



# LOVERBOY

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By

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# **DEDICATION**

For my daughter Sydney Lane.

No dream is ever too big.

Dream on...

I wrote this for those who are healing.  
Who has ever needed to heal. There is

light at the end of the dark. Good things  
can come from bad. There is hope. I  
know. Because...I was there.

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# Charlie

*My name is Charlotte  
Murphy. Charlotte? Charlotte... No...  
No, they call me Charlie. I call me  
Charlie. Everyone calls me Charlie;  
they have for years. My head hurts.*



*Bad. I'm twenty-one? I'm from Indiana. Wait. Where in Indiana? Why can't I remember? My parents have lived there all my life. Indiana? Morgantown, Indiana. But, I moved? I don't live there anymore. Ugh. Why can't I move my head? No. I don't live there anymore. I live in New York. For... for...? School. For school. I live there for school. And, I'm a dancer. I'm an instructor for a studio part time. I work with the younger girls. I can't move my arms, either. Where am I? Where was I? It's black, everything is black. I was*

*leaving school. No. Work? No, I don't work until later this week. Why can't I remember? What was I doing? I was leaving...something. Somewhere. I'm sore. Everywhere hurts. The party. I was leaving a party. That's it. I left the party, because people were acting crazy. I walked. I walked home. I remember. I cut through Central Park. But then someone grabbed me. Someone grabbed me hard. They covered my mouth. I remember!*

My eyes pop open, and suddenly I'm greeted by annoying, harsh white lights

and beeping noises. I groan softly. My God, I was right. I was grabbed. Someone kidnapped me. They don't still have me do they? They can't. No. I ran. I got away. I move my eyes around slowly and realize the only thing that can have beeping noises and such bright lights is the hospital. I'm in the hospital. I don't remember getting here. I couldn't have gotten here by myself. Could I? I moan again, this time making an attempt to move my hand. At least, I think I'm trying to move my hand. It hurts, too. My head, my neck, my arms, my legs,

everywhere. Stabbing pains, shooting pains; pains that I've never felt before in my life course through every last inch of my body. Just how hurt am I? I can feel my heart beginning to pound furiously deep in my chest. I hear a clicking noise and feet on the floor as the sounds come closer.

“Charlotte?” I hear a soft female voice.

I open my mouth and realize how dry it is. I swallow hard and make another attempt to speak.

“It's okay, Sweetie,” she interrupts

me. “You don’t have to talk. Do you know where you are?”

I give myself a moment and fight through the pain enough to nod my head.

“You understand that you’re in the hospital?” She asks.

I lick my dry lips to find an array of what feels like cuts around them, and nod slowly once more.

“You are one lucky girl,” she says, as I feel her working with the tubes that I now see are all attached to me. “We didn’t expect you to wake up this soon.”

“Pain,” I finally choke out.

“Don’t worry; we’ll get you something more for the pain.” She reassures me. “Just try to relax for me. Don’t worry now; the police are here.”

*The police?*

“Police?” I stammer.

“Why, dear, after what you’ve just been through they wouldn’t dare leave you without protection,” she says softly, as I feel her working with another tube that I can now tell is running directly into my arm.

“Protection?” I ask. “I was,” I pause to swallow. “I was kidnapped.” My thoughts become jumbled a moment as I try to comprehend everything that’s happened to me. Everything in my mind seems to be surrounded by a thick haze, and I can’t pull even one random through from the mess.

She looks down at me, making the most pitiful face I have ever seen on a person. “Oh, Sweetheart, I better let the police talk to you about that.”

*Just how bad am I?*

“Can I,” I stop. “Can I sit up?” I ask

“Do you feel up to it?” She asks. “I don’t want to exhaust you; you just woke up.”

“How long have I been out?” I ask, now feeling more strength in my voice.

She takes a moment to glance at the gold watch on her wrist. “Just about twelve hours now, dear.”

*Twelve hours?!*

“I think sitting up will help my back,” I reply, softly.



She cocks her head to the side, giving me the pitiful look again. This time I can't be too sure, but I think I can see tears in her eyes. She finally nods and begins pushing buttons on the side of the bed that control the angle and lift. I can feel my body's muscles beginning to work for the first time, in what feels like, years. Aches, pops, and uncomfortable groans; I can feel it all. I finally bring my strongest hand up to my neck, rubbing a tender spot that is completely covered with what I can only assume is a large bandage.

“Would you like a pillow behind your back?” She asks, the pitiful look falling over her face again.

I can't imagine just how bad I look, but judging by the look on her face, not pretty. I nod slowly as she helps me lean forward, just enough for her to slide the pillow behind me.

“Can I get you anything else?” She asks, giving my shoulder a tender pat.

I shake my head.

“Well, the doctor will be in shortly,” she replies. “But, if you need

me, just push this button.” She pulls a remote from behind the bed, pointing at the bright red button. She smiles. “The other two buttons control your TV.”

“Thank you,” I manage, as I weakly take the remote from her hand.

As the nurse turns to make her exit, I’m surprised to see a doctor already on his way in. He’s tall with pale skin, and his eyes give the impression that he hasn’t slept in days. His hair too; it’s mousy brown and cut short, but looks as though he’s just crawled out of bed. He smiles.

“Glad to see you awake,” he says.

“How do you feel?”

“Like I was just run over by a Mack truck,” I say, working to adjust myself in the bed.

“Well, given what you’ve just been through, I would say you should feel even worse,” he says. “Mind if I have a look at you?”

I shake my head. Do I honestly have a choice? He steps closer, and suddenly I feel a pang of panic that I can’t explain. My heart begins to race and I can feel

sweat beginning to build up on the palm of my hands. I swallow and give him a strange look. I open my mouth to apologize, but he politely stops me.

“It’s okay, I won’t hurt you,” he says.

“I’m sorry,” I say. “I don’t,” I pause to swallow and look away for a moment, “I don’t know what happened.”

“You’ve been through a lot, Charlotte. You’re a very lucky young woman.”

“I guess I don’t remember what

exactly I've been through," I say, looking down at the tiled hospital floor.

"One step at a time," he says. "Best just to take it easy for now. Would you like for me to call Doctor Kenton? She's really great to work with. I think you would really like her."

I shake my head. "No, it's okay. I trust you."

Five whole minutes into his routine examination, and I regret not letting him phone Doctor Kenton. My palms are sweaty, my mouth is dry, and, though I have been able to control my racing

heart, I'm sure he's able to pick up on how uneasy I am with his hands anywhere near me. After listening to my heart, he backs away slowly and smiles.

“Everything looks perfect,” he says.  
“You sure you feel alright?”

I nod. “As well as I can for the aches and pains.”

“I can certainly make sure you have something for the pain,” he says, “Is there anything else I can get you?”

“Well, I do have a question,” I say,  
“How long will I be in here?”

“It’s hard to say,” he says, “It could be a few more days; it could be a week. The best thing for you is to stay here until you’ve healed. You’ve endured a lot, and I wouldn’t want to release you just yet.”

I nod. I should have figured. “Is there any way that I could get some clothes that are a little more,” I pause. “Covering?”

He nods. “I can’t see how some good warm sweats would hurt.”

“Thank you,” I say.



“And, one last thing,” he says.

“There’s a gentleman here; a police officer. He’s to stand guard at your door.”

*Police? Stand guard at my door?*

*What the hell happened to me?*

“Okay.”

“I’m sure he’ll be in shortly for his questions.”

I nod.

“You let us know if you need anything, Charlotte.” He smiles.

I nod again in silence as he makes

his way out the door. It's then that I can hear him talking to the cop, who truly is standing just outside my door. I slowly lean my head back and sigh. I can't remember a thing. What's worse is, now I don't know that I want to.

The light knock at the door makes me jump unexpectedly. I let out a deep breath as the nurse from before steps in, smiling.

"I brought you something warmer to slip on," she says, "The police department was kind enough to lend us some sweats for you," she explains as

she sets them on the bed. “Would you like some help getting dressed?”

I look down at my right hand that’s badly bruised, there’s an IV ran in the top. Glancing to the left, I see it’s in the same horrible shape, minus the IV. I give a slight nod, and she begins helping pull the blankets back. It’s the first time I’ve seen anything other than my hands, and I see that both my legs are cut up badly and bruised. My mouth drops as I see some of the cuts are extremely deep and have been stitched up. My eyes follow up my legs to my bruised thighs, and I

see the deep purple bruising has gone in between them. I look up at the nurse, with, more than likely, the same pitiful look she gave me.

“I’m sorry,” she says, softly. “We don’t have to do this now.”

I shake my head and swallow. “I want to be covered.”

She nods as she helps my legs off the side of the bed.

“I was raped.” I ask, “Wasn’t I?”

She quietly reaches for the navy blue sweat pants and gingerly guides my legs

into them. Finally, she looks up and gives me a slow, sad nod.

I lick my lips and look down as I ease myself down off the bed long enough to pull the sweat pants up around my sore waist that is just as tender to touch as my legs.

“Would you like the sweatshirt on too?” She asks, holding up the navy blue sweatshirt that has the word POLICE in bold yellow print on the front.

I nod. “I just want to be covered.”

“I understand,” she says as she

begins working gingerly around the IV, and an array of deep cuts and bruises that I now see are all over my upper body as well. I feel a wave of nausea wash over me as I fight to hold everything from vomit to tears inside.

“There,” she says, finally tugging the warm shirt down around me. “Feel better?”

I nod. “Thank you for your help.”

“It’s no trouble,” she replies.

“Would you like some socks, too? These floors get so cold at night.”

I immediately nod, wanting each and every inch of my body to be covered by something, anything at all.

She pulls a pair of thick gray socks from a storage cabinet, and is kind enough to help them on my feet. She smiles and pulls the blankets around me once more. “You get some rest now. The more you rest, the quicker you’ll heal.” She smiles, as she heads for the door.

I force a smile. “Thank you. I will.”

Normally, I wouldn’t mind being left alone at all; but, now that I have a lot

swimming through my mind, I don't want to be left alone to remember anything. I remember I had walked to my friend Rachael's party. I knew most of the people there, except for a small handful of her latest fling's friends. They were the reason I left. Turns out they had a taste for a lot of booze and drugs too. And, by drugs, I don't mean marijuana. I mean cocaine and other substances I don't even want to think about putting anywhere near my body. I told Rachael it was bad news, and to get them out. But, she didn't believe me, of course.



Isn't that how it always worked? It was her party and her place, so I did what I thought was best. I grabbed my coat and took off. I walked. I know I walked; I usually walk everywhere. But, I cut through Central Park. Not because it's really a short cut, but just because it's one of my favorite places. That was my mistake, cutting through the park. That's where he got me. How stupid can I be? Who walks through a deserted park, late at night, alone? Apparently, stupid Charlie Murphy does.

I make a feeble attempt to roll to my

side, but I'm greeted by a new stabbing pain on my hip. One so bad I let out a loud cry and bring myself nearly to tears. I take a few deep breaths, and suddenly the large, wooden hospital door is flung open with such a great force that it makes a loud banging noise against the wall. There, standing in the doorway, is the police officer. There's no mistaking him in his perfect black uniform. He's young, a lot younger than I would ever expect, and tall with golden brown hair that has a messy style. My yelp has clearly startled him. His body finally

relaxes, and he straightens himself out.

“I’m sorry,” He says, “I didn’t mean to bother you, I just...” He stops.

I shake my head. “It’s okay.”

“I’ll just be outside if you need me,” he says, as he grabs for the door handle to shut it behind him.

I stare blankly at the door. He’s a ‘He’. How could the police department even think of sending a man after what I’d been through? Even though, I admit, I wasn’t fully aware of just what I had been through yet. Stupid police

department. Stupid me. Stupid men. Stupid everything. I sigh deeply. The pain in my side is slowly beginning to fade into a light throbbing. I have a sudden urge to lift my sweatshirt in order to see what has caused the immense pain, but after seeing my legs, I fight the urge to look just yet. After my legs, I'm terrified to see the rest of me, even though I know I will have to eventually. It is my body, after all.

Despite the aches and pains that are pulsing and throbbing, I pull the blanket up around my shoulders a bit

tighter and close my eyes. I suddenly feel exhausted again. Apparently I'd just been through hell, and I looked like it too, so I didn't see anything wrong with letting myself fall into a nice, deep sleep.

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## Nick

### *The Next Day*

I didn't expect to see Charlotte Murphy in such a bad state. After what she had just been through, though, she was very lucky to even be alive. But, the cuts, bruises, and swelling are a heart

wrenching shock to see. I still haven't spoken more than ten words to her. Not after I burst into her room last night just before she fell asleep again. And, even if I had, her memory was still incredibly fuzzy, more than likely from the amount of drugs and suffering her attacker had put her through. Up until now, she had no idea just what she'd lived through. She'd survived a brutal attack from one of the city's most notorious serial killers.

There have been five other victims, all just as beautiful and as talented as she. But sadly, all five had lost their lives.

Women in the city were dropping like flies, and we as police had no idea where to even begin! The killer left nothing, not one trace of evidence behind.

I let my feet kick out in front of me as I push my uncomfortable chair back onto its hind legs. I run my hands up my face and through my hair. I haven't slept but a few short hours; just a short snooze here and there. Charlotte is the killer's only survivor, and we are sure he'll target her again to finish his business. That's where I come in. To make sure



that doesn't happen. Right now, the worst thing in the world that we could do to her would be to leave her alone. And with me on the job, that will never happen. See, I'm just an every-day patrol officer. But, that's not what I really want. I want to climb the ladder and be somebody. Guarding Charlotte Murphy is my chance to show everyone how seriously I take my job, and just how good I am at doing it.

I throw my neck from one side to the other, making it crack loudly. Waiting is the hard part. Once she wakes up, I am

supposed to finally introduce myself and ask her a few questions. I'm supposed to give her the run down about how she will have 24-hour police protection. But, until she wakes up, here I sit, in the most uncomfortable chair I have ever sat in before, and wait. As luck would have it, I don't have to wait long this morning. I don't know which is worse, waiting or having to ask the poor girl to remember what she could.

I draw in one long deep breath as I stand up to stretch. A doctor and a nurse have both gone in her room to answer

the call light that came from inside. I begin to pace the floor outside the room slowly. I don't know why, but my nerves are in a tight ball, and for some reason, I feel as though it is a little personal. I take another long breath in and exhale slowly. I am sure I will be the next one to go in her room, and I'm not sure how either of us will handle that. The nurse and the doctor both leave the room quicker than I expect. The doctor is kind enough to let me know that she will see me now. I nod, and begin to slowly push open the door.

“Charlotte,” I say, keeping my voice as low as possible.

“It’s Charlie,” she replies back as I slide myself past the doorway and into the room.

She’s sitting up in bed, wrapped up in her sweats and blankets. Her eyes are bruised, with shades of black and blue framing them. There are large cuts; some with stitches, others with bandages all lining her face and neck. The only other skin revealed on her body, her hands, are in equal condition. Her right arm, having the IV running from it as various

liquids are being pumped into her system. But, underneath the bruises, IV, bandages, and stitches is a beautiful young woman. Her skin is a soft ivory, that, without the marks, would probably be flawless. Though I can't make out the color, her eyes are lighter, brighter, and seem to glow. Her hair is a warm honey color that, despite being a tad messy, is still shiny and near perfect as it sits on top of her head in an up do that's beginning to fall around her face.

“Hi,” I say, swallowing hard.

“Hi,” she says, and I can

immediately tell she's forcing herself to be friendly. I don't blame her. A man isn't exactly the best for a job like this.

“I'm Nick Andrews; I was sent here...”

She immediately interrupts to nod her head. “I know.”

“Is there anything I can get you, Charlotte?” I ask.

“It's Charlie,” she says again as she pushes a large gob of hair from her eyes.

“What?” I ask.

“Charlie; everyone calls me

Charlie,” she explains. “Call me Charlie.”

I nod. “Alright, Charlie; call me Nick.”

She looks up at me, finally meeting my eyes for the first time. Her eyes are large and blue. I can see that tears are very visibly beginning to fill them. She snuffles and dabs at her eye. “Nick?”

I nod. “Family name,” I say, pulling a chair next to her bed, “After my uncle on my father’s side.”

She nods and carefully brushes a

tear away that has dribbled down her cheek, “So, why did they send you?”

I never expected her to be blunt.

“Unfortunately, we really don’t have many ladies at the department,” I explain, “and, my boss just thought I would be the easiest to talk to.”

Her eyes meet mine again, and she purses her lips that I can see have tiny cuts lining them. “Can I honestly trust you?”

I nod. “Of course.” I add, “I wouldn’t make you say anything that



you're not comfortable with, either."

"How do they expect me to talk to someone that I don't even know?" She asks.

"Good point," I say. "I'm Nicholas Christopher Andrews; I am twenty-five years old. My mom is Diane, and my dad is Gerald. We're from Maine. I have four younger sisters. They call me the pretty boy at the department, which I hate. Um," I take a deep breath in and release. "I love dogs; my apartment is usually a mess. But, I love being lazy." I reach behind me and dig my wallet from

my pocket, where I fish out my driver's license to pass to her. "I really hate that picture; I hadn't had a haircut."

I watch her as she carefully reaches forward, but then she hesitates. I can tell she's scared to death. Not just of me, but of everything. She's unsure, uneasy, and it's a heartbreaking sight to see. Even for a guy like me. It's been a while since I've seen an expression quite like this, and it never gets easier.

"It's okay," I reassure her.

She finally takes it and glances

down. “Twenty-five, huh?” She asks.

I nod.

She looks up at me and studies me carefully. “You look nineteen.”

“Some guys have all the luck, you know?” I say, as she extends my ID back to me.

“So, I’m guessing you want to know what I can remember?” She asks.

I nod. “I just want to see if you remember anything new, or anything at all for that matter.”

She nods. “I understand.” She closes

her eyes for a moment and takes a few deep breaths. “I remember that I was at a friend’s party. When things weren’t going as planned, I left early.” She takes another long breath. “I remember I walked, since I walk everywhere. I had decided to cut through Central Park.”

I can see that she’s beginning to obviously struggle as her eyelids start to flutter and her hands give a little twitch. “It’s okay, Charlie, you can go slowly. Take your time.”

She nods. “I had cut through the park, because I love it. I never thought

that anything like this would happen. I remember this guy; he grabbed me,” she says, her voice growing softer.

“Can you remember where he took you?” I ask.

She gives her head a shake. “Just that it was cold; very cold and dark.” She finally opens her eyes and looks at me. “I was on the floor. It was like a basement with windows that were up high.”

“That’s good,” I say. “That’s great, Charlie; anything else?”

She gives her head another shake, “Nothing yet. So far, that’s all I remember. I don’t remember when he...” She stops suddenly.

I can tell she’s beginning to struggle once more. There’s pain in her eyes and face. She looks lost, heartbroken, and completely down. I feel horrible for her, and find myself choking back a few tears of my own for some reason. “It’s okay,” I say, “best to take it slow anyway. It makes it easier to remember everything. But, what you just remembered is great. We can use that.”

She finally let out a smile. “Think you’ll find him?”

“I know we will,” I say. “It just takes time.”

She nods. “I know that you’ll be here while I’m in the hospital,” she says, “but what happens when I go home?”

Home. I don’t blame her for wondering about that. She may not know what she’s lived through just yet, but she knows enough to be frightened. Luckily for her, the police department has come up with a clever tactic to make her feel

at ease on her road to recovery. I clear my throat one more time and take a breath.

“Well, I’m sure we’ll send police protection to your house,” I tell her. “We want you to be comfortable; heal at your own pace. Being in your own home should offer you some comfort.” She makes a strange face. It is an odd situation. Not one that the police would normally use. But, when we have a survivor as delicate as Charlie, we want to cater to her every need. Many counselors believe that being in her own



home will help her. In my own opinion, they're right. Who could heal completely if we stuck her in some hotel, surrounded constantly by police? I give her a wide smile. "Look at it like having your own personal body guard."

She leans back into her bed. "That's one way of looking at it."

I nod, standing and straightening my uniform. "I'll leave you to get some rest, but I'll be just outside. Let me know if you can remember anything else."

She nods as I see myself out the door. Hopefully, over time, things will

be easier for her.

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## **Charlie**

It has been a long week. Long, tiring, and draining while trying to remember, trying to heal, trying to live in general. It's not every day that you're kidnapped by one of the current most wanted serial killers. A serial killer that, after months

of tracking, finally had a name; Loverboy. Just thinking about the name makes me sick to my stomach. I still haven't regained much of my memory; just a few tidbits here and there. Not enough to catch Loverboy, like I had hoped.

And, after spending a week in the hospital, many of my wounds are on the mend enough for the doctor to feel as though releasing me is the best idea. I feel safer in the hospital. I can't imagine how being home is going to make me feel. At least here I have Nick right

outside the door, and he isn't about to let anyone pass without a thorough questioning, which I am eternally grateful for. But, home? My apartment is small, big enough for just me, but lonely, too lonely, and certainly not as safe as I like it. Though it's a secure building, there's not much protection. I don't have a gun; I don't own a tazer. I let out a breath as I feel the fear wash over me. I don't want to be alone, and I'm not ready for it.

I remember Nick had mentioned about having protection at my home, but

that was the last I heard of any protection. Now, here I am, slowly dressing as I fight through the surges of aches and pains. I am lucky that a good friend stopped by my apartment and brought me some of my own clothes and shoes. I can't describe just how good it feels to put on my own fabric softener scented clothes. That seems to be enough to ease my mind for now as I take another deep breath. I carefully layer a few tank tops and gingerly pull the open sweater around me. I take another look at myself in the mirror. Though on the

mend, the cuts and bruises are certainly all visible. A few of them even had the stitches removed. I still can't help but wonder how many of them will leave scars. I blow a tuft of hair from my eyes and begin brushing my hair back. No sense in worrying; I am alive. I pull my thick gob of blonde hair into a pony tail. I sigh deeply when the knock at the door makes me jump. That part still hasn't gotten easier. It seems that even the slightest noise can make me jump now.

“Charlie?” I can hear Nick's voice on the other side of the door.

“Yeah?” I answer, sliding into my slip-on UGGs.

