part of the party—mingling with each and every one of you as we open gifts! Up first, Reed."

My heart plummets at the sound of his name.

Out of the corner of my eye, I spot Reed making his way over to Anna and Abby. Reed throws his arms around Abby and pulls her in for a hug.

His voice penetrates my heart like a thousand knives. "Firstly, I want to thank everyone for coming out and helping us celebrate Abby's special day." A short round of applause breaks out. "Happy birthday, Abby. I know you've been saying that you want to learn how to drive. Well, Mom and I talked and thought that this could be a perfect stepping stone."

Turning my head, I fully look at Reed and see him outstretch his arm to the rink doors.

Oh my God.

The doors pull open and reveal a side-by-side vehicle as someone drives it onto the ice. But not just any basic model.

This one is hot pink and glittery with the words *Abby's Dream Car* on the side.

Abby screams in excitement and takes off for it with the world's biggest smile. "Oh my gosh!"

Everyone laughs and cheers at her happiness. It's contagious. Unfortunately for everyone else, I doubt their gift is going to come close to Reed's, so hopefully, they have all accepted they aren't winning the title of best gift.

My smile pulls at my lips as music continues to play in the background, and this moment really does feel like a fairy tale for Abby.

My gaze drifts back over to Reed, and the air is knocked from my lungs.

His eyes are locked on me. My smile falters, and I force my gaze to the floor. God, that look in his eyes, it was pure pain. It hurts so much more than I was prepared for. Like my heart is trying to claw its way out of my chest.

Breathing in the scent of the arena, I think I'm about to spiral out of control. I need to get out of here. *Now*.

"Desserts are set up in the back. Feel free to grab anything and everything!" Anna says into the mic. "I think the birthday girl might need a minute to take in her new present."

Everyone laughs, and the crowd falls into muffled conversation. And that's my cue.

"I'm not feeling well, guys. I'm going to head home early," I announce to the table, not even aware I cut someone off while they were talking.

"Are you sure?" Laura asks, her hand immediately wrapping around mine.

Nodding, I say, "Yeah, I'm sure. I'm just going to hang back to say good-bye to Abby, then leave."

Of course, I omit the part that includes waiting for Reed to walk away so I can go say good-bye. But I feel like she understands and reads between the lines.

Standing up, I push my chair in and grab the present I have for her. Spinning around, I drop Laura's hand without a word and come face-to-face with Abby and Anna, whose smiles are taking over their faces—a striking difference to my own.

“Charlotte!” Abby shouts and runs into me, wrapping her arms tightly around my torso.

“Hi, Abby. Happy birthday!” I muster the most cheerful tone I can manage.

“Thank you!” she says and pulls away, her eyes instantly dropping to the gift bag. “Did you see my new car?”

“Umm, heck yes, I did! How cool is that?” I exclaim.

“So cool! Do you want to ride in it with me sometime?” she asks.

“I would love to,” I answer genuinely, although I'm not sure how realistic the chances of it happening are.

Her eyes drop to the gift bag in my hand again, and this draws an almost-hysterical giggle out of me.

“This is for you,” I say as I hand her the gift.

“Really?! Thanks!” she shrieks.

Fighting the sadness trying to escape me, I wipe my eyes nonchalantly, trying to play it off. But as my gaze meets Anna, I know she saw it. They weren't tears of joy at seeing Abby. And I know Anna also saw that from the sad, pitying look that flashes my way as she smiles.

“I'm not feeling good, Abby. I have a bit of a cold that just won't go away.” *Ain't that the truth?*

“Oh no. Well, my mom always says you have to sleep your sickness away. Are you going to sleep to get better?” she asks me, unfazed at my illness.

“Is it okay with you if I leave early to get some sleep? I did have to make sure that I came to see my favorite girl though,” I tell her sweetly.

“Me? I'm your favorite girl?!” she asks with untamed excitement.

“Of course you are,” I tell her, watching her smile grow even bigger somehow.

This could be the last time I see Abby or Anna. This time next year, they will have forgotten about me. I will simply be Reed’s ex who broke his heart. I hate losing them too.

“Are you sleeping here?” Abby asks.

Anna cuts in, “No, silly. She is probably going to sleep at home. Are you okay if she goes home to get some rest and feel better?”

“Well, yeah. I don’t want her to get worse,” she says matter-of-factly.

“I appreciate that.” I force a smile her way.

My stomach twists and my eyes well back up with tears as I take a step toward her.

Dammit.

Now it’s me that throws myself around her, hugging her tightly. Even though she knows I’m sick, she hugs me back just the same.

“Get better, okay?” she demands more than asks, and this time, a genuine smile tugs at my lips.

“I will,” I promise her, unsure if it’s one I’ll ever get to keep.

Anna opens her arms, and I step into them, fighting the tsunami building in my eyes. Breathing her in, I find myself mentally checking out. This is all so much more overwhelming than I could have ever imagined.

I really, really need to get out of here before I lose it.

Pulling away, I avert my gaze and say, “I’ll see you guys later.”

“Bye, Charlotte!” Abby shouts at me as I rush back off the rink on the pink carpet, my tears already starting to fall.

I just need to get outside, feel the fresh air, look up at the sky, then go home.

“Charlotte,” Laura calls out to me.

Turning around, I continue to move backward off the rink, and by instinct, my gaze darts straight to Reed, who I find is watching me with a softer gaze, which somehow hurts even more.

“Stay and have fun. I just can’t be here right now, okay? Call me later,” I tell her, although I don’t know if I’ll even have the courage to answer.

“Charlotte, slow down. Talk to me. I know you said you aren’t feeling well. But is that just because of Reed?” she pleads, continuing to practically chase after me as I near the doors I entered through.

“I don’t want to cry here, okay? Sometimes, it’s just hard, being around him after we broke up,” I admit, which is true.

“Why don’t you talk to him? I bet you two could work this out,” she offers.

I laugh at her, like a crazy kind of laugh, at the words she said so easily, as if it could be that simple.

“No. Leave it at that for tonight. Please,” I beg of her.

“Will you call me later?” she asks and reaches out for my hand.

After letting her brush my hand, I take another step backward and lean into the door. “Yeah. Now, please, I just want to leave without making too much of a scene. Go back to the party and have fun.”

“I love you,” she says with a saddened smile.

When I push backward, cool air wraps around me. “I love you too.”

Throwing the door open, I slink through it and gasp at finally being alone. Looking up, I try to see through all the bright lights, hoping to see my stars. But they’re undetectable, as is any ounce of comfort.

I can’t do this every time I see him. I can’t spiral and show that I still care. I need to be tougher than that. I will be

stronger than that. I don't have a choice if I want to save him from the anguish of loving me.

REED

“That’s what I’m talking about!” I scream at Kos, as do the rest of our guys as we huddle around him.

Kos just tied the game up against the New Jersey Jackals with only four seconds remaining in the third period. There is almost no chance that we’ll be able to score again in the four seconds that remain, aside from a miracle. Which means that we are going into overtime. Which also means that the regular five on five turns into three on three. Three players from their team against three players from ours—and of course, the goalies too.

After skating in front of our bench for glove bumps with our teammates, we return to center ice for puck drop. The ref blows the whistle and then drops the puck. The Jackals gain possession, and both teams waste the clock because there’s not really a point in trying to run a play with that much time left. The buzzer sounds, and we skate to our benches for a quick break before the start of overtime.

After a quick talk from Coach Carrington, we are ready to get back on the ice and finish this game with a win. The ref at center ice blows his whistle, and our first overtime line skates out. Our first line consists of three forwards, which isn’t always a common grouping to leave out a defender, but we have found success with this, so we continue to use it.

Kos, Burnsy, and Costy ready for the puck drop—Kos at the center dot—and the whistle blows. The ref drops the puck. Kos wins the battle, kicking the puck backward to Burnsy. Costy is already practically waiting at the blue line to enter the offensive zone.

Burnsy must know before he even looks up because with a quick flick of the wrist, Costy has the puck and takes off

toward the net with no Jackal players between him and the goalie.

He dekes out the goalie out by leading him to his left, and at the last second, he skates right, swings his stick wide, and flicks it into the top-right corner of the net.

The arena goes feral, the lamp is lit, and the bench is emptying out on the ice, taking off for our overtime scorer, Costy.

“Let’s fucking go!”

“YES!”

“Let’s go, boys!”

“Thatta baby!”

All the Nighthawks players continue to hoot and holler the entire way over to Costy, piling into him once we reach him.

“Woohoo!” I cheer.

After a moment of chaotic celebrating, we all bump helmets with Macky and head off of the ice. We’ve got places to be tonight—or rather, a *place*. The Penalty Box, the same bar we go to after every home game win.

As we skate off of the ice and begin walking down the tunnel, the wind gets knocked out of me.

I didn’t think she was going to be here tonight. As much as I wished I could help it, I looked for her, but I didn’t see her the entire game.

Charlotte is filming us walking past her, and the smallest grin lifts her plump lips. That is, until I fill the frame of her camera. Her eyes fly up over the camera lens, and for a brief second, all I see is sadness in her eyes. But as fast as it was there, it is quickly replaced by neutrality, like there isn’t a single emotion behind those annoyingly beautiful blue eyes. She looks back down at the camera and doesn’t say a word to me.

I don’t know what would’ve hurt more—her actually speaking to me or *that*.

Trying to bump my mood back up, I do my best to push her out of my mind. But even as I change out of my jersey and gear, I can't shake the image of her saddened stare. Is she pitying me? Is she sad for me? Is she sad for herself? Maybe she finally realized she'd messed up. Although I find that hard to be true, as she ignored me anyway.

Costy offers to give me a ride, but I want to drive. I'd rather have my vehicle there if I don't drink and I want to drive home instead of waiting around for someone else. And I'm not entirely sure where tonight's level of alcohol consumption is going to fall.

When I arrive at The Penalty Box, most of the Nighthawks guys and their girls are already in our booths. Fucking speed demons, I swear.

Walking over to them, I find a seat next to Jensen. The waitress walks over shortly and takes our order. I start with water and a pineapple martini. Which, of course, merits some chuckles from the guys, as my orders usually do.

"You know that's, like, a girl's drink, right?" JD teases me.

I laugh. "You say that. But if you tried one, you wouldn't drink beer. Because no one fucking enjoys the taste of beer. It's fucking gross. No one has ever said, *Wow, this tastes amazing*, after drinking a Coors Light. And if someone has something to say about my choice of drinks, I dare them to say it to my face and see what happens," I say venomously, although the guys know I wouldn't fight them over a drink. Someone else maybe, but not them.

"Rude. But probably fucking true," he agrees with me, chuckling and taking another sip of his beer.

Burnsy is across from me, sipping on some water. His eyes flash behind me and widen, and then they lock on to me. Which only means one thing.

Charlotte is here.

"Hey, Charlotte," Burnsy says, far too giddy for my liking, and I kick him underneath the table.

He grunts, and I can't help but smirk, tipping my head down in an attempt to hide it.

Kos slinks into the empty seat to my left, and Charlotte and Laura walk a few feet over to the bar and have a seat at the stools. At least I can continue to avoid that inevitable confrontation with her for yet another night.

"You all right?" Kos asks, bumping my shoulder with his.

My martini arrives, and I use that as an excuse to hesitate, taking one, two, three sips before answering, "I'm great. What do you mean?"

My face is flat, and I know I'm not tricking anyone with my words, my expressions betray me every time.

"You want to go somewhere else?" Burnsy asks, and JD audibly gasps.

My lips tip up at Jensen's overreaction. "First off, there is no way you are being serious. Second, if by some crazy reason you are, you know we can't, and the answer is *no*. We can't break this tradition. You know better than anyone, bro; hockey players are superstitious. Well, most sports actually, but we are on a whole other fucking level."

Taking another sip of my martini, I glance up and look at Charlotte without thought, and my veins begin to boil. Some guy is leaning against the bar next to her, far too fucking close. Sitting up taller in my seat, I give them my full attention, not giving a fuck if she notices.

He says something with a dumbass smile on his face, and more than anything, I would love to erase it.

"Going over there?" JD asks, and I know he's taunting me, egging me on, hoping I do.

"No," I say to him, reminding myself that she isn't mine to protect anymore.

She leans away from him, and he trails closer to her. She is literally pushing into Laura to avoid this dude, and he's not getting the goddamn hint. Is he blind? Or just a fucking prick?

Laura says something and hops off of her stool, quickly followed by Charlotte, and they walk toward the restroom. My eyes don't waver from the guy in the red polo shirt with the dumbass smirk.

He turns, talking to his buddy, probably saying something cocky about how she's totally into him. He quickly scans the crowd, specifically the area by the restrooms, before reaching into his jeans pocket and pulling out a little baggie.

He takes a pinch out, and before his hand is fully over Charlotte's glass and sprinkling the contents into her drink, I am out of my chair, kicking it out behind me.

I reach him in practically two strides and haul him to his feet by his shirt, slamming him into the wall to our right. "You must be the dumbest fucking person in the world if you thought you were going to get away with that."

His eyes are so wide that I think his eyes might burst from their sockets. His friend tries saying something to me, but I know without looking that my boys are behind me, giving me space to deal with this fuck.

I'm in his face, and he looks so goddamn pathetic. I grab the baggie of drugs out of his pocket. Part of me wants to empty the contents into his fucking mouth and see how he likes it. But somehow, I find the restraint not to.

I am seething mad as he tries pleading with me. "I wasn't doing anything, man! Please!"

A low growl leaves my clenched jaw. "If you're lucky and smart, you might still walk out of here with your teeth. If you decide to keep being a fucking idiot, then I'll take them with me as little trophies." Getting even more in his face, I spit the words through my teeth. "Don't look at her. Don't talk to her. Don't ever step foot in this bar again. Am I fucking clear?"

Tears are streaming down his face as he makes his first smart decision tonight. "Y-yes, I g-got you."

I release his shirt, and when he falls a couple of inches to the ground, I realize that I actually lifted him into the air against the wall. Without giving him a moment to run, I reach

into his wallet and take out his ID. Ripping my phone out of my pocket, I take a picture of it.

“Chad Boer. At 1435 Freelance Avenue. Got it.” I hand his wallet back to him, which he takes with shaky hands. “If I hear about you drugging other girls, Chad, losing your teeth will be the least of your worries. Understand me?”

He nods rapidly and shoves his wallet into his pocket. My gaze follows the motion, and I see the front of his light denim jeans are now navy blue and wet.

He is staring at me, waiting, and I give him permission to leave.

“Go.”

He and his little friend scurry out of here like they are on fucking fire. The bouncers come over and check that we’re cool and don’t need anything. There are certainly perks for being friends with the entire staff.

Before we head to our seats, I walk over to the bar and get the bartender’s attention. “These have drugs in them. I don’t know if they need to be cleaned differently, but can you replace whatever they had, please, and just put it on my tab?”

She is absolutely disgusted with what happened and says, “This round is on me for the girls.”

We quickly sit down, and I tell the guys, “Don’t say anything about what just happened. Please.”

They all acknowledge my request, and I check to see if the girls have come back out, but I don’t see them. I glance once more at where they were sitting and see their drinks have been replenished.

Not ten seconds later, Laura and Charlotte are walking back over to their seats. They look around, and I would bet money they are looking for those two guys. Thankfully, they don’t waste much more of their night worrying about them, and soon, they are back to chatting and smiling with one another.

Deciding that I have had enough of everything tonight, I take the final swig of my drink and head out. There’s still time

left before I completely pass out, so I can try to work with Hatty some tonight.

He still isn't my biggest fan. But we are making big progress. He has started lying down in the same room as me. Granted, it is usually the farthest away from me he can get. But last week, he wouldn't even come out of his hiding holes, aside from eating and drinking when I was asleep. So, I consider this a big win.

I'm hoping in the next few weeks, maybe he'll let me pet him, and maybe one day, we could even snuggle. I'm patient. I'll wait for him to come around at his pace, no matter how long it takes. I'm in it for the long run. Part of me wonders if that potentially applies to more than Hatty.

CHARLOTTE

Lost, confused, and utterly exhausted—that’s how I’ve been feeling these last two weeks since my treatment. Every time I think I’ve hit rock bottom, I somehow sink even lower. The chemo fog is having a far stronger impact on my life than I anticipated. I kind of thought it would be like when you have a bad cold and feel that you’re slower. But this is so much worse. I’m zoning out for minutes or hours at a time. Everything is hazy right now, like I’m a ghost drifting through the motions of everyday life, but not fully here.

I don’t know how much longer I can keep this up. I went to work every day last week, and my body is still paying for that decision. I doubt Laura will continue letting me work from home. Even she has her limits. But she’s going to have to accept at least one more day because this morning, I barely have the energy to get out of bed, let alone go to work.

If only I could chug a Red Bull or two, surely, that would help. But unfortunately, I’m supposed to avoid caffeine with my treatments.

Throwing my comforter off of me, I force myself out of bed. My to-do list this morning is fairly basic, but it’s still going to take me everything to get through it.

Brush my teeth.

Shower.

Eat something.

Drink an annoying amount of water.

Crawl back into bed with my laptop.

Walking into the bathroom, I avoid looking into the mirror altogether. Quickly, I undress and start the water for my

shower, and step into the steaming hot water.

“Shit, too hot.” I wince and practically slap the handle to turn the temp down.

The water cools down, and when it’s nice and warm, I sigh and relax. I used to take the hottest showers—like, so warm that you could barely stand it. But now, my skin is so much more sensitive, so the water is currently more lukewarm.

Rubbing shampoo into my hair, I try not to focus on how little there is left to wash. It feels almost weightless in my hands as I gently massage the soap into it.

My chin trembles as I rinse the soap out, staring straight ahead at the stark-white shower wall. Grabbing my loofah, I squeeze my pomegranate body wash on it and hold it under the water to suds it up. Softly, I swipe the loofah over my stomach, watching it jiggle more than it used to. I wish that were for a healthy reason, like I was eating so much good food and getting gloriously food drunk. But unfortunately, it is just *another* side effect.

Without meaning to, I drift inside my own mind, and before I know it, I’m back in bed with clean, wet hair, fresh breath, a tall glass of water, and my laptop.

Thankfully, I can mindlessly edit some photos that I took last week and get them prepped for posting. This should at least fill my morning up, and then I can send them off to Laura to show that I’m doing *something*.

I only get about two photos done before my head is bobbing and my eyes are fluttering shut.

“Are you sure you’re ready for this?” Reed asks with a big smile, and my heart is racing so fast that I think it might actually burst.

“No!” I squeal and squeeze his hand tighter, jumping in place with a mix of nervousness and excitement.

“Here we go!” he shouts and steps off of the metal platform.

We plummet down, and the air is rushing up all around us like nothing I've ever experienced before.

"Ahhh!" I scream joyfully as Reed and I free-fall together through the sky.

"I love you, Charrrrlotte!" he declares to the world as he squeezes me tighter.

The ground is quickly approaching, and fear begins trickling in as I worry that we're waiting too long to pull the parachute.

"Reed!" I scream, this time out of growing terror. "Pull the cord!"

Oh my God, we're falling too fast.

Gripping the straps of the backpack I'm hooked into, I try to talk to Reed again. "Reed! Pull it!"

He starts laughing, one of pure evil. "What cord, Charlotte?"

I hear the click of something metal, and all of a sudden, Reed isn't against my back anymore. He swims through the air, getting out in front of me.

"Oh, this one?" He smirks and releases the parachute, slowing his descent instantly while I continue to race toward the ground.

"Reed!" My voice trembles as I plummet to the earth.

Oh my God, I'm going to die.

Bracing myself for impact, I slam my eyes shut.

"Ahh!" I scream.

Any second now, I'll be but a memory in other people's lives, a blip in time.

"Ahh!" I fly up, soaking wet from my sweat.

Looking around, I search for Reed, but quickly realize that I was dreaming. It was all just a dream—or rather, a nightmare. But regardless, it's over. Now, I just need my heart

to figure that out because I'm huffing and puffing like I'm still falling to my death.

"Shit," I grunt and clumsily jump out of bed.

I didn't mean to fall asleep. I needed to get all of those photos edited. As if I were still in free fall, my stomach twists and churns, and I know I'm only seconds away from having a gross mess to clean up.

Rushing into the bathroom, I throw open the toilet lid just in time for vomit to explode out of my mouth, splashing into the water. My diaphragm tightens, and once again, I heave into the toilet, but this time, nothing comes out. But that doesn't make it any less painful.

"Goddammit!" I slam the lid in frustration, wishing that my life could be anything but this right now.

Sinking down onto my butt, I wipe my mouth and rest my head in my clammy hands. My body slumps down and begins quivering. I haven't even eaten today, and all that came up was liquids that I will very quickly need to replenish so I don't dehydrate.

What's the point of putting myself through this if the outcome isn't survival?

My phone rings in my bedroom. Summoning strength from God knows where, I stand to my feet and walk into the bedroom. Right as I reach for the phone, the call from Laura disappears, and all of my notifications pop up on my lock screen.

Holy shit.

Six missed calls from Laura.

What in the hell is going on?

Immediately, I call her back, and she answers it before I even hear a ring.

"Thank God! What is going on?" she snaps.

Oh my God, does she know? There's no way.

"What do you mean?" I feign ignorance.

She scoffs, “Charlotte! You missed the interview with Barrett Olson! Hello!”

No way. That wasn’t happening until three p.m. over the phone. Pulling the phone away, I can only imagine this is some elaborate prank because I think it’s only, like, eleven a.m. ...

Six p.m.

I was asleep for another ten hours? How is that even possible?!

“Laura, I-I’m so sorry. I-I don’t know what happened.” My eyes well with tears, and my heart stirs with disappointment I’ve never felt.

“Do you know how hard it was for me to get that interview? How many months I had to spend jumping through hoops to get Barrett frickin’ Olson, Nighthawks royalty, to agree to do an interview after a twenty-five-year media hiatus?” She sharply inhales. “I gave it to you for exposure, Charlotte! To get your name out there! And you forgot?! Now, I’m getting my ass chewed the fuck out because I made the fuckup of a century with a legend.”

My lips part, but nothing comes out. I don’t know what to say. There isn’t anything that will justify the damage I just did. She put herself on the line for me, and I let her down in the biggest way imaginable.

“I’m sorry ...” I whisper as my heart breaks in two.

Even as unprepared as I was to lose Reed, Abby, and Anna, I was never prepared to lose Laura. She is my best friend in this entire world and has been for as long as I can remember. I would understand if she hated me after this, for ruining potentially the biggest groundbreaking interview of her career. Yet again, my cancer kills another one of my relationships.

She scoffs, “Yeah, I bet. Look, I need to go cool down and do some damage control with his agents. Take a few days off or a week. But get better before you come back to the office. Because this can *never* happen again.”

A beep sounds in my ear as she ends the call.

How can a nap be so detrimental?

“Arhhhhh!” I scream from the bottom of my lungs and throw my phone across the room and into the wall.

Tears bubble up inside of me, and I let them loose like a bomb going off.

Grabbing a pillow from the bed, I place it over my head and scream, “Ahhh!”

How did I lose everyone?

“Ahh!” I scream again.

I roar into the pillow, releasing every ounce of anger, sadness, and fear that has been trapped inside of me.

As I deplete every drop of energy I have left, my cries and shouts turn into pitiful whimpers as I curl up in my bed. Wrapping my arms around my pillow, I cuddle the only thing that I have left—the inanimate objects that I can’t push away.

How did I end up destroying everything by trying to save it?

REED

Coach Carrington glares daggers into me as we settle into the locker room after the first period, which is totally justified. I know that, and he *definitely* knows it.

“Larinski!” Carrington practically growls at me, calling me out in front of the entire team.

“Coach,” I respond respectfully.

“That was a dumb fucking penalty, and you know it. You knew it before you made it. You’re a smart player, far smarter than that shit. Look around at your team,” he orders, and I oblige, although I would rather tell him where to shove it right now. “Do you want to lose this game for them?”

“No, Coach,” I bite out.