“Is everything okay?” He asks.

I nod, stepping out of the small bathroom and open the door all the way. “I’m fine, just getting dressed. You can come in.” As horrible as my ordeal has been and as awkward as I have been around men, Nick is completely different. After having spent a week with him, I am beginning to warm up to him. I am almost sad to be out of his protection.



“I have good news.” He smiles.

“They caught him?” I ask.

He shakes his head. “I wish I could tell you that, but no; I’ve actually been ordered to accompany you home and be your live in body-guard.”

“Really?” I ask. For some reason, some part of me swells with happiness and relief. I feel a little of the fear I had been carrying around lift off my shoulders. At least now, I know that I won’t be going home alone. And that, is the biggest relief yet.

He nods again. “They figured since you have been doing so well with me, it wouldn’t work out to change things around, and everyone thinks that your recovery will go smoother at your home.”

I nod. “I’m sure they’re right.” I take a seat on the bed that I’d just spent a week in. They may be right, but it doesn’t make it less scary for me. Honestly, I’m so scared right now, I can barely stand up, and if I do, I want to curl up in a ball and never move. I take a few breaths that ease me back into a

relaxed state.

“Is everything okay?” He asks, closing the door behind him.

“It’s just,” I pause. Suddenly I feel the fear creeping back up my body. It seems as quickly as I can suppress the fear it can come right back within seconds. I bite down on my lip. I’m not sure where to go from here. I’ve survived; I lived, but what happens next? How do you really continue to live after this? How do you carry on after some man...I force myself to stop as I feel my body starting to shake. “I haven’t been

home in a while. I'm not sure how it'll feel to be there. I'm not even sure I can sleep, let alone keep living after this."

He cocks his head to the side. I can tell that he is reading me, studying me. His lips pout for a moment, then part as he begins to speak. "I believe you will. And, I'll be right with you; not much can get past me."

I let my shoulders drop and I take a nice long breath. I look back up at him. It's clear that he's exhausted. His hair is a mess and his beautiful green eyes now have dark circles lining the bottom. It's

funny... I think now is the first time that I've truly looked at him and paid attention. For the first time, I'm seeing him out of uniform: instead, he's in jeans and a tee shirt. My guess would be to seem natural taking me to my apartment. His hair is a hybrid brown-blond that has a golden shine. He seems taller to me now, with a muscular build and chiseled features. It's obvious that being in the hospital with me hasn't given him much time for grooming, as his face is covered in scruff, unlike the first night I met him. His eyes look as though they're

just begging for sleep. Poor guy; makes me feel bad for him.

He purses his lips for a moment.  
“Why don’t we get you home? You’ll probably feel better the minute you step inside.”

“What?” I ask. “Right now?” I can feel my heart beginning to pound in my chest. I didn’t realize I would have to go home so soon. Now? I can’t go home now.

He nods. “It is okay, Charlie. I’ll be right there with you.”

I shake my head. “I really don’t know if I can do this, Nick.”

“You can do this,” he says. “Look at you, you got away. You fought and you got away. Surely you can find the strength to go back into your own home.”

I shake my head. “Not after this.”

“You can. And, I’m going to do it with you.”

I feel a wave of nausea wash over me, and I take a good breath in. I finally look up and nod. “Fine, let’s get me home.”

He smiles and opens the door for me.

It really is an odd situation to be in. And one that I never guessed I would ever be in. After packing the rest of my belongings and being given more than enough prescriptions to last a few months, it's been explained to me, yet again, that Nick has been ordered to be as covert as he can. Apparently, they think I'll forget everything, because for the twentieth time I've been told that Nick will accompany me home; he will



live there secretly as protection. A move that is supposed to aide in my recovery. It's firmly believed that keeping me in a comforting environment, such as my home, will ease my healing. I've been told that I can come and go as I please, Nick will join me, and to not be frightened to simply carry on with life. It certainly seems easier said than done. My body may very well be healing, but as for my head and my heart, I'm not so sure. Nick is trying to explain to me that he'll spend most of the time in civilian clothes. Even though the killer will

probably guess I'll have protection, we want it to seem as natural as possible. It's difficult to comprehend a word he's really saying as he's guiding me down the hallways of the hospital. I pull my sweater tightly around my body and cross my arms in front of me as we pass a few nurses that give me that heartbroken look. I know how I look, and I know how I feel, but when people look at me like that it just makes me feel even worse. I feel tears beginning to fill my eyes as we near the elevator. I feel my lips quiver as I fight to swallow both

my tears and my fears.

I feel his hand come down lightly on my shoulder. “Are you okay?”

I snap my eyes to meet his, and think for a minute. Am I okay? Am I okay? I am physically. I’m alive, but mentally I’m having a slight breakdown. I haven’t been outside of this hospital in a week. I feel safe and sheltered in here. Now, I’m about to face the world with the help of one single cop.

“It’s okay, Charlie,” I hear him. “I won’t let anything happen to you.”

I give him a nod, and somehow I know that he's telling the truth. I swallow hard as he jabs the 'down' button on the elevator. Maybe once I'm home it will feel completely different. I feel my mind return to its haze, as Nick explains to me we're allowed to take his personal vehicle. I suppose, as peculiar as this entire situation is, I'd rather go home in a normal truck than a police cruiser. I let out a sigh and try to give him a nod to signal that I'm half paying attention to him. I am. Well, I'm trying to anyway as the elevator doors open with

a light ding.

If I thought that walking through the hospital was quite emotional, being outdoors is just plain mentally straining. I find myself fighting a wave of emotions, tears, and panic attacks as I hear Nick's voice try to calm me. But as he pulls into the crumbling parking lot to my building, I can't help but feel terror wash over me. Even though I wasn't taken at home, I can't help but to feel as though Loverboy is there, in some dark corner, just watching me. I take a deep breath, and we both get out of his truck

simultaneously. I finally have my first moment of reassurance when I dig my keys out of my pocket. The building where I live is secure. The main front door inside the building is locked 24 hours a day, only tenants, and now the police, have a key. But, I can't help but to pause as I hold the key at the door.

I feel Nick's hand drop softly on top of mine. "He's not in there."

I force a nod. "I know." I jam the key into the lock and twist. The door unlocks with a click, and I slowly push it open. Nick shuts the door behind us, and

immediately the lock slams back into place with a loud clicking noise.

He looks down at me for a moment.

“What floor?”

“Second,” I tell him as we make our way up stairs.

I can feel my legs become wobbly with each and every step we take upward. My ultimate fear is that he’s found me and when I turn my lights on, I’ll feel those arms clamp around me, making it impossible to move or get away. I take a long, slow breath as I

fumble with the rest of my keys.

I feel Nick's hands on mine again as he takes the keys from me. I look up to see a crooked but reassuring smile.

“Which one?”

I point to the larger gold one, and wrap my arms tightly around me.

He unlocks the door, pushing it open slowly. A soft breeze wafts under my nose. It still smells the same; warm vanilla and spices. Various fragrances I'd placed throughout my tiny apartment that made it smell like 'home' to me. We walk in slowly, and I realize that I've



forgotten to turn off my table light next to the couch. I sigh deeply, seeing it's completely empty and everything the same as before I left. I hear the door shut and lock behind me. I turn around to find him still watching me contently.

I smile. "I only have one bedroom, and you're more than welcome to it."

He shakes his head. "No, you'll sleep much better in your own bed. I'll be more than happy on the floor."

I point over to my couch. "I have a couch; you can sleep there if you'd like."

He nods. “Perfect.”

“I’m sorry,” I say. “I don’t mean to sound stupid, but how exactly does this work?”

“What do you mean?” He asks.

“I mean, you just basically live here, right?”

He nods. “And make sure you’re protected. This guy is ruthless and, unfortunately, we have no idea what he’s capable of. They figured low-key is best, and they wanted you to be comfortable as well. You’re probably

most comfortable here in your own home.” I know he’s repeated this to me several times, but who would ever think that they would find themselves in a situation like this.

I nod. “I see, so can I get you anything? Coffee?”

He shakes his head again. “You get settled, and I’ll be fine.”

“Settled...” I say. “Right.” I look around, unsure of what to do. Finally, I look back at Nick. “I’m just going to take a shower.”

He nods. “Okay, I’ll just be out here.”

I scurry past him and reach for the television remote. “Here,” I say, passing it to him. “For the TV; feel free to help yourself in the kitchen, too.”

He smiles. “Thank you.”

I turn slowly and head to where my bedroom is. I pull another set of clean clothes from my closet, a few more tank tops to layer and another open sweater, this one larger. I take a careful look around my bedroom, just to make sure

nothing has fallen mysteriously out of place, before I head down the hallway to the bathroom. I turn the water on and wait until it creates steam in the tub, then I carefully pull the silver plug to make the water spew from the shower head. I slowly undress and climb in, letting the scalding water run down and all over my body. I groan softly as a few of the cuts become tender under the hot water. I reach for my shower gel from its usual place in my shower and begin scrubbing my body up and down, making sure not to miss an inch. I scrub hard enough to

make my skin glow red, as though I could simply wash the horrible cuts and bruising away; as though I could wash Loverboy away. The light knock at the door makes me jump.

I take a deep breath, and then poke my head from behind the shower curtain. “Yeah?”

“Hey, everything okay in there?” I hear Nick’s voice come from the other side of the door. “You’ve been in there for nearly an hour.”

“Yeah, I’m fine. I’m just stepping out,” I tell him, reluctantly shutting off

the water and reaching for my towel.

“Okay,” I hear. “Just let me know if you need anything.”

“Thanks, I will,” I say, rubbing the towel tenderly over my body.

I carefully slide into the gray pair of yoga pants and layer the tank tops over my body. I run my hair brush through my hair, yanking it into a messy bun before throwing the large sweater around me. I take a look in the mirror at my cut up and bruised face. I sigh. No sense in trying to hide it. I still look awful. I still feel

awful. There's no denying that. Maybe a few more weeks and my face would at least look normal, and I could feel a little better about things. There has to be some hope there. I open the door, and I can already hear the television on in the other room. I find Nick on the couch, flipping through various channels.

“Feel better?” He asks, turning to look me in the eye.

I nod. “A little.”

“One step at a time,” he says.

I nod slowly and bite down on my



lip. I glance over at a nearby clock. It's not even 8 o'clock, but I feel exhausted. I honestly can't tell if my exhaustion is genuine, or if my prescriptions just plan on knocking me out each time I take them. I yawn softly. "Let me get you some blankets and pillows," I tell him. "I'm kind of tired, so I think I'll head to bed a bit early tonight."

"No problem." He smiles, as I head down the hallway to a small closet that is completely filled to the brim with all of my extra home goodies. I tug out two medium pillows and three blankets. One

being a quilt that my mother had made me years ago; much like the one on my own bed. I yawn sleepily again, and quietly pass him the fluffy pile of blankets. He accepts them with a shy smile. It's obvious neither one of us have been in such a situation, but given the circumstances and how I'd gotten to know him in the hospital, I don't mind it as much as I thought I would.

“Thank you,” he tells me, laying the pile carefully on the couch.

“You're welcome,” I say. “Feel free to let me know if you need anything else.”

You know where the bathroom is, and help yourself to the fridge.”

He nods. “I will; you get some rest.”

“I’ll try,” I say. “Goodnight, Nick.”

“Goodnight, Charlie,” I hear him say softly as I head down the hallway to find comfort in my own, warm bed.

- 4 -

## Nick

I lay back on the couch, tugging a blanket up slightly as I stare at the ceiling for longer than I had hoped to. It's not that I can't sleep. I can. It's just that, I *can't*. It's an odd situation to be in, period. The fact that we need Charlie

comfortable, so we kept her in the home. Also, keeping me low key. Give the impression that I'm simply living here as a friend or boyfriend. Help her continue with day-to-day activities. I'm stressed, worried, and now I keep waiting for something to happen; something horrible. I know I'm not the only one with the job of keeping her safe. Her building is secure, and probably has more eyes on it than I've been told about. My eyes are heavy. I'm exhausted. I need sleep. I finally give in and roll over to my side as I peek at the clock. Just after one in

the morning. Things are quiet, and Charlie is resting, so no sense in fighting sleep anymore. I slowly close my eyes, and just as I feel sleep slowly creeping up on me, I hear a loud scream, followed by several pitiful cries. Within a split second, I'm off the couch in a full sprint to her bedroom. When I throw open the door, I'm surprised to find her, safe in her own bed, locked into a nightmare. Before I can make my way over to her, she suddenly springs up from her bed, gasping for air and pushing her hair from her face.

She slowly looks over at me, not surprised to see me in her room. “It was just a dream,” She mumbles. “Just a dream.”

I nod.; “Are you okay?”

She shrugs. “I don’t know. I don’t know anything right now.”

“Things will just take time,” I tell her. “You need time to adjust; maybe you could talk to someone about what just happened,” I suggest, trying to push her in the direction of a counselor. Not my place, but, for some reason, I feel the

need to help her by doing more than just sleeping on her couch.

“Who?” She snaps suddenly. “You? When did you suddenly become such an expert?”

I don’t take offense to her tone. I run my hand through my hair slowly and shrug. “I’m not an expert,” I tell her again. “I’m just making a suggestion. I see a lot of cases like this, and I also see that talking to someone can really help.”

She sighs deeply and cups her face in her hands. “I’m so sorry, this is just,” she pauses, “hard right now.”



I nod. “I understand.”

She slowly pushes the blankets off her, letting them pile up into a heap at the foot of her bed. I see she’s still wrapped up tight in the layers of clothes she had put on earlier as she swings her feet over the edge of the bed.

“Do you like coffee?” She asks.

I don’t hesitate. “Yeah.”

“Would you like some?” She asks.

“It’s weird, but it usually helps me sleep to drink something nice and warm.”

“I’ve heard of worse things helping

people sleep,” I tell her.

“Yeah, but it can also help me stay awake when I need it to,” she admits. “I lived off coffee and cereal during finals.”

I smile as she walks past me and into the hallway. “You gotta do what you gotta do.”

She nods. “And, that was stay awake and study.”

I follow her slowly into her kitchen, where I watch as she begins working away, pulling various things from

cabinets and setting a silver coffee maker on the sparkling clean counters.

“Need any help?” I ask.

She gives her head a shake. “I got really good at this during finals. You should have tasted my coffee before. Awful stuff; could have killed a horse.”

I find myself laughing. “It couldn’t have been that bad.”

She nods. “It was like tar,” she says, pulling a pack of tan coffee filters from another cabinet. “Do you like just black coffee? Cream or sugar? Or are you one

of those guys who like the flavored coffee?” She turns to smile, holding up several small packs of coffee.

“You know, I just like it plain; no cream, no sugar,” I tell her taking a seat at the small table.

I lean myself back against the wall, relaxing my body as I keep a close watch on her. She scoops the coffee grounds, measuring it exactly. As she dumps a few scoops into the filter, I get a brief whiff of the grounds as she takes the time to reseal its container, placing it in its own spot. Everything was

organized, clean and neat. If this girl were to see my apartment, she'd probably fall over. It wasn't that I tried to be messy or lazy. I did clean when I got the chance. But, given my job and the amount of time put into it, I didn't clean often. Saying my place was messy was a huge understatement. Seeing her place and the state it was in made me feel like a slob.

As the coffee maker begins to work its magic, she takes the time to lean against her counter, crossing her arms in front of her body. Her eyes meet mine as

she begins wiggling one foot around.

“You mentioned that I could talk to someone,” she says softly. “Like whom?” She asks.

“A counselor; we have some great recommendations,” I tell her. “Female, if you prefer.”

She slowly nods. “Do you think it could really help?”

“I’ve heard it can really help to open up about things,” I say. “I mean, think about it; keeping things bottled in only makes it worse. Imagine how good it may feel to get things all out in the

open.”

She nods again slowly, as though rolling the idea over in her mind. She opens her mouth to speak, but the gurgling from the coffee pot sends her into a slight jump. She takes a breath and shakes her head as she reaches out for two ceramic mugs from another neatly organized cabinet. “Hope you don’t mind strong coffee,” she says as she begins pouring two cups.

“Not at all,” I reply.

She slowly walks over to the table,

careful not to spill, and sits the cup in front of me. She finally takes a seat across from me, bringing both of her legs into the chair to sit Indian style. It's then and there that I find the most incredible urge to stare. Her brown hair has since fallen from its messy bun and is now hanging loosely and comfortably around her face and shoulders. I can now see that her eyes are a shade of blue-green that I've never seen before. I watch as she slowly lifts the cup to her lips, carefully, blowing softly through puckered lips before having a sip. Once



finished, she returns the cup to the table to lock eyes with mine again.

“What?” She asks softly as she bites down a moment on her bottom lip.

“Has anyone ever told you that you bite your lip a lot?” I find myself releasing a slight chuckle as her cheeks turn an adorable shade of pink.

“Sorry,” she says, “bad habit; sometimes I don’t even catch myself doing it. I do it when I’m thinking.”

We both sit in silence for a moment before I open my mouth to speak again.

“Care to talk about your dream?”

She wraps the sweater around her body again, this time tighter. “I...do you think I should?”

“Well, it’s better than holding things in,” I tell her. “You can’t just expect to forget things. Even if you did forget, those thoughts would be in some part of your mind, just hiding,” I say, taking a long drink of coffee. “They’ll always be there, and eventually they’ll come back out.”

“Like a nightmare,” she says, bringing her own coffee cup up to her

lips.

“Nightmares, flashbacks,” I say.

“Memories, good or bad, are things you just can’t erase. But, you can talk about those memories and bring them out in the open so you won’t be haunted by them.”

“No one can possibly be haunted by good memories,” she says, having another drink of her coffee.

“I was just making a point that it doesn’t matter if a memory is good or bad, you can’t just erase it. The only ones that can haunt you are the bad

memories.”

“And, in other words, you’re telling me that I should talk to someone,” she says, shifting her other foot around to point her toes in almost a graceful, dance-like move.

“It would more than likely help,” I say. “Look at it this way, nothing bad can possibly happen from you getting your feelings and thoughts out in the open.”

“And, just how do you know all of this?” She asks.

“I just know a few things here and there,” I say, having another drink.

She lets out an annoyed huff of air and pushes a large blob of hair from her face.

“Look, just take my word for it; I know a lot more about this than you think I do.”

“If you really expect me to let you stay in my home, then you’re going to have to tell me something,” she says. “You know more about me right now

than a lot of people do. You know what happened to me. I can't just share things with people that I know nothing about. It's hard enough having you live here."

I nod. "I guess I can understand that. I'll keep it short and sweet for now," I tell her. "My sister."

"Your sister?" She asks. "Wait, this happened to your sister?"

I nod. "One of them. Not quite as bad as you, but she was raped, yes. That's how I know."

"I'm sorry," she says. "I didn't

know.”

“Well, now you do,” I say. “But, now you have to take my word for things; talking about what happened will only help you. You could start to remember more of what happened, and the more you can remember, the more we know. The more we know, we can catch this guy even faster, Charlie.”

She looks at me and sighs, but I know the look on her face; she’s thinking about it and now she understands. “I may not be ready to talk about my dream, but I will say, it felt like it was happening

all over.”

“I promise you, Charlie; I will never let anything hurt you again.”

She gives me a nod, and for some reason I can tell that she believes and trusts me.

### *One Week Later*

It has been a straining week, for all of us; the police, the city, but more so for Charlie. In the time since Charlie's



hospital release another woman's body has been found. The same as the others; naked, raped, beaten, and tortured in ways unimaginable. On top of the trauma of Charlie having to see the news of the 6<sup>th</sup> Loverboy victim being found, there was the trauma of what had happened to her. She knew very well that the 6<sup>th</sup> victim could have been her. It was supposed to have been her. The nightmares are coming on stronger. She sleeps in increments of no more than an hour, before waking up dripping with sweat and screaming. But, she insists

that she isn't going to talk to anyone just yet. She is adamant that when the time comes, she will talk. I trust her word, and give her the space she needs. On top of all the added stress, we had another task to tend to; keeping Charlie out of the news. Being known as "The girl who got away," would not only make her healing time slower, but also advertises her to the killer, whom we strongly believe has no connection at all to his victims. She feels that, for her own safety, she needs to hole herself up into her apartment and put her life on hold. No one tries to

argue; it's her healing process. Luckily enough, her professors have been kind enough to pass her assignments and notes via email, so she is able to continue her studies.

I lean back slowly into the chair, letting my feet rest up on the ottoman. I glance out the window: A couple strolling down the sidewalk, a jogger, and someone walking their dog. Nothing out of the ordinary and nothing suspicious; which is how I like it. It means that the killer hasn't managed to track Charlie down somehow. I hear a

rustling over on the couch. I look over and see that Charlie is staring blankly at her laptop screen as she lets a few curse words fly. Her norm for when she became stuck on an assignment. She lets out a deep sigh and leans her head back on the couch.

“You okay?” I ask.

She raises her head enough to nod.

“Tired.”

“You could always go take a nap,” I tell her.

She gives her head a shake. “I’m

fine. Really.” She smiles.

“Have you thought more about what I said?” I ask.

“About talking to someone?”

I nod.

She gives a light shrug of the shoulders. “I don’t know. I know I should, but...” She makes an odd face. “I don’t know how comfortable I would be.”

“Remember, we do have some great recommendations,” I tell her. “They specialize in victims of assault.”

“Is that what I am?” She asks.

“What?”

“A victim of an assault?”

I nod. “Well, that would be the, uh,”

I pause, “fancy police term for it.”

She purses her lips and seems to be thinking for a moment. “I guess it makes sense. I am a victim of,” she stops.

“Something...”

“Do you have any idea what he did to you?” I ask suddenly before I can stop myself. I see the pitiful look wash over her face. Her wounds are healing well,

the bruising is minimal, but you can tell she's very much mentally scarred.

She shakes her head. "I know he raped me. You don't have to be a rocket scientist to figure that one out. Not to mention the bruises between my..." She stops.

"It's okay," I say. "You don't have to tell me."

"For some reason I feel comfortable telling you, now," she says. "I mean, you've been with me twenty-four-seven since I woke up in the hospital." She lets out a slight laugh. "I feel more

comfortable telling you now than some counselor that I don't know."