“Good. Then, next period, don’t make selfish decisions on the ice,” he snaps, then redirects his attention anywhere else but at me. “We are playing well; they are just playing better. Passes could be cleaned up. But where we are falling short, aside from dumb penalties, is on our shift changes. They are too slow or hesitant, and it’s giving the Elmont Eagles a breakaway almost every time. That mistake will cost us goals.”

I’m trying to calm myself down by the time the intermission comes to an end, but it’s to no avail.

JD drags his feet in the locker room, and I know he’s waiting around for me.

As we walk back toward the tunnel, JD asks me, “What’s going on, man?”

“Nothing,” I huff and keep moving.

“Is this about Charlotte?” he asks boldly, and I freeze on my skates.

“No, but if it was, it’s not anyone’s business.” I snap. I know that I’m being a dick, but I can’t seem to stop myself.

“Look, you just need to talk to her and figure your shit out. Or move on. But you’re distracted, and it’s obvious. You’re not your usual self, and I just want to help you get out of your head,” he says quietly as we walk down the hallway toward the ice.

“Look, I’ll be better out there, okay? Can we just leave it at that?” I practically beg him because if we keep talking about this, I’m going to lose it for good.

I understand that I’m being a jerk, but anger is so much easier to feel than sadness, and I’m going to cling on to that rage until the sorrow is gone.

“For now, sure.” He smirks.

Then, he starts shouting, hyping himself and us up as we close the distance to the ice just as the announcer is welcoming us back.

We’re up one to zero, going into the third period. But in reality, we should have pulled away from them long before now. We need to get some pucks deep, and as much as it pisses me off right now to have everyone in my face, I know they’re right. I need to play better and smarter. I can’t keep letting my emotions make my decisions in this game.

My line consists of Kos, Burnsy, Costy, JD, and I take the ice for the puck drop.

The ref whistles, and away we go. The Eagles win the face-off and move into our defensive zone, maintaining possession with killer and flawless passes.

They continue to move the puck rapidly, no one holding it longer than a couple of seconds. One of them slaps the puck, and it flies toward the net. Without thought, I drop a knee and spin into the shot. It ricochets off of my ankle, and, FUCK, it hurts!

But I don't have time to feel the pain right now as they wind up and fire again, but this time, Macky catches it in his glove and stops the play.

The puck drops on the dot closest to Macky, but this face-off, we win. My legs are fucking screaming as Kos takes the puck and skates off the other way and buys us some time to change. Costy, Burnsy, JD, and I manage to switch out. But Kos is stuck on the ice for about another minute before he is able to finally get some reprieve when the other team ices the puck.

"Fuck." Kos winces as he hops the board, and I know his legs have to be burning.

That was a long shift to start the period with. Usually, a shift averages anywhere from forty-five seconds to a minute, although a minute is usually on the longer side.

We begin to dominate the ice as we move into the final five minutes of play. Burnsy scores on a breakaway, making it look so easy that anyone could do it. But that's what makes Burnsy so good. He's so talented that everything is almost natural and effortless to him—or at least, it looks that way.

An Eagles player trips Costy and is sat down in the box for a two-minute time-out, giving us an advantage with them down a guy.

Kos enters the zone, and we file in after him, spreading out and passing the puck with speed and intention. One of their defenders makes a fatal mistake. I don't get this opportunity all too often, so I am definitely taking it.

I slap my stick on the ice, and Costy knows in the blink of an eye what I'm asking for—the puck. He passes it across the ice, and it beautifully glides between three guys. I catch the puck, pull back, and fire. It sinks between the goalie's five-hole, and for a second, I think he stops it with his thighs. But then I see the puck ever so slowly glide over the red line and into the net.

"YES!" I scream and punch my fists and stick into the air.

The buzzer sounds, the lamp lights, and my team crashes into me.

“Nice fucking shot!” Burnsy screams.

“That one’s gotta hurt his ego.” Kos laughs.

Those kinds of goals are some of a goalie’s least favorite because when they watch them back, they see that they slowed the puck down, but not enough, and it slowly drifts in behind them.

“Fuck yeah!” I shout and bump gloves with our bench as we celebrate the goal.

The arena is blaring loud, and there is almost no feeling in the world that compares to that. As a defender, I don’t find goals often, and when I do, it’s usually on a deflection of someone else’s shot, which still counts and definitely still takes skill. But it’s not the same as just sinking a puck by yourself.

Costy ends up getting an empty net goal at the end of the period, stretching our score from three to four against their zero. Another win for the books.



I promised Abby that I would finally teach her how to drive the side-by-side, and today is the day I’ll finally do it. She was so excited at her party when she saw it. It made keeping it a secret all that much better, just to get that moment.

I shoot Abby a text as I park along the curb outside of my mom’s house.

Me: I’m here! Let’s do this!

In the blink of an eye, the front door flies open, and Abby rushes outside before I’m even out of my pickup.

“Reed!” she cheers and rushes down the driveway. “Finally!”

“Hey! I’ve been busy!” I tease her. “But I’m here now.”

She eyes me scoldingly. “Yeah, yeah, yeah. Now, get that bad boy off of there.”

I brought it over for her on a trailer I’d borrowed from one of my teammates. It’s been chilling in the private parking garage at the arena since the party.

“All right, all right.” I laugh and walk over to the trailer and drop the ramp to the ground.

“Are you excited?” I ask her as I walk up to the vehicle, open the door, and slide into the driver’s seat.

“Yes! Yes! Yes!” she cheers.

I start the engine and drive it down the ramp and onto the pavement, pulling the glittery hot-pink vehicle into the driveway.

Abby charges the car and opens the passenger side. “Can we go for a ride first?”

She scoots over and sits as close to me as she can, and my heart fucking bursts at the love I have for her.

“Of course we can, Abbs.”

She is beaming as I back the side-by-side out of the driveway and onto the street. These vehicles are not permitted on highways; however, they are permitted on residential streets like this one.

“Did you have a good birthday?” I ask her as I slowly drive us down the street.

She might be itching to get behind the wheel, and I’m excited to teach her. But I’m also excited to just get to be her big brother, driving her around like I used to do when I lived with them.

“Yes. It was perfect. Thank you for making it so special,” she says and leans against my shoulder. “I love you, Reed.”

Carefully leaning my head against hers, I say, “I love you too, Abbs.”

After taking Abby on a thirty-minute drive around the neighborhood, I show her the basics of how to drive it. She has

her learner's permit and has driven with my mom in her car multiple times, so I knew that this wasn't going to be too hard of a lesson. I playfully tell her that she might need my help again, and she brushes me off. I then ask if she'd be willing to go on a movie date with her big brother soon, and she delightfully agrees.



As I walk into my house, I'm desperate for my bed. My body could use some ice, but I'm going to wait until tomorrow and do an ice bath. Nothing sounds better than curling up under the covers and passing out.

Meow.

"Whoa, that's the first time you've ever greeted me, buddy. What's up?" I ask Hatty as I set all of my stuff down.

He meows again, and I look at his food bowl, which is now empty.

"Eat all of your food? That's good." I pick the bowl up and walk over to the pantry and fill it. "I love that you told me that you needed food. Thanks, Hatty."

As I go to set the bowl down, he purrs, and I kind of freeze up. This is the first time I've ever heard him purr, and it's the cutest fucking sound I've ever heard.

I set the food down and take a quiet breath before trying what I have been dying to do since I got him home.

I reach out hesitantly, and he sniffs my fingers as I hold my breath. He purrs again and pushes into my hand, rubbing his super-soft head against me.

I don't care if he's only doing this because of the food. I will happily take it.

"I saw a video the other day of a cat scratch wall. Would you like a wall that you can run up? I can make one for you," I tell him as if he can actually understand what I'm saying.

He meows, and I interpret that as a yes.

“All right, well, we’ll start that project soon, okay?”

He meows again, and he’s purring like a motor as he continues to brush against my hand repeatedly.

CHARLOTTE

I'm dying. I think I really am.

There is no way, with what my body is feeling and going through, that the outcome can be anything but death. I've started accepting it at least. Thankfully, that means this pain will soon be gone forever.

Today is my last scheduled chemo session, and when I say that the hardest thing I've ever done is open my car door to walk inside here, I mean it. My body is at its limit. I don't know how it's even possible that these symptoms can get worse after today.

At this point in my mom's treatment is when she started deteriorating. Maybe I am at that point too. If it means I don't have to feel this anymore, then I might even welcome it.

Ella grabs my attention and yanks me from my dark thoughts.

"I made you something." She rocks back and forth on her heels, holding something behind her back, which she reveals a second later.

"You made that for *me*?" I actually squeal, shocking myself a bit at the strange high-pitched noise that leaves me.

Ella is flushed and grinning as she holds up the friendship bracelet. "Yeah!"

When I stretch out my hand, she slides the bracelet onto my wrist. A perfect fit.

"I loooooove it," I sing to her, and she giggles.

"It matches the one I made for Cocoa." She thrusts Cocoa in my face, and I laugh.

“It sure does.” I admire the super-tiny string of beads wrapped around the plush arm of her bear.

Ella never fails to bring light to any dark situation. I am forever thankful that she introduced herself to me at my first appointment. Treatment would have been ten times more dreadful without her bubbly self.

If it wasn't for Ella, there is a good chance I wouldn't have been able to do this today. But I can't let her down. I won't.

“Princess Ella and Queen Charlotte,” the nurse, Jackie, calls out as if she were announcing our entrance to a royal ball.

With Cocoa in hand, Ella leads the way. I trail behind a few steps because I would rather cut off my hand than sit in that dreaded chair again.

Ella looks back, and I take a mental screenshot and file her photo next to the definition of *strength* in my mind. I know she's in pain, and I know she's going through a similar treatment as me. Yet she is the one leading the way, and I'm dragging my feet with my tail between my legs.

The nurse hooks us up, and I realize I haven't had a chance to read my bracelet yet. Looking at my wrist, I read it.

Queen Charlotte and Princess Ella. Besties.

That's right. We are besties.

When this is all over and I'm gone, I hope she will be okay. I hope she continues to smile and laugh like she does now, if not bigger and more often. I hope she finds a new bestie to make bracelets for. I hope she and her mom stay close and their friendship grows with them.

By the time Ella and I are finished with our chemo treatment, I'm so cold that I worry I'll never truly be able to warm up again.

Ella's sleepy as the nurse unhooks her. After the nurse does the same for me, I hold Ella's hand, and this time, it's me that takes the lead. Harper is slumped over in her chair but perks up the second she sees us. Her face changes from hopelessness and despair to the happiest person alive in the blink of an eye.

It's almost scary how effortlessly she is able to hide her sorrows.

"Hi, baby. Are you sleepy?" Harper asks Ella, brushing the hair out of her face.

"Yeah," she says, yawning.

She releases my hand and lets her mom pick her up.

"I'll walk out with you guys," I say as I walk in front of Harper to get the doors for her and Ella.

Harper parked next to me, and we walk to our cars in silence. The concrete is slightly wet, and the air smells like fresh rain and grass. Inhaling deeply, I slowly exhale, feeling every cell of my body relax just slightly. The sky is cloudy, light and dark mixing in the clouds above with drops continuing to fall sporadically.

As Harper unlocks the car, I get the door for her again, and she sets Ella on the seat.

As Ella buckles up, she asks me with worried eyes, "Are you coming to my next appointment too?"

Harper sucks in a sharp breath like she wished Ella hadn't asked. But I smile at both of them.

"I wouldn't miss it for the world," I tell her with absolute certainty. Holding up my bracelet, I add, "Besties, remember? Besties always show up for each other."

"Yeah! Besties!" She stretches Cocoa up in the air, waving his arm and bracelet sporadically.

Harper gently shuts the door and turns to me. "I'm so thankful that she has you." Her eyes well up, causing a lump to form in my throat. "She truly loves you, and you make this so much easier for her."

Chuckling softly at the absolute irony of that statement, I smile. "One thousand percent, she's made it easier for me. I don't think I would have shown up for today if I hadn't known that she was behind those doors, waiting."

A short silence stretches between us, and Harper opens her door and says, "I'll text you the details of her next one."

"Whenever it is, I'll be there," I say, rubbing my hand over my heart.

She smiles and slides into her seat, shutting the door behind her and leaving me with my own haunting thoughts once again.

Walking the few feet to my car, I hope more than anything that I'll be around long enough to see Ella reach remission.

Raindrops start falling harder as I begin driving home. The pitter-patter on my windshield is calming, and before I know it, I'm parked and walking inside of my quiet house.

Shutting the door behind me, I slide down the dark wood until my butt hits the floor. I wrap my arms around my knees and tuck them into my chest. Biting my bottom lip, I look around the room. At the pill bottles strewn on the coffee table. At my wig lying on the couch. At the ghosts of memories of Reed, Laura, Josh, and me that will always haunt this place. It sickens me, knowing I'm in the midst of making the final memories here and they will be nothing but lonely and sad ones.

I don't want to die. I don't want to leave the people I love. I don't want to just disappear at the drop of a hat like my mom did. Here one moment and gone the next. I don't want to think about everything I'm leaving behind.

My bottom lip trembles, and my eyes well up with tears. My breathing becomes shaky, and I fight the sobs trying to burst free.

KNOCK. KNOCK. KNOCK.

"Ahh." I jump away from my door, scared out of my mind at the unexpected knocking.

It's probably just a package or something that Josh ordered and forgot to tell me about. They'll leave in a moment.

Anxiety begins rippling through me as I rise to my feet and peer through the peephole. It's definitely not a package

deliverer—unless my best friend recently changed jobs. Laura is standing less than a foot away from me on the other side of my door.

Fuck.

I'm just going to ignore it. My place is obviously not in a state for visitors. If I don't answer, she'll leave, especially if she thinks I'm not here.

“Charlotte!” she shouts and pounds on the door again.

I'm not answering it. I can't.

“I know you're in there! I heard you scream! Open the door!” she pleads.

Dammit.

Not happening. Today, more than any other day of my life, I do not want to talk about work. I don't want to discuss how I majorly fucked up, not just for me, but also for her.

I stay quiet.

“I'm not going away!” she warns, and panic begins settling into my chest.

Goddammit, you persistent woman!

My lungs beg to scream, to release some frustration. But instead, I rush over to my couch, rip off my purple beanie, flip my head over, and situate my wig on my head. Right as I'm about to stand upright, I hear a bone-chilling noise—the sound of a key sliding into my door.

Shit, I forgot she had a key!

But I also never thought she would just bust inside.

Whipping my head up, I pull the wig into place and scoop all of my pill bottles into my arms. Right as I'm turning around and taking off for my bedroom, the door clicks and opens.

“Why in the hell wouldn't you open the door?” Laura protests, shutting it behind her after she steps inside.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuckity. Fuck!

I just need to get these bottles out of my hand, and I might still be able to salvage this. Taking another step toward my bedroom, I stay silent, physically unable to say a single word to her. Not until I know that everything I have worked so hard for will stay exactly where I want it—buried.

“Charlotte! Are you seriously just going to ignore me like I’m not here?!” she practically shouts at me.

I force out an excuse through my clenched teeth. “I’ll be right back.”

My steps get faster as I try not to run into my bedroom and away from her. But this proves to be difficult. Laura and I have been best friends forever. If she were acting even a sliver of how I am, I would be freaking out and so confused. I’m not completely surprised she showed up, but I’m very disappointed in the universe for letting it happen at all.

“Charlotte, stop.” Her voice cracks, and my gait wavers, but I push forward.

When I walk through the doorway of my destination, a slight pulse of satisfaction thrums through my chest. So close to keeping everything in order and just as it should be.

But that glimpse of hope is shredded as I hear Laura race after me and into my room.

“You are not getting off that easily!” She jumps in front of me, and the world around me spins.

Everything I have been protecting and keeping quiet is shattering into a million pieces.

“Charlotte?” she asks, sounding a million miles away.

Tears fall down my cheeks, and I can’t look away from my feet. This was never part of my plan. This wasn’t supposed to happen. No one was ever supposed to know.

“Charlotte?” she whispers this time, her voice starting to tremble the way my entire body is.

My head starts shaking, slowly at first and growing faster and faster until it’s completely uncontrollable.

No, no, no, no, no, no! I refuse to believe this is really happening.

Her hand grazes my arm, and I freeze.

“Please go away. Leave.” My voice is unrecognizable.

“What?” She sounds wounded by my words, but I ignore the pain I feel, knowing I caused it.

I won’t look up at her. But I repeat myself.

“Get out,” I order, my voice harsh and cold.

She grabs on to my face and lifts my head up, trying to force me to look at her, but I look anywhere else.

“What is wrong with you? You are my best friend! Please tell me what the hell is going on. I’m worried about you!”

Remaining silent, I fight with myself. Do I build my walls up higher or let them finally crumble?

“Charlotte, please talk to me,” Laura shakes me slightly, but the movement is enough to jar me and pull my gaze to hers.

“Please leave,” I whisper.

She glances down for the first time and looks at the pharmacy that I’m holding tightly on to.

“What is all of this?” she mumbles and reaches for a bottle.

Surprisingly, I let her take it.

I have to accept the facts of what is happening. Laura will not leave this apartment without me telling her the truth. If she were to leave without it, I know she would express her concerns to Alec, which would get around to Reed, and then I would have to tell everyone anyway. I’ll just have to make sure she leaves, promising to never speak another word of this. I’ll resign from work. I’ll get a new job and distance myself so that it’s easier for her to keep up the lie. I’ll figure it out.

She studies the bottle and looks back up at me, more confused than ever.

“They’re medicine. They’re all drugs I have to have,” I explain without emotion—I have none left to give—and toss the bottles onto my bed.

“F-for what?” She sets the remaining bottle down.

Sitting down next to them, I take a deep breath. I’m exhausted from all of this, completely drained.

Running my fingers into my wig, I tug it gently and pull it off of my head.

Laura softly gasps, and sits on the bed next to me, taking my hand in hers.

“Oh my gosh, Charlotte ...” She trails off.

I know she has a ton of questions, so I’ll try to answer a few of them. “I have cancer. Stage 3 breast cancer, to be exact.”

“Oh, Charlotte ... your mom ...” She throws her arms around me and pulls me as tightly as she possibly can into her.

Feeling her warmth is overwhelming. I haven’t felt that sense of serene love since my diagnosis, or maybe it’s more so that I haven’t let myself feel it. I’m just so tired of keeping this charade up. I think her knowing is going to make it less lonely. Hopefully, I didn’t just fuck everything up.

After a moment of consoling each other, she jerks back and says in her mom voice, “I am so mad at you!” She lightly slaps my shoulder. “How could you not have told me?” Her eyes light up, as if she just thought of something. “Oh my God, that’s why you did it. That’s why you broke up with Reed.”

I nod as the sobs from earlier build back up in my throat, and my lashes wet with tears. “This doesn’t leave this room. Do you understand?”

“Char, you can’t keep going this alone!”

“I’m not. I have a friend that’s going to treatment too. And now, you know. That’s already more people than were ever supposed to find out,” I tell her, mimicking her mom tone.

She sighs heavily and brushes the back of my hand with her thumb. “I know you’re scared. I can’t possibly imagine what you’ve been dealing with. But blocking everyone out isn’t going to save them or *you* any pain.”

“I’m not trying to save myself any pain.” I meet her stare and hold it. “I’m trying to save everyone else.”

She bites her lip, and her eyes well up with tears that waterfall off of her lashes, her face contorts between anger and sadness. “Well, I’m worried about you! Not everyone else! Screw everyone else! What did you think would happen? That you would just distance yourself, die, and then we would just be fine? Huh?”

Shaking my head, I say, “I don’t know! Yes! I had to try anything else other than staying close with everyone. I’ve seen what this does to the families of patients. I don’t want to be the cause of everyone else’s demise.”

She cups my face in her hands and sobs, “Charlotte, you are far too important for us to forget you and just move on. It’s impossible. You are a part of me and always will be. You are my frickin’ sister! That is never going to change, no matter what happens. I’m sure everyone else feels the exact same way. We love you. That’s why I came pounding on your door! Because I couldn’t stand having anything come between us, especially something as silly as work.”

Inhaling sporadically, I blink the downpour of tears away and gasp again, unable to control my breathing. “I’m”—gasp—“sorry.”

She leans her forehead against mine. “Don’t apologize for a choice you made when you were trying to survive. Not when you don’t have anything to be sorry for.”

I stay silent because I do feel sorry, and I doubt that is going to change anytime soon.

“Please don’t tell anyone, Laura. Please,” I beg, pulling away.

She looks torn and hesitates before saying, “Of course I won’t tell anyone without your permission, Char, but I really

don't think that keeping this in the dark is the right answer. Can we discuss it sometime? If you're up for it?"

No. I should say no because I mean no. I can already see the ways this is affecting her, and it will continue to do so.

Cancer doesn't just infect the patient; it seeps into the loved ones and does far more damage than what shows up on the scans. It is a killer, a cold-blooded murderer, shooting cancerous bullets, and I will take every one so that they don't have to. That isn't changing because one person knows.

Before I have a chance to answer, she cuts back in. "Don't answer. I'm in no place to put pressure on a decision that only you should make. I love you. I'm here for you in any way that I possibly can be."

Maybe Laura barging into my house is a blessing in disguise; maybe I don't have to keep this act up at work. That would take such a gigantic amount of pressure off of me.

"Do we have medical leave?" I ask quietly, my gaze falling back to the floor.

I hate the way discussing my illness makes me feel helpless and sad.

"Oh my gosh, yes, of course. I'll get the paperwork put together, and if you're feeling up for it, you can pop in, and we'll knock it out in, like, ten minutes," she says.

I can tell she loves that she has something she can help me with. It warms my heart and slows the tears down, knowing that I can make her feel helpful by doing that.

"When?"

"Tomorrow? We can do it as soon as you want. I can't believe ..." Her voice cracks, and I look at her. "I can't believe you've been doing this all by yourself, Char."

Shrugging, I brush it off. "I didn't really feel like I had a choice. I couldn't let my cancer do to all of you what my mom's illness did to my dad. He's still broken after all these years."

“Do you think he would have changed a single thing if given a chance to go back and do it over?” she asks, and I realize that I absolutely hate my best friend for putting things into perspective like that.

Because I know for a fact that my dad would rather be heartbroken a thousand times over than to not be with my mom when she was alive. But that also kind of proves my point. I think Reed would make the same choice for me, and I didn't want to give him that option.

I still don't.

REED

“Why are you FaceTiming me right now? It is five thirty in the damn morning,” JD groans and blinks rapidly, focusing his sleepy eyes.

My heart is beating so fast that I’m scared Hatty will hear it and run away.

Whispering with the softest tone I can manage, I say, “Look.”

Moving my phone over slightly, I show Jensen what I woke up to this morning. Cute little Hatty is curled up on the pillow next to mine, sound asleep.

“Reed?” Jensen grunts. “I’m going to kill you.”

An uncontrollable chuckle leaves me, and I freeze, gauging if Hatty will wake up, but after a moment passes and he remains sound asleep, I suck in a slow breath.

“He’s never done this before. He usually sleeps on the couch in the living room. Bro, he’s actually starting to like me!” I practically squeal at the phone. “I’ll admit, part of me was getting nervous that maybe he never would.”

This time, it’s JD who laughs. “You are ridiculous. But I’m happy your cat is finally liking you. Someone has to, right?”

This fucker.

“Low blow,” I warn with a slightly playful tone.

He chuckles, then yawns and says, “Want to grab some breakfast? Might as well get the fuck up since I’m not going to be able to get back into the perfectly blissful REM sleep I was getting.” His tone sharpens at the end, and I smile.

“Yeah, I’m down. Give me a little bit though. I’m going to see if Hatty will let me pet him. You want me to pick you up in, like, an hour?” I offer.

“Yeah, that works. Gives me time to shower and shit.”

“All right. I’ll let you know when I’m on the way,” I say.

“All right, see ya then,” he mumbles before ending the call, and part of me wonders if he is actually going to get up or go back to sleep.

Setting my phone down quietly on my nightstand, I gently roll over and face Hatty. The second I stop moving, his eyelids flutter and open.