I smile. "I'm glad you're comfortable with me. That's a good thing."

"I'll be honest with you," she starts. "I thought the police were crazy for having a man be my body-guard. But, now, I'm glad they picked you. It's not so bad having you here. And, I'm glad we're not in some hotel somewhere. Being home is nice, too."

"Well, I'll be the first to admit, I



don't mind being here," I say. "It's not as bad as I thought it was going to be. I just wish you could sleep."

Her cheeks flush with color. "Sorry, it's just, every time I close my eyes I feel like I'm on the cold, cement floor. I don't even know who the guy is or everything that he did to me. But, when I try to sleep, I'm there, and he's with me. Except, in my dream I don't get away."

"How did you get away?" I ask.

She shrugs. "I know I was bound, with something tight." She looks down at her wrists, which both have remnants of

red cut marks that are beginning to heal. “The most I can figure is that maybe my hands were so bloody I was able to slide my hands out and just run.”

“You ran alright,” I say. “Straight to an officer on horseback.”

She makes a strange face. “I really can’t remember.”

“Do you remember how you got all the marks?” I ask.

She gives her head a shake. “Not really. But, I do remember something about a medical kit. Things you would

have in an operating room.” She shivers for a moment and finally looks up at me. “You don’t think he’s a doctor, do you?”

“Well, we certainly can’t rule out any possibility,” I say. “You just never know.” She scrunches up her button nose and gives me a look I’ve never seen before. “Are you hungry?”

I haven’t ordered any take out today, which means I haven’t eaten since the day before, at the least. I give her a nod; though I feel bad having her feed me.

“Do you like pasta?” She says. “I enjoy cooking, and I really haven’t

gotten a chance to do it in a long time.”

“I’m always up for pasta,” I say.

“Well, I’m always up for food. And, pie. I love pie, too.”

She lets out a light laugh, and pulls herself off the couch and heads for the kitchen. “You’ll probably love my ma’s recipe,” She tells me as she begins to dig in various cabinets and the refrigerator.

“Did your mom teach you how to cook?” I ask.

She gives me a nod as she begins

digging through her cabinets. “When I was about ten or eleven. She wanted to know that I could fend for myself, I guess.”

“Are you close with her?” I ask.

When she turns to look at me, I can tell I’ve accidentally stumbled onto a soft spot; one that I probably should have left alone. I lick my lips and look down a moment. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay,” she says. “You didn’t know. My mom and I,” she says, grabbing for a large black pot, “we just have a really rocky relationship. Ever

since I didn't get into the school she wanted, and I still moved here."

I'm clearly treading where I don't belong, and begin to feel bad. "I'm sorry," I mumble again. "I hope you and your mom work things out."

She nods as she begins filling a large black pot with hot water. "What about yours? Were you taught to cook?"

I suddenly feel a little relief that she's not upset with me for asking about her mother. She's already been through enough, I feel horrible upsetting her with

petty questions. “Cooking, to me, is usually what comes from the freezer or the Chinese place down the street.” I laugh, finally.

She makes a sickened face. “How can you put that in your body?”

“Easy,” I say. “When you burn popcorn, you find other ways to eat.”

She laughs. “Come in here. You’re going to help.” She pulls another pot out, and begins working on a bright red concoction that I can only assume is the sauce. She hands me a large wooden spoon and smiles. “Stir slowly.”

I give her a funny look, but obey and begin twisting the spoon in a circular motion. “I’m telling you, this could go very bad.”

“Just listen to me, and you’ll be fine,” she says as she tosses in a mixture of various spices. She looks up at me as she tosses in another brown powder.; “I’m curious now; if you’re not good at cooking, what are you good at?” She gives me another smile that this time I fully take in. Her smile is wide, bright, and beautiful. Her blue-green eyes



crinkle just at the corners as she stares at me, and I realize that I'm supposed to answer her question.

Finally, I shrug, coming to my senses. "I don't know. Not much of anything, I guess."

"Oh, come on," she says, taking the spoon from me and adjusting the burner temperature. "Everyone is good at something."

"Well, what are you good at?" I ask.

"Cooking." She laughs. "Now, your turn."

“Damn.” I laugh. “I feel like I was trapped into that one.”

“Well, you should have seen it coming,” she admits.

“Fine,” I say. “I can play piano; pretty well in fact.”

“Really?” She asks as her bright eyes seem to grow large and curious.

I nod. “Not to toot my own horn or anything, but,” I lift my arm as if to pull an imaginary air horn, “Toot toot; I’m really good at it.”

She laughs. “I never could get the

hang of it. I tried, don't get me wrong. I tried for about three years." Her cheeks flush. "Just never worked out." She passes me the spoon again, silently ordering me to stir the sauce. "I will say, you don't strike me as the piano type of guy."

"Well, you don't strike me as the cooking type of girl." I laugh.

"Well, I just couldn't imagine having to order in Chinese every day of the week," she shoots, teasingly.

"Can you do anything else?" I ask.

She shrugs. “That’s for me to know, and you to find out.” She begins pulling the pot of pasta slowly off the stove and working the noodles down into the colander.

“Well, I will give you one thing,” I say, bending forward to put my nose over the pot of sauce, “This stuff smells fricken awesome.”

She laughs, and runs scalding hot water over the noodles. “Just one of my many talents.”

“Many talents, huh?” I ask. “Like

what?”

“You tell me something else, and I’ll tell you,” she says. “It’s called having a conversation.”

“Okay,” I say. “I can doodle.”

“Doodle?” She asks, giving me a blank stare as she places piles of noodles onto crisp white China.

“Yeah,” I say. “Like, cartoon. You know, the Sunday comics.”

“An artist,” she says. “I’m impressed. I said it once, and I will say it again; you really do not strike me as

that type of guy.”

“What kind of guy do I strike you as?” I laugh as she takes the spoon from me and works on ladling sauce onto the pasta.

She shrugs. “I don’t know; the big tough type of guy. You know; the quarterback of the football team who dates the head cheerleader.”

I immediately laugh. “Please, more like band geek.”

She rolls her eyes as she grates fresh cheese on top of the sauce. “I seriously

doubt that.”

“Why do you doubt that?” I ask, taking the plates to sit them at her table.

“Because, well, look at you,” she says. “The pretty boy. I mean, come on, you’re not fooling me. Did you play football?”

I nod. “I did for a while; football and basketball.”

“See, I told you!” She says, pulling a can of Pepsi from her refrigerator and a bottle of wine from her cabinet. She holds them up, silently asking me to

choose.

“What the hell,” I say. “I’ll try some wine.” I suddenly give her a funny look. “Are you even old enough to drink?”

She laughs. “Are you serious right now?”

I laugh. “Dead serious; are you old enough to drink?”

“Oh. My. God.” She laughs, reaching for her wallet on the counter. “I’m being carded in my own home, by a cop, who I’m feeding.” She politely passes me the ID. “Twenty-one, I



swear.”

Though it’s an adorable look, she does look quite disgusted with me right now. I fight a little round of laughter as I look down and search for the year she was born. She is, in fact, old enough. I can’t help but smile. “Not a bad picture,” I say, handing it back to her.

She rolls her eyes, tucking it back in her over stuffed, pink wallet. “Please, I was exhausted. Of course my license expired during finals. That’s just how that works.” She laughs as she pours two glasses of a dark red wine. She carries

the wine goblets over, and slowly takes a seat next to me. “So, you’ve now seen my horrible license, so tell me, did you date the head cheerleader?”

I smile. “Hate to burst your bubble, but no.”

“Damn, I thought for sure I had that one pegged,” she says, taking a small sip of wine before having a bite of pasta.

“Okay,” I say, shoveling another bite into my mouth. “Your turn. Tell me something.”

“How did I know that was coming?”

She asks, having a small bite. “Hmm. Well, I’m kind of a felon.”

I can feel my eyes grow wide as I stare blankly at her. “You’re a what?” I have a small drink of wine, which to my surprise really does bring out a different flavor to the pasta.

“My last boyfriend back home,” she pauses. “He cheated on me after two years. I caught him in the act none-the-less.” She took a long breath and sip of wine before looking up and off into the distance. “So, I slashed his tires, put hay bales in all his seats, and covered his

car in bologna, mustard, and saran wrap.”

My eyes widen as I cough on the wine I’ve just taken a sip of. I feel her hand come down and pat me hard on the back.

“Are you okay?” She asks.

“Yeah, I’m good,” I say, wiping my eyes that have begun to water. “You did that?”

She nods. “Yeah, not exactly proud of it, but, I was young, dumb, and pissed.”

“Well, you probably shouldn’t have just told a cop what you’d done.” I wink.

She laughs. “Been there, done that. I was caught and punished once.”

I laugh. “Serves you right.”

She takes a swallow of wine.

“Serves him right.”

“Point made,” I say, having another bite of pasta. “Sounds like he was more than deserving of what he got.”

“I think he was anyway,” she says.

“So, tell me, your turn; what else are you hiding?” She asks, having a petite bite.

“Well,” I say, taking a gulp of wine.

“Remember that ex of yours that cheated on you?”

She nods. “Wish I didn’t, but yeah.”

“My last girlfriend did the same to me,” I say. “I caught him and her in my apartment and on my couch.” I look at her, almost dumbfounded by what I’ve just said. My business is my business, and I usually do an alright job of keeping my personal life to myself. But, for some reason tonight, I don’t mind opening up to her.

“Oh Nick,” she sighs. “I’m sorry. I

really know how it feels.” She gives me such a sad look; one that makes me want to hug her.

I lick the wine off my lips. “It’s okay. It’s her loss. Or so I was told.”

She shoots me a little smile. “I really am sorry. And, for what it’s worth, I’ve had an array of horrible dates since then. Like Jason, the ass who stole my savings. Tom, the personal trainer who insisted on going everywhere with an open shirt. Or how about Chris, who I walked in on licking

my bathroom mirror?”

That was as much as I could take. I burst into such a fit of laughter I nearly spilled the red wine. I've heard of bad dates, but licking the bathroom mirror has to shoot to the top of the list.

“Wow,” she says softly. “Good thing I don't have a complex about it or anything.”

“I'm sorry. I'm sorry,” I say. “I couldn't help myself. Licking the bathroom mirror?”

Before long, she's laughing too.



Finally, her eyes return to mine. “I really am sorry. Is that part of the reason why you keep things to yourself?”

I nod. “Part of it.”

“What’s the other part?” She asks.

“Well, that and I generally like keeping to myself,” I tell her.

“Hmm, that’s funny, I do remember a guy telling me that it’s always better to open up and talk about your feelings.”

I laugh. “You got me, and I did say that. I guess I need to take my own advice, huh?”

She nods. “You do.”

I smile and have another sip of wine.

As I stare at her, I can tell she’s more relaxed; her body completely loose as she has another drink of wine. Her cheeks are filled with color, and, despite the amount of heavy pasta weighing in on her stomach, I can tell that she’s feeling the effects of the wine.

“So, tell me, why did you become a cop?” She asks.

“Remember my sister that I told you about?” I ask.

She nods and has another bite of pasta.

“She’s my youngest, and she was raped. I kind of knew before then that I wanted to be a cop, since my dad and grandfather were both cops, but after that happened to her, it was a sealed deal. I stopped at nothing to become one.”

“I know I’m not the only one that this has happened to, and I know I won’t be the last. I just wish that no one had to go through this. I am truly sorry about your sister,” she says, softly.

I look up at her, and the bright shine of sincerity in her eyes, and smile.

“Thank you.”

“I really hope that she’s doing well now.”

I nod.

“I’m sorry,” she says, “I shouldn’t pry.”

“It’s okay,” I tell her, “I don’t mind telling you, for some reason.”

She smiles and has another drink of wine. “Whew,” she breathes. “I really should have had something else to drink.

I know it's great with the pasta, but now I'm exhausted."

I laugh. "Why don't you try getting some sleep? I'll clean up; it's only fair, since you did all the cooking."

"Ah, but you stirred the sauce." She laughs, and I can tell that she's just teasing me.

"Please, I'd be completely helpless if I couldn't at least stir a pot of sauce," I say. "Go on, get some rest."

She smiles and finally nods. "Alright, I'll give it a shot."

I watch her carefully as she takes one last drink of her wine before standing to push her chair in. “Are you sure you don’t want any help?”

I shake my head. “You go get some rest. You need it.”

“Thank you.” She smiles before heading down the hallway to her bedroom.

I begin slowly clearing the table, emptying the wine from each wine glass and clearing the remaining pasta off each plate before carefully loading them into

the stainless steel dish-washer. I glance up at the clock, and I can't help but to think of my sister, Anna. Despite the clock reading nearly eleven, I can't fight the urge to phone her. I dig my cell phone out of my pocket and scroll through the contacts until I get to Anna's name, and press the green "Send" button.

Like always, she answers within a few rings.

"Hey Anna," I say. "Sorry it's so late, but I just wanted to see how you were doing." Despite being more than a year past her assault, I still find myself

calling to check on her. She's young, and, while it did take her a while at first to ease back into life, she's honestly been doing great. Finishing up counseling, if she hasn't already. Moved in with her boyfriend, James, whom she met shortly after her assault. Truthfully, she does better with this than I do. I'm just an over-protective big brother who loves to bug his little sister. And, if I'm honest, seeing Charlie and her situation makes me think of her even more, though I know she's just fine.

“Nicholas!” She squeals, her voice



cheery and bright as it always is.

“I was just wondering how you were, and it’s been a while since I’ve called you,” I admit.

“A while?” She asks. “It’s been almost three weeks. How are you?”

“I’m doing okay; working right now,” I tell her.

“Working?” She asks. “Nicholas, it’s eleven at night. I know you’re still somewhat new, but you need sleep.”

“Well, this requires night and day vigilance, and besides, a little lost sleep

won't kill me; I'm a big tough man," I tell her, making her laugh. "So, how are you?"

She lets out a deep sigh. "Well, I'm pretty sure I destroyed this Blu Ray player that I just attempted to hook up to my new TV, but other than that..." She laughs. "I'm doing great." I hear a brief pause. "You should really come up for a visit. You know dad doesn't know how to hook up anything high tech, and I'm terrified that if I let James he'll just end up blowing it up." She laughs again.

I chuckle with her. "Might be a

while; not sure when I'll finish with this assignment," I admit. "It could be tomorrow, it could be a month from now. But, the good news is if I'm decent with this I might actually get a little recognition."

"Aw, that stinks about the time frame, and if anyone deserves recognition, it is you," she says. "You sure you're okay?"

I take a long breath. "I'm sure; I just wanted to call and see how you're doing."

“You know I *am* doing okay now, you don’t have to make these late night calls and phish for information. Just ask,” she tells me. “I’m still talking to the counselor, things are going really well. James has been helping a lot, too; you’d be proud of him.”

“Sometimes, I just really have to check for myself. You are my little sister.”

“I know,” she says. “You should go get some sleep. I’m going to do the same before I throw this Blu Ray player.”

I laugh. “You sound like mom.  
Goodnight, Anna.”

“Someone has to put you in your place. Goodnight; sleep tight.” She laughs just before the phone line clicks off.

I shove the phone deep into my pocket again, and return to cleaning up from dinner. I store the leftover food in a few plastic containers that I manage to find from her well organized cabinets, and carefully scrub the pots we’d used to cook before placing them in a drying rack. I smile for a moment, and sort of

feel accomplished. I don't think I have ever been in a kitchen this long before in my life; let alone to put away food properly and wash dishes.

I click off the light and head to the little living room. Thanks to a friend at the department, I at least have some spare clothes, bath items, any of the basics that I will need, which helps me. I head over to the couch where my things are, for the first time in my life, neatly stored. I pull out a pair of gray sweat pants and plain white tee shirt. As I turn to head to the bathroom for a quick

change, I notice Charlie standing in the hallway.

“Charlie, everything okay?” I ask.

She nods. “Nick, I’m sorry about your sister, and what your ex did to you,” she says, rocking back and forth a moment on her toes. “I’m really glad that you’re here with me. I do trust you, and I’m happy we got a chance to talk tonight.” She’s clearly thinking and a little unsure of herself. Just by coming out to talk to me, shows me just how strong she is, and I admire that.

“Do you maybe, want to talk about things?” I ask her.

I can see her eyes grow large and tears standing in them as the bright emerald-blue glaze over. She purses her lips tightly, looking up as she tries to conceal the quiver. She nods and wipes at her cheek, continuing to rock back and forth on her feet, “Only if you’ll listen.”

I don’t have to think twice. “You know I’ll listen to whatever you feel comfortable telling me.”

I motion for her to have a seat on the



couch. She heads over slowly, leaning into the corner, bringing her knees to her chest. She pushes a few stray hairs from her face as she glances over at me. She looks exhausted, so sleep deprived it's pitiful. Her skin is pale and glowing in the dim lighting of the living room. I toss my change of clothes back into the bag and make my way over to have a seat at the other end of the couch.

“The night he got me,” she pauses. “The night Loverboy took me, I was so stupid, Nick. It was the stupidest thing I’ve ever done. I was walking through

Central Park, by myself, at one in the morning. Who does that?” She scolds herself as a few tears begin dribbling down her cheeks. “Why? Why was I so dumb? I remember him grabbing me. I remember how tight he held onto me, and how scared I was. I remember feeling a sharp pain in my neck.” She wipes at her face as more tears begin to pour down like an out-of-control fountain.

I slowly reach for the box of Kleenex on the table and place them in between us on the couch. I fight an urge

to reach out to hug her, and, instead, pass her a tissue. “It wasn’t your fault, Charlie. It wasn’t your fault at all. You can’t just blame yourself when you have no reason to.”

“It was, though, Nick. It was my fault,” she says, wiping at her already red nose. “I made it too easy for him. I put myself out there, and he took me. Why didn’t I just stay at my friend’s party? Or how about call a taxi to get home? Nope, my dumb ass had to walk home. And, I had to cut through Central Park, which isn’t even a short cut.” She

cries.

“I think there was a good reason why you left that party,” I say. “I think you need to ask yourself why you left.”

“The party was a mess,” she says. “People started doing hard drugs, the guy I went with came onto me too strong.” She sighs. “It was a bad night.”

“See,” I say. “You got yourself out of a situation that you didn’t need or want to be in. Think of how the night could have ended if you would have stayed.”

“But, by leaving I put myself in an even worse situation!” She weeps.

“Why exactly did you go through Central Park, if it isn’t a short cut for you?” I ask.

“Because I just love it there; I love parks. I love the things going on this time of year. And, I do love the zoo. I go out of my way for Central Park. Guess I haven’t taken the time to realize just how dangerous it is,” she says calmly as she dabs at her eyes. She takes a breath and slowly moves her eyes to meet mine, “How is your sister doing now?”

“She’s doing wonderful. Has a great life. She’s in school. She has a steady boyfriend. Matter a fact; she met him about a week after the incident.”

She gives a slight smile. “How long did it take her? To find her life again?”

“Everyone is different,” I say, “but, for her, about six months or so. She is still healing, but she’s living.”

“Do you honestly think I’ll ever get to that point?” She gives me such a pitiful expression, that I have to fight myself not to hug her. She looks scared,

worried, and lost. She's obviously strong, or she wouldn't have made it out alive. I feel even worse for her since not only does she have to recover, mentally and physically, she has to live in fear of knowing that her attacker is out there and may want her dead.

I nod. "I really believe you will."

She lets out a soft snuffle. "But why?"

"Because you're strong, you're willing to talk about it, and it hasn't even been all that long since it happened; that shows strength," I tell her as I reach to

her and give her shoulder a soft pat.

She looks away for a brief moment to yawn, and then looks back to me with exhausted eyes. “Thank you. That really means a lot to me.”

I smile. “And, I mean every word of it too,” I say. “You should really go get some rest. But, remember, you can talk to me. I’m glad you’re comfortable enough to talk me.” I nearly feel my cheeks flush with embarrassment as I feel more like her father at this moment, than the cop staying with her to watch



over her.

She nods. “Thank you, Nick.” She smiles. “Maybe I will talk to that counselor. If they’re anything like you, I’ll be healed in no time. Goodnight.”

“Night,” I say as I watch her trail back down the dark hallway to her bedroom.

\* \* \* \* \*

The next night, I kick back in her lounge chair, which is quickly becoming

my favorite seat in her apartment. It's clear neither of us truly has a handle on how we're supposed to do things. We have lounged for a better part of the day, had breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Charlie has had a calmer day. I can tell that after our talk last night she really seems to be doing better. I'm quite proud of us both. She trusted me enough to listen, and I actually listened without pushing counseling on her.

Right now, the TV volume is set low on a children's channel. Charlie is sitting on her couch, her laptop planted

in her lap as she throws out a few choice words toward one professor in particular. I glance out the balcony doors for a moment to see a calm street. Calm. That's what it had been for weeks. No one had heard or seen anything. Not the police. Not the media. No one.

A ding rang through her computer's speakers, signaling another email. I hear Charlie sigh. "I swear to God, if that man sends me one more paper to write."

I can't help but to stifle a laugh, as I have to look up and away from her for a moment.

“Um, Nick,” she interrupts me for a moment, and she immediately has my attention. “I think you should look at this.”

I rush next to her. The sender of the email was labeled in bold, capital letters. **LOVERBOY**. She looks up at me as her breathing quickly becomes choppy and deep. I can tell that she’s in the early stages of a panic attack.

“Nick,” she stutters my name. “It’s him.”

I can see the tears already starting to

form in her eyes as I quickly take the computer from her. I move the screen from her view as I open the email myself. The minute I read the horrible words on the screen, I don't regret moving it from her view. The sickening paragraph details her days and nights while under his lock and key. I feel myself become nauseous as I read only a small fraction of what he has done to her. Suddenly, I feel my stomach drop completely when I see there are attachments to this email, too. I hesitate, but open it to find several pictures of

Charlie. I close my eyes for a moment, and slam the computer shut as I begin to dig my cell phone from my pocket.

As I press the number to my department on my cell phone, Charlie has begun pacing her floor, walking back and forth in a steady pace with her arms wrapped tightly around her. She sniffles a moment and takes a few deep breaths, as I can tell that she's fighting her tears and her increasing panic attack.