He stares at me as if I just caught him with his hand in the cookie jar, and I restrain the urge to laugh. It’s like his plan was to sneak out before I woke up, and he didn’t want to make a big deal out of it.

“Good morning, Hatty,” I whisper to him.

He studies me, seemingly unsure of what to do next.

Very slowly, I stretch my hand out and stop a few inches from his face. His eyes widen, but he doesn’t shy away. Neither of us moves; we just stare at each other. Then, for a brief moment, like the briefest of brief moments, he lifts his nose and sniffs my hand.

YES! That’s a fucking success in my book. I am going to make this cat love me if it’s the last thing I do.



Jensen and I went to IHOP for breakfast and probably ate way too much, but how can one not overeat when it comes to IHOP? It’s impossible.

After overeating, I drove our food babies back to my place, and we played an NHL video game, that we call Chel for short, for a couple of hours—or more like ten hours. Then, I dropped him off at his place, and I ran to a pet store to grab

some toys and more wet food for Hatty. After I ran that shit home, I changed and headed to the arena for practice.

As I'm pulling into the parking garage, the annoyance and anger that I've kept at bay all day surges up inside of me when I see Charlotte's parked car. I shouldn't be so surprised she's here, but it's a punch to the gut nonetheless, knowing she is. I don't think that's ever going to change. As much as I want to hate her for ending us, I can't help that I'm still hopelessly in love with her.

Parking my car, I grab my phone, wallet, and keys, and I start walking toward the entrance of the building. JD must have gotten here shortly after me because he is jogging to catch me as I open the door of the arena, holding it for him.

"Thanks, man," he huffs.

"You are a professional athlete. How are you so out of breath from that jog?" I laugh as he crosses through the threshold of the door.

"Shut the fuck up. I'm not even breathing *that* hard," he says defensively.

I don't say anything, I just shake my head, smiling because he is in fact breathing *that* hard.

We say hello to the security guys and make our way to the locker room to get ready and gear up. As we're passing some of the offices, I stop dead in my tracks at Charlotte's voice. The door is closed, so it's a bit muffled, but I can still make out the words.

Right before Jensen reaches the glass door of the office, I grab his shirt and tug him backward so we stay out of view.

"Get back here and shut up," I whisper aggressively at him.

"What?" he says loudly.

Smacking my hand on my head, I whisper, "I'm trying to listen. Shut the fuck up!"

He holds his hands up, and his eyebrows shoot up. "Got it."

Tuning him out, I close my eyes and will my ears to listen harder than they ever have before.

Laura is talking, but I can't make out exactly what she's saying. I only pick up the words *paid* and *it's okay*.

This doesn't help me figure anything out.

Charlotte starts talking. "I'm sorry I'm leaving."

What?

A guy's voice perks my ears up. "We understand completely. You have to do what's best for you. But we will definitely miss you here every day."

She's leaving? She's fucking leaving?!

"Thank you," she mumbles.

I have a feeling whatever the fuck is happening in there is about to come to a close, and we cannot be here when they open that door.

"Let's go." I tug on Jensen's sleeve.

We jump past the door and speed-walk down the hallway, turning to the locker room right as I hear the office door open behind us, followed by the voices of Laura, Charlotte, and the guy who I think is their boss. But we don't slow down; if anything, we speed up.

By the time we are actually inside of the locker room, it is me who is huffing and puffing.

What in the fuck just happened? I can't believe she's leaving. She wouldn't quit; that's not who she is. I know she loves that job and would do anything to keep it.

"Hey, guys. What's up?" Brett asks, obviously confused at our dramatic entrance.

"We were—" JD starts, but I slap his chest with the back of my hand and interrupt him.

"Nothing," I say and hustle over to my cubby to change.

I need to get on the ice and clear my damn head. I must have heard wrong, right? Is she actually abandoning this team?

Abandoning me?

The second I'm ready, I practically race to the ice with my stick. Skating out, I join Alec and Cam, who are already doing one on ones as a warm-up with Macky in the goal. Scooping a biscuit in my stick, I skate toward the empty net across the ice from them. Dribbling the puck, I skate hard yet aimlessly in the zone, unable to shut my fucking brain off.

Why in the hell is she leaving? I don't get it. It doesn't make any sense. Is being near me so miserable to her that she would rather leave her dream job than to get over it?

Snapping the puck into the net, I mentally scream, *Fuck*, but then I quickly realize that it wasn't as internal as I intended.

A few seconds later, Kos is skating over to me, and I wish he would go away because I don't think my mind can handle a check-in from my captain right now.

"What's up?" he asks.

"Not much," I bite out and try to rein myself in.

I'm never an ass or a douchebag unless someone really provokes me, but even then, I am still controlled.

God, Charlotte drives me crazier than anything in this world, partially because she is the only person capable of doing it. Not being with her is bad for my health and my game. But I don't think that I'm the person who can change that because I wasn't the one who ended it. I can't be the only person putting out love in this relationship; it's a fifty-fifty effort. I wish I could love *us* enough for the both of us.

"Reed, just talk to me. What's up? I know you've been struggling lately," he says as if it's the clearest thing in the world.

But it probably is. I'm not really good at hiding it, although I don't care to try to. I'm not scared of wearing my heart on my sleeve like most guys.

"I don't have anything I want to talk about," I admit, grabbing another puck near us.

He sighs like he has more to say.

“Do you have anything you need to get off your chest?” I ask, shooting the puck into the net, then resting my stick parallel to the ground against my hips.

He skates to the front of me and looks me dead in the eyes. “I think you should maybe take it easy on Charlotte and on yourself.”

Easy on Charlotte? What the actual fuck?

“Why is that?” I huff at his audacity.

He looks around, and curiosity piques my interest. “Laura mentioned that she’s going through some stuff right now.”

“Like what?” I ask, hating how my anger immediately subsides and concern takes over.

“Look, man, I don’t know much more than that. But I think you are being too hard on yourself and too hard on her,” he continues, giving me unsolicited advice.

He has this look on his face like he knows a lot more than he’s saying. His lips are pinched together in a slight frown, his brows are furrowed, and he’s restless.

“Spit it out, for crying out loud,” I bark.

“Reed, I don’t really know anything more than that, honestly. Just take it easy on her for now, all right? Focus on you, and if you need someone to talk to, I’m here for you.” He skates off before I can stop him.

“I’m here for you.”

I think I hate when people say that. Like, is that supposed to make me feel better? Should I just start dumping on them right then and there?

No, of course not. I don’t want that, and I doubt they want that either. So, where do I go from there? Should I call them when I can’t sleep at night because I know that Charlotte should be in bed next to me? Should I call them over to me when I am losing my mind and temper on the ice?

Coach Carrington blows the whistle, ripping my mind out of the never-ending spiral of questions.

I skate over in front of the bench where the team is gathering. Our head coach and his two assistants are waiting for us.

The guys are mumbling about moments during our last game, about a skill or trick shot they are learning, and a couple of other things I can't make out. But regardless, none of it matters right now. Because how in the hell are they not as trapped in their head as I am? I can't look anywhere without searching for the blonde-haired stunner who is now my ex-fucking-girlfriend—almost ex-fucking-fiancée if she had waited to break my heart until after I proposed.

She was supposed to be my fucking wife! Our story was supposed to be *forever and always*, never *what might've been*. But I haven't given up on our forever and always even if she has.

“Finally,” Coach Carrington snaps as the last of us join the huddle, “split into your two scrimmage teams, five on five.”

We obey immediately, dividing ourselves into the same scrimmage groups we typically practice in. With my stick in hand, I skate to the center of the ice, knowing that my line will be first up in our group.

I don't want to be here right now. I try to push Charlotte out of my mind and focus on the task at hand, but it's damn near fucking impossible.

Coach Carrington blows the whistle and drops the puck. Kos wins the face-off, as he usually does. He has one of the best face-off win percentages in the entire league.

He leads us down the ice and into the zone. Costy gets the puck and fires a shot at Macky, who blocks it.

We continue to scrimmage for the next twenty minutes, switching lines in our group after each shift. This isn't helping me get my mind off of Charlotte at all.

JD bumps me with his stick as we get back on the bench after our turn on the ice. “Hey, where are you at, man?”

Smacking my stick against the board, I sigh. “Not here. I can tell you that.”

He chuckles. “Well, that much was obvious.”

Glaring at him, I smirk. “Asshole.”

He shrugs, and his eyes follow the play happening in front of us. “Just go talk to her, man. It’s clear you’ve got some unresolved shit.”

I shake my head. “I don’t think it’s that simple. She doesn’t want to talk to me.”

“And? You need to talk to her, and she needs to listen. Get all the junk that’s been weighing you down off of your chest. She at least owes it to you to listen,” he says. Then, he yells at one of our teammates, “You should’ve grabbed that!”

“I don’t know if talking to her would help anything,” I admit, scared that if I did vent to her, her rejection would destroy me all over again.

“Have you tried?” he asks like it’s the simplest question in the world.

“No,” I huff.

It’s not like she really waited around for debate that day. She couldn’t get out of my house fast enough after she gave me her piece of mind. But he’s fucking right. I haven’t even told her that she fucked up. She ruined the best thing she’ll ever have, that either of us will ever have. She didn’t even try to fight for us.

But I won’t make that same mistake. Also, I deserve some fucking answers.

My heart begins racing in my chest, and all I can see are memories of us together. Of the first time we met at Fireflies back in Duluth. The time we built birdhouses for the front of my house because she wanted to watch them out the windows. The numerous times we cooked dinner together in my kitchen while I pretended that it was our kitchen. Because the truth is, it was. And it still is. Even though I paid for that house before I even met her, it’s ours more than it was ever just mine.

Everything I have is hers, for God's sake. She owns my smiles, my laughs, my tears, and my soul. If she doesn't want them anymore, then they can die in her possession because I don't fucking want them back.

Jensen's right. And I hate it when he's right.

I'm done sitting here, wallowing. I need to talk to her. I need to tell her that there isn't anyone else in this world that I want to love. If it's not her, I won't love again. If she really is done with me, I will let her go. Because she deserves to be happy, no matter how she finds that happiness—with or without me.

The lines on the ice are getting tired, and I know we will have to switch out soon. But I can't do this right now. I can't focus on this. I shouldn't be here.

Fuck it.

Without thinking about it, I start untying my skates.

“What are you doing?” JD scoffs.

“What I should have done a long fucking time ago,” I say, kicking off the first skate. “Can you take care of my shit?”

I kick the other skate off and hand him my stick.

“Yeah, of course. Anything you need, bro,” he says with a proud smile.

“Thanks, man.” I dap him up and start walking around the bench to the tunnel.

“Larinski! What are you doing?” Coach yells from the ice.

“I'm leaving. I'm sorry,” I shout without looking back.

“Reed!” JD shouts before yelling, “Go get your girl!”

A smile breaks across my lips while my walk turns into a jog as I race down the tunnel toward the locker room. I just need my keys. And maybe my shoes.

I reach the locker room a minute later, slip my tennis shoes on, grab my keys and my wallet. I don't even bother to change out of my pads and gear. I can't stop. I need to get to her as

fast as I fucking can. Ripping out of the locker room, I race to my car and take off for her place.

I need her back. I tried to give her space, to respect her decision. But her decision was fucking wrong.

Maybe I'm crazy. Maybe I'm going to pound on her door, and she's going to call the cops because she can't believe that her psycho ex showed up at her house, unannounced. But I definitely will not be giving her a heads-up if that's the outcome. I at least want to plead my case to her first.

I'm still sweating as I throw my pickup into park. My hair is sweaty and crazy. I want time to fix it. I want everything to be perfect. But I don't have time for that right now.

Grabbing my Nighthawks baseball cap from my backseat, I throw it on my head backward. My legs are practically pumping by the time they hit the ground outside, and my heart speeds up faster and faster with each stride I take. My chest is rapidly rising and falling, and my stomach is in complete knots as I close the distance to her front door.

I can do this. I can do this. I feel like I'm about to throw up as I reach her door and hold myself up with my arms on each side of the doorframe.

I'm heaving, completely out of breath.

I don't know what the hell I'm going to do if she turns me away. But I know I can't go on without trying.

"I love you," I whisper, and I do the scariest fucking thing I've ever done—I knock on her door.

CHARLOTTE

I jump as I hear someone pounding on my front door. Oh, it's probably just Laura. She said she was going to come over after finishing something up at the arena.

I'm mid-change into my PJs, barely having just got home. I teeter on the decision of taking my wig and beanie off before answering, but I don't think that I'm quite there. I don't like seeing myself without it yet, and I'm definitely not ready for others to.

Rushing over to the door, I throw it open, and my stomach and jaw *drop*.

"Reed?" I gasp.

No, no, no, no, no, no, NO, NO, NO!

What is he doing here? He can't be here! Fuck, why didn't I look through the peephole?!

He's not saying anything. He's just staring at me with the most intense gaze. His breathing is ragged and labored, like he ran here from the arena. But the strangest thing about this is that he's still in his damn hockey gear.

I have no idea why he's here or what he wants. And I'm scared to ask.

We remain in this silent stare-off as what feels like minutes tick by. Finally, he makes a move, but not exactly the one I was hoping for.

"I'm coming in," he says as he pushes past me and walks inside.

"Reed, get out. What the hell are you here for?" I snap, trying to keep my voice cold and hard.

He starts pacing in my living room and says, "Please, just listen to me before you say anything."

Oh God.

Oh no, I can't hear this. If he tries to convince me to get back with him, I am going to break down. I don't want to do this again. But if it comes to it, I'll have to break his heart all over again even though it's the last thing I want to do.

Why can't he just be a jerk? Why can't he just forget about us, about me?

Please don't do this.

He stops mid-stride and turns toward me, his face in anguish. "Tell me what's going on. Tell me the truth. Tell me what everyone but me seems to know."

"Get out," I warn him.

"No, I'm sorry. I'm not leaving until I have some answers. Some *real* answers," he says, meaning every single word.

"Reed, I don't want you here." I force the painful words through my teeth.

"Then, tell me!" he snaps.

I throw my hands up in defeat, fighting the urge to cry and run into his arms. "There's nothing to tell you, Reed! Get out of my damn house!"

"No." He stands taller, and I know he's not going to give this up.

"What do you mean, no? You don't have permission to be in here. Get out," I order him again, which he dismisses immediately.

Stay strong, Charlotte. You are doing this for him.

"If I'm trespassing, then call the cops. The only way I am leaving here is if they can manage to drag me away from you. But I'm prepared to put up one hell of a fight, Char."

Hearing him say my name has my heart shredding to pieces. *You can't give in. You can't be the thing that destroys*

him.

“Leave, Reed, *please!*” I beg of him, for his sake and for mine because each second that I’m in his proximity has my resolve crumbling to the damn ground.

“Tell me what everyone else seems to know but me. Alec told me to take it easy on you today. Never once has he taken your side in any of this. He knows damn well that you ended things. But for some *crazy* reason, he seemed to be on your side today. I don’t know what Laura told him. But regardless, it seems they know something about you that *I* don’t. And *that* reason has one of my best friends in the whole world telling me to take it easy on the girl who broke my fucking heart. So, please enlighten me on why I should go easy on you.”

“Get out.” My voice shakes, and I hope he doesn’t see that his plan is working and he’s wearing me down.

He looks at me with the utmost frustrated confusion. Something snaps inside of him, and he storms over to me, closing the ten feet between us until we’re practically standing toe to toe.

He lifts his hands as if he’s going to grab my face, but he stops himself. “Tell me. Tell me, and I’ll leave.”

“No. You’ll leave now because I said so!” I shout, and my lip quivers.

Shit, I do not have time to cry right now! Somehow, I push the emotion back inside, and my face remains neutral.

He sighs and aggressively drags his hands down his face. “Do you not *get* it, Charlotte?!”

He’s panting still, somehow even harder than before. It’s been so long since we’ve been this close, but I haven’t forgotten how stunning his blue eyes are. But I sure did miss them. He smells so good. I miss falling asleep, breathing him in.

Stop.

I do my best to harden my heart and brace myself for what I’m going to have to do. “I don’t need to *get* anything, Reed.

We're broken up. We aren't together anymore."

He scoffs, and his frazzled composure doesn't waver. "You don't get it. That was never an option for me! When I daydreamed about us, I never considered this was a fucking possibility. That we could ever be apart! This wasn't supposed to be the end of our story, Charlotte! I thought you used to believe that too."

I still do.

"Well, I d-don't anymore." My voice cracks.

I am falling apart. He needs to leave before I fully do.

"Well, I *never* doubted it. You are *it* for me. You are the one that I chose for life, Char. That's what you don't see. I didn't view you as my girlfriend, I saw you as my future wife. You were never temporary for me." He thrusts his hands through his hair. "For God's sake, I bought a ring! Did you know that? I spent hours researching, shopping, and designing a ring *just* for you. I was going to propose. I had the perfect plan. I knew exactly how I wanted to do it. And then you fucking *blindsided* me! You grabbed hold of every piece of our beautiful future and tore it apart in front of my eyes. So, please tell me. *Tell me* why I should take it easy on you, and I'll leave. I *promise*."

Don't tell him anything.

My chest constricts as I stare at him. I can't help but picture the first time we met. His smile was so genuine and kind. A stark contrast from the frown that I give him now. How did my plan to protect his heart go so wrong? But I guess I couldn't have planned on him never giving up on us.

What am I supposed to do?

What if this doesn't kill me? What if I live? Then, what will I do? Watch him go on with his life while I hate mine? This was supposed to be cut and dry. How did it end up so goddamn messy?

As hard as I want to stop this, I can't. No matter how much I want to feel his arms wrap around me and tug me close or

how badly I want to feel his lips on mine just one more time, I didn't go this far just to give it all up.

"I knew you were going to propose, Reed." I slam my eyes shut as the words leave my mouth of their own accord.

I can't bear to see his reaction.

"You knew?" His voice shakes.

Opening my eyes, I force myself to look at the pain I'm causing him. Because this is the last time I am doing this. If I have to, I'll move across the fucking country to keep my distance.

"T-that's why I left when I did. I didn't want to have to say no when the time came," I admit, not completely lying.

I didn't want to have to turn him down, but I would need to.

His shoulders are slumped, and as absolute defeat pulses through him, it is my heart that is shattering again.

"How could you stop loving me, Char? After everything? How was it so easy for you to just shut it off?" His voice is harsher, angrier, and I understand why.

He *should* be mad. He should hate me to my core.

Although this is the outcome I want, it doesn't make it any less hard to feel or watch. My eyes well up with tears, and I can't let him see that.

I need to breathe. But I can't fucking breathe. Like, I physically cannot force any air into my lungs.

My feet are moving before I even realize it, but I know where they are taking me. The one place I always go when I get overwhelmed.

Shoving my balcony door open, I step outside and let the brisk air wash over me and dry my tears.

"Charlotte!" Reed calls after me and stays on my heels the entire time.

My arms are on the railing, and I'm staring into the dark, starry sky. I'm finally able to take a breath.

I thought this would make it easier, to be able to look up at my stars and see everything in a new light. It was supposed to reset me, help me find a better perspective. But it's only making me realize that life is so fucking short—mine maybe even shorter. If I only have a little time left, I want to spend it with him.

But then how is that fair to him? How is it right to be selfish enough to tell him and be with him, but then leave him behind to pick up his own pieces?

I can't find a happy medium. It's not possible.

"How did you stop loving me, Charlotte? *Please* tell me because then maybe, somehow, I can do the same," he pleads, and his voice cracks.

Chills run down my body, and the words are slipping between my lips before I can stop them. "I didn't stop loving you ..."

"What do you *mean*?" His voice is barely audible.

I might as well have shot myself in the damn foot. How am I going to cover this one up? Great job, me.

"Just because we can't be together doesn't mean I stopped loving you. I just don't want to be with you anymore." I try to talk my way out of whatever hole I just dug myself.

"That doesn't make any sense!" he cries out. "Why can't we be together then? Just because you say so? Even though you have no good goddamn reason? I don't get it!" He locks his hands on top of his head, and tears pool in his eyes.

As if a bomb goes off inside of him, his sadness and confusion morph into an inferno of anger. "How did I fall in love with someone so selfish?"

Selfish?!

Something inside of me *snaps*.

Somehow, one tiny little word slithers its way behind every stone wall that I built and knocks them all down. I am many things right now, and I can handle everything he dishes out. But selfish?! He has no fucking idea how far from the truth he really is.

Whipping toward him, I come unglued. “You are sitting here, telling me that I don’t get it. But it’s *you*, Reed, who doesn’t get it!”

His eyes widen and lips part.

I don’t leave any room for him to talk. Now, it’s my turn. And now that I’ve opened this can of worms, I know I’m not going to be able to stop. It’s too late for that.

My fingers stretch onto my knitted beanie and grip it tight, and I pull it hard, ripping both the hat and my wig from my head.

His eyes soften, but I continue my rant.

“I’m not *selfish*! I’m the furthest thing from *selfish*!” I enunciate every single word because he needs to hear them loud and clear, and I step toward him. “Everything I have done is for *you*! Breaking us up was for *you*! The reason Alec told you to take it easy on me is because Laura knows the *why* behind everything I did for *you*.” My eyes pool with tears, which roll down my cheeks uncontrollably.

He reaches out and swipes the tears away on my cheek. “Charlotte ...”

I step back and out of his reach. I shouldn’t have done that. Oh my God, I shouldn’t have done that.

I can’t believe I just ruined everything ...

REED

*W*hat is happening?

My brain is spinning, and I can't think straight. What does she mean, she did everything for me? That doesn't make any sense.

Her hair ... oh, Char, what happened to your hair?

"Charlotte ..." I trail off, speechless.

"Don't," she snaps at me, and I flinch at the whiplash of emotion coming from her.

For a second, I saw my Charlotte, the one with no walls. But now, she's built them back up. I hate that anything exists between us.

She rubs her head, and my heart constricts at the look on her face. She looks so vulnerable and so broken. I hate that she feels that way.

"You look beautiful." The softened words leave my lips without thought.

Her stare flicks up to me harshly. "Don't say that."

Hesitantly, I take a step toward her and say, "Don't tell you that I think you've never looked more beautiful than you do right now?"

"Stop," she whimpers, her voice cracks, and the walls between us start falling to pieces.

I take another step toward her. "I've *never* doubted that you're going to be my wife. I've *never* doubted that I want to spend every day for the rest of our lives together. I've never doubted that it's *you* I'm meant to be with." Closing the distance between us, I cage my arms around her and grab the

railing her back is now arching against. “I didn’t doubt it then, and I don’t doubt it now. Whatever you’re going through, we’ll get through it together. Nothing will ever, ever fucking change the way I feel for you.”

She heaves and sobs as the river of tears continues to stream down her cheeks. “I don’t want to hurt you ...”

“Being apart from you is the only thing that will hurt me, baby. In every life and in every circumstance, no matter how long our love story lasts, I will choose *you*, and I will love *you*,” I tell her because it’s true.

We are meant to be together. We always have been. And we always will be. Nothing will change that.

“Please stop,” she cries out.

I want to kiss away every single tear, but I’m not pushing that boundary just yet.

“Do you love me?” I ask her and hold my breath.

I know she does. She wouldn’t act this way if she didn’t. But she could still lie and tell me no. And never give me another chance. I need to hear her *say* it.

“*Reed*,” she whimpers again, looking down at my chest.

Taking my hand off of the railing, I place it under her chin and lift it up, forcing her beautiful eyes to look at me.

“Do you love me, Charlotte?” I ask her again. My eyes burn and start to blur with tears.

“*Reed*,” she cries, and her eyes fall to my lips.

“Tell me you still love me,” I whisper as I lower my head, hovering my lips above hers. “Tell me you love me.” My body tingles from my head to my toes, being this close to her again. “Tell me, Charlotte. Tell me you love m—”

She crashes her lips into mine and grabs my face, pulling me further into her. I freeze, just for the slightest of seconds before I realize what is happening, and I lose it, cupping her face in my hands.

Kissing her back is like the first breath of fresh air that I have had in weeks, and I can't get enough of her. My tongue swipes her bottom lip, and she moans into my mouth. The sound and vibration of her whimper light my body up like a bolt of electricity. I never want this to fucking stop.