"He knows where I live, Nick." She whimpers.

I shake my head to her to ease her

mind as I begin to tell the department what's happened. In the months of chasing Loverboy, not once had he made any direct contact. But, of course, he'd never had any of his victims escape either. I look up in the middle of my conversation to see Charlie is still pacing, now holding her stomach as though she's about to become ill. The color seems to have dropped from her face.

“He knows where I live, Nick,” she says again. “I just know he does. How did he get my email address? What other

information does he have?”

My heart begins to crush for her. In all the weeks of being under my watch, nothing had happened, and I prefer to keep it that way. In all the months of chasing this sadistic nut job, he'd never made contact. Why now? Why Charlie? The look of hurt and confusion is sweeping over her already tired face. It's a heartbreaking sight to see, and all I can do is move her computer and make a phone call. Some great protector I am. I finish up my conversation, now knowing an unmarked car is coming to Charlie's



apartment to collect the computer. I turn on my phone's lock screen and shove it back in my pocket.

I walk over slowly to her, placing my hands tenderly on her shoulders to make her footsteps stop. "I will not let anything happen to you, Charlie." She nods and wipes at her cheek. I fight the urge to hug her again as she stares at me. "They will need to take your laptop," I tell her. "They'll need the email and they have to track the source."

She nods. "Let them have it; I don't want the damn thing now." She tells me,

sniffing.

“We have the technology to find out where he sent that email from, Charlie,” I tell her. “We can get him.”

She looks up at me, with brighter eyes. “Really?”

“Really,” I smile. “We can put this guy behind bars and throw away the key.”

She finally smiles.

“This just puts us one step closer. And, by him contacting you, I think this could very well be his screw up. All it

takes is one little mistake and he's caught. How could he have known that you would be on your computer at the very moment he sent that email?" I ask. "He could have very well sent it with the intention of you reading it later."

She looks down for a moment, biting down on her lower lip. She's thinking. I remember her habit. Biting her lip means she's thinking. The wheels in her mind are turning. I have a feeling that I know what's coming next. Her eyes finally meet mine again. "What did it say?"

For some reason, I feel a pang of

hurt in my heart. I knew she would want to know.; I knew she would ask, but I can't tell her. I can't hurt her like that when she has been making such wonderful progress. To know the contents of the email, I fear, would crush her. "That's not important," I say. "The important thing is he screwed up and we can track him. This isn't just some piece of snail mail; it's an email."

She nods. "But, what did he send? What did he say? There has to be a reason that he would just email me out of the blue, right?"

I look deep into her eyes. I can't repeat the violent words he'd used to describe how he raped her, and the sheer enjoyment he got from her pain. I can't tell her his closing statement was that she would be next. I can't stand to look at the photographs myself, let alone tell her how she looked in them.

“That's not the important part.” I say, again. “What's really important here is that we can catch him, possibly tonight.”

She wraps her arms around her body and lets her gaze meet mine. “Tell me. I

have to know.”

I shake my head, because I can't. I can't put her through that pain again. I can't see her relive the one moment she wants to forget the most.

“Is it really that bad?” She asks.

I manage a slow nod as I lick my lips.

She breaks down, sobbing in such a way I see her knees buckle for a moment. For the first time, I feel the need to be truly protective; not just to keep her from harm, but to comfort her. I

hesitate for a moment, and then I wrap one arm around her. An unethical move, but for some reason feels right and normal. Before I can stop her, she throws both arms around me and holds tightly. I pause and take one deep breath before wrapping the other arm around her. She pushes her face hard into my chest as she sobs. Unsure of what to do, I slowly bring a hand up to her hair and let my fingers run through it. She squeezes to me tighter, and I find myself holding to her tighter as well, as though locked in my arms can take away the hurt

and the pain that she is feeling right now.

“I won’t let him hurt you again, Charlie,” I say, letting my chin rest on the top of her head. “I promise.”

The knock at the door makes her jump in my arms as she tries to push herself closer.

“Shh,” I say softly and wait.

“Andrews!” I hear the voice of Sergeant Wilson, my boss, scream through the door.

“It’s okay,” I reassure her. “I have to get the door.”



She nods. “I’ll just,” she pauses. “I’ll be back,” she says, and heads down the hallway where she disappears into the bathroom.

I walk to the door, unlocking each deadbolt and lock that has been newly placed on the door. Sergeant Wilson storms in furiously. He wastes no time in getting down to business, though for some reason, I still feel Charlie wrapped tightly in my arms. His eyes narrow in on me. “What was in the email?” He asks.

“Very detailed paragraph about her

time with him,” I explain as I unplug the computer charger from the wall. “And, photographs.”

“Of her?” He asks.

I nod slowly, and find my thoughts traveling back to her; I can still smell her. Sweet, like a mix of vanilla and honey. I shake out of it long enough to listen to my boss.

“Sick son-of-a-bitch,” he breathes.

“She didn’t see them, did she?”

I shake my head. “I wouldn’t let her.”

“Good work,” he says, taking the laptop from my possession. “I’ll get this back to the team, and I’ll phone you as soon as we know something. This has to be it, Andrews. This has to be his fuck up.”

I nod. “I hope you’re right.” I finally realize that I am talking to my boss, who came all this way to pick up a computer. “Why didn’t you send someone else?” I blurt before I can shut my mouth.

“Been stuck in the office, needed to get out,” he tells me. “Besides, someone has to check in on you, pretty boy.” He

lets out a deep laugh.

I make a sour face; he has to know that I don't appreciate the nickname, and I certainly don't appreciate him implying that something would be going on in this apartment. I sit on my ass for a better part of the day until Charlie offers to feed me. Then, I at least try to make myself useful and help her in the kitchen, though at times I can tell my lack of knowledge in the cooking department may be starting to drive her nuts.

“Aw, don't get your panties in a twist,” he teases again. This time I make

a face that if looks could kill I would have a winner. Boss or not, there are boundaries. His expression changes as he tucks the laptop under his arm and he heads for the door. “Be on your toes, Andrews.”

I nod as I watch him rush down the stairs and head for the door. We are on a timer now. If given enough time they could easily poke into Charlie’s email and find out where the email was sent from. A location can lead us straight to him. I take a deep breath and peer around in the hallway before shutting the

door and taking the time to carefully lock each deadbolt.

I head down the hallway to see the bathroom door is now open and completely empty. I continue a few more steps, seeing her bedroom door is now wide open. I peer in, and see that Charlie is now sitting on her bed, leaning up against the head board with her knees up to her chest.

“Are you alright?” I ask.

She looks a little worn. Her eyes have dark circles under them. She’s a

little shaky, and I can tell she's having a rough time with the email. She's a sad sight to see, sitting on her bed, her lips turned down in a frown while they quiver just enough for me to see.

She nods. "I think so."

"This could be it," I remind her.

"We could have him."

She nods again and purses her lips. She's fighting tears, and she's honestly doing a good job at it. "How did he get my email?" She asks.

I shrug. "I wish I had an answer," I

tell her, making my way into the room to sit at the edge of her bed. “I’m still here with you. No one is going to get passed me, unless I let them.”

Her eyes meet mine again for a moment, and before I knew what was happening, she lunges forward, throwing her arms around me and her body into me. This time, I relax and wrap my arms around her. She accepts my arms, and I feel her sigh as she seems to melt into me. The warm and sugary smell of vanilla comes up to my nose again as I rub a hand up and down her back. This



is clearly against what I am here for; clearly it wouldn't be allowed, but Charlie seems so at ease, it's difficult to push her away. "I won't let him get you," I say.

She nods as I feel her head on my shoulder. "I trust you, Nick."

I smile. "That's good."

I feel her breathing begin to slow and her muscles loosen up as I continue to let my hand rub her back.

"Thank you," she says, softly.

"For what?" I reply.

“For everything,” she says. “I know this isn’t normal. But, you’ve been here so long,” she tells me. “I just feel close to you; I feel safe with you.”

I smile.; “That’s what we wanted all along.”

My phone ringing makes her slowly, and reluctantly, move back. I fish it from my pocket, sliding the answer key and pressing it to my ear. “Please tell me you have great news.”

“He was at the campus library,”  
Sergeant Wilson wastes no time.

“Tracking him was no problem.”

“That’s good, that’s not too far,” I say. “Do we have him in custody?” I ask.

I can hear the let down in his voice. “No, and no one saw a damn thing. Even the person next to him can’t remember a damn thing, and he’s been on that computer for three hours for research.”

I slouch for a moment, and right away, Charlie picks up on my body language as her head drops. “We have to find him. I don’t know how much more she can take. And, besides that, it’s

getting harder to keep her out of the media.”

“I really appreciate your concern, Andrews,” he tells me. “But, you just remember your place in this case. We’re doing everything we can.”

“But, you don’t see her every single day; you don’t see what she goes through. I do,” I snap. “Maybe more needs to be done!”

He’s quick to interrupt. “We’re doing our jobs, I suggest you do yours.”

Before I can say another word, the

phone goes dead. I mutter a few curse words under my breath as I stuff the phone back into my pocket. I let out a deep breath as I look at Charlie. I don't want to tell her. What I want to tell her is that he's in jail and she's safe. Instead, she already knows the bad news. Her sad eyes meet mine, and I shake my head. "I'm sorry, Charlie, I really thought we had a chance."

She nods. "It's okay. I know they're working as hard as they can."

I nod. "You should get some rest, you look exhausted."

She gives me a funny look, one that I had never seen before. Suddenly, a rush of red floods her cheeks. “Could I ask you a favor?”

“Sure,” I reply.

“Could you stay in here tonight?”

She asks.

I drop my mouth. “Oh, Charlie, I don’t think that’s such a good idea. I mean, that completely goes against protocol. I’m sure there’s something huge against that.” I shake my head and feel a little awkward. “That’s...that has

to be crossing a line.”

“Please?” She begs. “I just feel so safe with you, and being close makes me feel that much safer,” she admits.

I look at her, and, even though making her feel safe is hard to resist, I shake my head. “I just don’t think it would be a good idea.”

“I know it’s a lot to ask, but I really don’t sleep that well,” she admits. “You know that. And, for some reason, being close to you relaxes me.”

I think back for a moment about how,

as I held her, I physically felt her body relax and her breathing slow. She had a point. “Okay, I’ll do it if it will truly help you sleep. I’ll pull a chair in here or something,” I say. “But, you absolutely cannot breathe a word of this to anyone, you hear me? No one can find out about this. It would be my ass in hot water, and I would probably have two assholes the next day.”

I can see the tears beginning to brim her eyes as she smiles, so wide that if I was standing I would have probably fallen over. “Thank you so much, Nicky,



you...” She stops suddenly, her mouth dropping and her cheeks filling with a rather cute shade of pink. She smiles nervously. “I’m sorry. I don’t know why that came out that way.”

I think for a moment. “It’s okay. I’ll just be back in a moment,” I tell her, getting up to head for the living room.

I take a quick seat on the couch, staring blankly at the colorful cartoon on the television. It’s a lot to take in, for some reason. She didn’t do anything wrong, she called me by my own name, but the tone in her voice... It’s hard to

put my finger on what really happened, because I don't know. I know we're been in this apartment for a while and for some reason, somehow we've managed to get a little close. Close enough to hug, close enough for her to feel truly safe with me. The situation all around is different, what would be wrong with adding one more thing to the loop. If she feels safe with me, I should feel grateful. She's been to hell and back, and me making her feel safe is a compliment. So why did I have to walk out of the room? My mind is quite the

mess as I make myself shake out of it. I hear the hallway creak, and within a moment, I feel her hand come down on my shoulder. I turn to look up at her and immediately smile.

“I really am sorry,” she says.

“It’s okay,” I say. “Really. Not a big deal at all.”

“It was a little unprofessional on my part,” she tells me. “I shouldn’t have asked you to stay in the room with me to begin with, Nick.” She pauses.

“Andrews.” I look over my shoulder as she purses her lips and sadness washes

down her face. “Officer Andrews.”

I shake my head. “It’s Nick. Just Nick. I like that better anyway.”

She smiles nervously. “I didn’t mean to make you uncomfortable.”

I shake my head again. “You didn’t, truthfully.”

“It just kind of,” she pauses, “came out, I don’t know what I was thinking.”

“I could tell,” I smile. “Look, don’t worry about it, please? It’s not a bad thing.”

She takes a deep breath. “It’s not?”

Not a bad thing? I pause, letting my mind wander. It really isn't a bad thing. She'd basically called me by my own first name, nothing bad or wrong about that. Nothing terrible. She just called me Nicky. My mom has called me Nicky before. Not in the tone Charlie had used. She sounded more...more...I still can't put my finger on it.

I snap out of my funk and shake my head. "No, it's not a bad thing."

She smiles again, and proceeds to rock back and forth on her toes. Another habit that I'm picking up on. She seems

to be nervous, on edge, and worried when she does it. It's rather cute. I find myself smiling wide. "Charlie, please don't worry about it."

"Well, if it's not a bad thing, then why did you get up and leave?" She asks.

Always full of questions; some of which I have no idea what the answer is, since I haven't thought of that myself. "It just really surprised me, I guess. We've always had such a professional relationship." I smile. "Here, why don't we get some air on the balcony? It could

do us both some good,” I say, standing, to head for the large double doors.

“As in, go outside?” She asks as I pull the doors wide open.

I nod, “Fresh air is good for us; take some deep breaths and unwind.”

She licks her lips and finally shakes her head. “I don’t think I can do that,” she admits.; “It’s been a while since I’ve been outside.”

“Well, now is as good of a time as any.” I smile. “C’mon, I’ll be right out here with you.”

She gives me another odd look, and, finally, I step in close enough to take her hand in mine. “I’ll be right next to you.”

“What if...” She starts.

I won’t let her finish. “No what if’s. Just relax. It’s just the two of us. Alone. Nothing bad is going to happen.”

She finally nods, and I lead her onto the balcony. I feel her hand tremble as I walk her to the banister.

“I used to love being outside,” she says, softly, looking out.

“There’s no reason to stop loving



it,” I tell her. “Don’t let him take away things that you love the most in your life. That’s letting him win, Charlie.” I smile. “It’s perfectly okay to force yourself to take baby steps. This is a baby step.”

She smiles. “Thank you. Sometimes I think you’re more understanding than other people, even that counselor they had me call a few days ago.” She laughs softly, “He’s already trying to push me outdoors; he doesn’t understand the ‘I’ll go when I’m ready’ part. Or the part that I have talked to him once.”

“Some people don’t,” I tell her.

“They want you to jump right into the deep end.”

“Well,” she says, “it’s a little known fact that I’m terrified of deep water.”

She glances over at me; her eyes begin to change as they’re fueled by curiosity. She focuses hard on something, and I watch her contently as she licks her lips and cocks her head to the side. Her lips curl at the corners as her hand moves slowly over to me. I don’t know what she was looking at until I feel her pushing up the sleeve of my tee shirt. My tattoo. I stand perfectly still for

a moment, while she takes a moment to examine it carefully. The gray police badge, my grandfather's own badge number printed plain on the front and the flag behind it, wrapping partially around my arm. The words, "*They can't hurt you, unless you let them*" scripted carefully below it.

"You have a tattoo," she says softly. "It's beautiful." She looks up at me. "It must mean something."

I nod. My tattoo was just that, and I normally kept it hidden.

“What does it stand for?” She asks curiously, her fingernail tracing tenderly over the words.

“My grandfather,” I can feel myself choke up as I speak. “He was a cop too, killed in a drug bust gone wrong.”

“Nick, I’m so sorry,” she tells me, laying her warm hand tenderly on my tattoo. “I could tell you the long story, or I could just show you.” She turns her back to me and raises her tank top. There, along her entire back, is a Phoenix; a beautiful, emerald eyed Phoenix rising from the flames. Its wing

span is so wide, the tips past to her sides.

“Charlie, this is amazing,” I tell her. I look closer; ashes are falling from the feathers on the wings, his talons clenched as he majestically rises again. I place a few fingertips along the artwork. Such immaculate detail, even at the most tiniest points.

“For my friend.” She pauses. “My best friend, actually. He was killed in,” she takes a breath, “A bad accident. A drunk driver. He always told me the Phoenix would always rise from the

flames. He said I would always rise too.” I can hear a slight smile in her voice. “I know it’s why I fought, and it’s how I pushed myself to fight him.” She slowly tugs down her top, and turns to me again. I suddenly feel as though I am seeing a side of Charlie I doubt many people had seen.

I smile. “I am sorry about your friend. But, your tattoo is amazing.”

She nods. “Thank you.” She gives me a slight smile. “I do love being out here, but, I think I’m going to head back

inside. It's kind of cold."

I nod. "I understand; I'll be back in a bit."

She turns to walk inside, and I can't help but stare at her lower back and wonder how many people had seen the ink that was so precious to her. Part of me feels special that she bared so much to me. I take a deep breath of air and rub at my face. There's an unseasonable chill in the air, and after I take in more of the cold than I can handle, I make my way inside and I shut the door behind me, making sure to lock it and double

check it. Charlie is sitting on her couch, Indian style, thumbing through an old copy of a Jane Austin novel.

She looks up, smiling. “Thank you for letting me peek at it.” She gestures toward my bicep. “I’m going to guess only a handful of people have seen.”

I nod. “Likewise; I’m sure it’s the same for yours.” I take a seat next to her.

She nods. “My family and a few choice friends, that’s it. My mom, of course, hated it.” She takes a moment to take a breath and release it. “One more



reason that she and I have a strained relationship.”

I give her a tender pat on the shoulder. “She will come around.” I smile. “And besides, mine was like that too, but she adjusted. She always said she couldn’t understand putting such a permanent thing on one’s body”

“That sounds just like a typical mom.” She laughs, tucking some stray hair behind her ear.

I laugh, and she glances at me from the corner of her eyes, smiling slightly. I smile back. “You really are beautiful.” It

is out before I can even think to catch it. Out before I even realize what I just said.

She looks down as the cute shade of pink tints her cheeks, and she glances up at me from under her eyelashes. “What?”

I run a hand through my hair and down the back of my neck. “I’m,” I pause. “I’m sorry. That just came out.” I laugh, nervously. “I don’t know what I was thinking.”

“But, you think I’m beautiful?” She asks.

I'm not sure how to reply. I'm not even sure I know how to speak at this point. So, I do what I know I can do. I nod and smile. Easy enough and she can at least understand that. I almost feel my own face growing warm as I let out a breath of air.

“For what it's worth,” she smiles, “thank you. It's been a really long time since I've heard anyone say anything like that.”

“A person's a damn fool not to think so,” I say.

“Well, thank you.” She smiles, her cheeks filling up with pink once again.

“Charlie, I really am so sorry that this has happened to you,” I tell her. “No one deserves this to happen to them.”

“That means a lot,” she says. “And, I’m sure you’re right and with time it will get better.”

I smile and begin to think for a moment. “I have an idea,” I say. “How about we go out?” I suggest.

“Out?” She asks. “Like completely outside, out?”

I nod. “Out, for a walk, a drive; maybe grab some pie.”

“Isn’t it too late?” She asks, glancing back at the wall clock in her kitchen.

I shake my head. “I don’t think so.”

“Is it safe?” She asks.

I nod.; “You know I’m not going to let anyone or anything hurt you.”

She thinks for a moment. She’s nervous, she’s scared, and she isn’t sure what to do. She looks into my eyes, and I grin. Finally, she gives me a nod.

I smile. “Let’s go.”

“Well, wait,” she says. “Where exactly are we going? I look terrible.”

“Just out,” I say. “We both really need to get out of this apartment. We’ve been looking at walls for too long now. And, now is as good of a time as any.”

She nods as she rushes to her bedroom and returns with an oversized hooded sweatshirt that she begins tugging over her head. “Nick, I won’t lie, I’m scared,” she admits. “I’m terrified, actually.”

“I know, I can tell, but that’s

natural,” I tell her. “With time, it will pass. But, you have to get out there sometime, and you did great on the balcony.” I smile. “Are you hungry?” I ask. “I know this great little pie shop.”

“Pie?” She questions. “You were serious. This late at night?”

“That’s the only time you can have it,” I explain. “I know this from experience.” I smile. “My sisters and I would always sneak down into the kitchen in the middle of the night for our mom’s homemade pies.”

She lets out a slight laugh. “Sounds

like you love pie.”

“There is no better thing on this Earth than pie.” I smile.

She laughs again, but I notice her pause as we stand in front of her apartment door.

“You’re allowed to go outside, Charlie,” I remind her. “That’s why I’m here, so you can move forward.”

She glances over at me with tears in her eyes and nods. I open the door and carefully lock it behind us. I notice that as we trail down the steps to the main



level Charlie is a little shaky and pushes herself a little closer to me. I open the secured entrance, and she stops only to take a deep breath, but as soon as we step out into the night air I feel her suddenly cling onto my arm while we walk the short distance to my truck. I pretend to not notice as I usher her to the passenger side and hold the door open for her. I wait patiently as she climbs in, before walking over to my own door and lock them behind us. I glance over at her and hold my breath as I wait for her to slowly relax. Slowly, I see her muscles

loosen as she reaches for the seat belt. As I drive to the pie shop, I casually watch her from the corner of my eyes as she stares quietly out the window. Every so often her eyes grow wide with excitement, as though it's the first time she's ever seen New York City. She's beautiful, and in this moment she seems happy, content, and looks as though she feels safe. It's enough to make me feel good as I smile to myself and she enjoys her view out the window.

\* \* \* \* \*

“It feels like it’s been so long since I have been out in public.” She sighs, taking a small bite of pie. “And, I had to do it while looking like this.” She grumbles as she motions to her oversized sweat-shirt and messy bun.

“You look wonderful,” I say. “It takes time, and before you long you will be going out every day.” I take a cautious drink of coffee. “Everything has its own time frame.”

She nods and leans slowly back into

the booth. “I know it’s been a while, and I should be getting out more or at least trying to but at the same time, I know,” she pauses. “I know he’s out there.”

I nod. “I know. And, I know it’s hard.”

“But, like you said, sometimes I just have to throw myself out there,” she says. “Maybe this is what I needed all along.” She smiles, having another bite of pie. “The pie *is* worth it here.”

I laugh, having another drink of coffee. “And, it’s not so bad getting out of the apartment. I think I was getting a

little stir crazy myself.”

She gives me a bright smile. “It’s actually really nice. Maybe one day I’ll feel up to going to a friend’s party... or even seeing my friends at all.”

“Do any of them know what happened?” I ask.

She nods. “A few do. I mean, they don’t know the gory details, but they at least know.”

“It’s good that you told them; that’s a good first step.”

She nods. “But, at the same time, I

feel like they treat me differently. Like I'm fragile now or something..." She looks down.

It's easy to see Charlie doesn't want people to think she's breakable. She wants to come off as strong, even if she is breaking on the inside. She is quite tough, I'll give her that. I haven't met anyone like her before. Even drugged and beaten she's a fighter. And, now, every day she fights to push herself to move forward. I give her a little smile. "Not everyone knows how to deal with things like this," I explain. "They may

need some time too, for it to sink in.”

She nods and reaches for her own cup of coffee. “I will say, the coffee is awesome here too.”

As I reach for my own coffee, my ringing phone interrupts me. “Figures,” I say, digging in my pocket to retrieve it. The screen is glowing with a number from the department. I answer. “Have good news?”

“There are two.” I hear Wilson’s voice come through the phone.

“What?” I ask.

“This whole time we thought we were looking for one sick bastard,” He says. “But there are two of them. They’re working together.”

“How can you know for sure?” I ask.

“Because, the last victim’s body...” he starts. “They fucked up. During autopsy tests, they found two different semen specimens, indicating there’s not just one killer, but two. Of course, we have no DNA matches yet either.”

I feel my heart sink as I drop my



head. I look up at Charlie, who immediately knows that it's not good news.

“Look, just keep doing what you're doing, Andrews,” he says. “Keep her safe.”

I nod. “I will.”

“And, we'll call with any more updates.”

“Thank you,” I say just before the line clicks silent.

She sighs. “More bad news.”

I nod.

“They didn’t find another body, did they?” She asks.

I slowly shake my head.

“They found something?” She asks.

“Sort of,” I say.

“What?” She asks.

“Well, after some tests on one of the girls, they said they were able to find two separate samples of semen.”

“Meaning?” She asks. Before I can say another word, her mouth drops open. “There are two. There are two Loverboys.”

I nod slowly and swallow hard.

Her eyes grow large and she looks down for a moment, scribbling her fork around her plate.

“Are you okay?” I ask. “It was the last thing I wanted to tell you. Believe me. You seemed to be having such a great time tonight.”

“I am having a great time tonight,” she admits. “But, that just sort of put a little damper on my mood.”

“Don’t let it ruin your mood,” I say.

“After everything that’s happened

tonight the email, that phone call how can I not let it ruin my mood?"

"Because, when you let it ruin your mood, you're letting them win, Charlie. Don't let them win, please. You're so much stronger than that," I say, reaching across the table and taking her hand in mine.

"Am I?" She asks.

I nod. "You are. You are the woman who fought hard enough to get away, because you wouldn't dare let them take your life. Don't let them take away what you love, or your freedom."

“I just,” she pauses. “It’s just been a rollercoaster tonight. Getting that email, you know, standing out on the balcony for the first time in weeks.” She smiles. “Hell, being out in public for the first time in weeks,” she admits. “Now this. Now, there are two of these assholes.” She looks down and shakes her head. “It was bad enough thinking about just one man doing what he did to me. I was unconscious, but, I’m not stupid, you know? But, now knowing that two possibly,” she pauses for a moment again, as if choking back nausea. “It

makes me sick to my stomach.”

I find myself sliding out of the booth and into the seat next to her, where I take her in my arms; the first time for me to instigate such close contact. Charlie doesn't hesitate; she moves in, wrapping her arms around me. I feel her sigh deeply as her head finds my shoulder.

“I'm sorry,” I tell her. “But, I'm here. You have me, and while I'm on watch, I won't let anything happen to you. You hear me?”

I feel her nod. “But, it doesn't

change that gross feeling in the pit of my stomach.”

“I know it doesn’t, but, give it time. When I have these assholes in prison, it’ll be a whole other feeling. A good one. They’ll be the ones getting raped.”

I hear her stifle a laugh. “Do you seriously think that’s what goes on in these prisons?” She asks, moving back slowly.

I nod. “I know that’s what’s going on.”

She laughs.

“Hey, do you really think these huge, tough guys, who are in prison for killing other men are really going to take a liking to what they’ve been doing to women?” I ask. “I mean, think of these huge, scary biker types who have respect for women.”

She laughs again. “I see your point.”

“Trust me; there aren’t many men that agree with what they’re doing out there right now.”

“I hope there aren’t any men who agree with what they’re doing.”



“Do you want to head back?” I ask.

She nods. “If you don’t mind. Maybe wind down, watch some TV.”

I begin yanking my wallet from my pocket, when she stops me and shakes her head. “It’s okay, I got it.”

“Absolutely not,” I tell her. “I brought you here; it’s on me. To celebrate your first time out of that apartment.”

She laughs. “Thank you.”

I nod and pull a ten and two five dollar bills from my black leather wallet

that's seen its better days. I slowly slide from the booth, Charlie following behind me, and head for the counter. I hand the older waitress the money, smiling, "Keep the change."

She smiles, thanks us, and adds for us to have a great night. I can only hope that Charlie will continue to have a great night.

Outside, we follow the same procedure to my truck. Charlie instantly grabs onto my arm, and again, I don't say a word as we walk over to my truck. I unlock and open the door for her,

allowing her to climb inside. Instead of waiting, this time I push the lock in on her door manually before shutting it tightly as I head over to the driver side and climb up.

“You still okay?” I ask, shutting and locking my own door.

She nods. “I’m fine. Well, at least, I think I am.” She turns her body to face me in the truck. “You know, I just don’t get it; I know that I was out of it, but I just don’t think I remember two men. One, yes. Two, no,” she admits.

“Maybe your memory is still a little hazy,” I say, pulling into the steady stream of traffic.

She nods. “I suppose it could be.”

She leans back into the seat, where she seems to be deep in thought. For some reason, she looks peaceful and content, and rather than interrupt her, we drive in silence back to her apartment. I leave her quietly to her thoughts as she concentrates hard on something obviously in her mind. I park in a random, open spot in her parking lot and shut off my truck. She watches and waits

for me to not only exit my truck but for me to walk over to her side before jumping down herself.

“There are millions of people in New York City,” she tells me as we head for her apartment. “How are you going to find two specific people?” She asks.

“We’re cops, Charlie,” I say, unlocking and opening the secure front door. “It’s our job; it’s what we do.” I nod, allowing her to head inside first.

“I know,” she says, walking in. “I

just feel like trying to find these two guys, with no leads, is like trying to find two needles in some jumbo hay stack.”

“But, it’s something cops are good at,” I reassure her. “We’re trained for it, and we will find them,” I say as we start up the stairs, side by side.

She shoves her hands into the front pocket of her hooded sweatshirt. “You better be glad that I trust you.”

I laugh. “Oh, trust me, I am.”

As soon as we’re inside her apartment, and I shut and lock the door

behind us, Charlie begins pulling her sweatshirt up and over her head, revealing a layer of a few tank tops underneath. She turns to look back at me. “I know this is your little domain, but care if I watch some TV?” She asks. “I’m not really tired, and the cable hasn’t been run into my own room.”

I shake my head. “Go ahead. Your house, your TV, your clicker,” I tell her, grabbing my own sweats from my bag. “I’m just going to change into some sweats.”

“You know, we should do something

tomorrow too. Maybe getting out more will help me. I could even call the counselor back and start scheduling my appointments for over the phone. It's something, right?-"

"That sounds like a good idea," I call to her from the bathroom. I hear the TV channels flipping and then slowly come to a stop. "You do what you feel comfortable with. And, we can definitely do something tomorrow," I say, pulling my plain hooded sweatshirt down over my head. "You know, maybe we could rent a few movies tomorrow,"



I tell her. “It gets you out for a bit, but not passed your comfort zone,” I say, making my way back into the living room. I can see that the TV is now on one channel. Lifetime. I shake my head and laugh to myself as I wander over to the couch to find Charlie passed out and leaning into the arm rest. She’s soundly resting on one of the blankets that I’ve been using at night, and she looks more peaceful than I’ve ever seen her. I take a spare blanket and wrap it completely around her. She doesn’t budge. I smile and begin to work the remote from her

hand. She seems to sink even deeper into the couch as I move over to the lounge chair and ottoman, just next to her. I casually flip through random TV channels, checking on Charlie every so often, until sleep washes over me and I fall asleep myself.

# **- 5 -**

## **Charlie**

I slowly tug the blanket up and around my shoulder as I become a little more coherent to the world. A few deep breaths and I can smell something in my apartment. Not something different; something good. I rub the sleep from my

eyes before opening them slightly, and realize that it's daylight. I crack them open a bit more, and realize that for the first time in weeks, I've slept through the night without one single nightmare. As I slowly sit up it dawns on me that I'm in the living room and on the couch. I took Nick's bed. I ease myself up and look around. The lounge chair shows signs that he'd slept there last night. I sigh and sink back into the couch for a moment. My pillow had been a blanket he'd previously used. It still smells like him; mix of Cool Water cologne and man

smell. I hear the floor behind me creak. I lie still for a moment and take a deep breath.

“Charlie.” I hear Nick’s voice behind me.

I immediately let the breath out and sit up. Nick is behind me with a steaming cup of what smells like coffee and a small plate.

“Good morning,” I say. “I’m sorry I took your bed last night.”

He shakes his head. “It’s okay. You slept, that’s what matters.” He looks down for a moment. “I made you some

coffee, and since I'm not a cook, I found some English muffins and jam."

I smile. "Thank you," I say. "That was really sweet of you."

He walks past me and places both the cup and the plate on my coffee table. "I figured you had cooked for me before. It was the least I could do."

"Thank you," I tell him again as he returns to the kitchen for his own cup of coffee. "What time is it?"

"Just after eleven," he answers, having a seat again in the lounge chair.

I can feel my own eyes become large. “What? Are you serious?”

He nods and smiles. I can now see that he’s still in his own gray Under Armour sweat pants, but is now in a plain white tee shirt. His feet are bare, and his golden hair is a mess from sleeping. His stubble is beginning to show more, and for some reason now I see the beautiful light and bright shade of jade his eyes are.

“Feel rested?” He asks, having a drink of coffee.

I nod. “Surprisingly, I do,” I tell him, taking a small bite of English muffin.

“Sorry that I couldn’t fix you something better,” he says. “It was that or cereal.”

I laugh. “Please, I’m lucky to have time for coffee in the mornings.”

“Are you still up to rent some movies tonight?” He asks.

“Well, renting from a store would be pointless when I have Netflix.” I laugh.

“So, you’re one of those people that



stream the movies to your TV.”

I nod. “I’m a movie freak, so it was the right way to go for me,” I explain. “But, if we want popcorn we’ll more than likely have to go to the store for that.”

He gives me a nod as he takes a sip of coffee. “That’s no problem.”

“Matter a fact,” I say. “I could probably stand to do a little grocery shopping, too.” I look down and pull off a piece of English muffin to eat. “It’s been a while since I’ve gone.”

“Hey,” he says, regaining my gaze.

“Baby steps remember? There’s no need to start rushing yourself now.”

“I know,” I say. “I just feel like I’ve fallen behind with everything. School, work, my friends...”

“I personally think you’re doing very well.” He smiles. “You’ve come a long way in a short amount of time.”

“You think so?” I ask.

He nods. “Of course, I think so. I know so.”

I smile. “Maybe one day soon I’ll

get up enough courage to go into work, check in on things. They said they would hold my position for me, given what's happened," I explain. "My boss was even kind enough to give me paid time off, so I'm not completely without income," I tell him as I bring my coffee cup to my lips.

"Some boss you have," he says. "Not many people would agree to do that."

"I know, I'm very lucky to have such a great boss to work for." I glance back at the clock, its hands have nearly

reached noon. “I can’t believe I slept as late as I did. I really should shower and dress,” I say, finishing the last of my coffee in a gulp.

“I’ll clean up my mess before you see it.” He smiles. “So, take your time.”

I nod and venture down the hallway to my bedroom, where I begin digging for clothes from my walk-in closet. For the first time in weeks, I’ve finally gotten the nerve to pull out a normal pair of jeans and fitted tee shirt. Baby steps. No sense living in my dance and yoga gear. I head back down the hallway to

my bathroom, where I hear Nick fumbling around in the kitchen again. I shut the bathroom door behind me and start running warm water. Given the small ache in my neck, I turn up the temperature just a bit more before stepping in. Before I disappear in the shower, I hear a loud clang come from the kitchen, followed by a yelp from Nick. Someone really needs to teach that boy around the kitchen.

\* \* \* \* \*

I take a good long look at myself in the mirror. It seems funny being in real clothes. I've grown so accustomed to my dance and yoga gear that it almost feels odd feeling jeans against my legs. My jeans fit, strangely, a little looser than they used to, but I certainly won't complain. And, I will admit that the pale pink fitted tee shirt does look quite nice on me despite all the bruises and marks. I examine my wet and stringy hair. If I'm going to wear normal clothes for once, I might as well go all out and actually do

something with my hair other than throw it into that mess that I call a bun. I reach for my hair dryer and begin drying it slowly as I straighten it. When I finish and look in the mirror, I feel like I'm looking at a new person. My hair is straight and quite shiny. It's a nice change from the slob I was slowly turning into. I give myself a smile and reach for my eyeliner, mascara, and lip gloss. Might as well; I've gotten this far. It's just make-up; will it really hurt to wear it?

“Hey!” I hear from Nick.

“Everything okay?”

I think for a moment and smile. It is okay. “Yeah,” I reply. “Just finishing up.”

“Okay,” he says. “Just wanted to make sure.”

When I step out of the bathroom I can clearly hear the TV. It sounds as though there’s a sports show on. I can’t tell what it’s really about, but it’s obvious that Nick wants one someone to play for a team. I shuffle just past him and into the kitchen, where I yank out the usual small note pad that I use for my



grocery list.

“I’m going to make a grocery list,” I tell him. “Anything you can think of that you want me to pick up?” I ask as I open my near bare refrigerator to have a look inside.

“Let me think about it,” he says. “I’m not picky, but I sure could go for more pasta,” he tells me, his focus still on the TV.

“I can do that,” I say. “I always keep pasta stuff stocked.”

“Charlie!”

His voice makes me jump back and look at him. “What’s wrong?” I ask. His expression is one that I have never seen on him. He looks happy, but confused, while his face seems flustered. It’s enough to make me feel a little self conscious as he studies me.

“You...You’re...You look different,” he says. “You look really good. I mean, not that you didn’t look good before, because you did, but, you look really,” he pauses. “You look beautiful.” His cheeks begin growing redder. “Not that you weren’t beautiful

before. But, you get my point.”

I laugh softly, and I can feel my own cheeks heat up a little. It’s a little strange hearing him compliment me. It does feel nice hearing the compliments; a little odd, but good none-the-less. He is adorable, with such a wide and beautiful smile that it’s enough to make me a little weak in the knees. An unusual and unexpected feeling for the girl who was raped and tortured. I glance down at my feet a moment and scrunch my nose before letting our eyes meet again. Nick’s face is still a little pink, and it’s

clear to see that he's embarrassed himself.

“I’m just going to shut up now,” he says, rubbing a hand down his face.

“Well, thank you,” I say. “Like you said, if I let him take away my life and everything I love then I’m letting him win. I don’t want him to win,” I admit.

“Well, you do look really great,” he says. “It’s a very suiting look for you.”

I smile. “Thank you. I swear I’m not the slob that I was slowly turning into.”

“I never thought you were a slob,”

he says. “I just assumed you wanted to be comfortably covered.”

I smile. “So, are you picky about the popcorn you eat?” I kind of feel weird asking him what he likes to eat, but honestly, he’s been taking such good care of me, the least I can do is feed the man.

He nods. “Butter lover’s, it’s the only kind I’ll eat.”

I laugh. “You have good taste, because that’s all I’ll buy.” I scribble popcorn, milk, eggs, yogurt, and orange juice on my grocery list as I turn to dig

through my small pantry.

“Have you ever tried that Jiffy Pop stuff?” He asks.

I nod. “Of course; only when camping, though.”

“Camping?” He asks. “You camp?” He’s now staring at me in complete disbelief. As though I’m making some wild story up about how they found a zebra in the subway.

I turn to look at him. “From Indiana, remember? I’m not like the girls up here.”

He laughs. “You got that right.”

“What about you?” I ask. “Do you like camping, hiking, and all that outdoor stuff?”

“Of course I do,” he tells me.

“Would you believe I have a four-wheeler back home?” I laugh, though I certainly feel a pang of homesickness wash over me. I miss my brothers, my dad, and my mom. Even though we have our differences, I still love them, whether we talk or not. Telling them what’s happened to me will be even

worse. I don't even want to believe what's happened to me.

Nick's voice snaps me back. "Now that I would have to see to believe."

I shoot him an offended look. "You have all sisters; I have all brothers, three to be exact. All older." I point to the large frame on the wall. "That's me and my brothers, all on our four-wheelers. Thank you very much."

"You're not very dainty are you?" He asks, laughing while examining the photo.



“Dainty? Are you kidding me? With three older brothers, I wouldn’t have lived passed thirteen,” I admit as I jot bread, strawberries, apples, and peanut butter on my accumulating list.

He laughs. “Imagine how they feel having a sister.”

I laugh sarcastically. “They would have rather thrown me to the wolves than protect me.”

“I’m sure as you got older that was a different story, though, right?” He asks.

“Well, yeah, but do you know how

many years that took?” I laugh. “I was thinking of fixing steak and baked potatoes tonight for dinner, would you like some?”

“Do you really think that I’m going to turn that down?” He asks.

I laugh and shake my head. “What man would?”

“A vegetarian?” He asks.

“Okay, ask yourself this,” I start. “What man do you know that’s a vegetarian?”

He pretends to think for a moment,

and then shakes his head.

“My point exactly,” I say as I look over my list.

“I should probably get showered and changed myself,” Nick tells me as he moves up from the lounge chair. “I’ll admit, it was nice to have a relaxing day. To not feel so on edge.”

“I’m pretty sure that you need more rest than I do,” I say. “I hope I have more days like that in the near future. I certainly will never complain about a full night’s sleep.”

“Don’t worry,” Nick reassures me.

“I know you will.” He disappears down my hallway, finding my bathroom.

I continue compiling my grocery list as I realize my kitchen is barer than I ever thought it was. What have I been eating for the past few weeks? I become a little agitated with myself as I shuffle through the cabinets and refrigerator. It’s becoming clear that, as I dig for food, that my growling belly is demanding to be fed. Which means; this trip to the grocery should be more than interesting. I find that after...after I escaped hell, I

haven't been doing things as I normally would. Sleeping, eating, it's all seemed to have taken a back seat while I try to figure out life. I have a life, and I am grateful that I survived. I'm heartbroken for the ones who haven't, but trying to figure out how to keep moving forward is still difficult. Right now, I'm a little afraid to go to the grocery store. Not because of a sky high bill, but because not one, but two Loverboys could very well be watching me. Watching, learning, and waiting for the perfect moment to grab me again and finish what

they started. I try to remind myself it has to get better and easier from here, but sometimes it's hard, even after vowing to never let them win.

When I hear the bathroom door creak open, I snap my thoughts back to the grocery store and my list of things I need. I never realized just how much faster it was for men to get ready than women; he couldn't have been more than fifteen minutes. I finish penning a few more things on my now two page grocery list, and look up to see Nick standing in normal clothes. A pair of

tennis shoes, dark wash jeans, and a green polo, which, I have to admit, doesn't look bad on him.

“No uniform?” I say, realizing the few times we'd been out was later at night and all the time we'd spent here was in normal clothes as well. “That means no gun.” I feel my stomach drop a bit as the thought of going out and having been out without any form of protection, aside from Nick, bothers me.

He shakes his head and lifts up part of the polo. There, tucked safely into a hidden holster, is his firearm. I let out a

sigh of relief.

“It’s a good idea to blend in with you during the day,” he says. “A young woman with a cop while grocery shopping may draw attention.”

I smile, and for some reason feel my cheeks warming up again. “You look nice cleaned up.” I now take in account that his face is freshly shaved as well, and how the green polo brings out the green in his eyes. I look down and then up at him from underneath my eyelashes. I can’t help but to notice how handsome he really is. Now that I’m taking the time



to really look at him.

“Thanks,” he says as he heads toward me. “Just about ready to go.”

I take a moment to come back to reality and I hold up the two long pages. “I really hope I am. I just need to throw on some shoes, and grab a jacket or sweater.”

He nods, and I run to my bedroom, grabbing a pair of below the ankle socks and my favorite low profile Chuck Taylor’s. I wiggle the socks and shoes onto my feet, and stuff my grocery list

into my pocket for safe keeping. I reach into my closet and pull out another favorite my Victoria's Secret PINK zip-up hooded jacket and throw it over my arm. "Well," I say, heading toward the kitchen for my purse. "If we don't leave now I may change my mind."

He laughs. "You're doing great. I swear."

"Yeah, but last time I was in my sloppiest clothes," I say. "Now, I just feel all exposed."

"You're not exposed; you look great," he reassures me. "I'm right here

with you.”

I smile and feel relief, knowing he is with me. For some reason, I have a feeling Nick would never let anything harm me. That alone makes me feel good. I take one deep breath as we head out the door of my apartment and lock it tightly behind us. This time, it does feel a little easier getting down my apartment steps and to the main, secure door, but getting outside is still challenging. I feel Nick’s comforting hand on my back as he urges me forward. I glance over at him and let out a breath that I was

holding.

“It’s okay, Charlie; I’m right here,” I hear him tell me as he reaches for the door.

“Just don’t let me go, Nick,” I tell him as I feel my voice shake.