Her lips part, and I take full fucking advantage. My tongue teases hers, and she reciprocates even more ferociously.

As much as I don't want this to ever end, I pull my lips away and roll my forehead against hers. I need her words.

"Tell me you love me," I groan into her parted and slightly swollen lips.

Her eyes flicker open, and she looks up at me, pulling away just enough so we can really look into each other's eyes.

I've never seen a battle so intense in someone's stare before. I wish I knew what in the hell was scaring her so bad that she would push me so far away. That the potential of even being with me has her torn.

"Charlotte, it doesn't matter if we aren't together. It doesn't matter if we are miles or countries apart. It doesn't matter how much time passes. People scour the earth to find more in this life; they crave a purpose for their existence and a reason to live. *You* are my more. *You* are my purpose. *You* are my *every* reason. Forever. Always."

A mix between a sob and a shriek leaves her, and she gasps before crying out, "*Of course* I love you! I love you more now than I did yesterday and the day before, and I will continue to love you more and more until my last breath. Forever. Always."

Smiling, I can't resist the surge of emotion that rushes through me.

We can worry about whatever hurdle we have coming later. Right now, I want to focus on this, on us.

This time, it's my turn to crash my lips down on hers, and the untamed passion we felt moments ago returns instantly.

“Fuck, I love you,” I growl and claim her lips again and again, until I don’t know where she ends and I begin.

“I love you,” she murmurs between kisses.

Ever so slightly, she pushes against my chest, and I let her lead. I’ll follow her wherever the hell she wants to go.

Her fingers skim the small sliver of skin above the waistband of my uniform shorts, and my body jumps at the contact. I can’t even fucking help it. My dick twitches instantly against my cup, and the sensation has my eyes rolling to the back of my head.

God, it feels like it’s been forever since I’ve been with her. I want nothing more than to be as close as possible right now. But there is no way in hell we are having sex tonight. Not after everything we’ve been through to get us to this point.

“Charlotte, slow down.” I pull back, breaking our kiss.

“Oh God ... you don’t want to ...” Her face falls, and I catch her chin as she tucks it into her chest.

“Look at me. I want to ... *fuck*, I want to. But not tonight. Not after I just got you back. I’ll make up for it.” I smirk, and her eyes glimmer. “I promise. Tonight, I just want to be with you. I want to hold you and kiss you. We will have time for *more* later.”

The light in her eyes fades, and I worry that maybe she regrets everything that just happened.

Her lip quivers, and she says, “That’s the thing, Reed. I don’t know how much time we really have.”

Gulping, I bite my bottom lip to fight back any burning tears forming. I know something’s wrong. She looks tired. Her hair is almost gone. Clearly, something is wrong. But I’m not going to lose her, right?

“I-I have ...” Her bottom lip shakes. “I have breast cancer.”

Oh God. Oh God.

Everything clicks into place, and it finally makes sense. I know why she pushed me away. She's told me the story a thousand times. The story of how her dad loved her mom so much that a part of him truly died with her.

FUCK!

All the times I was short with her and a dick. I hate myself so much more for making her feel even worse than she already did. But I will make that up to her if it's the last thing I do.

She shies away from me, but I'm not letting her run away from me ever again. I pick her up, and she wraps her legs around my waist and her arms around my neck.

"Please, stop trying to protect me from the potential pains of loving you; it's impossible. I'll never be able to stop loving you." I kick the balcony door open and carry her through the threshold, shutting the door behind us.

I don't stop walking until we are in her living room. Gently, I set her down on the couch, and I sit directly beside her. But it still feels too far away. Grabbing her hips, I lift her back up and place her in my lap and wrap my arms around her waist.

Now that we are situated, I breathe her in and say, "Tell me *everything*. I want to know every single thing that has happened since the day you left my house."

Her bottom lip trembles. "I understand if you're mad at me and you continue to be mad. Like, I would get why you would ___"

"Stop it," I cut her off. "Char ..." I force her to look at me by gently lifting her chin. "Am I happy that you lied to me about being sick? Absolutely not. As long as you never do it again. I'm not mad that you did what you thought you had to do, Char. I love you. Nothing will change that, and nothing will come between us."

CHARLOTTE

Last night was ... exhausting ... and perfect. I didn't want to tell him the truth, but I knew once he had me cornered on that balcony, I wouldn't be able to go through with my original plan. Maybe, deep down, that's why I ran out there, like I somehow knew that under the stars, all of my secrets would surface, and he would truly find me.

After he carried me inside, I completely broke down. I told him everything he wanted to know and everything that I'd been dying to say out loud. He cried with me—of course he did. Because he's the most empathetic man I've ever met.

I told Reed all about Ella. Once I started, it was almost impossible for me to stop gushing about that little ray of sunshine. He couldn't stop looking at me and smiling as I spilled every sweet moment that she, Harper, and I shared. A similar smile to the one I woke up next to this morning. I'll never get used to being loved by him.

After we divulged every moment that happened during our months apart, I was exhausted, and I needed sleep desperately. I half expected Reed to go home, but he refused to leave me. He slept in my queen-size bed with his arms and legs wrapped around me. I hadn't slept that deeply in what feels like forever.

He also told me about his new cat son, Hatty, which at first caught me off guard, but then I realized that I'm more surprised it took him this long to get a furry companion. He's always loved animals. He couldn't stop talking about the strides they'd made toward bonding, and somehow, the love he shares with the little three-legged gray kitty is the hottest thing I've ever seen. I can't wait to meet him and eventually make him love me too.

Harper texted me and said that Ella has chemo this morning, and of course I'm going to be there for her. When I told Reed, I could tell he was intrigued. To be loved by Reed is to be seen, validated, cared for, listened to, and protected. Which is exactly why I invited him along this morning, to let my two worlds collide. I want him to see the side of my life that I've kept in the dark, and I want him to meet the greatest little girl in the world.

Of course I checked with Harper if that would be okay. I even offered to take us out for lunch on a different day if that would be better and less intrusive. But she didn't even hesitate and said that she nor Ella would have any issue with me bringing Reed along.

He offered to drive this morning, and I realized how much I missed being his passenger princess with his hand on my thigh and his thumb caressing me without thought.

As we near the clinic, my feet start bouncing on the floor, and my heart quickens. I'm so dang excited to see her. She is forevermore my little sister. I want to be there when she finally rings the bell, going into remission. I want to be there when she starts middle school, high school, college. I just hope I manage to be around long enough to see all of those dreams through to the end. I pray that Harper and I continue to build the relationship that we've started to. I never imagined that going to treatment would bring me a bigger sense of family.

Reed takes a right into a grocery store parking lot, and I instantly speak up. "Your turn isn't for, like, a mile."

"I know." He smiles and parks in the front row and shuts the car off. "I'll be right back."

Squishing my eyebrows together, I say, "Wait, what? Where are you going?"

He smirks, then chuckles. "I'll be right back, Char."

What is he up to? Is he hungry and needs a doughnut or snack? Why didn't he just say that?

I can't seem to stop trying to figure out what he's up to the entire time he's in there. But the second I see the automatic

doors open to him, my lips part, and my racing heart skips a beat. His long strides carry him to his pickup in just a few short steps.

As he opens the truck door, he says, “I had to grab a few things.”

In his hand is a bag filled to the top and two bouquets. He hands the first one to me, and I take the biggest inhale, my eyes rolling from one of the best smells in the world—fresh flowers.

“I haven’t been able to get these for you in a while, and I missed it.” He blushes, then hands me the second bunch that’s smaller than the first. “These are for Ella. I figured she’s kind of like your mini, so since you like flowers, I had a feeling she would too.”

My eyes begin to burn and water as he puts his truck in reverse.

“I-I love you,” I murmur as a tear rolls down my cheek.

He presses on the brakes and leans over the console and grabs my face. Holding me, he looks into my eyes like he sees into my soul before kissing me fiercely, and I kiss him back just the same.

“I love *you*,” he whispers against my lips before refocusing on driving.

Trying to gather my wits, I remember the bag he had. “What else did you get?”

“Just some of my girl’s favorite things. They had those chocolate croissants you like, so I picked up a couple. I also grabbed a few bottles of apple juice, a bunch of bananas, and a pack of applesauce. I read online last night that they can help after chemo treatments, and I wanted to have something in case you or her need a little boost.”

Am I ever going to stop happy-crying because of this man?

“You’re the best,” I coo. “You do know I’m not getting treatment today, right?”

He shrugs. “Yeah, I know. But I also read that you still might not feel great, even after you’ve finished treatment, and I didn’t want you to have to track something down to help you feel better when I could just have it on hand.”

Oh my God, the word *love* isn’t strong enough to describe the way I feel about Reed.

“Thank you,” I whisper.

“You never have to thank me for anything,” he says and turns into the clinic.

“I’m going to do it anyway,” I protest with a smile.

He chuckles and throws the pickup in park.

Harper’s van is already here, which means Princess Ella is as well, more than likely inside, waiting by the window for me. I hope she’s feeling okay today.

Handing the flowers he got for Ella back to him, I say, “Here, you should give them to her. It’ll make her smile.”

“Are you sure? I don’t want to take any attention from you guys,” he says hesitantly.

Now, it’s me that’s chuckling. “She’s going to love you. And you got them for her; you should give them to her. After all, she’ll love that a handsome prince is bringing her flowers.”

He smirks with furrowed brows, takes the flowers, and gets out of the truck, shutting the door behind him. As I grab the handle, the door is pulled open and taken out of my hand.

“I got it,” Reed says, and my heart is on the verge of bursting.

He might actually be Prince Charming reincarnated.

“Thank you,” I murmur, and my cheeks flush as I step down onto the pavement.

As we walk toward the building, I can’t help but feel emotional, having Reed here with me. This was like a secret part of my life that no one knew about. To some extent, it felt like a dream, but with him here, it feels so real. It’s intense and somehow comforting and overwhelming at the same time.

Reed senses my anxiety, and he shuffles the flowers to his other hand before sliding his hand down my arm and interlocking his fingers with mine. His thumb sweeps over the back of my hand repeatedly as we approach the front doors.

He pulls the right one open and holds it for me to walk through. I do and turn back to him with his hand in mine, so I don't have to let go as he follows.

The second we're inside, I hear a familiar pitter-patter of the princess we are here to see. A moment later, she comes into view, running down the hallway with the biggest smile on her face.

I curtsy without even thinking about it, dropping Reed's hand to do so.

"My lady," I say properly, and she giggles.

She curtsies back, almost unable to contain her excitement, "My Queen."

Reed gently bumps me with his shoulder, and I know he's dying to be introduced to her.

"Hi, El." I open my arms as she runs into me with hers spread wide. "I have someone for you to meet."

She pulls away and looks up at Reed, like waaay up at him because he stands so much taller than her. "Who are you?"

"This is Reed. He's my boyfriend." My cheeks burn so bright at the simple admission, as if I were saying it for the first time.

Reed grabs the sides of his pants and bends at his knees, dipping his head down at the same time. By the time I realize what he's doing, Ella is practically rolling on the floor, laughing, clearly having caught on much faster than me.

"Charlotte didn't tell me that I was going to be in the presence of royalty. My apologies, Princess Ella. I hope these flowers will suffice as an apology." He holds them out for her, still bending slightly in a bow to her.

She clasps her hands and smiles wider than I've ever seen and gasps loudly. "Those are for me?!"

“Is there another Princess Ella here that I don’t know about?” he teases.

Ella grabs the flowers from him abruptly. “I sure hope not because she’s not getting these ones.”

She breathes them in, and I hope she loves the smell as much as I do. I hope they bring her the peace that mine brought me.

“I love them!” she squeals and rushes him, wrapping her arms around his lower waist in a huge hug.

He bends lower and hugs her back, patting her back at the same time. “Good. I’m glad.”

Harper turns the corner and notices Ella hugging Reed, and I watch the immediate look of concern quickly shift to happiness.

“Good morning, Harper,” I greet her kindly. “Harper, this is Reed. Reed, this is Harper, Ella’s amazing mom.”

“It’s great to meet you,” she says genuinely and offers her hand to him, which he shakes happily.

She notices the flowers Ella is holding and inhales sharply. “Oh my gosh. What did you get?”

At the sound of her mom’s voice, Ella pulls away from Reed, twirls, and shows the flowers off to her mom. “These!”

“Wow!” she sings, and her entire body relaxes.

I can’t imagine the stress and absolute fear that having a child going through this brings. Every time Ella smiles or laughs, it’s like Harper is so desperately trying to memorize the sight and the sound of her daughter. I’m glad that even for a brief moment, we could bring her a slice of tranquility.

The nurse that always seems to be on staff when we are here turns the corner and points at Ella. “There you are! I was worried we were going to have to call in the royal guard to track you down.”

Ella breaks into another fit of giggles, then begins skipping down the hall toward Nurse Jackie.

“Look what I got!” She pridefully shows the nurse her bouquet.

“Oh my goodness. Those are the prettiest flowers I have ever seen!” she squeals.

“Are you coming?” Ella asks, but I don’t realize she’s talking to me at first.

“Me?” I ask.

“Well, duh. We always go together,” she says so matter-of-factly and seriously for being only seven years old.

I glance at the nurse, and she nods, letting me know that it’s okay if I tag along.

“I’m coming,” I tell her. “I’ll be right behind you!”

Harper follows them toward the waiting room, which leads to the treatment rooms.

Turning toward Reed, I open my mouth to make sure he’ll be okay while I’m gone, but he cuts me off before I can even get a word out.

“I am happy to wait with Harper.” He leans down and kisses my forehead. “It’s clear that Queen Charlotte is needed. Just don’t forget about this commoner afterward.”

I laugh. “If I’m a queen, then you would obviously be the king.”

He shrugs and smirks. “I kind of thought so, but I didn’t want to crown myself with the title.”

He takes my hand again, and I lead us down the hallway and into the waiting room.

He spins me back to him and kisses me like we didn’t just walk into a room full of people. “I love you.”

I kiss him back and melt against his lips. “I love you too.”



After Ella finishes treatment, we mingle in the waiting room for a few minutes before walking out to the parking lot together.

“You know, Ella, you are the coolest person I’ve ever met,” Reed says as Ella goes in for a hug good-bye.

“You mean that?” she asks with a grin.

“Of course I mean that.” He smiles and hugs her back before releasing her.

“You’re pretty cool too,” she says shyly and turns to the car.

“Umm, excuse me, Princess, did you forget about your queen?” I scoff.

She turns back around with a menacing smile and says, “Gotcha!” before launching herself at me.

I catch her in my arms and squeeze her tightly.

“I’ll see you soon, okay?” I kiss the side of her head and pull away.

She throws her arms back around me and hugs me even tighter a second time. “Very soon!”

“You got it,” I promise her.

Harper and I hug good-bye, much less theatrically than Ella and I did, and we go our separate ways.

Sometimes, you meet people in an unlikely situation, and they somehow become some of the most important people in your life. Ella and Harper are that to me, an unexpected blessing that I never expected to come from this tragic experience.

CHARLOTTE

Today has me feeling more anxiety than I think I've ever experienced before. I've been dreading shaving my head since this all started. But it's time, and to be honest, there's not much left to shave off. Most of it has already fallen out.

I haven't really mentioned it to Reed, but I'm scared to do it. What if when it's really all gone, I don't find myself beautiful? I've always taken such pride in my hair, and it's always been such a big part of my appearance. What happens when all of it is gone?

I know Reed's seen me without my beanie the night on my balcony, but I haven't really let him see me without my wig since then. It has nothing to do with him. I know he will reassure me and tell me how beautiful I am. His words matter—they do. But so do the ones in my own head, and right now, they aren't the kindest when I look in the mirror.

I'm working on changing that, correcting the negative thoughts in the moment when they happen. I'm not always successful, but I'm trying to be.

Reed surprised me with homemade pancakes and bacon this morning when I woke up. I don't know what I would do without him. I have a doctor's appointment this afternoon, and we plan on doing my hair before that. My doctor's appointment is a check-in to see how the treatment is going and how effective it is killing the cancer cells. As long as everything is on track, we are going to schedule my surgery for my mastectomy. So, on top of the nerves of losing my hair, I have all of that going on too.

"Are you ready?" I ask Reed, my heart already racing a mile a minute.

He scoots over on the couch and grabs my hand, kissing it tenderly. “Whenever you are.”

My throat burns, and a lump forms as I stand up, my hand still in his. “I don’t know if I ever will be ... but let’s do it.”

He kisses the back of my hand repeatedly. “I’m so proud of you. You are *so* strong, Char.”

My eyes well, and I smile at him, unable to say anything, as I’m scared the tears will really start flowing.

Reed rises to his feet and waits for me to take the lead. I walk us to the dining table, where Reed already set everything up. He pulls the chair out for me, but I think I’m too nervous to sit down right now.

My shaky hand reaches out and grabs the razor. As I click it on, the sound shocks me, and I jump.

Reed wraps his arms around me from behind and kisses my cheek. “It’s okay, baby. You got this.”

I told him I wanted to do the first swipe when we planned this. I want to be the one to start, but I want him to finish. I won’t be able to see everything, and I’m sure it would look horrendously uneven if he didn’t help.

He releases me and steps in front of me. “I love you.”

“I love you,” I tell him as the razor continues to vibrate in my hand.

Lifting it up to my hairline, I close my eyes and feel a tear run down my cheek as the warm vibration touches my forehead. Gently, I push it through my hair and feel it fall down my face like snow as I buzz a strip down my head.

Slowly, I open my eyes and lower the razor. I blink away the fallen strands and look at Reed, who is holding his breath, then gently exhales.

I hold the razor out, and he takes it from me.

“Close your eyes real quick,” he instructs me softly, and I listen, fluttering my eyes shut once more.

The buzzing grows louder, like it's pressed against a surface, but he isn't touching me.

My eyes fly open, and the floodgates break all over again.

"What are you doing?!" I shout, in complete shock at what's happening in front of me.

Reed is smiling from ear to ear, but I can't focus on anything else, except the line of shaved hair that runs from his hairline to the top of his head.

"I don't want you to feel like you're alone in this. I'm here every step of the way. I'll help you with yours if you help me with mine," he says with a shy smile and flushed cheeks.

Ruefully laughing, I brush my tears away, stand on my toes, and say, "Kiss me."

He sets the vibrating razor down on the table, grabs my face, and kisses me tenderly. "You never have to ask me twice."

Smiling against his lips and before I lose the nerve, I ask, "Can you do mine first?"

"Of course. Do you want to sit down while I finish? Do you want water, a blanket, or anything?" he offers.

"No, but thank you," I whisper, while sitting down on the chair that he pulls out.

I look up at him, smiling with teary eyes, mixed with both the sadness of what's to come and the absolute love and happiness I feel from the gorgeous blue-eyed man standing over me.

Reed picks the razor up, and as I tilt my head back down, he kisses the top of my head and says, "Take a breath for me, Char."

I didn't realize that I had been holding my breath. I listen to him and take a deep inhale and exhale. Carefully, he runs the shaver over my head. Then again and again.

I wasn't prepared for the level of intimacy this was going to bring. I've never felt more exposed to him than I do right now,

and that's saying something since he's seen every bare inch of me. But as intimate as it feels, it's equally vulnerable. It's special. A moment that we will always share together, one he's making even more precious by having me shave his head too.

As he finishes the last strip, his lips press into the top of my now bare head. My eyes close at the contact, and a peace I didn't expect to ever feel again settles into my chest.

"All right, my turn," he says eagerly and sets the razor down.

I can't believe he's doing this. He's out of his mind.

"You don't have to do this," I assure him and stand up, turning slightly toward him.

He chuckles. "I think it's a little too late for that. Besides, I *want* to."

My heart warms from his words, his actions, and his love for me.

The urge to feel my head is overwhelming, and I give in. Tentatively, I lift my hand to my buzzed head and run my fingers over the patchy stubble that's left behind.

Reed leans down and kisses my cheek, then lifts my chin up to meet his eyes. "You're beautiful, so goddamn beautiful."

Nodding hesitantly, I force myself to really hear his words, to replay them in my mind like a mantra.

"Thank you," I whisper and move out of the way so he can sit in the chair.

With each glide of the razor on Reed, I feel as if I were shaving my own head. The feeling is oddly comforting. As his blond hair falls away, I realize something. It won't matter if he's bald for the rest of his life; it won't matter how his appearance changes over time. I will love him the same. I think he feels that way too.

After I finish with Reed's hair, he stands and picks me up. Wrapping my legs around his waist, I lean my forehead against his and breathe him in.

“I love you,” I murmur against his lips.

He grins at my words. “Not as much as I love you. I can’t imagine that’s even possible.”

Scoffing, I say, “Well, it is because I do.”

He smiles the kind of smile that doesn’t just show in your lips or your eyes; it lights up every inch of your face.



My appointment was the biggest weight off of my chest, and I desperately needed it. I think I might *actually* beat this. I really didn’t think that I would ever reach the point of feeling that way. I also didn’t think I would let myself feel that kind of hope again.

But the doctor said that my scans all looked exactly as they wanted after the last six months of treatment. My masses have shrunk, and I’m ready for my surgery. Which is good news—it is—but it also means that I’m losing my boobs, and I’m not sure I’m ready for that either. Cancer definitely isn’t going to wait around for me to feel prepared though. I have to be a step ahead of it, which means that I’m going to have to face that fear head-on.

My surgery is scheduled next week, so I have six days to get ready to lose yet another part of my identity. I’ve read articles about how women feel after a double mastectomy. They struggle with feeling feminine and sexy. I’m scared that I might never feel those things again. Will Reed find me sexy when I lose my breasts? Will he still look at me with that seductive gaze that used to scan my body repeatedly? We’ll find out sooner or later, I suppose.

There’s a lot I’m scared of right now, including doing what I’m about to do. Something that I’ve been putting off since I got my diagnosis because I’m scared of what it’ll do to him. I need to call my dad.

I’m done keeping this in the dark. Reed knowing has shown me that by not telling people, I’m taking away their

choice. I shouldn't isolate myself, no matter how much I want to. It's not fair to me, and it's not fair to the people who care about me.

Sitting down on my bed, I pull my phone out and take a shaky breath before calling my dad.

It rings once, then twice, and he answers on the third.

"Charlotte, thank goodness. I was worried you weren't ever going to call me back."

His tone is playful, but I also know part of him isn't kidding. I've been dodging his calls for weeks because I knew if I talked to him, I would want to tell him everything. I was trying to save myself from even more agony by putting it off. But it's time to rip that Band-Aid off.

"Hey, Dad," I say with a ghost of a smile on my lips. "I'm sorry I've been kind of MIA."

Any jolliness in his voice has vanished as he asks, "What's wrong?"

"Dad"—my voice cracks—"I'm sorry."

"Honey, it's okay. I know you've been so busy with your job. You are doing so amazing. Don't apologize," he assures me, which makes me feel worse about avoiding him.

"It's not that, Dad. I haven't called you back because there's something I need to tell you, and I've been nervous about doing it ..." I trail off.

He lightly sighs. "You never have to be nervous to tell me anything. What's going on?"

"Dad, I-I'm sick. I mean, I'm doing better now." My voice is but a whisper as I finish my confession. "I-I have the same sickness Mom did."

The silence is deafening, and I wait for him to say something, anything. He sobs into the phone, and my chest cracks open. I'm really tired of hurting the people I love.

"I'm sorry," I apologize as if that will make him feel better.

“Charlotte ...” He takes a deep, quivering breath. “You have absolutely nothing to apologize for, sweetie. When did you find out? Why didn’t you call me right away? I would’ve been there for you.”

Squeezing my eyes shut, I say, “I know you would have; that’s why I didn’t call. I didn’t want to put you through *that* all over again. Not after how hard you took Mom’s death. You didn’t deserve any more anguish.”

He sighs heavily. “You have always carried the world on your shoulders, Charlotte. You are so much like your mom in ways you don’t even realize. She would be so proud of who you are today.”