He smiles. “I won’t.”

I somehow manage to smile back. I trust him.

\* \* \* \* \*

Well, I've managed one small feat.

My first outing in the day in a busy super market in nearly two weeks. Nick made it quite pleasurable as he helped me find things on my list, eased my mind when he sensed my uneasiness. He even pushed the cart around for me, and was patient with me while pondered over which cereal to get for a good five minutes. Of course, by the time we leave the grocery and my purse is minus one hundred and fifty dollars, getting back outside was a little difficult. Nick immediately found a way to push the cart

with one hand while keeping one hand on my lower back. By the time we make it back to my apartment, I've made it clear to Nick that I want to get everything in just one trip. He seems skeptical of the idea, but agrees nonetheless to ease my fears. He's told me he'd be more than happy to take me up to my apartment and then go back for the rest, but for some reason, that thought doesn't sit well with me. But as we're lugging twenty separate grocery bags up the stairs to my apartment I am truly regretting living on the second floor. By

the time we reach my kitchen, I happily dump the bags on the counter. Nick places his just behind mine.

“I don’t know what’s worse,” I say, “Having to buy all this crap, lugging it all up the stairs, or having to put it away.”

He laughs. “Putting it away?”

I shrug. “I guess I’d rather put it away than lug it up those steps again,” I say as I begin digging things from the various reusable bags.

“How do you feel?” He asks, as he

begins to help me take things out and sit them on the counter.

I think for a moment. “Honestly, not too bad. Better than I thought I would feel. I mean, I had some uneasiness, but I’m not a complete wreck.”

“See? Baby steps can help,” he says, softly.

I nod. “They seem to be helping me anyway. I actually feel like I’m somewhat normal again.”

He smiles and hands me a few odds and ends to store in my pantry.



“Are we still on for steaks and baked potatoes tonight?” He asks.

“Of course, I just need to get this stuff all put away,” I say. “Since we missed lunch I’m starved, and I will start cooking right after.”

He smiles. “Anything I can do to help?”

“Actually, you can pick out two bigger potatoes, get them washed and wrapped up in some tin foil,” I say. “That’ll be a nice start, and it’ll take them longer to cook than the steaks.”

He obeys as I hurry to put every stitch of groceries away, making sure to leave out the fresh steaks I picked up from the butcher. I glance over at him as he carefully washes the potatoes and wraps them in aluminum foil. I have to admit, as strange as it is having him here, he's not a bad little helper, even if he couldn't cook to save his own life.

I smile. "You doing okay?"

He laughs. "I've never done this before in my life."

“Well, there is a first for everything,” I tell him, preheating my oven to 350 degrees. “You have to learn some time or another. A man can’t live off Chinese food alone, you know?”

“Hey, I don’t just eat Chinese food,” he tells me. “I throw in the occasional frozen dinner.”

I make a sickened face. “I won’t even eat those. Do you realize how much MSG and other yucky things they put in those? I mean, they could be frozen for ten years, and you’d still be okay to eat them.”

He laughs. “Well, what else am I supposed to eat?”

“Real food,” I say. “You’re going to start paying attention to me and learn how to cook. The least I can do when you leave here, is send you out on your own with the ability to fend for yourself in the kitchen.”

He gives his head a shake. “I might very well blow up your kitchen.”

I laugh as I begin prepping the steaks to be cooked and slide the potatoes into the oven on the bare oven rack. “Well,

it's not my kitchen; it's my landlord's."

"Even more reason for me not to cook," he says. "I'll just watch and eat the finished product."

"Uh huh, sounds like a typical man," I say, tossing some spices onto the steaks.

"Well, being your average, ordinary guy isn't such a bad thing."

I smile as I begin to cook the steaks on the lowest heat possible. "Don't you want to be a not-so-average, extraordinary guy."

“Point made, smarty pants.” He laughs. “You know, I will say I’m surprised.”

“Why is that?” I ask.

“I really expected you to be a vegetarian.”

“Please, I needed the protein to keep up with my brothers, and besides that, I need it for my job,” I admit. “No one can live off rabbit food alone.”

He laughs. “One of my sisters used to be a vegetarian, swore to us all that it was so much better for you. Which,

okay, I get. But after a while she said she wanted to try a burger. So, she did.”

“And? What happened?” I ask.

“She eats meat every day and hasn’t looked back since.” He laughs.

“I do admit that I kind of hate the idea that I’m eating some poor helpless animal.” I say. “I mean, I love every, and all animals. But, I just can’t live off rabbit food.”

“And, just how do you live with yourself for eating some poor helpless animal?” He teases.

“I just tell myself they came from the freezer section.” I laugh.

“Whatever helps you sleep at night,” he says, watching me contently as I pay close attention to the steaks.

“How do you like yours cooked?” I asked.

“Very well done,” he says. “I’m a big baby. Not one speck of pink.”

I smile. “I can do that.”

“You know, I’m really proud of you for the progress you’re making,” he says to me. “You’re doing extremely well,



and I think your counselor will be able to say the same the next time you talk on the phone.”

“Thank you. With how you put things, you know, about letting him take my life away just lets him win. That really sank in.”

He smiles wide. “It’s what helped my sister.”

“Really?” I ask.

He nods. “For some reason, it just made her bounce right back on her feet.”

“Well, it seems to be having the

same affect on me,” I say. “Maybe that’s what I needed to hear all along, and my counselor was going about things all wrong.” I smile. “Are you sure you didn’t pick the wrong profession?”

He laughs. “One hundred percent sure.”

“Are you an A-1 steak sauce kind of guy, or just plain Jane?” I ask.

“Depends on how good your steak is.” He smiles.

“Ouch. That’s a lot of pressure to put on me there,” I say. “I don’t make

steaks that much,” I tell him as I pull butter, sour cream, cheese, and real bacon pieces out for the potatoes.

“No pressure,” he tells me. “I’ll still eat it; I promise you that.”

“That hungry are you?” I laugh, now beginning to pull two plates from my China cabinet.

“Well, I am starving,” he says. “We did skip lunch, remember?”

I nod. “Pepsi, Coke, or something else?”

“Coke,” he says as he’s up and out

of his chair and reaching for two glasses to fill with ice for the drinks.

I tenderly pull our potatoes from the oven, placing them both on the plates; I pull back the tin foil to reveal two perfectly baked potatoes. Next, I turn to the steaks, both have been cooked very well done and to a perfect temperature on the inside.

“Geez, now I’m nervous,” I say.  
“It’s like you’re some food critic.”

He laughs. “If it’s anything like your pasta, you have nothing to worry about.”

Nick doesn't waste a second; he happily cuts into the steak and forks a bite into his mouth as I begin to slather my potato in sour cream, cheese, and pieces of crumbled up bacon.

“I'm definitely not putting any A-1 on this,” he says. “Are you a chef or something?”

I shake my head. “I'm a dancer.”

He reaches for his soda and gives me an odd look.

“Oh God, no!” I say. “Not that kind of a dancer. Ballet, Hip Hop, Jazz, I'm a

real dancer. I'm an instructor for a small group of girls at a private dance studio."

He laughs. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have thought that."

"It's okay," I say. "I can only imagine what some people do think when I tell them that."

"So, a dancer, huh?" He smiles.

"Yeah, I actually wanted to go to Juilliard, but," I pause. "It just didn't work out. I guess my audition wasn't up to par for them."

"I'm sorry," he says. "I know that

had to have been hard.”

I nod. “I was crushed; my mom more so. She begged me not to come to New York. But, I didn’t listen. I was, however, accepted into NYU. Luckily, I found a private dance studio that was more blown away by my audition than Juilliard.”

“It’s Juilliard’s loss.”

“Thank you,” I say, having a bite of baked potato. “That was a dark day in the Murphy home, let me tell you that.”

“But, NYU,” he says. “Geez, you

must have one amazing head on your shoulders.”

“I do okay, I guess,” I say. “I graduated from high school with a four-point-oh, and at the top of my class.”

“Well, you certainly know how to make a guy feel inferior.” He laughs, having a drink of soda.

I shovel another bite into my mouth, this time steak, and I chew happily. I hadn’t realized just how hungry I was letting myself get in between meals until I had gone to the grocery store, and I wanted everything in sight. “I’m not



trying to make you feel inferior,” I say, finally. “Besides, you have a tough job. I just dance and write papers all day.”

He laughs. “There’s one way to look at it.” He has another drink and his eyes meet mine. “So, how did your mom feel about NYU?”

“Well,” I pause. “She wasn’t the happiest. She had her heart set on Juilliard for me.”

“But, the question is,” he starts, “are you happy?”

“With school and my job?” I ask.

“Yes. Of course, I am; it’s NYU.”

“Then, that’s all that should matter,” he says, cutting another chunk of steak to eat.

“My mom and I have such a rocky relationship anyway,” I admit. “One minute we’re talking, and the next we’re not. We get mad at one another over the most ridiculous things.”

“And, what’s your current status with your mom now?” He asks. “Talking or not talking?”

I sigh. “Still not talking.”

He makes a face. “Does anyone in your family know what’s happened to you?”

I look up for a moment and have a drink; finally, I shake my head. “Not exactly.”

“What do you mean ‘not exactly’?” He asks, crossing his arms in front of him.

“I just never got around to telling anyone, I guess,” I say, using my fork to push a couple pieces of potato around on my plate.

“And why not?” He asks. “What about your brothers or your dad?”

“What?” I ask. “Are you kidding me? They would start the biggest head hunt in the history of the world. And, if I did, my dad would try to force me to come home. It would just be a mess.”

“Charlie, you can’t keep it hidden from them.”–

“And why not?”

“Well, this isn’t exactly something you keep hidden from family,” he says, leaning a ways across the table. “And,

besides, what happens when you finally do hit the news. How would they take that?”

I shrug. “I guess I never really looked at it that way.”

“You should think about telling them,” he tells me. “They deserve to know. And, whether or not you and your mom are talking, she still loves you. You’re her daughter. Her only daughter at that.”

I nod. “I guess you are right. Maybe I should plan a trip home soon. It’s not really something you tell them over the

phone.”

“That’s understandable.”

I wiggle a bite of potato in sour cream before having a bite. I take a moment to stare into space. He does have quite the point. I wouldn’t exactly want my family to hear my story on the nightly news. At the same time, I wouldn’t want to call home with such sad news. My mom and I may have a rocky relationship, but it would crush her; my dad and brothers too. They’d be grateful that I’m alive, but the battle

scars aren't easy to look at. I wouldn't want to cause a knock-down, drag-out fight either since I am happy here. I have school, work, friends... I have a life. Despite what's happened, I still love it here. I look back at Nick, who has continued to stare at me. I smile.

“So, you still up for a movie tonight?” He asks.

“Netflix is calling my name,” I tell him.

He smiles. “Well, how about I clean up and you get ready for a movie.”

I grin. “I can handle that. I’m just going to go change first.”

He nods as he begins clearing the table, careful not to spill or drop anything. *At least I’m teaching him something in the kitchen*, I think, before heading to my bedroom.



**- 6 -**

**Nick**

As I finish clearing the table and making sure each dish and glass has been carefully tucked into the dishwasher, Charlie returns wearing a pair of pale pink sleep pants and tank top. Her perfectly straight hair dangles

in her face as she gives her body a stretch.

“Is there anything in mind that you want to watch?” She asks, reaching for the TV remote.

I close the dishwasher and shake my head. “Nothing in particular. Why don’t you pick?”

“Really now?” She asks, turning toward me. “Even some chick flick?”

I fight the urge to cringe. “Of your choice if that’s what you want.” I tell her.

“Fine, then.” She smiles as she begins to power on the TV and her Netflix program. I watch carefully as she scrolls to the romance category. I should have known. My eyes lock carefully on the screen as she scrolls the few choices. Eventually, she lands on *The Notebook*.

“I should have known,” I say.

She laughs. “You did tell me that I could pick.”

I nod. “And, I’m not going back on my word.”

“Just be glad I’m not making you watch *Love Story* or *Gone with the Wind*.”

I clap my hands together. “*The Notebook* it is.”

She laughs as she settles into one end of the couch. “You complain now, but just remember, it could always be worse.”

“Ugh, don’t remind me,” I say, having a seat at the other end of the couch.

“How do you know you won’t like

it?” She asks.

“I’m a man,” I tell her. “I just know these things.”

She laughs as she presses the ‘Play’ button.

I begin to watch her carefully from the corner of my eye. Not even a half hour into the movie, and I can see the gleam of tears in her eyes. Suddenly, her sniffles only confirm my thoughts on her tears.

“Are you okay?” I ask.

She nods, her eyes never leaving the

screen. “It’s just so amazing how much they love one another.”

I stare at the television screen confused, as the scene now rolling features the two main characters arguing. I nod, pretending to know what she’s talking about. After another fifteen minutes of being confused about the movie, I finally give in and begin just watching Charlie from the corners of my eyes as she dabs away at her tears. I will never understand how women can cry at movies. Especially ones where it doesn’t quite look like the main

characters love one another as much as she thinks. But, what do I know? I fight the urge to talk to her, but she looks so happy and content, even with the tears rolling down her cheeks. I decide to leave her alone and allow her to enjoy the movie. It's strange, but despite the tears, she truly looks happy. By the time it comes for the end credits to roll, Charlie is sobbing uncontrollably into her hands. I glance up at the screen and note that it is implied the older couple had passed away. What a crappy ending.

She wipes at her face and turns to

me. “What did you think?”

“What did I think of what?” I ask.

“The movie,” she says. “What else would I be talking about?”

Her eyes widen as she wipes at her face, and I suddenly find myself a little embarrassed. I shake my head. “I’m sorry. I’m not sure. I guess I got a little distracted,-” I admit.

“You were distracted through an entire movie?” She asks, confused.

“I,” I pause. “I think I was.”



“Did you watch any of it?” She asks.

“Any little part?”

I begin to feel my cheeks grow warm, and I’m suddenly thankful that the lights are dim. “I saw a little.”

“The middle?” She asks. “The end?”

I shake my head, now completely ashamed. While Charlie had been content watching the near two hour movie, I was completely content watching her and her every move. Studying how she was sitting, how she would wipe at her face, how her eyes

would light up during certain scenes, and how they would fill with tears for others.

She laughs. “What did you watch this entire time? It was almost two hours!”

I take a deep breath. “I was watching,” I pause. I run a hand through my hair and make a face. Here is definitely one situation I have never been in. I haven’t watched anyone before like that. “I was actually watching you.”

“Me?” She asks. “Why on earth were you watching me?”

I shrug. “I guess I couldn’t help myself.”

Even in the dim light, I can see her cheeks turn a bright shade of red. “So, do you want to watch another movie?” She asks.

“Another one?” I ask. “Aren’t you tired?”

She shakes her head. “I should be, but no.”

“I can go for another one, but you should at least get comfy,” I tell her. “That way if you fall asleep, you fall

asleep.”

She nods, leaning closer into the couch as she flips through the Netflix main menu. This time, I can see she’s headed for the comedy section. Now, that’s doable. But, when she pauses over *Super Troopers*, I’m sure she’s just making fun of me. I don’t say a word as she pushes play.

I try to focus hard on the movie, but, for some reason, I find myself paying more attention to her as she laughs at the funnier parts. I laugh quietly with her, my eyes usually locked on her. Every so

often she would bring a hand up, pushing a glob of stray hairs from her face or tuck her hair behind her eyes. I smile to myself, realizing; to see her smile made me feel good for some reason. After a while, I see her settle into the corner of the couch, curling up a bit, her eyes still on the TV. She laughs softly as we make the switch from Netflix to regular cable. This time *Reno 911*, which I am sure, is another direct pun for me.

After a few episodes, I see her stretch slightly, pressing herself into the couch. Her bright eyes are sleepy, but

her slight smile never seems to fade. She wraps her arms tightly around her body as I slowly drape the fleece blanket around her body.

“What are you doing?” She asks, her voice much softer than usual just from the lack of sleep.

I smile. “It’s cold, and you’re tired.” I tuck it gently around her. “Get comfy; if you fall asleep, I’m right here.”

She nods in agreement, letting her eyes close almost immediately. It doesn’t take long after to see she’d been so relaxed she quickly fell asleep,

resting her head into the couch. I turn to face her, smiling as she rests as comfortably as the night before. It's not long after I feel myself slowly fade to sleep right next to her.

\* \* \* \* \*

The sun must have just been breaching the horizon when I wake up to the sound of metal against metal and the splintering sound of wood cracking. I jump up, as does Charlie, her eyes wide

with terror. Her breaths became rapid and she tosses herself from the couch, backing away from the door. I quickly draw my fire arm and unlock the door, flinging it open. There behind the door, crouching at the lock is a man, about Charlie's age, fumbling to pick the lock. My weapon immediately goes to his face.

“Jason, what the hell!?” Charlie squeals, taking a few steps closer.

He laughs nervously and gives us a wave. “Hi.”

I turn to her. “You actually know this



guy?” I ask, placing my firearm back in its holster.

She nods hesitantly. “He’s my ex,” she pauses. “And a moron.”

“Since when am I your ex?” He asks.

She rolls her eyes, crossing her arms in front of her body. “Since a year ago. What the hell are you doing here?”

“I came to check on you,” he tells her, standing up, folding the tiny Swiss Army knife. “It’s all over the news,” he says, shoving it into his pocket.

“Loverboy... they said he had you.”

She looks at me, then back to Jason, who was running a hand through his already messy and dirty hair. “What?”

“Loverboy,” he starts, “you know, that guy that’s kidnapping these girls, he rapes them and then tortures them.”

She immediately cuts him off. “I know who he is and what he’s doing,” she pauses. “How did...”

He stops her. “It’s on the news, they have your pictures,” he adds. “They keep talking about the night you

disappeared, when you left the party,” he states. “Then they started talking about how you somehow got away.”

She cups her face in her hands, leaning back on the arm of the couch. “I’m on the news,” she looks up at me, stunned. “Nick, they reassured me this wouldn’t be in the media this soon. It hasn’t even been three weeks, Nick. I’m still trying to heal.”

She looks scared to death, and with Jason standing there I have to fight the urge to hug her. “I don’t know how. Someone could have found out; leaked it

to the press.”

“So, just who exactly are you, Nick?” Jason asks, taking a few steps in. Now my eyes fall on him, and for some reason, I want nothing more than to punch him. He’s clean shaven, if he has to shave at all, with messy brown hair and dark eyes that are bloodshot. He looks as though he’s spent the night out partying too hard.

“Ugh,” she rolls her eyes again and points to the front door. “Get out; just get out.”

“Baby, you can’t possibly still have hard feelings?” Jason smiles wide as he takes a few more steps closer.

Charlie moves backward again as she glances at me. “Jason, my ex; the one who took my savings. I found him in bed with my so called best friend, Jennifer,” she explains.

My eyes grow bigger. “*That* ex.” Now things make complete sense.

“Did I mention it was in *my* apartment?” She pauses. “In *my* bed!”

“Oh, my God,” he says, stepping

closer to her to point out a large red mark on her arm. One of the many marks that are still very much on the mend.

“Did he do that to you?”

She steps back and quickly covers her arms as her head drops. Being so soon after the incident, Charlie is really opening up a lot by baring just the tank top. Both of her wrists are still red and healing. Deep gashes line her arms, a few on her face, some on her chest, shoulders, and upper back. Here she's making an attempt to brave her scars, and he has to call her out on them.

My mouth drops, and I turn to Jason, who shoves his hands into the front pocket of his tattered, gray hooded sweatshirt. “I think it’s best you go.”

He shakes his head. “And just who the hell are you?”

I pull out my badge. “Nick Andrews, NYPD,” I say calmly. “You can go quietly, or I can place you under arrest for breaking and entering.” I smile.

He gives me a blank stare. His dark eyes seeming completely empty and lost as he continues to stand in one spot. One

more reason to think he has spent the night partying when he should have been studying. He makes a face at me, looking completely confused. Now I can see why she's just annoyed with him. I haven't known him all of five minutes, and I want nothing more than to punch him and cuff him.

“You have the right to remain silent, anything you say or do.” Before I can continue, he has hit the ground running. I shut and bolt the door behind him.

She sighs, pushing her bed head hair from her eyes. “I need to keep you here



more often.” She looks up at me with wide eyes, and I can tell she’s had the same thought as me. “How did he get in the secure door?”

“It’s okay, Charlie,” I reassure her. “He could have slipped in behind a delivery guy; anything.”

She looks down at her feet as she takes a few deep breaths. Finally, she grabs the remote for the TV and flips it to a local news station. Like her ex promised, her photo is plastered on the screen. She looks completely horrified as she slinks onto her couch, nearly

missing the seat at first. The remote drops from her hands as she rests her face in them. It's when I hear a little sob that I take a seat next to her and wrap an arm around her. She looks up at me, confused and hurt. Now the world would know what happened to her. They would know how she was beaten, raped, and tortured. Her friends would know why she now had scars and why she had disappeared. She glances down at her red marks and lets her fingers pass over a random one.

“Don't ever be ashamed of those,” I

tell her softly.

“Why?” She asks.

“Because you are so much stronger than the person who tried to hurt you,” I reply. She looks at me, smiles, and lets her head lean onto my shoulder as we both stare at the television in disbelief.

**- 7 -**

# **Charlie**

The one thing I am terrified of and have been trying to avoid has happened. My worst nightmare has come true. My picture is plastered on the news, with the heading, “The One Who Found Safety” printed at the top. Not only is it

advertised to everyone that I know and love, including those who didn't, but I am once again thrown out there for the killers. Though, I'm sure the media doesn't know that little tidbit. My story of "courage, survival, and hope," as it's being advertised, is being blasted on every outlet of the news. I feel myself lean into Nick a little more without being able to help myself. I feel a headache coming on and nausea filling my stomach. He doesn't seem to mind as he tightens his arm around me a bit as we both stare at the screen.

*“Charlotte Murphy, a twenty-one year old college student was attacked while leaving a party. Being kidnapped by the notorious Loverboy, the city’s serial rapist and killer, it was sure Charlotte had her fate sealed. After being raped, beaten, and tortured for days, Charlotte was lucky and brave enough to not only fight back, but also survive. She’s currently believed to be under police protection, though Deputy Chief Abhrams hasn’t made an official statement.” She pauses. “He’s only stated that on behalf of Charlotte and*

*her family it's in her best interest to keep quiet as she takes this time to recover."*

I finally move and a look up at Nick, whose eyes are still glued to the screen. "Why would someone do this?"

He shrugs. "Money is almost always involved; they pay top dollar for a story like this."

"So glad to know that I'm just some story," I say. "I'd like to see how she feels after being 'beaten, raped, and tortured for days' and then thrown to the press."

“No one can even imagine what you feel. Which is just one more reason why I hate the press.”

I smile. “Thank you for this and for Jason, and thank you for last night; I really needed that,” I tell him as I sit up and push my hair behind my ears.

He nods. “Well, don’t make too many plans tonight, we’ll do the same.”

“Maybe this time I can dig up Police Academy.” I grin.

“Now I know you’re just doing this to make fun of me.” He laughs.



I shrug. “Maybe a little all in good fun, of course.”

“And, for what it’s worth,” he begins. “I’m sorry about that jerk. Kind of looked like a douche bag to me anyway.”

I can’t help but to laugh. “Yeah, I just found out the hard way,” I say. “Too bad I can’t pick ‘em.”

He smiles wide, exposing his perfect white teeth. “Well, it’s definitely his loss.”

I smile again; he definitely is sweet

and, make no mistake, sincere. “Thank you.”

### *3 Days Later*

“Oh, my God,” I swallow hard, ringing my hands together. “I feel like I’m going to throw up.” I feel my head spin for a moment as I try to take a few deep breaths to relax myself. I look down at the ground and fight off another wave of panic that makes me want to curl up and hide in the nearest hole.

Nick steps in front of me and places his hands tenderly on my shoulders.

“You do not have to do this.”

“I know,” I say. “But I want to.”

I take another set of breaths, breathing in deep and releasing them slowly like I had learned in my earlier dance courses. After much debate, and barely three weeks since escaping, I have made the decision to talk to the media. To ask the city of New York for help on anything leading to the arrest of the city’s killers. Though I came to the decision myself, with no help from the

police, I couldn't help but to feel sick about it. I couldn't help but to wonder if they would be out there. It seems that the two Loverboy killers didn't mind the attention, so wouldn't it make sense for them to be at an event where they are the central focus. The thought alone made the nausea crawl back up into my throat. I swallow hard and close my eyes as I wrap my arms around me.

“Are you okay?” Nick asks, giving my shoulder a reassuring squeeze.

I take a minute to think. “I think so. I mean, I could be better. But, I have to do

this. Asking for help directly from the people may be the smartest thing that I have ever done.”

“And, you’re perfectly okay with doing this?” He asks.

“I think so,” I say. “I am terrified,” I finally admit.

“Why?” He questions, moving both hands to my shoulders and rubbing slowly.

“These guys love the attention, right?” I ask.

Nick only nods.

“Wouldn’t it only seem right that a public event based on them would drag them out of the woodwork?” I ask.

“Couldn’t they very well be standing with all those hundreds of people?”

He hesitates, but nods. “But you have the protection of the New York City Police department. Do you realize how many of us are here; not to mention civilians?”

I nod.

“You’re safe, Charlie; I’ll make sure of that personally.”

“I just want to get this done and over with,” I tell him.

He nods, and I feel him gently lead me toward the room where the press is waiting. I grab onto his hand before he opens the door, and I feel him give it a soothing squeeze.

“I just need one more second,” I say, taking the time to compose myself. I run the words over in my head. I know what I’m saying. Somewhat anyway. I’m going in with a plan. I’ll say what I have to, answer a few questions, and get out of there.

I finally give Nick the nod, who opens the door, and I'm ushered into a bright sea of lights, cameras, recorders, and people. Behind the podium are New York's top police officials, including Nick and the officer who picked up my computer; everyone else, to me, is just a uniform. I see a burst of camera flashes as I make my way up to the podium. I begin to hear my name coming from all directions, everyone wanting to ask their questions. Everyone not caring about me; just their story.

I take a long deep breath. "If you'll



excuse me, I won't answer any questions at this time," I tell them. "But I will say this; ladies of New York, never think that this can't happen to you. Trust me, I thought just like that. I thought that surely something of this magnitude would never happen to me. That it couldn't. Take my word for it that it can. Protect yourselves, go out in groups, and don't stay out late. Loverboy is out there, and he will take his victims; don't let yourself become one."

"Excuse me, Charlotte," I hear one female reporter say. "Out of all his

victims, how did you manage to get away so easily?”

“Though my memory is still hazy, I assure you it was not easy,” I tell her.

“Charlotte, how does your family feel about these events?” Someone else shoots.

“How would any family feel?” I ask. “They are devastated, but happy to have me home, safe and sound.” I feel my heart sink slightly at the little white lie. Sooner or later, I would have to call them.

“Do you think you have any personal connection to the killer?” Yet another man shoots out, shoving his recorder out farther.

I look back at the man who everyone calls the deputy chief for a clearing; he gives me a simple nod signaling the okay. “I have no connection whatsoever to these men,” I say finally.

“Men?” The entire room erupts. Questions come flying from each and every direction. I feel Nick at my right, and the deputy chief at my other side, who takes the microphone from me. “If

you will excuse Miss Murphy, she's answered all of your questions for today," he says. "I will take over and answer any remaining questions that you may have."

"You did great," he tells me softly in my ear. "Better to have it in the open; all of it. People need to know."

I nod again. "That's why I did this," I say. "Better than having everything blown out of proportion on the news when they don't know half of the real story."

“Well, you did amazing,” he tells me. “So amazing, in fact, that we should celebrate.”

“How?” I ask, as he takes me into a small green room where I reach for a bottle of water.

“I know that we had made plans to watch a movie like last night,” he says. “So, why don’t we go all out?”

“Go all out? Like how?” I ask.

“Like to an honest to goodness theater,” he says. “I know a few; one actually shows these old movies from

the fifties and sixties. I figured you might enjoy that.”

“Do you think it would be safe?” I ask, having a swallow of water. “After all of this?”

He nods. “You know that you’re always safe with me. And, while you were up there I didn’t notice anything suspicious.”

“Just those hungry vultures of the press.” I sigh, sinking into a seat.

He laughs. “So, what do you say?”

I have to admit, the idea doesn’t

sound half bad. I love going to see movies, especially old ones. And part of me would like to think that getting out of my little apartment is doing me some good. “You really think it’s safe to?” I ask.

“With me on duty, you know you’re safe.” He smiles, having a seat next to me.

“Okay, then,” I say. “I think I can do this. I mean, I did go out for pie, and I even went grocery shopping. This is just a movie.”

“It’s just a movie and some

popcorn.”

I laugh. “Okay, it’s just a movie and some popcorn.”

“Well, maybe movie, popcorn, a drink, and Milk Duds,” he says, giving me a bright smile.

I make a sickened face. “Gross. Milk Duds?”

“Oh c’mon,” he teases. “How can you go to a movie without having Milk Duds?”

“That’s easy,” I say. “It’s because they’re gross. I like Snow Caps and



Raisinets.” I smile.

“Fine then. It’s a movie, popcorn, a drink, Milk Duds, Snow Caps, and Raisinets.”

I laugh. “Better make it two drinks.”

He laughs. “I’m not saying that all again; I’ll never remember.” He smiles. “What do you say? Yes or no?”

“Sure,” I smile. “I trust you; I have no reason to think I’m not safe with you. And, I am a movie nerd.”

“See, I can tell you’re already excited about it,” he tells me. “Have a

theater preference?” He asks. “The classic or current?”

I shrug. “Depends on what’s playing really. Any idea?”

He shakes his head. “No, but I can find out on my phone.”

I smile and nod, but suddenly I feel my heart race. A movie means being in a theater. Being in a theater means being in the dark; in the dark with Nick. Right next to me. I glance over at him while he plinks away at the keys on his smart phone. It is just a movie. I’ve been alone with him in my apartment for so long I

lost count, so what would the difference be? It's a movie night out. Not like a date. I take a gulp of water, as for some reason I feel my heart start to race; only this time I can't seem to pinpoint the cause of this panic attack.

“The classic theater that I know has *An Affair To Remember* playing,” he says, bringing me back to reality. “Know that one?”

I nod. “Of course, I know it. It's Cary Grant. How could you not know it?”

He makes a face. “I haven’t seen any movies before the eighties.”

I laugh. “You’re missing out,” I say. “Most of the best movies were made back then. The movies today have trouble keeping up. That’s why they keep remaking the old classics,” I note.

“Point made,” he says. “What about this one, *Ben Hur*?”

I laugh. “Do you realize how long *Ben Hur* is?”

He gives his head a shake as he looks back to his phone.

“It’s over three hours long, Nick.”

He raises his eyebrows. “Okay, so not *Ben Hur*. So tell me, how bad is *An Affair To Remember*?”

I laugh. “It’s not bad at all. Really great, in fact. But, it’s another chick flick.”

“Well, if you say it’s so great, then maybe I need to see it too.”

“They’re both great, *An Affair To Remember* and *Ben Hur*,” I tell him. “But, the first is definitely the chick flick.”

He looks down at his phone. “Well, none of the new releases look worth the money you pay to see them.”

“So, *An Affair To Remember* it is.” I laugh.

He nods. “Looks like it. Unless you want to sit in a theater that long for *Ben Hur*.”

“I have the Blu Ray at home; I can just torture you with that,” I say.

“Well, first things first,” he tells me. “I should get you back home while the press has something else to concentrate

on.”

I nod. “Good idea.”

\* \* \* \* \*

The Princess Theater truly is a classic. I’m in awe by it actually. So much in fact, I feel like it’s love at first sight. I feel like I’ve gone back in time as we walk up to it. The history states that it was built in the early thirties. I’m in shock at how very well taken care of it is. It has everything from the crimson

carpet to the ticket stand just outside to the magnificent glowing sign. Though it is smaller than the theaters I'm used to, only having two viewing rooms, but it seems so perfect that I don't even mind.

“You know,” I start as we head for the ticket stand. “We don't have to see another chick flick. You can always pick something else.”

He shakes his head. “It's okay. I don't really keep up with the movies and you do. I wouldn't know what to pick anyway.”

“I could always pick another one



making fun of cops.”

He shakes his head. “The guy in the shorts from Reno nine-one-one is more than enough. Thank you very much.”

I laugh. “It could always be worse,” I note, as he pulls his wallet from his pocket and requests two tickets for *An Affair to Remember*.

“So, is this another crying chick flick?” He asks as we walk inside.

If I thought it was amazing on the outside, I’m nearly blown away at how immaculate it is on the inside. The smell

of theater popcorn hits me hard, and I find myself sighing. It's then I realize that Nick is staring at me, waiting for my reply. I feel my cheeks flush. "More than likely." I tell him, as he orders a large popcorn and two drinks.

"Why do women cry at movies?" He asks.

I shrug and laugh. "We just do. Don't men cry at movies?"

He laughs. "I don't know. I can't remember the last time I cried."

"You were probably still in diapers,

right?” I tease.

“More than likely,” he says with a sarcastic chuckle.

I laugh as he passes me my drink.  
“Because tough men don’t cry, am I right?”

“I think men do cry,” he admits.  
“They just keep it hidden.”

I laugh. “One more reason to prove that women are completely different from men,” I tell him. “This is embarrassing, but I remember I went to see *P.S. I Love You* with a group of

girlfriends. Before the end of the movie we had all caused a sobbing scene in the middle of this theater. It was bad.”

“P.S. I Love You?” He asks.

“A movie with Gerard Butler,” I say.

“Now, that guy I know,” he says.

“Law Abiding Citizen.”

I laugh. “That’s right.”

“He was in a chick flick?” He asks as we make our way to the theater.

I nod. “He sure was.”

“But, he’s Mister Tough Guy,” he

tells me.

“But, he’s sexy, and women like him.” I admit.

“Oh God, does Charlie have a crush?” He asks, pushing the viewing room door open for me.

I nod. “I sure do, on some of the Backstreet Boys, too,” I openly admit.

“Please tell me you’re joking,” he says as we climb the steps into the back rows of seating.

I shake my head. “Nope. Your turn. Who’s your crush?”

“It used to be Kate Hudson,” he says. “But, right now, I don’t know.” He gives me an odd look, one that I’m not used to seeing, combined with a little smirk that makes me have to think about how to speak again for some reason.

“You know, some men don’t like her simply because she’s lacking in some departments.” I laugh.

“Aren’t most of the model types lacking in places because they starve?” He asks.

“Point made,” I say, taking off my

jacket and giving it a toss onto the empty seat next to me.

“Some guys do like *real* women, you know,” he tells me, settling into a seat next to me. “We don’t all want models or movie stars. Sometimes we think some women are more beautiful than that.”

“Well, I would like to know where they are, because I have yet to meet one,” I tell him, sneaking a piece of popcorn from the top of the bucket.

He smiles and moves his eyes to glance at me from the corners of them.

“I’m one of those guys.”

“You’ve surprised me again,” I say. “I thought for sure you’d be one of the guys with one of the vegetarian models on his arm.”

“Please, don’t make me laugh,” he says. “I need someone who can at least help me cook. We’d both starve then, because I can barely toss a salad.”

I laugh and push my hair from my eyes. “And you do need protein to keep up your strength for work.”

He grins wide. “You see my point



well.”

I take a moment to glance around as the lights begin to dim and the screen lights up brighter than before. I’m shocked to see that Nick and I are the only ones in the theater. “Looks like everyone else went to see *Ben Hur*.” I let out a little laugh as it’s no surprise really. People today usually go for the new releases.

He laughs and has a small bite of popcorn. “Gives me a chance to ask stupid man questions during the movie.”

“Didn’t anyone ever tell you that

there is no such thing as a stupid question?” I ask.

“Teachers in high school, but do you really think I paid attention?” He asks.

I shake my head. “Probably not. You know I had a teacher who wouldn’t take ‘I don’t know’ for an answer.”

“So, you had to make stuff up?” He asks.

I laugh. “He expected you to know.”

“I would not have been in that class, that’s for sure,” he admits.

“Oh come on; I think you’re smarter

than what you let on.”

“I graduated from high school with a three-point-two grade point average,” he admits. “But, I was one of those guys who just breezed through and didn’t try. Not like you, Miss Genius.”

“Please, I’m far from it,” I say.  
“Remember, I was the one kidnapped because I was walking though Central Park in the middle of the night. Alone.”

“Hey, that wasn’t your fault,” he tells me in my ear. “And, you’re certainly not stupid. You’re human.

Humans make mistakes.”

I feel his warm breath on my ear, and I feel a chill run down my body. I feel my stomach tie up as I fight a little bit of nervousness as I try to look forward at the screen. I glance over from the corners of my eyes and let out a little sigh.

“You know I’m right.”

I nod. “I know, but I can’t help but feel like it was my fault.”

He shakes his head. “Please don’t think like that.”

I finally look over at him as I prop my feet up on the back of the seat in front of me. “You know, you did just pay twenty dollars to watch this.” I laugh as I feel something beginning to flutter in the pit of my stomach. It’s enough of a shock to make me look away from him.

“I know you’re just changing the subject,” he states.

I nod, though I’m not sure I’m changing the subject for the reason he thinks. I attempt to collect my thoughts and think my words through before I reply. “Because I do feel dumb. I left a

party, alone, and went through Central Park, knowing full well what was going on out there.”

“So, you made a mistake; everyone does. Like the time when I took my parents car without their permission and ended up wrecking it.”

I stifle a laugh as I feel my nerves ease a little. “How was it coming home that night?”

“I was grounded for six months,” he tells me.

“Oooh, ouch. But, you do the crime,

you do the time,” I say.

“But, that’s how we learn,” he tells me. “We make mistakes.” He brings his hand down tenderly on mine, and I feel my body jolt again. I can barely look at him as the wild fluttering in my belly starts up again.

“Thank you.”

He nods. “Now I’ll let you watch the movie.”

“Now that I’ve missed the first twenty minutes.”

He laughs. “I missed it too.”

“But, you didn’t want to see it in the first place.” I laugh.

“Now, that is not entirely true,” he tells me, turning to face the screen. “See, I want to watch it.”

I can’t help but to laugh despite my nerves being all over the place. We turn our attention to the movie for a while. I take in Deborah’s beautiful clothes, that gorgeous diamond pinky ring, and her love of pink champagne. I try to focus on every single detail of the movie.

Everything, other than Nick sitting right next to me. I feel the fluttering deep in



my belly, and then another wave of nervousness. I shake it off and stare at the screen for a few moments before I feel Nick's fingertips as he gently taps my hand to get my attention.

“Is it just me or are they technically both cheating on their significant others?” He asks.

I laugh softly. “Technically, yes.”

“How is this romantic?” He asks.

“Wouldn't you be upset if the man you were supposed to marry went for someone else?”

I giggle again. “Point made. But, I guess since it’s just a movie we look at how perfect they are for each other.”

“Mhm,” he says. “Thank God it’s just a movie. If this happened other women would be killing a lot of men, or busting the hell out of a whole lot of cars.”

I nod. “Probably right.” I turn my full attention back to the movie for a moment until I hear Nick’s voice in my ear again. His warm breath on my ear sends that wild jolt coursing through my body that nearly makes me jump. I

quickly turn my head to face him to find his face a mere inch or two away from mine. I swallow and take a breath. “I’m sorry.”

“I was wondering if you wanted to grab a bite to eat after this,” he asks.

I swallow hard again as I feel a lump beginning to form in my throat as I realize that he has yet to move his face. “I can always whip something up. I just hate over doing it outdoors,” I explain.

He nods. “Understandable, but you are doing great. This is a huge deal.”

I give a nod as I try to talk again. I think through my words carefully. “Oh, I forgot to tell you, I moved my appointments to Doctor Larson’s office. It’s better than the phone, I guess.”

“Charlie, that’s great!” He exclaims.

“It’s just once a week, but it’s something, right?” I lick my lips and suddenly feel how hard my heart is beating, and this time it doesn’t feel like a panic attack that I’m used to. I close my eyes and let out a breath of air.

“You okay?” He asks.

I nod. “I am, I’m sorry; I don’t know what’s wrong with me.” A shiver runs up my spine as goose bumps rise on my arms. My heart continues to race as I try to control my thoughts. Nick. This is all about Nick. I stare at him, confused. Not because I’m truly scared or having a panic attack, but because he’s...Nick; the man who can’t cook to save his life, who loves sports, and who would do anything to protect me right now. He is ridiculously handsome with his brown-blond hybrid hair that he loves to spike up and mess up. His bright green eyes

that would probably make my stomach flip if I could see the color in the dark. And, that adorable smile, that I *can* see in the dark and *does* make my stomach flip. I begin to feel a little unsure of things. A little unsteady as I shiver again. How could I possibly want...after all that's happened to me?

“Cold?”

I shake my head. “No, I’m fine. I just feel,” I stop. “Well, I just feel like I...” I feel my cheeks flush with color. “I’m so sorry. I’m kind of embarrassed.”

I feel Nick’s warm breath push

closer to me as heat from his body begins to surround mine. I feel another shiver run down my body as Nick's nose nuzzles mine, and I quickly realize that I'm not the only one thinking about doing something. I feel my heart rate pick up again; not from fear, but out of nerves. Like I'm some fourteen year-old who is experiencing her first kiss.

“Nick, I might be really bad at this.”

“I really doubt that,” he tells me as he touches my face.

“I think I've forgotten how,” I tell

him as I bring a hand up to his clean shaven face and into his hair for a moment.

“That’s not true; no one forgets.” He smiles as I feel his fingertips gingerly brush along my cheek. “Charlie, I think I’m about to kiss you.”

Before I can say another word, his warm lips brush with mine, the fear and panic I expect isn’t there at all as his lips leave a small peck on mine. I feel my heart beat steady, and my shaky hands relax as he plants another soft peck kiss on my lips. I sigh as his nose



nuzzles against mine and his hand runs up and into my hair. I slowly push my lips against his, this time for a softer, lingering kiss.

When we pull away I feel myself sigh as I close my eyes and press my forehead to his. “Are you okay?” He asks.

“I’m fine. No,” I say. “I’m great. I just thought that I shouldn’t or wouldn’t want to do that ever again,” I tell him. “And, when I wanted to with you, I got embarrassed.”

“I would say you’re perfectly normal,” he says, smiling.

“I can only hope.”

“You know, it’s okay to look at me,” he says, laughing slightly as he rubs my nose with his again in an attempt to make me look at him.

“I know that,” I say, laughing nervously, “I’m just.”

“Embarrassed,” he finishes, finally adjusting me to look him in the eyes.

“It just happened really quickly,” I say. “But, I really wanted to.”

He smiles. “Obviously, I did too.”

I feel my cheeks heat up. I know it’s more than likely wrong. No, not “more than likely,” I’m sure it is wrong. They sent Nick to watch over me and they kept me in my home to make healing easier. They put their trust in him and in me that nothing would happen. Given the circumstances, I really believed nothing would happen. But, here I am...falling for the cop sent to protect me. “I cannot believe this.”

He smiles. “Not like we planned it.”

I shake my head.

“Would you like to finish your movie?” He asks.

“I.” I pause. “Well, I kind of want...”

He stops me mid sentence, placing his lips directly on mine again. I feel myself melt as this time I wrap my arms around him. He responds quickly by wrapping his arms snugly around me. I feel his warmth surround my body. I am enveloped with emotions...happiness... security...peace.

It's the sound of a clearing throat

that interrupts us. We both stop and look in the direction it came from to see a young teenager in the theater's uniform. "Just because you're alone in here doesn't mean you can do what you want."

"Oh, my God," I mumble, looking down and focusing my eyes toward Nick's chest as he turns to the sound of the voice.

"So sorry," Nick says. "Won't happen again."

"It had better not," the young boy warns. "We'll be keeping an eye on

you.”

I bring a hand up to my forehead.

“You’ve got to be kidding me. What am I, fifteen?”

Nick laughs as he cranes his neck toward the exit. “He’s gone.”