Sobs tear free from my chest, and I imagine the same is happening to him as he cries into the phone, “I don’t want to do any more of this over the phone. I’ll be on the next flight, okay?”

Gasping in air, I slowly exhale. “Okay. I love you, Dad.”

“I love you too, sweetie. I’ll see you soon,” he says and ends the call.

I’m excited to have him here, but I know it’s going to be equally hard for both him and me. I hate seeing him in any pain. I know being with me is going to bring back a lot of old feelings that he had when my mom was sick. But I’ll be here for him the same way I know he’ll be for me. We’ll get through it, finally together.

There’s one more call I have to make, but my emotional battery is so drained. I’m going to have to call Josh after a nap. If I’m ripping all of the Band-Aids off today, then I also have to tell my other best friend. He’s going to be so mad that I didn’t tell him. But I know that anger will only come out of a place of deep love. I’ve always said Josh is like the male version of me. If he was sick and hiding it from me, I would be so mad at him. But then I would instantly feel the need to care for him and help console him. I imagine he will have a similar reaction.

After waking up from a four-hour nap, I call Josh and explain everything that's been going on. He responds exactly how I imagined he would. By the end of the call, we both are crying and telling each other how much we love each other. He tries to tell me he was cutting his trip short to come back, but I tell him I would sell all of his prized possessions if he did. He has been excited to go home, and I'm not going to be the reason he comes back sooner than planned. Regardless, he'll be coming home within a week anyway.

Somehow, in the midst of keeping everyone in the dark, I forgot how important it is to have the support of those you love most. Everyone's love for me feels like a shield that I can wield against my illness. I intend to win this war with my army beside me.

CHARLOTTE

“Pick a genre,” Reed says, scrolling through Netflix as we sit on the couch under a cozy blanket.

To be honest, the only thing I can focus on right now is the sensations shooting to my core with every swipe of his thumb on my bare leg.

“Umm ...” Any thought on the verge of forming vanishes as he trails his fingers higher up on my leg.

It’s been so long since he’s touched me like that. Having his hand on my skin as he teases me has me forgetting everything I know about movie genres. I would love to stare at a blank screen for hours if it means he won’t stop.

He definitely notices the effect he is having on me right now. He digs his fingertips into my thigh, and I gasp at the jolt that shoots through me.

“Genre, Char. Pick a genre,” he tells me, knowing damn well that he is the reason why I’m struggling to answer.

Shooting a glare at him, I say, “Comedy.”

He chuckles with an evil smirk on his lips and quietly puts on the movie *Horrible Bosses*. We’ve seen this, like, a thousand times, but I have no protest as I don’t plan on watching much of this at all if I get my way.

I need to *feel* him again. I need him to touch me so desperately that my body is physically aching.

Charlie Day’s character is trying to defend himself from the advances of his handsy boss while Reed and I stare at the screen as if we are actually paying any attention to it.

Inching over to him, I push my body up against his, keeping my eyes locked on the TV.

His fingers wrap further around my inner thigh, and he squeezes, eliciting a quiet moan that I didn't intend on releasing. The effect he has on me is overwhelming, especially since it's been a while since we've been physical together.

My breathing quickens as his fingers continue to dance over my skin.

"I've missed you so much, Char," Reed hums, his voice low and husky.

Warm tingles run up my spine when I hear that sexy gruffness in his voice. It's always driven me crazy.

The question bursts from my lips before I can stop it, "Were you with anyone in between ..."

"Absolutely not. You are it for me. Nothing changed when we were apart, not for a second." His voice is powerful and assuring. "Were you?"

I scoff in almost a laugh and cry. "Oh God, no. You are the only person that is allowed to touch me."

"Good. And that's the way it's fucking staying. You're mine, Charlotte. Forever," he growls.

"Always," I whimper.

Running my hand across his lap, I want to graze his dick and tease him like he is doing to me. But I'm not ready for the rock-hard erection that is already pulsing in his sweats. *He's already that hard, just thinking about me and touching my thigh?*

"Fuck," he groans as I rub my palm down his covered length.

Turning my head, he brushes the blonde hair of my wig back and presses his lips against my ear. His hot breath sends tingles down my spine. His soft groans that I elicit with every touch are the most beautiful fucking melody I've ever heard.

"I've missed you," I whisper.

His hand shifts higher, and he runs his fingers up my thigh until he reaches my shorts. He adjusts his hand and slips it beneath the thin material.

He drags his teeth over my earlobe and places a rough kiss against my neck. “Do you feel what you do to me? Just the *thought* of having you again has me so fucking hard that it hurts.”

He runs his tongue up my neck, and an uncontrolled whimper shakes free from my parted lips.

“Let’s see how the thought of me makes you feel,” he says as he cups my pussy over my underwear. He tugs it to the side and runs a finger through the arousal that’s already soaking through my panties.

“Fuuuck,” he growls. Pulling his hand out of my pants, he raises his hand to his lips and sucks his finger clean. “Mmm.”

Shivering with anticipation, I watch him lick his lips as he stares at me with darkened, hooded eyes. I don’t know how much longer I can hold myself back before I just launch myself at him.

Lifting my hands, I grab his face. I hover my lips over his and moan into his mouth, “I need you.”

In one smooth movement, he grabs my waist, picks me up, and throws me onto his lap, my legs straddling him.

He pushes me down until his oversize bulge is pressing right where I want it. “Yeah, baby? Tell me how badly you need this dick.”

I grind my hips against him, and my eyes roll from the sensation that I never thought I’d feel again. “I want you so bad. *Please.*”

“Mmm.” He chuckles wickedly and throws his head back. Reed, being the dirty-mouthed golden retriever that he is, says, “I want to feel you pulse around my cock again so goddamn bad, Charlotte. But I don’t want to rush us back into anything.”

Reed is the most understanding and caring man in the world. He will always try to put my needs first. But he doesn't realize that, right now, I don't need space or time apart. I need to feel him bottoming out inside of me while he makes me see fucking stars.

Hopping off of his lap, I watch his face contort into confusion. The blanket that surrounds us falls to the ground. Placing my hands on my hips, I grab the bottom of his shirt that I'm wearing and smirk.

"What are you doing?" he mumbles and lifts his hips, adjusting the pants that look painfully tight against the outline of his thick cock.

"We aren't rushing into anything, Reed," I say confidently as I lift the shirt up and over my head, exposing my bare chest. I toss the shirt on the ground with the blanket. "I love you, and I want to have sex with my stupidly hot boyfriend before the doctors take these away from me," I say, cupping my boobs.

It might not make sense to him, but I need to do this for myself. Maybe I am selfish—at least sometimes. But I need him to fuck me while I still feel somewhat normal. Maybe that's messed up, but I *need* this. With my wig on and my killer boobs still intact, I want Reed to fuck me like he used to—with crazy passion and a bit of roughness. I don't want him to treat me like I'm fragile.

His head tilts to the side, and his eyes narrow. I can tell he is debating on whether or not to check in with me and see how I'm feeling about everything or bending me over this couch. I hope he chooses the latter. We can talk later.

"*Please*," I beg and place my hands on his thighs. Then, I move my right hand and grab his erection. I groan, "Please fuck me like it'll be the last time you ever wil—"

He catches my mouth and brings it down to his. "Don't even finish that sentence. Your surgery will go perfectly, and you will be perfect. Because you are fucking perfect—with or without these."

He flicks my nipple, and I flinch at the shocking jolt that pulses through me. What if I don't have any sensation similar to that after my surgery? That's why I *need* this. I need to feel everything in case I can never feel some of it again.

"Suck on them, play with them, fucking worship them before they're gone. I'm *begging* you," I cry out to him.

He closes his eyes and grunts, "I think I love hearing you beg."

"Yeah?" I squeeze him, and he groans. "*Please, Reed. Fuck me.*"

His hand flies up and grabs me right beneath my jaw. He crashes his lips to mine, and any resolve he has completely snaps.

He parts my lips with his tongue and plunges it inside of my mouth. He consumes me with his kiss, and I couldn't be happier about it. He stands up, slides his hands around my ass, and lifts me up. I hook my hands around his neck and my legs around his waist, and he carries me to my bedroom without either of us coming up for air.

He tosses me playfully on the bed and stares down at me. Something about a blond-haired, blue-eyed six-foot-three man that's all mine towering over me has me feeling animalistic. His fingers grip my shorts, and he tears them and my panties off of me in one fell swoop.

"Open your legs for me." he demands, and I obey happily. "Fucking hell, Charlotte. You're dripping onto the bed; you're so goddamn wet."

His words make my pussy flutter as he crawls between my legs and places his hands on the inside of my knees, pushing my legs apart as far as they can go. The stretch in my hips feels like it's pulling on my core.

His stare is mesmerizing, and I can't look away. He holds me in place with his hands and his gaze as his tongue slams into my wetness. He drags his tongue up my center, lapping me up.

“Fuck, I forgot how good you taste,” he growls against me, and the vibrations dance over my clit.

He slides a thick finger inside of me, and I gasp as one quickly becomes two. His tongue continues to worship me as his fingers hook inside of me and threaten to send me over the edge.

His other hand reaches over my stomach and cups my breast. The rough pad of his thumb rubs my nipple in an intoxicating rhythm.

“Reed,” I gasp as a shiver runs from my toes, through every single cell in my body, and up through my head.

He sucks on my clit, his tongue flicking it at the same time. He pulls back just for a second. I feel his lips tilt up against my pussy, and he says, “There we go, baby. I feel you tightening up around my fingers. Keep going. You’re almost there.”

His lips and tongue go back to their tortuous rhythm, and I fucking lose it.

My body explodes, and I cry out, “Reed! Fuuuck!”

He continues to work me through my orgasm, making it last for what feels like forever. He stands up, and in record time, he strips himself of his sweats, boxers, and T-shirt. As his dick springs free from its cage, I lick my lips and scoot my hips toward the end of the bed.

He steps forward and slides his cock through my wetness. “Fuck, Charlotte.”

He pulls back and thrusts forward again, the tip of his dick rubbing my clit. I gasp, and he bites his bottom lip.

“Promise me something,” he demands as he grabs his shaft and pumps it once before teasing my entrance with the thick tip.

“Hell of a time to ask me to promise anything,” I mumble and wiggle my hips, trying to feel more of him.

“Promise me you’ll never leave again,” he says, and my heart pulses at the same time as my core.

Looking at him, I promise him, “I will never leave you. It would kill me.”

He releases himself, grabs a pillow, and kneels on the bed.

“Lift your hips, Char,” he orders.

As I lift my hips, he slides the pillow underneath my ass. He lines himself back up, teasing me again as he leans over and places his lips on mine in a tender kiss.

I grab his face and kiss him back intensely. This isn’t rough and harsh; it’s so fucking gentle and all-consuming.

“It would kill me too,” he whispers and pushes into me.

“Fuck,” I gasp as my body struggles to stretch around him, the pressure overwhelming. “It’s so much.”

He kisses my forehead, then my cheeks, then my nose, and my lips. He continues peppering me in his love as he says, “Tell me when you’re ready for me to move.”

Nodding, I breathe heavily as my body adjusts to him. Slowly, I circle my hips, and pleasure overrides any sense of pain. Grinding against him, I can’t even form a word, so I nod, giving him all the permission he needs to move.

His dick twitches, and he grins menacingly. The complete fullness of him inside of me is immense in the best possible way. He arches his back and slides out of me slowly before thrusting forward. Every inch is intoxicating.

“You feel so fucking good, stretching to take me,” he growls into my panting mouth.

“Oh God.” My eyes roll back as he picks up his pace.

He sucks my nipple into his mouth and bites tenderly. It feels so *fucking* good.

He bottoms out in me and pulls back out until his tip is about to slip out, then slams back into me, our skin slapping together. He creates music, using my body like an instrument that was made just for him.

“I fucking love you,” he grunts as he grabs on to my hips.

“I love ... ahh!” I shriek as he fucks me harder, and my entire body begins to catch on fire.

“I want to see you—really see you—when you come around my cock,” he says and threads his fingers into my wig.

He tugs gently and removes it, tossing it onto the nightstand beside my bed. A new wave of vulnerability and pleasure hit me.

“You are so fucking sexy, Charlotte. I wish you could see how perfect you look, gripping my fucking cock,” he says as his fingers dig into my hips and his thrusts find that perfect balance between fast and slow. “That’s it, baby. There you go.”

“Oh Gooood! Fuuuck! Reed!” I cry out as my body explodes again, and I come harder than I think I ever have before.

My legs shake as waves and waves of endless heaven pulse through me.

“I’m not going to last much longer,” Reed warns as his pace picks back up.

Unable to form a single coherent word, I nod and moan as my orgasm continues to soar.

He slams into me fast and hard. “I’m fucking coming,” he groans and pulls out. One pump of himself is all it takes to finish him off. “Oh my fucking God,” he groans so loudly and uncontrollably as he finishes all over my stomach. He’s panting as he kneels over me and smiles. “You look so hot, covered in my cum.”

His burning hot gaze sears my skin as he looks at me.

He wets his bottom lip and smiles. “Let me get a towel. I’ll clean you up, then make you some food.”

Giggling, I lightly kick my feet against the bed. “That sounds amazing.”

He smiles proudly and walks into the en suite bathroom of my bedroom. My heart feels so full right now; I could cry. I missed the surge of emotions that comes after sex with Reed. The sex was just the beginning. He’s the king of aftercare.

He'll wipe me down, cuddle with me, make me a snack, and refuse to leave my side for a while. The sex is unmatched on its own, but *that love*, that tenderness, is priceless.

REED

“I t’ll go smooth and be over before you know it,” I try to assure Charlotte, although she seems to be far more relaxed than I am as we walk into the hospital.

Charlotte has her surgery today for her double mastectomy, and I am a nervous fucking wreck. I have no idea how she is so calm and collected right now.

I hold her hand in mine as she checks in, and she starts filling out some paperwork.

“That is a ridiculous amount of stuff they expect you to do the morning of your surgery,” I say, staring at the dead tree on the clipboard they gave her.

She side-eyes me playfully. “This is nothing compared to everything else I have done since I started treatment.”

Watching her fill everything out, I feel like my stomach is twisting in knots. I know this is a surgery that is performed regularly. But that doesn’t matter because the only thing that matters is how hers goes. Going under anesthesia will probably be fine, and the surgery will go great, but my brain won’t stop being a dick right now and asking, *Yeah, but what if it doesn’t go right?* And I want to scream at it.

“Will your mom be able to take me home if you have to leave for the game before I’m ready to go?” she asks.

I laugh at how crazy that question is, like there is any possible alternative to my being here. “I’m not going to my game, Char. There’s no way in hell that I won’t be here when you wake up. There will always be another hockey game, but there’s only one you. And *you* are the most important part of my life, and I’m staying here every step of the way.”

“I love you.” She leans over and puckers her lips.

Sliding my hand along her jaw, I kiss her and breathe her in.

Everything is going to go great today. The surgery is going to be successful. She is going to be okay.

There is no other outcome that can happen. I just wish I could convince my sweaty hands and racing heart of that too.

As Charlotte finishes up the final page of the mountain of paperwork, a nurse comes out and greets her.

“Charlotte, we are ready to take you back.” She turns to me. “Are you coming back as well?”

Looking at Charlotte, I let her answer because that’s not my place to say.

She grabs my hand and says, “Yes, he’s coming with me.”

We follow the nurse, and she takes us to a private room, shutting the door behind us. She goes over some questions with Charlotte, takes some quick vitals from her, and then leaves us to wait for the doctor who will be coming in to chat before she is taken back.

Charlotte is bouncing her knees incessantly. Standing up, I grab my chair and move it across the room to sit next to her. Reaching out, I gently rest my hand over her thigh, brushing my thumb back and forth.

“Take a breath for me, baby,” I whisper and lean over, kissing her cheek.

She turns to me with teary eyes, and I wish I could punch cancer right in the fucking face. How dare it hurt my girl! How dare it make her feel insecure and scared! I hate it more than anything in the world because I can’t do a damn thing about it.

“I’ve been meaning to ask you something,” I murmur to her.

Her eyes flash to mine. “What?”

Smiling, I tap my fingers on my leg. “After you’re cleared to go home, I was wondering if you wanted to come home

with me to *our house* for good.”

Her head tilts, and her eyes water as she nods. “Are you sure this is what you want?”

Lifting my hand, I run my thumb along her bottom lip. “Clearly, if you have to question that, I haven’t been telling you enough *exactly* what you mean to me. You’re mine; I’m yours. We might as well have rings on our fingers as far as I’m concerned because I’m committed to you in every sense of the word.”

She gasps softly and leans forward, kissing me. “I would love to move in with you and Hatty.” She laughs. “I think Josh was getting tired of having a roommate anyway.”

“Good. I was getting tired of sharing my time with you,” I tease.

“You’re ridiculous.” She giggles and rolls her eyes.

She mouths the words, *Thank you*, as a knock sounds on the door, and I know she’s thanking me for helping to relax her, but truth be told, I’ve been dying to ask her to officially move in with me.

“Good morning, Charlotte. How are we feeling?” an older gentleman asks with a smile, holding his hand underneath the hand sanitizer dispenser until it shoots some out into his hand.

“Feeling okay. Ready to get this over with ...” she says, then chuckles shakily.

“Understandable. The surgery itself will last about five hours. Do you have any questions or concerns right now?” he asks.

“No, I don’t think so. We covered a lot at the last appointment.” She nervously laughs again, and I gently brush my thumb over her leg to let her know that I’m right here with her.

Cupping Charlotte’s face, I lean down to claim her lips with mine. “I love you so goddamn much, Char. I’ll be right here when you wake up, okay?”

She nods and bites down on her bottom lip. “Okay. I love you.”

She’s anxious, which is only feeding my own nerves, but I don’t want her to see how fucking terrified I am right now.

The nurse wheels her out of the room, and being left to my own thoughts is so much worse than I anticipated. A different nurse escorts me to the waiting room. I have to sit here for five hours and wait, wondering and hoping that everything is going great. I’m going to drive myself fucking insane.

My phone buzzes in my pocket. Jensen is calling me.

“Hello?” I answer.

“Hey, man. How’s it going so far?” he asks. “Holding up all right?”

Sighing, I admit, “She just went back, and I’m already fucking stressed.”

“It’ll be okay. They do this surgery all of the time, like you said. Take your own advice for once, Goldy, and try to relax,” he says, as if it could be that simple.

I can never relax when it comes to Charlotte. Not when her life is in the hands of someone else. I hate feeling so out of control about something, especially when it comes to her.

“Yeah, yeah. I know you won’t be able to relax until she’s done. Do you need anything?” JD offers.

Shaking my head, I answer, “No, my mom and Abby are going to stop by in a bit, and I think we’re gonna grab some food from the cafeteria while we wait.”

Someone yells in the background of his call.

“I’ve got to go, Reed. Keep us updated, okay?”

“I will. Thanks for calling.”

“Of course. We’re family,” he says matter-of-factly and hangs up.

We are *family*. I know I cherish these boys, and I appreciate the friendships we share. But it’s more than that. We would do

anything for each other, on and off the ice.

When I told them about Charlotte, they all hugged me and offered anything they could. I can't imagine that there is anything that I could ask of them that would help Char. But if there was something, they would do it for her. Not only because they care about her, but also because they care about me.

"Reed!" a familiar and sweet voice calls out to me.

Looking around, I see Abby racing toward me.

"Hey!" I exclaim, stand up, and open my arms for her.

She wraps her arms around me and rests her head on my chest. "I missed you, Reed!"

Hugging her back, I squeeze her a little too tight, and she grunts. "I missed you too, Abbs." My little sister is pure fucking sunshine. "Where's Mom?"

Abby releases and plops herself down in the chair next to me. "She's coming. She had to park the car."

"All right. She doesn't think you're waiting for her by the doors, does she?" I ask, knowing that this wouldn't be the first time Abby adventured on her own when she wasn't supposed to.

"I knew she wouldn't be able to wait, knowing you were inside," my mom cuts in with a smile.

Still standing, I greet her with a warm hug, but I think I selfishly might need it more than she does.

"How are you doing?" she mumbles before she pulls away. "Any updates yet?"

Rubbing the back of my neck, I say, "No, they just took her back."

She rubs my arms up and down while saying, "I'm sure everything will be just fine."

"Yeah," I sigh.

She sits to my right, opposite of Abby, and asks, “How has it been, being back together? Clearly, you both still love each other. How are you guys doing?”

Smiling because I can't not smile when I think of Charlotte, I answer truthfully, “Better than ever really. We're doing good.”

She pats my knee. “Good. That is exactly what I wanted to hear.”

When I glance at Abby, she is lost in her tablet, playing some game. I love my sister, but she is terrible at keeping secrets. An image of the custom ring I had made for Charlotte flashes in my mind.

Leaning over, I whisper to my mom, “I, uhh ... I'm going to propose to her.”

She gasps, “Oh my gosh, Reed, that's wonderful. When are you doing it?”

“I don't know exactly. I'm kind of playing it by ear right now. With her surgery and then radiation, I want to plan it for the perfect time, and I don't know what that looks like yet.”

“That's amazing, sweetie.” She reaches over and hugs me from the side in our chairs.

I meant what I said to Charlotte that night. I've never had any doubt that she is going to be my wife. I just have to find the perfect moment to ask her. God, I can't wait to marry her. I know the moment she walks down the aisle, I am going to be a blubbering mess. But I can't help but feel everything so fucking intensely when it comes to Charlotte.

CHARLOTTE

The last five weeks have been filled with an immense amount of rest, self-love, and medication as I recover from my surgery. I followed all of the doctor's aftercare instructions. No lifting 5 or more pounds, no strenuous exercise, limited arm movements. Don't push myself.

I didn't realize how many little things I had to reevaluate, even riding or driving in a car. I got a seat belt pillow that protects my chest and softens the pressure. I had to change how I was sleeping, avoiding my usual position, laying on my stomach with a leg bent.

But I got through it, with the help of Reed, Laura, Josh, and my dad. And emotional support from Ella and Harper. I couldn't have done it seamlessly without them. But as much as I have appreciated the constant waiting on me, I am excited for the few quiet hours I have had since Reed left for his game tonight.

Which leaves Hatty and me alone for some much-needed bonding time. He's super timid, and Reed warned me thoroughly. It's really sweet actually—the way he loves Hatty. I've never seen a prouder cat dad. It makes me excited at the idea of us having kids one day. He would make the best dad in the world. After seeing how he is with his new fur baby, I'm certain of it.

I think Hatty has more toys than I ever did as a kid. Every room has a cat tree or a bed, and toys are scattered over the entire house. On top of that, he has, like, a five-year supply of wet and dry food. I don't know if he's preparing for an apocalypse or what. But if the zombies attack, at least Hatty will be happily fed. Not Reed though because his fridge is atrociously low on *everything*. Yet another reason he will

make a great dad—he's selfless. I will just have to do the grocery shopping if we want to eat.

"Hattyyy," I whisper-sing as I walk into our bedroom.

I've learned that Hatty loves to hang out under our bed. I haven't seen him in a few hours, so this is the first place I'm going to check. A faint meow answers my call.

He's pretty nervous about new people, but I think he might have warmed up faster to me than Reed. But I feel like most animals innately trust women more than men because, like, *same here, kitty*.

Hatty stealthily prances out from underneath our bed, stretching and yawning as he does.

"Good morning," I coo in a baby voice.

Anyone who says they don't talk to their pets in a baby voice is lying. You can't help it. The same way you can't help saying *big yawn* or *big stretch* to them.

It only took a few days for him to come around to me. Reed is still his number one human, but I am a *very* close second.

Crouching down, I stretch my hand out and wait. He lazily walks over and slowly brushes against my hand with his head while meowing softly.

"Hi, buddy. Ready to watch Dad's game?" I ask him as if he can answer me.

The game should start in about an hour. The Nighthawks are hosting the Minnesota Mystics. With how the guys have been playing so far, they shouldn't have any problem walking away with a win. But I get nervous every game, no matter what their chances are. Especially since Reed's a defender and tends to get in a lot of fights. I know that it's part of his job, but I don't always love watching him get hit. Ninety percent of the time, he doesn't take a punch, but there is still that other ten percent that he will. It doesn't matter how great of a fighter he might be; no one wins every fight forever.

Suddenly, I remember that I want to throw on my man's jersey before it starts. I grab my oversize Nighthawks jersey

and put it on. Nothing beats wearing your partner's name on your back. Even though I'm only in the confines of our home, it still feels like I'm proclaiming to the world that I'm his.

I know Reed likes it when I wear it. He made that perfectly clear when we started dating and would go feral, seeing me in it.

Grabbing my phone, I take a quick selfie and send it to him.

Me: Good luck, Goldy! I love you! Hatty and I will be cheering you on!

I wish that I could be at the arena. That energy is crazy and contagious. Hockey is fun to watch on TV, but nothing compares to seeing it in real life.

"Come on, Hatty," I call as I walk out of the room.

His three-legged pitter-patter is right behind me as I head to the living room to get the TV set up for the pregame show. After I get that ready to go, I make a few snacks that I can munch on during the game. I've been craving queso a lot lately, so I make some of that and grab some tortilla chips and a White Claw.

My phone chimes, and once I get my armful emptied onto the coffee table in the living room, I pull my phone out of my pocket and check it.

Dad: On my way. See you in a few! Go Nighthawks!

My dad flew in a few days after my surgery, and it's been great, having him here. I miss him. I was worried my sickness would sink him even further into his shell, but somehow, it seemed to break it instead. He's never been more present and alert. I hope it stays that way.

"Those are not for you," I say as Hatty tries to steal a chip.

Taking a deep breath, I try to practice what my new therapist told me. Look around the room with intention. What do I see? What do I smell? What does it make me feel? It's supposed to help ground me.

I've been trying to train my inner voice to be more positive and kinder. It's definitely a work in progress.

I see a fireplace with photos of Reed, Hatty, and me on the mantel. I see a giant TV that I get to watch my boyfriend on. I smell delicious queso that my mouth is now watering for. And I feel ... *happy*.

The doorbell rings.

Jumping up, I walk over to the front door and let my dad in.

"Hi, sweetie!" he cheers and pulls me into a big hug.

"Hi, Dad." I smile against his chest and hug him back.

I'm so glad he's here. We stand in our embrace, longer than a hug typically lasts, and if we stay this way much longer, I might just start crying.

I didn't think that I would make it this far. But here I am, alive and breathing. I'll never take another day for granted again.

Pulling away, I take a real look at him and see that he's wearing the same thing I am—a Larinski jersey. I giggle, unable to help it.

"You like it? I got it today." He grabs the hem of it and does a twirl.

I chuckle. "It looks great, Dad. I love it."

Hatty meows from the living room.

"He agrees too!" my dad says joyfully.

That's so cute. As proud of a cat dad as Reed is, my dad is just as proud as Hatty's granddad.

"I've got some chips and queso if you want some?" I offer and walk toward the living room.

"Sounds great. We'd better hurry so we don't miss anything," he says urgently.

Kos is doing a pregame interview on the ice when we sit down on the couch.

“We stand with her. She’s not fighting alone, and we want to show her that,” Kos says, and my face falls.

What is he talking about?

A flash of something pink on his neckline catches my eye, but I can’t make it out.

Kos waves someone over, and a second later, Reed appears on screen.

What is he doing?

“Hi, Reed. Please tell us more about what tonight means to you and your team,” the interviewer prompts.

The camera zooms in on Reed and Kos. That’s when I notice what looks so different about their jerseys. Along the neckline of their top, the words *For Charlotte* are embroidered in hot pink.

Oh my God.

My hand flies to my mouth as a few tears fall from my lashes.

They aren’t allowed to do that. They can’t alter their jerseys. They will all be fined for this. That is *so stupid*—and so, so *sweet*.

“I’m glad you like it.” My dad pats my back.

“You knew?” I scoff, my head whipping to him.

He chuckles and wipes away a tear of his own. “Of course I knew. Reed wanted me to make sure you were watching when it happened. Somehow, I still almost messed it up.”

I laugh with him.

Reed starts talking, and I can’t do anything but hang on every word. “Charlotte is the girl that lights up an entire room when she walks in. She is so selfless and kind, constantly putting everyone else first. She deserves to know that we stand with her in her fight against cancer. She is so strong, and I know she’ll kick cancer right in the a—”

“Whoa! This is live, remember?” the interview says with a bit of panic in her voice.

Oh my God, babe.

I can't imagine the stress that just ran through her from Reed almost swearing. It happens from time to time—when an interviewee cusses on a hot mic. Hot meaning live.

He laughs. “Sorry. She'll kick cancer right in the *butt*. Regardless, she's got this. The coaches are also wearing pink ties tonight to show their support. Our entire club is rooting for her, especially me. She's the love of my life, and I can't wait to see her win this fight. We know that embroidery is illegal on the ice, but we will pay those fines with smiles. We are also donating the amount we are fined to breast cancer research.”

“That's beautiful. Thank you guys so much for speaking with me.” She dismisses them and turns to the camera. “What an amazing gesture from a great group of guys. Charlotte, the Nighthawks nation is by *your* side every step of the way.”

The screen changes to the two guys who sit behind our reporting desk, and they say a brief thanks to the interviewer before continuing to discuss how the teams rank up against one another. But I can't even focus on what they're saying. I can only think about the guy who just said that I'm the love of his life on live TV.

I love him so much that, sometimes, I feel like my body can't physically contain it. It's overwhelming, and it's *everything*.

“Proud of you, girl,” my dad whispers, wiping my cheek.

I look at him as my bottom lip quivers. “I love you.”

He smiles with a lingering sadness dancing in his eyes. “I love you too.”

Hatty meows at my feet, then jumps up onto my lap.

“Oh my gosh, hi, buddy.” I smile and laugh as the remaining pool of tears fall from my eyes. “He's never done this before!”

I try to contain my squeals of excitement so I don't scare him off. He's come close to my lap, but never sat on it, and definitely never *jumped* on it. This moment might not seem that precious to most, but it's huge. Hatty has had a rough life, and he hasn't really felt love before Reed and me, aside from the shelter staff. In spite of everything he's been through, including losing a leg, he is opening up to us and thriving.

People can learn a lot from animals. This feels like a teaching moment, not for him, but for me. At Hatty's lowest moments in life, he could have given up. But he never did, he fought day in and day out to survive. Look at him now——living in kitty luxury with parents who love him. If he can beat the shitty hand that life dealt him, then maybe I can too.

The Nighthawks go on to crush the Mystics four to one. During the game, my dad and I ate an entire bag of chips with the queso. I think we were fighting with each other over who got to lick the bowl clean. It was so good. And to finish the night off, I made my bestie, Ella, a bracelet of her own to match mine and Cocoa's. She's going to be so excited; I can practically see her smile now.



“Extra salt and butter, please!” I shout at Josh, who's in the kitchen, making us some popcorn.

He just got back from Duluth yesterday, and we are going to have a movie night together tonight, like we used to do all of the time.

“Yeah, yeah!” he calls back to me, laughing.

It feels so good to have Joshikins back.

He comes around the corner with two large bowls of popcorn and napkins.

“Ooh, yes, please!” I say and reach my hands out to take one of the bowls.

He happily hands me one and sits down next to me on the couch. I press play on the movie, and we get comfy underneath blankets and start digging into the buttery goodness in front of us.

“I missed you. I missed this,” I hum and rest my head on his shoulder.

He leans his head down on top of mine. “I missed you too, Char.”

Safe Haven starts playing on the TV, and we are hooked right away in the opening scene. The main character, Katie, is taking off, running barefoot in the rain to an old lady’s house. We get completely lost in the first half hour of the movie before either of us says anything.

“Can I tell you something, Char?” Josh says, and I definitely catch the slightly nervous tone in his voice.

Setting my bowl on the coffee table, I turn to him completely. “What’s up?”

He mimics my actions and sets his bowl on the table. He takes a shaky breath in and out. “I’m so anxious. Umm ...”

I grab his hand and take it in mine. “You can tell me anything, Josh. You know that. I love you, no matter what.”

He squeezes my hand and cautiously meets my eyes. “I-I— God, I don’t know why this is so hard to say.” He pauses, and then his words fly out of his mouth. “I’m gay.”

Oh.

“You scared me!” I lightly slap his arm, and he looks more confused than ever. “I know you’re gay, Josh. I’ve had a feeling that you were since we were, like, fifteen. I’m glad you feel comfortable enough to share it with me!” I throw my arms around him and pull him in tightly. “I love you.”

A sob bursts from him, and he leans into my touch. “I love you too.”

Laura and I have had an inkling about him being gay for years. But we never pushed him to tell us anything because that isn’t our place. We knew that if we were right, and when

he was confident about it and wanted to share it with us, he would. I'm glad that time has finally come.

"God, it feels good to actually say it out loud," he sighs, and I pull away from him to see the biggest smile on his face.

"Good. I'm proud of you. Did you tell your parents when you were home?" I ask, wondering if that's why he planned a longer trip down there. I'm sure he had to work the nerve up to do it; his dad has always been a bit traditional.

He nods and says, "Yeah. They were a little surprised, I think, but they all said they loved me, and it doesn't matter who I'm attracted to or love as long as I'm happy."

My heart warms, and I lean into him, resting my head on his shoulder once again. "I'm glad. You deserve to be happy, Josh."

"Thanks, Char," he whispers and leans his head back on mine as we tune back into the movie playing in front of us.

CHARLOTTE

This morning, we are going to meet up with Harper and Ella for her appointment, then grab some breakfast afterward. I can't wait to give her the bracelet I made. Who knew a ten-dollar bracelet kit could bring so much joy to the world?

As we get in the car, my phone rings. "It's Harper. I'll let her know we are on the way."

I answer cheerily, "Hello?"

She gasps and breathes heavily. "Charlotte."

My heart drops through the floor. "Harper, what's wrong? Are you okay?"

She is hyperventilating as she says, "Ella, s-she's in the emergency room. Everything was f-fine! She was doing *good*. B-but this morning, she ... I don't get it. I don't understand."

My body aches as her words sink in, and tears aren't welling in my eyes; they are already pouring down my cheeks. "I-is she okay?"

"What happened?" Reed whispers.

"Which hospital are you at, Harper?" I ask before she has time to answer my last question.

"S-Saint Joseph's. And she's okay ... but they said that she'll—" She cuts herself off. "When can you be here?"

Quickly, I tell Reed which hospital they're at as my heart is threatening to burst through my fucking chest. "Saint Joseph's."

He types it in his phone and loads the directions up before tearing out of the garage and driveway.

“We’re on our way. Should be there within fifteen minutes,” I tell her, struggling to keep my voice stable.

“O-okay. Let me know when you get here, and I’ll come out to the waiting room,” she says and hangs up without a good-bye.

Clutching my phone in my hands, I press it against my forehead, then let it fall from my hands, not caring where it ends up.

How is this happening? What is even happening? We are supposed to be visiting her for her follow-up appointment and then grab breakfast. She’s supposed to be happy and giggling.

“What’s going on?” Reed asks softly, placing his hand on my thigh.

“I don’t really know. But nothing good,” I force the words out between deep breaths to keep myself calm because I’m a split second from completely losing it.

The fifteen-minute drive to the hospital feels like it takes us hours. I can’t stop picturing Ella’s face. Why wouldn’t Harper just tell me what’s going on? As Reed is driving into the parking lot, my heart is in my throat. He pulls up to the emergency room entrance and parks.

“Go. I’ll find you when I get parked,” he says urgently.

Grabbing my phone off of the floor, I kiss him quickly. I throw the door open, and everything seems to slow down and speed up at the same time. My legs are moving as fast as they can carrying me through the automatic doors. Memories of her laughter fills my ears in the silent entrance. My vision is blurry, and I blink rapidly to try to clear it. The nurse lifts her hand as I’m about to sprint past, stopping me dead in my tracks.

“Ma’am, you have to check in and get a visitor badge,” she informs me, and I decide that at this very moment, formalities and procedures are the worst thing in the world.

There’s a kiosk on her desk. I grab my ID out of my phone wallet case and scan it on the machine. With shaky fingers, I enter Ella’s name and select the dreaded emergency room. The

slowest goddamn printer in the world takes its sweet time to print every inch of the sticker name tag.

The second it's done, I rip it from the machine and smile at the lady, who seems satisfied. While I try to catch my breath, I ask, "Emergency room?"

She points down the wide corridor. "Go straight through there, take a right, follow the signs."

"Thanks," I say, panting, and take off running again.

Ripping my phone out of my pocket, I call Harper.

She answers immediately. "Hello?"

"Hi." I huff and puff between words. "I'm here. Following the blue f-footprint stickers."

"You're almost there. I'll be out in two seconds," she whispers and hangs the phone up.

Part of me wants to run faster to reach Ella as quickly as I can. The other part of me wants to turn around and never stop running because then she will always be okay in my mind. Nothing will be wrong, and everything will be all right. But I can't run away, not from her.

I burst through the doors to the waiting room, scanning instantly for Harper. When I finally spot her, I kind of wish I hadn't. Because I can never unsee the absolute terror and devastation on her face.

Oh God.

"Oh, Charlotte," she cries out and rushes over to me, throwing her arms around me in desperation.

She heaves and sobs, and my heart begins shattering in a way I've never experienced before.

Still hugging her impossibly tight, I ask a question that I don't want the answer to. "What's going on?"

She melts in my grasp, and my entire body stiffens. While she's still wrapped around me, she weeps. I think it's easier for her to tell me without looking at me. I can understand that.

“She’s *gone*.” Her words are but a haunting whisper in my ear.

What does she mean, gone? Like *being transferred to another hospital* gone? Like *taking a nap and sound asleep in the bed* gone? But even as I stand here in this never-ending moment, I know what she really means. I just refuse to accept or believe that it’s even possible.

She can’t be *gone*. She just can’t.

Squeezing her tighter, I cling to her for dear life. Her pain resonates off of her, sinking its claws into me until I feel the same agony.

“You said she was okay?” I beg of her to tell me she’s fine.

“She w-was. A few minutes ago, she left us ...” The words vibrate from her trembling lips. “This morning, I went to get her up for her a-appointment. But she wasn’t moving. She was breathing but barely. She wouldn’t open her eyes or wake up,” she blubbers, and I can’t imagine how hard those words are to say.

“She died during our drive *over*?” I shriek, and my throat feels raw as my words tear their way through.

She nods, and somehow, this broken world shatters even more.

Looking through the ocean of tears building in my eyes, I see a couple of free chairs to my right. Very gently, I pull away from Harper and walk us over to the empty seats.

“Is s-she here?” I ask, the words tearing chunks out of my throat.

Harper nods sporadically. “She’s in her room still, if you w-want to come s-see her?”

A sharp gasp leaves me. “P-Please.”

Somehow, she manages the strength to stand, and leads the way. We walk in the heaviest silence I’ve ever experienced, each step seemingly heavier and harder to take than the last.

I'm waiting for Harper to say she's just kidding. That this is the meanest prank and Ella is just fine. Because how could she not be? I just saw her. She was her usual giddy self with the world's biggest smile on her face. But as Harper opens the door to Ella's room, I know the horrible truth.

She looks like Snow White in the glass cage in the middle of the forest. Like she's frozen in time, waiting for her prince to come bring her to life. Right now, I hate fairy tales because they won't save this princess, the most deserving one in all the land.

"Oh God," I cry out and rush to her side, dropping to my knees and taking her cool hand in mine.

Harper loses it, crying louder than I've ever heard her. Sounds of death and the utmost heartbreak fill the room.

Her hand feels so small in mine. It shouldn't be this small when she leaves this world. It hasn't had a chance to *grow*. Why can't she grow up? Why can't she have more time?

How is it possibly fair that someone as good and pure as Ella can be ripped from this world in the blink of an eye? It's *not*. It's so not fucking fair.

Her bare wrist strikes me across the heart.

I grab on to the beaded bracelet on my wrist. The one I made for her that says, *Princess Ella and Queen Charlotte. Besties Forever. Always.*

Talking to my princess, my voice is ragged, raw, and thickened with my pain. "This is for y-you. Now, we have ones that match. I know if you were here, you would be smiling so big and so bright. You would be throwing your arms around me and never letting go. I wish more than anything that could happen. I would trade places with you if I could, El. I love you."

I mean that. I wish I could take her place. She deserves to live on, to be happy, not to be gone.

How do I say good-bye to someone who was meant to have more time? Who was bigger than the whole sky? How do I

walk out of this room, knowing it's the last time I'll see her? I don't think I'll ever be able to leave.

"It's perfect," Harper whispers, and I didn't even realize she had stepped behind me.

Nodding, I lay my wrist beside hers. Cocoa is tucked under her arm, but the bracelet on its wrist is still visible. Three musketeers—that's us, ready to rule the world. Although now, I'll have to do that for all of us.

Ella was the epitome of resiliency, bravery, and sunshine. She was the person whose laugh you feel in your soul like a beam of warmth. She brightened every room she walked into. She made everyone happier and their lives better.

How are we supposed to accept that someone that good and pure is just gone?

I'm holding her right now. She's right there, but so far away.

My thumb brushes her hand, and I lean down and rest my head on her arm and whisper, "Just wake up, El. *Please.*"

Why won't she just wake up? She's here. I'm touching her. But why won't she just come back to us?

Oh God, I think I'm going to be sick.

Gently releasing her hand, I rush over to the trash can in the corner of the room and heave everything in my stomach, over and over again until I dry-heave. Someone rubs my back as I take deep breaths to calm myself down.

"It's okay. She's okay." Harper's shaky voice does little to relax the tornado tearing through my chest.

When I turn around, she hands me a tissue, and I wipe my mouth.

A nurse comes in and asks me, "Are you all right? Need some water?"

Shaking my head, I say, "No, thank you. I'm sorry that I—"

She cuts me off, holding a hand up, "Please don't be. It's okay."

She collects the trash can and walks out of the room, leaving Harper and me alone with Ella. As much as I want to never leave El, there is someone who deserves to spend every second by her side and get as much time as she can. This time, it's me who pulls Harper in for a hug.

"I love you, Charlotte. You mean so much to me. I know Ella felt the same way," she whispers, but I can't stop replaying one word over and over.

Felt. Past tense. Because she's *really* gone. Somehow, my tears slow and my breathing evens out, and I think that my body is somehow in denial of what is happening. But for the brief moment of reprieve, I'm thankful.

"I love you guys too," I murmur and pull away. "I'm here—don't forget that. Call every time you need someone. I don't care what time of day or night it is; I will answer."

She nods and wipes underneath her eyes. The phantom outline of a smile lifts her lips, then it's gone. "I will."

"Do you want me to stay? Do you want to be alone?" I gasp and fight back the returning burn in my eyes.

She nods almost painfully and her voice is rough and desperate. "I need to be with her for a while longer."

"Okay," I whisper and force a quick smile before turning around.

As I take a step out of her room, I feel numb. Not just my mind, but my body too. I feel like someone could punch me in the face, and I wouldn't notice it. Or maybe I just wouldn't care.

This all feels like a dream, a terrible one, but a dream nonetheless. In a moment, I'll sit up in bed, and the memory of this entire day will fade as reality takes over. As much as I wish that were true, I'm not waking up from this.

I never used to run from my emotions. I used to live life like Ella, with my heart on my sleeve. But when I got diagnosed, I think everything was so emotional and heightened that I got overwhelmed by it. I started blocking it out inside of

letting it happen. It's a skill I didn't think I had, but one that I very quickly perfected.

If I don't feel the pain of Ella's death, then in my head, it didn't happen. If I cry and mourn her, then it will come true. But if I can manage to keep it together, she'll still be here. I know that's crazy and not true, but it feels that way.

Right now, I just want to go back to bed. I want to fall asleep and go to a place where Ella and I can frolic through a field of wildflowers in oversize ball gowns and crowns. She would love that.

I don't want to be sad right now. I don't want to feel the absolute dread of this moment. I want to smile at the incredibly bright life she lived. I want to think about the dreams she had, the hopes she carried in every jolly step. I don't want to be sad that she's gone. I want to be happy that I was blessed enough to know her at all. She saved me. When I was at one of the lowest points in my life, she grabbed my hand and refused to let me go at it alone.

Walking into the waiting room, I twirl my bracelet on my wrist. She will always walk beside me. Even if I can't see her, I know she'll be there.

"Char?" Reed whispers.

As I look up to him, I know that, eventually, Ella would have called him Prince Reed, and I giggle at the thought.

"What happened?" he asks and takes my hands in his.

"Ella ... she's gone. Please just take me home," is all I can manage to say as my voice shakes aggressively.

"I'm so sorry, baby. Oh God, I'm sorry." He kisses my head.

I don't want to talk about what happened. I don't really want to talk at all right now. He wraps his arm around my shoulders, and we walk out in silence. He knows I'll talk when I'm ready. He's patient enough to wait and to not push me to do it.

I am certain of one thing as we walk out of the hospital: I am never going to be the same without my princess.



Sleep is the only form of comfort that I crave right now, and I am really good at doing it. When we got home from the hospital, the first thing I did was kick off my shoes and crawl under the covers. And sleep.

But unfortunately, my body won't let me do it forever. As I wake up, I find a gray fur ball nestled in the blanket beside me.

"Hey," I whisper and pet his soft side.

He rolls and meows softly. I have never met a more vocal cat. It's like he's really talking back to you sometimes.

Reaching out, I pet my little fluff ball, and he rolls onto his back, completely exposing his belly. He is also the first cat that I've ever met that likes belly rubs. Gently, I brush my fingers over his soft tummy as his body vibrates from his purrs.

"Char?" Reed murmurs.

Turning, I see him standing in the doorway with a soft smile.

"Are you up for a bath? I'll run one for you," he offers.

That actually sounds amazing right now.

I nod. "Yes, please."

He smiles, seemingly proud that I accepted his suggestion. "You got it."

A few minutes later, he comes back in, and at first, I'm confused as to why he isn't going into our en suite to start the bath.

"It's ready," he announces.

Although I'm still curious as to why he chose to use our other bathroom since neither of us typically showers in it, I throw the blankets off and walk over to him.

“Thank you,” I say, leaning up and kissing him softly on the lips.

He gently kisses me back and says, “You’re welcome.”

He holds his hand out, and I take it, intertwining my fingers with his. He leads me down the hallway and to our main floor bathroom.

He pushes the door open, and my heart swells. Candles are lit on the counter, and rose petals are scattered on the floor and in the water. The bath tray that hangs over the tub has a candle and a steaming cup of what looks like tea. Tea makes me feel better when I’m sad, but I always forget about it. Thankfully, Reed remembered for me.

He has always been hyperaware of everything about me. He seems to remember every single thing that I like and dislike. The things that make me happy and sad or bring me comfort. In moments like this, I am overwhelmingly grateful that I found him.

“There are two towels in the warmer and a fresh set of PJs and panties for when you’re done.” He drops my hand and steps behind me, snaking his arms along my waist. “I love you.”

My eyes burn as I form the easiest words in the world. “I love you too.”

He releases me and steps out of the bathroom, closing the door behind him. When he said he was going to run a bath, this isn’t exactly what I was picturing. But I will happily accept it. This is one of the many reasons I love him.

In situations of life or death, of grieving and sorrow, you come to know who people really are. How they handle those situations tell you a lot about them. Reed is exactly who I need him to be.

He is patient. He understands that I need to process a lot of this alone. Not because I don’t love him and want him with me. I do. He gets that. He’s not clinging to me, but he’s there when I need him to be, sometimes before I even know it.

He knows I need space to understand what I'm feeling. He helps me with that by doing things like this. By bringing me tea, running me a bath, or making me food to make sure I eat. My water bottle never empties because he's constantly filling it up for me so I stay hydrated.

He's not making a grand gesture to try to make me feel better. He *gets* it. Without trying, he is helping me heal by focusing on the little things so I don't have to. He's the best partner in life that I could have ever asked for.

Slipping my clothes off, I step into the hot bath and sink beneath the water. I wonder if Ella liked water or swimming. I hate that there are things I might never know about her. I hate that I will forever have unanswered questions about her. But I also know that Ella would hate for me to wallow in her death. She would want me to find the light in the dark of what happened to her, and I'll be damned if I'll let her down.

Harper texted me and let me know that she is planning her funeral for Saturday, and I know I'm going to be a blubbering mess. And that's okay. I grant myself the permission to be sad and destroyed. Because you have to feel it sometimes—the pain of life. You can't hide from the despair of life; you have to feel your way through it.

REED

“How’s she doing?” Kos asks, skating up to me.

I shrug, and my heart weighs heavy as I answer, “She’s hanging in there. Today’s going to be a hard day for her. But we’ll get through it.”

He pats my shoulder with his glove. “I’m confident you will. If you guys need anything, let me know, okay?”

Nodding, I respond, “Yeah, I will.”

Our water break ends, and we line up for puck drop. Our practice team just needs to score one more to end the scrimmage. Then, morning skate will be done, and I can run a couple of errands before I go home to wake Charlotte up.

I almost didn’t come this morning, opting to stay in bed with her. But I needed this,—to be back on the ice. Something about it is therapeutic. I think all—if not, at least most—hockey players would agree. Nothing feels quite as natural as being on skates. We practically learned to skate before we walked.

Coach blows the whistle and drops the puck. Costy gains control and skates toward our zone. The opposing line picks his pocket, and, damn, he’s flying.

Digging into my skates, I push myself harder, and I’m right on his heels.

“When did you get so fast?” I ask number nineteen as I finally catch up to him and slash at the puck, knocking it off his stick.

“When did you get so damn slow?” he jabs back, laughing.

Burnsy skates on his right, and I push the biscuit his way. Now, we're racing back the other way. I don't know why I'm extra tired this morning, but my legs do not have the energy they usually do.

Thankfully, my boys have everything under control as I drag myself into the zone behind everyone else. Burnsy dishes the puck to Kos, then to Costy. Costy skates around the back of the net, and—

He is not ... holy shit.

He presses the blade of the stick into the ice, picks up the puck, and lacrosse-style throws it into the net as he comes around the other side.

“Wooooo!” I shout.

That's a hell of a goal. It's called a Michigan, the lacrosse-style move of picking the puck up on your stick and in a sense throwing it into the net instead of shooting it. Not a lot of players in the NHL can do this. To be honest, I didn't really know Costy had that in him.

We all pile into Costy and applaud him on his goal. Not only am I glad we won, but I'm also glad it's over. I'm fucking tired.

“Good practice, boys,” Kos tells us as we skate over to the coaches at the bench.

They say a few words about what we did well, things they noticed that still need to be finessed more, and what to look forward to tomorrow. We have the next three days off of games, which isn't very common during the season. But I'll take it because Char and I need that time together. It doesn't really matter if we had scheduled games or not; I would be by her side anyway.

We all head to the locker room. I shower quickly and change into my Nighthawks hoodie, Nighthawks beanie, sweats, socks, and tennis shoes.

Before I head home and get ready for the service, I have to stop and get a few things. Pulling into the parking lot of a local

grocery store, I grab my wallet and phone. I need to make it pretty quick here.

Walking with intention, I hastily find the floral shop inside. After a quick examination of the choices, I select a few bundles—white roses, white daisies, baby’s breath, and eucalyptus leaves. Of course they don’t come together. But I found a couple of photos online of what I think it should look like, so I’m just going to make it in my truck before I walk in the house. I also pick up a ceramic vase, a bottle of water, and a pair of scissors. I pay and head out to my pickup.

Now, I just have one more place to go before heading home. It’s a little out of the way, but I know it will mean a lot to Charlotte that I’m bringing her a few of her faves this morning.

As I walk into the coffee shop, I smile at the familiar face behind the counter.

“Good morning, Reed!” Morgan says as she finishes making someone’s order.

“Good morning,” I say, walking up to the counter. “I need Charlotte’s usual order.”

“One chocolate croissant and an iced mocha, coming right up. Chlo, would you mind grabbing the croissant?” Morgan asks her bubbly friend.

“You got it,” she replies cheerfully. “How’s Charlotte doing?” she asks, directing her attention to me.

Sometimes, I hate that question, and I’m sure Charlotte does too. Because truly, how honest is anyone expected to answer that? Does she want to know that Charlotte cried herself to sleep last night while I held her? That today is going to be absolute misery for her as she buries the little girl that she always saw as a little sister? I know that Chloe is just being nice, and she always has been kind to Char and me. I also think that I’m hyper-protective of her today, and someone asking about her good or bad has me on edge.

“She’s doing all right,” I say honestly and hand Morgan more than enough cash and tell her to keep the change.

Chloe folds a little white bag and hands it to me. “I threw in an extra croissant,” she whispers. “Tell her hi for me.”

My heart warms at the gesture. “I will. Thanks.”

“There’s my girl!” Cameron’s voice booms from behind me.

I turn around and ask mockingly, “Are you trying to scare the quiet and polite customers?”

Cam shrugs and walks over to the swinging door that lets you behind the counter. He pushes through and walks up behind Morgan, wrapping his arms and practically his entire body around hers.

“As cute as this nice moment is, Cam, either help her finish my coffee or fuck off. I have to get going,” I say, *mostly* playful.

He holds his hands up and peels himself off of her. In a matter of seconds, Charlotte’s drink is done and in my hand.

“Thank you, guys.” Shooting a look at Cam, I say, “*Not* you.”

“That’s fucking rude, Goldy.” He laughs and turns back to Morgan, unable to keep his attention away from her for too long.

That I understand. Charlotte has the same gravitational pull to me that Morgan does to him.

Making the fast drive home, I zone out until I pull into the garage. I have, like, five minutes to make this arrangement and get my ass inside.

Leaning my phone in my cupholder, I lay the flower bundles out on the seat and cut the rubber bands and paper holding them together. I read online that I’m also supposed to cut the bottom of the flowers at an angle. Not sure why, but I will listen to the Google gods.

Emptying the water bottle into the white vase, I dump the packet of floral food into it and stir until it’s blended. Then, stem by stem, I cut each one and assemble them inside the vase until it resembles the photo on my phone.

“I think it looks pretty damn good,” I mumble to myself as I admire my work.

Grabbing the empty bag from the grocery store, I throw all of the garbage in it, tie it up, and set it by the door inside the garage. Then, I grab the flowers, coffee, and pastries before unlocking the door and heading inside.

All of the lights are still off downstairs, meaning she is still asleep or just hasn't wandered down here. Kicking my shoes off, I ascend the stairs and turn into our bedroom.

Walking over to her side of the bed, I set everything down on her nightstand and sit on the bed next to her.

“Good morning, baby.” I stroke her cheek, whispering, “Char, you've got to get up. We have to leave soon.”

She starts to squirm in the blankets. Leaning down, I kiss the top of her head, then her temples, her nose, her cheeks, and her eyes. They flutter open as I pull away.

God, she is so beautiful.

Her voice is raspy and sleepy as she says, “Good morning.”

She yawns and sits up onto her elbows. The flowers catch her attention, or maybe it was the coffee, but regardless, she turns toward the nightstand.

“Oh my gosh, you got me flowers and breakfast?” she asks, sounding more awake with each word.

“Yeah,” I say, feeling my cheeks heat up.

“They're beautiful.” Her voice is barely audible as she throws herself up and slides her legs off the bed beside mine. “Thank you.”

She rests her head against my shoulder, and I lean mine against the top of hers.

“You're welcome.”

“I love you,” she murmurs, and draws endless circles with her finger on my forearm.

I press my lips onto her head and kiss her. “I love you too, Char.”



The service is beautiful. Flowers decorate nearly every inch of the funeral home. It is clear that Ella had a major impact on every person she met. The love that fills the room is infinite, and everyone’s heart is weighing extra heavy today.

Harper stands at the front of the room with a piece of paper in her hand.

“T-Thank you all for being here and for celebrating my little girl’s life today,” she says shakily. “Ella might not have had a long life in this world, but she had a happy one. She was such a bright and joyful girl,” she cries out.

The paper begins to shake as her hands tremble more and more. Charlotte stands up and rushes over to her, wrapping her arm around her shoulders.

Charlotte whispers something to her, then projects to all of us. “If it’s okay with you all, I would like to say a few things about Ella.” Char continues to console Harper as they stand beside Ella’s casket. “I met Ella at my first chemotherapy appointment. She was brave and outgoing enough to approach me. And I am so thankful that she did. I got to know her and Harper throughout my treatment.”

Harper watches her with tearful and endearing eyes as Charlotte continues, “Ella was a real-life princess. She was selfless and kind. She had a radiant glow that emanated from her. She was the type of girl who made her mom buy two tiaras—one for herself, of course, and one for the scared woman she’d decided to befriend. She might not have come from a royal bloodline, but that doesn’t matter. As far as anyone is concerned, she was and forever will be *Princess Ella*. I love her, and I will miss her every single day. Let us celebrate her life today and focus on all of the times she made us smile and laugh rather than the sadness that she is gone. Long live Princess Ella.”

The congregation breaks into applause, and a few even cheer out, “Long live Princess Ella.”

Harper and Charlotte hug for a minute before returning to sit beside me. A few other family members of Ella’s share happy memories and moments. It’s the most beautiful and heartwarming service I’ve ever been to.

Charlotte kisses my arm and squeezes me when she needs some support, and I’m at her disposal. I only met Ella once, but it was enough to understand why Charlotte became so fond of her. I can’t imagine what Harper, Ella’s friends and family, and Charlotte are feeling. I can’t imagine what I would do if I lost Abby.

After a few more stories, a few prayers, and a slideshow of photos and videos of Ella—including one of Charlotte and Ella in some waiting room, playing with crowns—we follow the officiant and Harper and others to the cemetery where she is being put to rest.

Charlotte hasn’t let go of my hand since we got out of my truck. Music is playing softly as the officiant says a prayer and Ella is slowly lowered into the ground. Harper shakily picks up a handful of soil and tosses it onto the casket. My eyes well up as everyone says their good-byes to both Ella and then Harper.

“Thank you ...” Harper weeps and pulls Charlotte in for a long hug.

Releasing my hand from hers, I give them their space to grieve together, but I’m still here for when Charlotte needs me.

They have a quiet conversation that I can’t fully hear, and then Charlotte walks over to me. “Are you ready?”

Cupping her face, I stroke her wet and swollen cheeks. “Are you?”

She nods in my hands and flashes a mournful smile. “Yeah. I think she wants to have some time with her girl.”

“Okay, I’ll pull the truck up.” I lean down and kiss her forehead.

The ride home is quiet, and by the time we pull into the garage, I think Charlotte is about to pass out from exhaustion. I don't know what it is about crying, but it is one of the most energy-depleting things in the world.

"Do you want me to run you a bath?" I ask her as I pull her door open and offer my hand to help her out of the tall pickup.

"No, I'm okay," she says, hopping down.

"Okay." I kiss her head and shut the door behind her.

She walks inside and heads straight upstairs. I follow behind her. She strips her black dress and tights off and throws them on the ground with force.

Her breathing quickens, and I see the spiral happening right before it's about to hit. She sobs, then freezes.

"Take a deep breath." I rub her back to try to calm her.

I know that her upper body is very limited in movement right now as she heals.

She sits down on the bed and scoots back with her legs crossed.

I hop onto the bed, gently pull her into my lap, and wrap my arms around her as she breaks apart.

"I've got you, baby," I whisper. "I'm right here. I've got you."

I hold her while she lets everything out. While she cries for the little girl she loves. I don't know every demon that she is fighting, but I know she's not doing it alone. I hold her until she runs out of tears and until she falls asleep in my arms.

After both of my arms and legs fall asleep from this position, I wiggle out from behind her and tuck her underneath a cozy blanket. I'm glad she can get some sleep; hopefully, it will help her begin to heal.

Going downstairs, I know as much as I don't want to, I need to do some chores.

Over the next few hours, I manage to clean the downstairs bathroom, do a load of laundry, and clean the kitchen and

living room.

I don't know about Charlotte, but I'm starving by the time I finish cleaning around the house. I throw a pizza in the oven and head upstairs to wake her and try to get her to eat and drink something.

As I turn into the bedroom, I don't find her in bed.

"Char?" I call out.

Light tapping on the glass door of our balcony startles me. I should have known she'd be out there. Walking over, I slide the door open and step into the cool New York air.

"What are you doing?" I ask softly and lean against the railing next to her.

"I don't know," she answers, staring up at the starry sky. "Do you think she's up there, watching over us?"

Lifting my gaze toward the sky, I say, "I would like to think so. Wouldn't you?"

"Yeah. Today has me realizing something," she mutters and turns her attention to me.

How is she even more beautiful, being lit up by the stars and moon tonight? I'm glad she is comfortable not wearing her wig around me. I hope she is starting to feel as gorgeous without it as I think she is.

"What is that?" I ask and bite down on my bottom lip.

She turns her body toward me and looks deep into my eyes. "That no matter what dreams you make in life, sometimes, you don't get to see them through. Not everyone gets their happily ever after."

She lifts her hand and cups my cheek, and I lean into her touch.

"You are so patient and unconditionally loving. I'm sorry that I tried to end our story too soon. Thank you for not ever making me feel bad about that decision. And thank you for understanding that I was doing what I thought was right."

“Of course,” I tell her, my heart picking up at her kind words. “I would do anything for you. I love you.”

She smiles, and the slightest touch of it reaches her eyes. “I know. I love you too. And that’s why I don’t want to waste any more time.”

“What do you mean?” I cock my head to the side, trying to see where she’s going with this.

“I know it’s a bit unorthodox to do this. But I don’t really think I care.” She laughs. “I have dreamed my whole life of princes and princesses finding their happily ever after. I always had my head stuck in a fairy tale. Then, somehow along the way, I found one of my own. We deserve our happy ending, too, and I don’t want to waste another minute.”

This girl never fails to surprise me. My eyes burn, and I dig my wallet out of my pocket. I’ve kept it in a sealed pocket of my wallet since the day it arrived in the mail. It didn’t matter that we were apart; I couldn’t give up on us then, and I never will.

Pulling the ring out, I drop onto one knee as tears fall from my eyes. My voice cracks as I say, “C-Charlotte Winters, will you marry me?”

She smiles, her whole face lighting up, and she nods. “Yes, yes. Please yes.”

She holds her hand out, and I slide the ring onto her left ring finger; it’s a perfect fit, even better than Cinderella’s slipper. Standing up, I grab my fiancée’s face with both hands and crash my lips into hers.

“My wife. You’re going to be *my wife*,” I tell her between desperate and needy kisses.

She giggles and kisses me back. “And you’re going to be my husband. How crazy does that sound?”

She pulls me back down for another kiss, and I happily and greedily oblige.

Pulling away, I kiss her forehead and say, “I don’t think it sounds crazy at all. People say I was made to play hockey, but

I think I was made to love you.”

CHARLOTTE

This morning, I'm meeting up with Harper for coffee at the Little Dove. At Ella's funeral, we promised each other that we would stay in touch. It's been over a month or so since we laid her to rest, and we need to catch up.

I got here early so I could get us a good table. The place is usually busy all day with people coming here to work on their laptop or visit with friends, and I wanted to get one of the tables with the swinging chairs that hang from the ceiling. I don't know whose idea this was, but they are the greatest thing ever.

Harper arrives shortly after I sit down with my iced mocha and croissant. The second I see her, I leave our table and go to her, embracing her in a big hug. Her scent hits me, and my eyes burn. I wasn't prepared to be reminded of Ella from Harper's scent.

"Hi," I say as I pull away. "What do you want to drink?"

She has a gift bag, and guilt strikes me that I didn't think to get her anything. But I try to cut myself some slack; we didn't set that expectation with each other, so I doubt she's anticipating anything in return.

We walk over to the counter, and Morgan takes her order. After she gets her coffee and cinnamon roll, we go back over to our seats.

"I love your necklace," I tell her as the small diamond teddy bear pendant flashes in the light.

"Thank you." She caresses the necklace gently, and for a brief second, she seems to disappear to another place in her mind before returning and saying, "This is for you."

She hands me the princess-themed gift bag. I imagine the theme isn't a coincidence, and whatever is inside is related to Ella.

As I tear the tissue off of the top, Harper says, "She told me that if anything happened, she wanted you to have her. I agreed that if anyone besides Ella should have her, it should be you."

My eyes well up with tears as I look down. Cocoa sits inside the bag with a bow on her head.

Giggling, I remember the time I met Ella and what she told me about Cocoa. She was so flabbergasted that I didn't have a teddy bear. My audacity was so shocking to her.

Of course, even after she's gone, she finds a way to spoil me with her love.

I pull Cocoa out and press her against my chest, tucking her head in my neck and hugging her deeply. It's like giving Ella a hug—or at least a piece of her.

I set Cocoa on the table and look up at Harper, who is crying along with me.

"I don't think I can take Cocoa, Harper. You should have her."

She smiles sweetly and pats her necklace. "Ella was buried with a matching pendant. I don't need Cocoa as a reminder of her, and I don't need Cocoa to feel safe. She was Ella's reminder that everything will be okay. The memory of Ella's happy smile and this"—she caresses the necklace again, as if she were stroking Ella's cheek—"are the only reminders I need."

"I promise to keep Cocoa safe. And if you ever want, I am happy to share custody." I smile, the faintest hint of a laugh leaving my lips.

"I appreciate that," she says and looks at the bear endearingly. "Now, let me see that ring." She grins and reaches for my hand.

I forgot that I haven't seen her in person since Reed and I got engaged—or more like when I forced Reed to propose to me.

She examines my ring and admiringly says, “It’s gorgeous. You said he customized it just for you?”

“Yeah, and on the inside of the band are two engraved words. *Forever. Always,*” I tell her, remembering how I felt, running my finger over the engraving when I first held the ring. He couldn't have done a better job.

“That’s beautiful,” she says, and then her attention drifts to my arm. “You still wear it?”

The bracelet Ella made me dangles from my wrist. “Of course I do. I wear it every day. Although I’m so afraid of it catching on something and breaking. I’m so conscious of it; I feel like its bodyguard or something.”

She chuckles and gently releases my hand. “I love that.”

“Good,” I tell her genuinely, happy that I could bring her any joy.

“How are you doing? How’s treatment going?”

“It’s going as good as it can. I’m still getting chemo treatments to ensure that any undetected cells are gone. But I should be finished soon as long as everything keeps going well. So fingers crossed.”

“I’m glad to hear that.” She smiles at me and finishes her cup of coffee.

We continue to sit and swing for another hour or so, sharing every slightest update in our life and going on tangents about completely unrelated topics. That hour feels like five minutes by the time we’re done. I want to stay here with her until it closes, hearing old stories of Ella and hearing new stories of Harper.

She asks about all the wedding details, which I happily share. We are going to get married next summer. Of course, it has to be scheduled during the offseason because during the hockey season, it would be so hectic for both of us.

I'm back at work now, part time to start because I still need a lot of time to rest after my chemo treatments. But I didn't realize how much I missed work. I love my job. I get to hang out with my best friend and have fun. It doesn't get much better than that.

Reed pretty much gave me no budget because he thinks we deserve a wedding that any king and queen would be proud of. Who am I to deny that dream of his? I will happily throw the wedding of a century. I don't know how I got lucky enough to find him, but I'm never questioning it or putting it at risk again.

As much as I love Cocoa and will cherish her forever as Ella's most prized possession, she isn't my bear; she'll always be Ella's. And that's okay. I will keep her safe with me forever.

When I get home, I find my two boys snuggled up on the couch, watching the Washington Wild kick the Buffalo Norsemen's ass.

"How was your coffee date?" he asks as I kick my shoes off and walk up to the back of the couch.

Bending over, I throw my arms over him and down his chest, kissing his head.

"It was ... good. She gave me Cocoa. She said that Ella told her to give her to me if anything happened," I say, resting my chin on top of his head.

"The teddy bear? That's sweet. We should get, like, a shadowbox or something to store her in, if you want, just an idea," he says, bending his head to look up at me.

"That's a good idea actually," I admit.

That way, I can look at Cocoa whenever I want, take her out to cuddle her when I need to, but never have to worry about her getting damaged.

"I'm going to hop in the shower," I say and kiss him upside down.

He kisses me back the best he can in this position and says, "Need some help?"

I blush and smirk. “Do I need help in the shower?”

“Yeah, I mean, it’s nearly impossible to reach the middle of your back without assistance,” he says with a straight face.

“You mean, like, how the loofah with the handle helps?” I say, giggling.

His eyes fall, and he says, “You’re ruining my cute offer.”

Grabbing a pillow from the cushion next to him, I pick it up and take a step toward the stairs, turning back and throwing the pillow at him as a distraction. “If you can catch me, you can join me!”

He grunts and jumps off the couch. I spring up the stairs, running with everything I have into our bedroom.

“I’m going to get you!” he calls a few feet behind me.

He yanks me back into his chest, twirls us around, and falls back onto the bed, taking me down with him. We are a laughing mess as we try to catch our breath.

My face hurts from the oversize smile pulling at my cheeks as his fingers dig into me, tickling my sides.

“Got you,” he whispers and kisses the side of my head.

Hopping off of him, I offer him my hand to help him up. “All right, let’s go, Goldy. Those luscious locks aren’t going to wash themselves.”

He takes my hand and barely tugs as he sits up. “True. After you.” He gestures in front of him. I step forward, but he grabs my shirt and pulls me back. “Ehh, never mind. Let the king go first.”

I slap his back playfully as he walks toward the bathroom. “Rude!”

He laughs and turns around, walking backward into the bathroom. His fingers grip the bottom of his shirt, and he pulls it up and off in one smooth motion. It doesn’t matter how many times I’ve seen him naked; it’s impossible to get used to the way his body looks, like it was hand-carved by Michelangelo himself.

His muscles ripple as he tosses his shirt to the ground. God, I could stare at him all damn day. He works hard for that body, and it *shows*.

Knowing that if I want this shower to go smoothly without too much funny business, I need to stop ogling him.

My eyes shoot up to his, and he smirks at me with hooded eyes. Yep, he one thousand percent saw me checking him out. My cheeks burn, and I bite down on my bottom lip as I grip the waistband of my shorts and push them down to my ankles, kicking them aside.

He tugs his sweats and boxers down at once, and I practically drool as his already-hardened cock springs free.

Focus.

Nervous tingles run down my back as a dreaded realization slams into me. This is the first time he'll see me completely naked since I've had my surgery.

Oh God.

What if he doesn't think I'm sexy anymore? Or what if he—

"Hey, stop that." Reed lifts my chin up, forcing my gaze to find his. "Get out of your head, Char. What are you thinking?"

Dropping my gaze back down to his bare chest, I sigh, "You haven't seen me ... not since my surgery ..."

He lifts my gaze back up, and my eyes burn with vulnerability. "Are you scared to show me?" He kisses my forehead and cups my face in his hands. "Do you trust me?"

I look up at him as he strokes my cheeks. "Of course I do."

He smiles softly and moves his hands to the bottom of my shirt and grabs it. Slowly, he lifts it up, inch by inch, while his intense gaze never leaves mine.

"Lift your arms, baby," he whispers.

Taking a shallow breath, I do what he asked and lift my arms above my head.

Never has a moment in my life felt more raw and more revealing than this. He pulls my shirt up past my neck and over my head. When it stops blocking my vision, I find his eyes still looking at mine. But his stare is smoldering, and my face warms under his gaze.

He lightly places his hands on my arms and turns me around. As I let him guide me to where he wants, I find myself in the mirror. He positions me in front of him. He studies my reflection, finally letting his gaze travel down my body and over my healed incisions.

“Don’t you see?” he asks, meeting my stare in the mirror.

He kisses the nape of my neck and waits for me to answer.

“What?”

He holds me in place with his sparkling blue eyes. “Don’t you see how goddamn perfect you are? So beautiful, Charlotte.”

This time, it’s not just my face that warms; my entire body ignites at his words. Even my eyes burn, welling up with tears. Not sad tears though, but ones that bleed strength and happiness.

“I love you,” I murmur and lean into him.

“I love *you*.” He kisses the top of my head.

He releases me and walks over to the shower and starts the water, leaving me to look at my reflection.

This body is proof that I survived and that I am going to continue to survive. I think I am beautiful like this too. No. I know I am. I don’t need boobs to be sexy. I am hot with or without them. Even if not everyone thinks so, I don’t care. Because I know I am, and if I stumble on that confidence or forget, Reed will be there to lift my chin up and remind me.

“Are you coming?” he calls over to me in a teasing, lighthearted voice. “Like you said, these locks aren’t going to wash themselves.”

Laughing, I take one last look in the mirror.

I did it. I'm here even though I never thought I would be. But I didn't do it alone. I had Reed, my dad, Laura, Josh, and the entire Nighthawks family. I think I also had a few angels looking over me too.

"I'm coming!" I say and turn away from the mirror and walk over to the shower.

As I step underneath the warm water, Reed smiles at me and says, "Finally, I've been waiting. But I would've waited forever for you."

I know he's not just talking about the shower. He's talking about *us*. That he would have waited forever for me to come around and let him back in.

Ella once said that teddy bears protect you and make you feel safe. Reed is who I grab on to when I feel afraid or lost. He is who I turn to when I need support. He is who comforts me in moments of sadness and who I celebrate with in moments of happiness. Reed is my teddy bear. And I wouldn't have it any other way.

EPILOGUE



REED

“Are you excited for tonight?” Jensen asks with a shit-eating grin on his face.

“Are you kidding me? I might be more excited to show Charlotte off as my future wife than I am for a playoff game.” I chuckle.

A serious look strikes his face, and he smacks my shoulder. “Now, that’s too far.”

He breaks into laughter, and I join along with him.

“I’m sure, sooner or later, you’ll be getting down on one knee for a lucky girl.”

He scoffs and throws his head back. “Not if I can help it. I’m a free bird, Reed. I’m not ready to be tied down.”

Squinting at him, I say, “You don’t even really go out and meet girls anyway. I haven’t even heard you talk about hooking up with someone in a while. For God’s sake, your body count is, like, five. So, why exactly are you wanting to be single?”

He smacks me in the chest. “Hey, this conversation isn’t about me and my lack of a love life. This is about *you*.”

“Uh-huh,” I say, grabbing a puck that is sliding on the ice past us. “Who knows? Maybe future Mrs. JD will run right into you. Look at Cam. He wasn’t exactly the serious type until Morgan. Now, look at him.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. If my future wife smacks me in the face, then maybe I’ll pay attention.” He laughs.

“All right.” I chuckle. “Now, I just have to pay someone to slap you.”

“Not funny,” he says behind me as I skate away from him and toward the net with the puck on my twig.

Coach Carrington blows his whistle, and we all skate over to center ice, circling around him.

“Good practice today, guys. Keep hustling and digging in like that, and we are going to take the cup this season,” he says with pride.

God, I can’t imagine that feeling. The ultimate win in the hockey world. I can see it now. The buzzer going off, confetti shooting everywhere, and us dogpiling into each other before taking turns, lifting the famous silver cup in the air.

One day, that dream is going to come true. But for now, I’ll focus on the fairy tale I get to live every day. The one where I get to call my dream girl my future wife.

“Kos, take it away,” Coach says before stepping out of the circle.

Alec skates into the center with pride and his hands behind his back, which is immediately suspicious. He glances up at me, and I know something is going to happen.

“Tonight, we celebrate the engagement of our boy Goldy. We are so happy for you and for Charlotte. We can’t wait to get”—he looks over at Coach Carrington—“appropriately and safely drunk with you guys tonight.”

Carrington laughs, knowing that appropriately drunk to him and appropriately drunk to us are two different things.

“Bring it in, boys. Goldy on three. One. Two. Three. GOLDY!” he cheers, as does the entire team.

He pulls something from behind his back, shakes it, and by the time I figure out what it is, I realize it’s far too late for me to escape. He pops the cork and sprays us all with champagne, aiming specifically for my face.

My back is getting far wetter than it should, and I turn around to see Coach Carrington spraying me with a second bottle.

“You’re wrong for that!” I shout at him as he shakes the bottle and sprays other guys on the team.

This was not how I was expecting practice to end. But I’m thankful nonetheless. After some more fun on the ice, we disperse to the locker room to wash the now-sticky layer off of us. I feel bad for the equipment managers that are going to have to deal with all of the tacky gear. But they were also there when it happened, laughing and smiling with the rest of us.

Charlotte and my long-awaited engagement party is tonight, and I’m *fucking* stoked. Laura, Morgan, and Char have been planning it for a couple of months. It’ll be at this stunning venue that has a glass roof, like an elegant greenhouse. There will be delicious food. Good friends, family, and all of the important people in our lives.

It’s going to be perfect.



“You have got to be kidding me.” My air is knocked out of me.

Charlotte blushes and twirls in her fitted white evening gown. It looks like the softest silk that is formed to her like a glove. Her hair has started to grow out, and she has it straightened into a cute bob that stops right below her ears.

“You look so fucking incredible, baby,” I say and walk over to her, grabbing her face in my hands.

She giggles, then warns, “Be careful; this makeup took, like, an hour and a half.”

Laughing against her perfectly painted lips, I say, “I’m sorry. I wouldn’t want to ruin it.”

She looks up at me, and her eyes twinkle like a starry night sky. “Thank you.”

“Shall we go out there with the peasants, My Queen?” I ask her with a proper accent, extending my hand.

She takes it and smiles. “We shall.”

As the doors are opened for us, we walk through, hand in hand. Our friends and family erupt in cheers. If this is any glimpse into what the actual wedding will be like, I'm even more excited than before. White and purple flowers decorate the room from floor to ceiling. Twinkly lights dangle from the ceiling and down some of the glass walls. Candles burn across the tables, casting a soft glow in the room. This place is magical, like it was ripped from a damn fairy tale.

We dance into the room, and I spin Charlotte underneath my arm before pulling her into me. "God, you look amazing."

She giggles, a gushing smile stretching across her face.

Music fills the room around us, and we are instantly swarmed by our loved ones.

Harper approaches Char and pulls her into a big hug while JD and Kos grab my attention.

"Damn, I didn't know you could actually clean up this nice," Jensen says teasingly.

"Real funny," I scold him, chuckling.

"Happy for you, man," Kos says and daps me up before pulling me into a hug.

"Thanks." I beam.

We continue to make our way through the room, mingling with everyone who was able to make it tonight. Even the coaching staff swung by to give us their congratulations.

All of the coaches enter with their wives on their arms, except Coach Carrington. I could have sworn he was married though. But maybe not, or maybe something happened. Regardless, that's not really my concern right now. They greet us happily and give us their best wishes.

After a couple of toasts and a few unwarranted speeches from some of the guys, dinner is served. Everyone is hungry; it's obvious from the silence in the room. Soft music plays over us while we eat, which I'm thankful for because, otherwise, it would be awkwardly quiet in here.

I finished my plate in a few bites, but I'm still starving. I'm craving something sweet. I'm just not talking about actual food.

What I'd love to do more than anything right now is sneak away to have my *favorite* treat—my future wife. She looks so goddamn good tonight; I can't take my eyes off of her.

She looks over at me and gulps. Her eyes darken as she looks up at me through her thick lashes. I don't think it'll take much to convince her to sneak away with me for a few minutes.

Her fingers graze my thigh, then drift over my zipper.

Fuck. My cock twitches, and I know she feels it pressing against her hand because she responds by cupping me under the table. Grunting, I sit up and adjust myself.

My voice is low and husky as I lean into her ear and ask, "Do you want to go for a walk around the grounds?"

She nods and sucks her plump bottom lip between her teeth.

"Excuse us," I say to the table.

JD eyes me knowingly. I scratch my eye with my middle finger, and he laughs.

Taking Char's hand in mine, I lead us out through the doors of the main room. The grounds have a few greenhouses. This is the main one, the place that most events are held in. Then, there are a few smaller ones a short walk away. I might or might not have already scouted the area on the off chance that this moment would come. I didn't necessarily expect it to, but I wanted to be prepared. Then, I saw her and knew that I was not going to be able to keep my hands off of her tonight.

My dick throbs in my tight slacks as I take us outside and along the stone pathway and into the small but still beautiful building. Only the ceiling is glass in this one, and all of the walls are solid, thankfully. At least we don't have to worry about anyone seeing inside.

There also aren't any cameras, which is why I chose it. I made sure to pay extra attention to that detail when we were touring the venue the first time.

"Do you have any idea what you do to me, Charlotte?" I growl as I shut the door behind us and lock it.

She is studying the twinkling lights and endless flowers, and she blushes a deep red. "I have a feeling I know."

Walking up behind her, I run my fingers up her sides, and she shivers. "Do you *really*?"

She turns in my arms and looks up at me with a daring smirk. She trails her hand up my thigh and grabs my hardened shaft through my pants.

"Mmhm," she hums and licks her lips.

"Turn around," I order her as all the blood in my body rushes to my dick.

Fuck, I need her so goddamn bad right now.

I grab the small zipper of her dress and slowly pull it down to where it stops right above her ass.

"Take it off," I grunt and step back so I can watch my favorite show.

She twirls around and shimmies the stark-white dress over her head, leaving her *completely* naked. She hands me the expensive gown, and I hang it on the door so it doesn't get dirty.

"You're not wearing any panties?" My pants become so impossibly tight that I actually think I might break the zipper.

She smirks and slowly shakes her head. "I couldn't. The dress would've shown the lines."

Gulping, I reach out and grab her bare hips. "I think that might be my new favorite dress of yours."

Her fingers start unbuttoning my shirt, and as she finishes the last one, I shake it off of my shoulders and hang it over her dress on the door.

“What is that?” she asks, her voice still breathy but serious.

Stretching my arm out between us, I show her my tattoo, the first one I’ve ever gotten.

“Stars?” Her voice is a shaky whisper as she studies the black-and-white ink decorating my forearm.

I nod and stroke her cheek with my thumb.

Kissing the tip of her nose, I say, “You always look up at the stars when you feel overwhelmed. I figured, now, you can always see them anytime you want. When you need it, I’ll be the stars for you.”

“I fucking love you, Reed,” she growls, and a hunger shimmers in her eyes.

Grabbing her jaw in my hand, I pull her to me and desperately capture her lips with mine before sucking her bottom lip between my teeth and tugging.

“Do you see those beautiful tulips?” I whisper, and she nods. “Good. Bend over that flower bed, spread your pretty little legs, and let me show you how much I love you too.”

She giggles and nods before turning around and walking over to the high flower bed that is full of white tulips. She slowly leans forward and holds herself up by her hands on the edge.

Undoing my belt, I kick my shoes off and drop my pants and boxers, my cock springing free and smacking my stomach.

Stalking over to her, I groan, “God, you are so fucking perfect, baby.”

Grabbing one of the throw pillows from the patio furniture next to her, I set it down on the ground.

I bend over her, and she soaks my cock as it slides between her legs. “*Fuck.*”

Reaching down, I grab her right knee and lift it, setting her foot on top of the flower bed, completely exposing her glistening pussy. Dropping onto the throw pillow, I run my nose along her inner thigh, and she shivers.

“We don’t have much time before people start noticing we’re gone,” she whispers.

My tongue laps against her center, and I breathe her in. She smells like *fucking* ecstasy.

“Yeah? And they can wait till I’m done with my dessert,” I say and plunge my tongue into her needy pussy.

My fingers find her clit, and I rub it in circles while I worship her with my tongue.

She moans and gasps as I find those perfect spots she loves so much. Sinking a finger into her, I pump it slowly at first, stretching her out to take a second.

“Fuck, Reed,” she groans and grinds against my face and hand.

Thankfully, we don’t have to worry about messing my makeup up. She can soak my face, and I’ll thank her afterward.

My fingers circle her faster as my tongue works her tenderly. She’s already tightening around my fingers, and I’m greedy. I want her to come for me *now*.

As if on cue, her back arches, and her legs stiffen as she reaches her climax. I work her harder, faster, and her orgasm tears through her, pulsing and clenching my fingers inside of her.

“Fuuuck! Oh my Gooood!” she cries out, and I smile against her.

With her wetness still on my fingers, I stroke myself as she turns around with the sultriest gaze.

Do we really have to go back to that party? I just want to take her home and lose myself in her.

I don’t know how I managed to get lucky enough to convince this girl to love me. But I am going to make sure she knows how fucking grateful I am every day for the rest of our lives. I’m going to start by making her come at least one or two more times.



CHARLOTTE

“Grab on to my neck,” Reed growls, and I wrap my arms around him.

He picks me up, and my legs grab his waist. He teases my entrance with his tip, and I try to lower myself down onto it, but he pulls his dick away.

I’m so goddamn turned on right now; I feel like I’m going to explode ... *again*.

He smirks, then lines himself up once again. I moan as his thick tip pushes into me. With his hands on my ass, he lowers me onto his engorged cock, slowly stretching me inch by inch. He has to go slow for the first thrust. It doesn’t matter how many times we have sex. He’s so big that I have to adjust every single time.

“Fuck, baby. You’re doing so good, taking me,” he groans into my mouth.

He continues to lower me until my ass is flush against his hips. He lifts me gently, only an inch or two up and off his cock, before slamming me back down. My head and eyes roll back at the strike of lightning that hits me.

“There you go, Char. All wet and ready for me.” He bites at my shoulder before completely losing control.

He bounces me against his hips and fucks me without mercy. I don’t think he’s ever made me feel so full. I swear to God, he is so deep inside of my stomach as he bottoms out inside of me over and over.

“Oh God, Reed,” I moan, breathy and needy. “Just like that ...”

He continues to use me, sliding me up and down his cock. His body is glistening under the glowing sky as he pants and

grunts with each thrust.

My core is tightening, and my body begins to vibrate as I feel light as a feather as he finds that perfect spot repeatedly.

He forces my head up, and my eyes barely flutter open to see him. He's never looked so feral, so *hungry*.

"Keep those pretty eyes open, baby." He thrusts into me at the same time that he slams me down onto him, and his request suddenly becomes impossible to follow.

He chuckles darkly and groans, "That's it, baby. There you go."

I'm so close. I'm going to—

"Ahh! Fuuuck!" I cry out uncontrollably. My head flings back as I come harder than I ever have before.

"Look at those pretty little stars while you come for me," Reed groans.

My body is floating among the stars as I reach heaven from Reed's touch.

My orgasm is still tearing into me as he somehow fucks me harder than before.

"Oh fuck, baby. I'm going to come. Get ready to open your mouth," he growls as I let him use whatever he needs of me.

He pulls out of me hastily, and I drop to my knees on the cold concrete, opening my mouth and sticking out my tongue.

"Charlotte," he moans and slams his eyes shut. "Fuck, baby."

He comes on my tongue, and I take every drop before swallowing.

After a few seconds, his eyes open, and his body relaxes.

"Forever? We get to do that *forever*?" he mumbles incoherently. "I can't fucking wait."

Standing up, I laugh at his state of euphoria and walk over to our clothes. Picking up his boxers and slacks, I toss them to him. He catches them and smiles at me, like a little kid on

Christmas. He helps me get my dress on without wiping all of my makeup off, and I help fix his shirt and tie so it doesn't look like we snuck off to have sex.

We get dressed in happy silence. Before he unlocks the door so we can head back to the party, he grabs my jaw with both of his tender hands. He leans down slowly, taking his sweet time to press his lips into mine.

"I love you, Queen Charlotte," he whispers and exhales softly.

Feeling so giddy from his love for me, I press another kiss against his lips. "I love you, *King Reed*."

I can't believe that I almost let myself live without experiencing this moment. I mean, the choice wasn't completely up to me. My cancer could have decided that this day would never come. We haven't rang the bell yet, but thankfully, we have been winning every battle along the way. Later, if it ever comes back for round two, we'll beat it all over again. I say we, because it's not just me. Cancer doesn't affect just one person, not truly. And I couldn't have gotten this far without all of these people.

Not everyone gets the chance to say they won that battle. I know that firsthand. Ella fought fearlessly, but she didn't win. It didn't matter how much we wanted her to, how much we prayed and cried, hoping for victory. It took her anyway. Far too young. She is a part of me, and she always will be. We might not have had a long time together, but I wouldn't have traded it for anything. Would I have rather not known Ella to save me the pain of losing her? *Never*.

My dad would say the same thing about my mom. He loved her unconditionally and still does. She is the love of his life, and that is never going to change. It took him a long time, many years, to mourn her death. He's not done—I don't think anyone ever truly is. But he's in a better place. He is happy to be happy. He doesn't have guilt when he smiles anymore, knowing that she's gone. He smiles because he knows she's there, smiling with him, even if he can't see her.

“Come on, Mrs. Larinski. Let’s go visit with the peasants.” He smiles and holds out his hand.

Sliding my fingers between his, I chuckle. “Not *Mrs.* yet.”

“Ahh. You might as well be. I already call you my wife. Just because we haven’t walked down the aisle and signed the fancy paper doesn’t mean that you’re not eternally mine and I’m not yours.” His words are like a hug to my heart as we walk out of the building and head back to the party.

“About time you two hurried back,” Laura teases us the second we enter the room.

Reed laughs and has no shame in his game. “I would say I’m sorry that I stole her away, but I’m really not.”

“Oh, I’m sure,” Laura scoffs. “Come on.”

We follow her through the room, smiling at the onlookers of our friends and family.

“Wow, you look incredible!” Josh whistles, and my heart swells at my best friend’s compliment.

Dropping Reed’s hand, I rush over to Josh and hug him. “Thank you. So do you!”

Seriously, he looks perfectly put together in his suit and tie.

“I’m glad you made it,” I murmur into his ear before pulling away.

He glares at me playfully. “You do realize that nothing would have kept me away from this tonight, right?”

Josh just started a new job at an art gallery in town, and I told him not to stress if he couldn’t make it tonight because I know how important that job is to him. He has finally found his passion. I think he had to get out of our hometown to really find himself, but nothing makes me happier that he has become comfortable with who he really is. I, for one, am not standing in the way of his success. We can always party to celebrate the pretty ring on my finger.

“Yeah, yeah.” I pat his chest.

“We should get seated,” Laura whispers over my shoulder.

Laura and Morgan put a lot of time and effort into tonight, and I will be sticking to their flawless itinerary.

“Josh, you’re here at our table,” Laura tells him.

Turning around, I find a strong chest staring at me. “Oh my God! I didn’t even hear you back here.”

Reed chuckles. “I’m never too far from you, Char. And I’m stealthy.”

This time, it’s me who laughs as we follow Laura to our table. “Reed, I love you. But stealth isn’t exactly your forte. For God’s sake, at six-three, you’re, like, a muscular giant.”

“Ooh, keep giving me compliments. I like it.” He bends down and kisses the top of my head as we reach our table.

He pulls my chair out for me. “Thank you.”

He sits next to me and takes my hand in his, stroking the back of it with his thumb.

Jack, Alec, and Laura sit across the round table from us. Alec is explaining something about hockey to Jack, who is not listening very intently, and I bite back my smile at the cute father-son moment playing out in front of me. Laura and Morgan are discussing who they think is going to get the drunkest tonight; they are torn between Jensen and Brett. I vote Brett. Josh sits down beside Jack, immediately stealing his attention from Alec.

Poor Alec. I laugh.

Cam is the last to join our happy table, wearing an all-black suit and no tie with the top few buttons undone. I swear he and Morgan will make the cutest kids one day. If only pink hair were hereditary because it looks amazing on her.

Glancing at the table next to us, I see my dad with a smile plastered on his face, chatting up one of Reed’s teammates. I’m glad he seems to be having a good time.

Reed taps my wrist, and I turn back to him.

His eyes are glistening as he whispers, “Are you okay?”

Nodding, I feel a tear run down my cheek. “Yeah, I’m just ... happy.”

He lifts our hands up, and he kisses the back of mine. “Good. You deserve to always feel that way, Charlotte, and I will always make sure that I do my best to uphold that.”

Reed stands up, gently dropping my hand. He grabs his glass and taps the side of it with his knife. “Excuse me.”

The crowd silences, and everyone gives him their attention.

“I am so excited that everyone could be here with us tonight to help us celebrate our engagement. Nothing is more important to us than our friends and family. So, having all of you here means everything to us.”

This earns a few cheers from his teammates and the rest of the guests.

“I have a little surprise for my Charlotte.”

My heart jumps, and my palms start sweating. “What?” I whisper in shock.

The large doors at the front of the room open, and in walks ...

Oh my fucking God!

A woman in a maroon shirt with a logo I can’t make out walks in—and she’s holding a SLOTH!

“No you didn’t!” I squeal and shoot to my feet.

“Happy engagement, Char.” He leans over and kisses my head.

My heart feels so full that it might actually burst. “You’re never going to be able to top this, you know.”

He laughs. “I’ll have to find a way then. Here, sit down. She’s going to let you hold him.”

“Hi, you must be Charlotte,” she says sweetly as she approaches our table.

Don’t freak out too much. You’ll scare the baby.

Sitting down slowly, I answer, “Yes.”

She chuckles, and I'm certain that my excitement is plastered on my face.

Laura pulls out her phone and starts recording and grabbing a few photos.

“This is Binky. He is eight months old. He was brought to our refuge after he was found malnourished and abandoned. But he is thriving now,” she informs us as she lifts Binky and sets him down on my lap. She positions my hands where she wants them as the fluffy boy reaches for me and grabs my hands. “There you go. Aww, he likes you.”

Oh my God, he likes me!

Reed is beaming behind the zoo worker, and I can't decide if I want to look at how happy Reed looks or at the most adorable creature I've ever seen sitting in my lap.

Laura takes this moment to announce to our guests, “Binky will be available for photos after Charlotte is done getting her one-on-one time if you want to meet him. In the meantime, enjoy the snack and dessert bar. Then we've got a few activities planned for the future Mr. and Mrs.”

I didn't know my body could contain so much giddiness. My face literally hurts from smiling. Binky drops one of my hands, and I one thousand percent take this opportunity to do something that I have always wanted to do. With the tip of my finger, I boop his cute little nose.

When I look back up at Reed, someone else draws my attention—Harper.

Of course I invited her. We might not have known each other for very long, but the time we have known each other feels so impactful that it feels like it's been forever. Her eyes are watery, and she is smiling so gently and sorrowfully, and I know she's thinking about sweet Ella. Ella would have loved to meet Binky. She would have thought it was the coolest thing in the world. She nods at me and wipes her eyes dry. I smile back at her and dip my head. Harper deserves the respect of royalty; after all, if Ella was a princess, then Harper is a queen.

I'm so glad that I made it, that I survived long enough to enjoy this beautiful night.

Fear of hurting Reed made me walk away from him. I wanted to protect him and save him from the anguish that my father had gone through when my mom died. But that was wrong, and the fear of losing him will make sure that I never make that mistake again. Life is full of uncertainties. You never know what day is going to be your last. Or at what point you will have to say good-bye to the ones you love. Never take a day or moment for granted. You never know how many you might have left. If you are lucky enough to find your happily ever after, don't ever let it go. Hold it close to your chest and love it with everything you have.

Forever.

Always.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Pru Schuyler is a Top 10 Amazon Best-Selling author, best known for her Nighthawks hockey romance series. She writes *happily ever afters to cry for*, including characters and stories that her readers can truly empathize with. At the heart, her books focus on undying love.

She secretly judges people who get through the day without any caffeine because she consumes an insane amount in order to function. She lives in the Midwest with her adored fur babies and husband. When she isn't getting lost in her writing, she is busy procrastinating by attending her local NAHL games, watching her favorite shows and movies, and spending time with her family at home.

OTHER BOOKS BY
PRU SCHUYLER

THE WICKED TRILOGY

The Wicked Truth

The Wicked Love

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(INTERCONNECTED STAND-ALONES)

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Find Me on the Ice

Find Me Under the Stars

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MRS. CLAUS DUET
(INTERCONNECTED STAND-ALONES)

Stealing Mrs. Claus