“Could this moment have been any more embarrassing?” I ask, looking over my shoulder.

“Oh, that kid is what, fourteen?” Nick says. “Like he hasn’t done this before in his life.”

“Yeah, but he probably hasn’t been

caught,” I say.

He smiles and plants one last kiss on my lips. “I’ll let you finish the movie.”

“Well, I can’t finish it now.” I laugh softly. “I’m too distracted, and besides, we’re probably being watched right now.”

“I highly doubt we’re being watched.” He laughs. “Do you want me to go arrest him? Would that make you feel better?”

I laugh. “Stop, I don’t think he’s old enough to be arrested.”

“I can arrest anyone if I want to.” He smirks in a way that makes my stomach flip.

“Mhm, even some fifteen year old kid just doing his job?”

He shrugs. “Doesn’t hurt to try. Kids are always afraid of cops.”

“I never was,” I say. “Well, until I committed my little crime,” I admit.

“Just remind me to never piss you off,” he says, laughing.

“Afraid I’ll put the hay bales in your truck?” I ask.



He shakes his head. "I'm more afraid of the bologna and mustard."

"Well, just don't make me mad and I won't do anything crazy," I say, glancing up at the screen again.

He smiles. "Trust me, I won't."

"So," I start, "I'm just curious. Was tonight supposed to be," I pause. "A date?"

"Well, what do you think?" He asks.

I shrug. "My mother always told me that if a man pays for anything then it's for sure a date."

“How do you know I’m just not some nice guy who doesn’t mind paying for you so long as it gets you out?” He asks.

I shrug again and bite down on my lip. “I don’t know. I guess I didn’t realize how you felt about me,” I say. “I guess I still really don’t know how you feel about me. I’m just assuming.” I look up at him. “I’m sorry; when I get nervous I talk too much. Am I talking too much?”

He smiles. “What have you got to be so nervous about?” He asks.

“I don’t know,” I say. “This. You. Me. Us.”

“Don’t be nervous,” he says.;

“There’s no reason why you should be. Nothing will change between us. Well, except for,” he pauses to think.

“Relationship status? Is that how this works?”

I nod, though I am completely unsure myself. “That’s kind of what I was thinking.”

He smiles. “As in not quite single anymore...dating?”

I nod. “Not single anymore... dating...each other.”

“So, we’re on the same page there,” he tells me. “And this whole time you’ve been comfortable with me, so why change that now?”

“You do have a good point,” I say. “I am wondering, though, is this allowed? I mean, can you get into trouble for this?”

“I’ll definitely guess it’s more than likely frowned upon,” he tells me.

“So, in other words, keep it quiet for

now?” I ask.

“Well, keep it so that my boss doesn’t find out.”

“That’s easy,” I say. “Dumb question, which one is your boss?” I flush.

He smiles and tucks a random strand of hair back behind my ear. “The big guy is the Deputy Chief; he took over after you at the press conference. My direct boss is Sergeant Wilson; he came to get your computer.”

“Ah, those guys,” I say. “I guess I

should have known that.” I purse my lips for a moment. “Do you think any leads came up after the press conference today?” I ask.

He shrugs. “I’m not sure; I’m sure they would call me if some had.”

“I just hope it wasn’t just a waste of time,” I tell him.

“I don’t think it was a waste of time at all,” he tells me. “I know you did the right thing.”

I look over at him and nod. Doing the right thing has left me feeling a little

ill. Everyone would know what's happened to me. How much I endured. They would know what all the scars on my body are from. It's enough to make me feel insecure and wonder if any of them will ever go away. How will I explain to my children one day, what happened to me? Or anyone for that matter? How do you explain why little noises make you jump? I let out a light sigh as I feel Nick move a little closer to me.

“So,” he says, softly, slowly moving his hand close to mine to lace our fingers

together. “Is this okay, too?”

I nod. “Perfectly okay,” I tell him, leaning my head slightly onto his shoulder. “Perfectly okay.” For once, I stop all the horrible thoughts in my mind. I don’t think about the two Loverboys, what they did to me, or my scars, marks, and bruises. I lean my head on Nick’s shoulder and I relax for the first time in weeks. I pay close attention to his breathing as I can somehow feel that he’s just as relaxed. We’re peaceful, and I will be the first to admit that not being on edge feels amazing.



\* \* \* \* \*

I find that when the credits begin to roll that I'm quite disappointed. Not in the movie, but in the fact that I have to move away from Nick. Neither of us has moved an inch, and I prefer it that way. Which seems like it would be a lot more unusual after what I've gone through. He stays still, allowing me to slowly move. I glance over at him and smile. He returns the smile and stands, reaching for

my jacket.

“So, was it worth it coming out tonight?” He lets out a light chuckle as he helps me into my coat.

I blush and give him a nod.

He takes my face in his hands.

“Don’t be nervous around me, Charlie, please. Nothing will change between us. You’re still safe with me. I won’t let anything hurt you.”

“We’re just trying out dating,” I say.

He gives me a nod. “Exactly.”

I smile and lean forward to wrap my

arms around him.

“You’re safe,” he tells me. “It’s more personal now than ever. I won’t let them hurt you again.”

I squeeze onto him tighter. I believe him. I believed him when I first met him, and I believe him right now. Nick will never let anything happen to me.

“How much trouble can you get into?” I ask him, reluctantly pulling away.

He shrugs as he brushes some hair out of my eyes. “I don’t really know. I

don't want to find out, either."

I lick my lips. "It's more than just frowned upon, isn't it?"

He leans forward and pushes his lips to my forehead briefly. "Don't worry about that, Charlie. Getting to know you like I have in the past few weeks, I know that you are worth the risk."

I feel my cheeks heat up, and for some reason a few tears in my eyes. "I don't want you getting into trouble for me."

“Well, I say you’re worth the risk,” he grins. “Don’t you worry about that, or anything else for that matter.”

I let out a little laugh. “So, how do two people date when one of them is scared to get out of her apartment?”

“Lots of movies, cooking, playing board games,” he tells me. “I told you, don’t worry; let me take care of the worry.”

I lean in and hug him again, and that sense of safety washes over me from head-to-toe and I sigh. “So, does this

count as our first date?”

“This counts as our first date,” he tells me as we’re interrupted again by the sound of a clearing throat. I bury my face in Nick’s chest out of sheer embarrassment as he throws a hand up in the direction of the voice. “No worries. We’re just leaving,” he laughs, as he and I both begin making our way for the exit.

The drive back to my apartment is quiet, but very calm and peaceful. Nick has opted to drive with one hand and hold my hand in his. It’s relaxing to feel his touch, and a sense of security

surrounds it for me. I stare contently out the window and watch the lights, people, and other cars as we drive by. Such a busy city. It makes me wonder how I was taken without anyone noticing. Late or not, this is the city that never sleeps. I let out a sigh, and I feel Nick give my hand a tender squeeze. In the past few weeks he has gotten incredible at reading me; he knows just when I need him, like right now. He stops my thought process, and I look over at him and smile just as we arrive back at my apartment.

Nick meets me at the passenger door and takes my hand in his again as he leads me to the secure door, unlocking it for me. We trail up the stairs, and when he opens the door slowly to all the lights powered on, as usual, a more than likely expensive comfort, I can't help but to glance around and luckily see nothing out of the ordinary. I watch as Nick does the same before turning to smile at me. I slowly let out a sigh of relief. From a distance, I can hear the sound of music, soft music, my cell phone.

“Excuse me,” I say, running into my



bedroom to grab the phone that I had been choosing to ignore for the past few weeks. I slide the screen to ‘answer’ and place it to my ear. “Hello?” I immediately smile; it’s Lana, my boss at the dance studio. She had called a few times earlier in the week, but I hadn’t been up for answering. I almost feel badly for ignoring her as she has been so good to me. She sounds excited to hear I am doing as well as expected and healing well. She has seen all of the press conference coverage, and had to check on me again and reassure me that

my job will always be waiting. I thank her and somehow end up agreeing to a visit the very next day.

“Oh Charlie,” she says. “The girls will love that; so will your adult contemporary class.”

“I’ve really missed them,” I say, slowly wiggling out of my jacket. “I’ve really missed dancing. God knows I could use a good work out.”

“Oh stop,” she says. “You’re a stick, and you know it.”

“Lana, the girls,” I say. “They don’t

know anything about what happened, do they?”

She lets out a breath. “So far, I’ve simply told them you had an accident, but would be back soon.”

“Thank you,” I say. “I just think they’re too young to know what happened.”

“So, we will all see you, tomorrow right?” She asks.

“You will, I promise. Maybe I can even work on getting myself back in gear and back to work.”

“That would be wonderful, but just remember not to push yourself too quickly. Healing, and your health, is first and foremost,” she tells me. “We all miss you.”

“I miss you too,” I say, as we end our brief phone call. I hurriedly change into a pair of yoga pants and tank top. I head out of my room and grab a small band for my hair. I find that Nick has already changed and found his way into the lounge chair where he looks rather comfortable.

“That was my boss, at the dance

studio,” I say. “She was wondering if I could go there tomorrow and see my classes. I agreed to see them tomorrow. Is that okay?”

He immediately nods. “I think that’s a great idea.”

“I know I can’t be in hiding forever,” I say, pulling my hair into a quick bun. “I have to go back to work sometime. And, right now, it’s my classes that are suffering.”

He smiles. “You’re on the right track.”

I nod, and I begin to slowly pace behind the couch. “I was wondering. Tonight, I mean, that really happened? It wasn’t just some spur of the moment, have to try it, and it’ll never happen again thing, right?” I make it to the end of the couch, and as I turn around slowly Nick has quietly made it in front of me to place his hands on my shoulders.

“You said you talk too much when you get nervous.” He grins. “Do you think too much, too?”

I laugh softly as I feel his hands slide to my waist. I expect to feel

nervous at his touch in such a private place for me right now, but I'm still rewarded with the feeling of safety. "Some people tell me I do. It's probably true."

He tenderly pulls my body closer to his. "I promise, it wasn't just some act on impulse, and that as long as you'll let me it'll happen again and again." He grins wide, leaning down to let his nose rub against mine. I feel my cheeks flush as he plants a soft kiss on my lips.

I smile and feel myself giggle nervously. "I'm sorry. I just never

thought I would want something like this again. Especially so soon.”

“It all depends on when you find that right person,” he says. “My sister did.”

“Are you saying you’re the right person?” I ask.

“I must be,” he boasts, smiling.

I laugh and try to wiggle free. “Don’t rub your ego too much there.”

He pulls me in closer and smiles. “I think you’re the one rubbing my ego right now.”

I can feel my face get hot as I wrap



my arms around him and pull myself in for a tight hug. “You are the last person I thought would make me feel safe. I was wrong,” I tell him resting my head against his chest.

“That’s what matters the most.”

I pull away slowly. “Can I just,” I pause. “Can I just try one thing?” I laugh nervously. “Because I do really like you.” I stop and stand on my tip toes to push my face to his. Nick helps by leaning down and into me as I feel my lips barely brush his. “I just really want a real kiss.”

“A real kiss?” He asks, his lips tickling against mine. “What in the world do you call the other ones?” He laughs softly.

“You know what I mean.”

He nods. “I do.”

I swallow as his lips tease mine for a moment and eventually press to me. I feel my body relax as his pushes into me to deepen the kiss. I feel my mouth part and my heart pound as I pull away.

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay. Relax. Just breathe,” he

tells me. “Don’t rush yourself. We don’t have to rush anything.”

“You’re pretty understanding about all of this,” I tell him.

“My sister, remember?”

I nod. “Definitely not like most guys.”

He shakes his head. “Definitely not.”

I smile. “Want to just watch some TV until I pass out?”

He laughs as I head over to the couch. “Think sharing the big lounge chair is rushing yourself?”

I smile. “I don’t think so.” I reach for a blanket as he makes himself comfortable on one side of the chair and I join him on the other. His arm immediately wraps around me, and my head finds that perfect place between his chest and his arm. He tugs the blanket around me and clicks the button to power the TV on.

“If you don’t mind,” he says, “no click flicks. Something funny.”

“Deal,” I say, though I know it won’t be long before I’m sleeping.

He flips through a few hopeless channels before finding *Pawn Stars* on the *History Channel*. Something we can both live with. I let my eyes close and I feel myself slowly drifting to sleep.

\* \* \* \* \*

I wake slowly to bright light in my eyes. My head has slipped comfortably down on Nick's chest where I can hear his heartbeat and feel his steady breathing. The blanket has been adjusted

around the both of us and his arms have found their way tightly around me. I stretch my legs out further onto the ottoman and groan softly as I do so.

I feel Nick move slightly. “Good morning,” he says. “I didn’t expect you to wake up this soon.”

I move slightly to look at him. “Morning.” I smile. “How long have you been awake?”

“Not that long,” he says. “I was planning on just letting you sleep in.”

I rub the sleep from my eyes and

glance at the TV where there's a show about classic cars on. "What time is it?" I ask.

"Just after nine," he tells me. "Still plenty of time to see your dance groups."

I smile. I feel as though it really had been forever since I had seen either group. And, my group of younger girls always had their own way of brightening my days. "I'm going to get in a shower before we go," I say. "Is that okay?"

He nods. "Of course, I'll be right here waiting."

I push off the blanket and slowly begin working my way out of the chair. But, not before Nick can sneak in one soft kiss. He grins wide. “Now you can have your shower.”

I feel my cheeks fill with color as I head down the hallway and disappear into the bathroom to work through all of my thoughts, all of the new feelings, and the future.



**- 8 -**

**Nick**

I lean back into the lounge chair and adjust the volume on the TV a bit more as I hear the running water start. I flip through random channels, checking for anything worth watching. I return it to the history channel, deciding something on

there had to be better than what the other channels were playing. Ten minutes into another episode of Pawn Stars and I note that the water in the bathroom had stopped running and was now replaced by the sounds of a hair dryer. I grab my phone and decide to check for any missed messages. The screen goes right to my screen saver, indicating nothing important had happened while I slept. I toss it back on the small side table and resume watching the TV as I can now hear Charlie cursing at her hair in the bathroom. Eventually the bathroom door

opens and I catch a glimpse of her hair that has been placed in a perfect bun as she heads back to her bedroom.

“I’m curious,” she calls to me.

“You’ve surprised me before, you might do it again. Do you know how to dance?”

“What?” I ask. “You mean like the funky chicken?”

I hear her laugh; clearly not what she meant. For me, dancing is like cooking. Someone is bound to get hurt when it happens.

“No, I have two left feet, and I dare

not try,” I tell her. “How long have you been dancing for?” I ask.

“Since I was about four,” she calls back to me, and I hear a rustling sound from her room.

“In other words, you’re awesome,” I say.

“I guess I’m okay,” she says back to me, now coming down the hallway toward me. “When you dance long enough you’re bound to pick up on a thing or two.”

She now steps into my vision. She’s

in black from head to toe. Long, form-fitted black pants and long-sleeved top, with special black shoes in her hands that I can only assume are made for dancers.

“If you’ve been dancing since you were four than you’ve probably picked up on more than just a thing or two.” I smile. “You look beautiful,” I say, noting the makeup and shimmering eye shadow that she’s put on.

“Thank you,” she says. “The girls love it when I’m made up, and I don’t want them to know that something this

serious has been going on.”

“What were they told happened to you?”

“Lana, my boss, told them I’d had an accident. Not the best, but it worked.”

“Well, they had to do what was best for them.”

“I hate seeing them lied to, but under the circumstances, what else could be done?” She asks.

“Well, your boss did the right thing,” I say. “I bet they will be excited to see you.”

“I know I’m excited and nervous to see them,” she says. “I’ve really missed dancing.”

She looks a little uneasy as I step toward her and place my hands on her shoulders. “What’s wrong?”

“We’ve just...anytime we’ve gone out, it’s been just the two of us,” she says. “I haven’t exactly interacted with others.”

“Charlie, you are doing an amazing job,” I remind her. “These are your students, and you know as well as I

know that you can do this.”

She gives me a little nod. “It’s just that no one I know has seen...” She looks down at her wrist for a moment. I know as well as she, that underneath her long sleeved top and pants are various marks, some still healing, some look fresh, but they’re there and they’re a reminder for Charlie of what she went through. They’re there to show the world what she lived through. I take her hand in mine to look at the marking around her wrist. Make no mistake that it’s from being bound as her other has one to



match. The marks are still pink with healing scabs around them from the cuts. She lets out a deep sigh as I use a finger tip to tenderly trace around it.

“This does not define you,” I tell her softly. “This is not who you are. Do not be ashamed of a red mark, because you are stronger than that.”

She looks at me with tears in her eyes and gives me a smile.

“You are safe, Charlie; I will never let anything hurt you again,” I say.

She gives me a bright nod. “Then we

should go, so I can attempt to dance again. Let's see how well my sore body cooperates."

"Well," I say. "Let me get ready and we'll get you to that studio."

\* \* \* \* \*

The minute we pass through the great double doors to the room lined with mirrors, a large group of girls waste no time in running up to Charlie. She looks back at me briefly with worry washed

down her face. It's overwhelming, and she is still nervous. She's fighting it well, because as I've told her many times, she has a strength beyond even me. I give her a little nod and mouth the words, "You are safe. I am right here." She returns the little nod, and finally squats to their level. Some squeal, some yell, and some just chatter to her as several others are at the same time. They each have their turn giving her a warm embrace or giving her a kiss on the cheek.

"Miss Charlotte!" One girl yells.

“I’ve missed you!”

Another latches onto her. “We like Miss Anabelle,” she adds, “but, she’s mean.”

I have to turn away to hide my laugh. Kids are brutally honest, that’s for sure.

“How are you feeling?” The tallest girl chimes in.

“Better.” Charlie smiles. “A lot of time spent in the hospital, but I’m feeling up to dancing again.”

“When are you coming back for good?” One of the shortest girls asks.

“Soon, I hope,” Charlie replies. “I still have a little recovery, but my doctor doesn’t think it should be too much longer. I’m still just a little sore from the accident, though. I need to get my strength back.”

A young girl glances toward me as I stand in the back ground. I manage a smile. She smiles back and waves. I wave back, unsure of what to do.

She turns to Charlie, looking her directly in the eyes. “Miss Charlotte, who’s that man?”

For some reason, I feel like hiding. If Anabelle is mean, God knows what they'll say about me.

She glances over her shoulder at me. "That's Nick, he's my," she pauses, looking at the girls. "He's my really great friend."

"He's really cute." One of the girls flushes. For some odd reason I feel my own cheeks feeling rather warm.

"Miss Charlotte, it's not nice to lie." The first and tallest girl smiles. "Is he your boyfriend?"

Charlie laughs. “Lucy, nothing slips past you.”

The girl turns to me. “Miss Charlotte is our favorite, she’s the best instructor,” she explains to me. “She dances beautifully.”

Charlie’s cheeks flush immediately.

“Will you dance for us, Miss Charlotte?” All the girls seem to sing in unison. Though it takes her a moment, Charlie finally agrees.

“Girls, let’s first see if Miss Charlotte feels up to it,” a lady who

looks to be in her mid-thirties says. “She has had a long three weeks. She’s still getting better.” She looks at Charlie with sad eyes. “Do you feel up to it?”

Charlie seems to think things over thoroughly, and then nods. “If I don’t, I’m letting them win.”

The older woman pats her shoulder, and, with teary eyes, gives her a nod. Charlie is standing up to her attackers today. She’s living and doing what she loves. I feel part of me swell with pride as I can see that some part of her, no matter how small, really is beginning to



heal.

I stand in awe as I watch Charlie flip, twist, spin, and twirl her body in such graceful and smooth movements that I'm in shock. The girls all take in each stride carefully, studying each movement. Though I honestly have no idea what she is doing or how she is doing it, I know enough to know that it's not only beautiful, but flawless.

As Charlie comes to a slow, graceful stop, the girls all begin to clap and cheer. One of the youngest and smallest of the girls pushes through the

others to stand at Charlie's feet. Charlie looks down at her and smiles as the girl begins to speak. "Miss Charlotte, will I ever be as good as you?"

She smiles before leaning down and putting herself at eye level. "You keep practicing and working as hard as you do, Pippa, you will be as good as whoever you want to be."

A big smile spreads across her face, and she wraps her small arms around Charlie, who pulls her into a tight, warm hug.

“Alright girls.” The older lady smiles. “Let Miss Charlotte breathe; you still have practice.” She turns toward Charlie, smiling, as the gaggle of young girls rush off toward the mirrors. “Charlie, I’m,” she pauses. “We are so...”

Charlie calmly holds out a hand. “It’s okay.” She smiles. “I’ll keep getting better.”

The lady steps forward, opening her arms to wrap Charlotte in them. “I have to be frank,” she whispers rather loudly. “Who is the fine specimen standing over

there?”

This time, I have to look up at the ceiling to fight off laughter. I know she’s talking about me, but I don’t think there was ever a time in my life when I was referred to as a ‘fine specimen.’

“He’s actually the police officer who was assigned for my protection,” I hear Charlie say. “But, one thing kind of led to another, and I think we’re,” she pauses. “I think we’re...see, one thing led to another...” She lets out a nervous little laugh, “I really don’t know how else to put it, but I think we’re dating.”

She makes a funny face. “The entire situation has been odd. They normally don’t assign protection like this, but something about making me more comfortable,” Charlie explains. “He and I have gotten really close, not meaning to.”

A look of shock spread across the other lady’s face as she smiles. “So scandalous.”

Charlie laughs. “Would you like to meet him?”

The lady nods. “Yeah, of course I

would!”

She walks her over to me, smiling.  
“Sarah, this is Nick,” she turns to me,  
“Nick this is Sarah, one of the other  
instructors; she basically got this job for  
me.”

She extends her hand to me, and I  
receive it in a firm shake. “Nice to meet  
you.”

“Charlotte here, is one of our more  
experienced dancers.” She smiles.  
“Incredible talent, deserved to go to  
Julliard. But, those judges couldn’t pull  
their heads out of their asses long enough

to recognize real talent if it bit them in the balls.”

Charlie’s face flushes. “I don’t know about that.”

“Well, I don’t know much about dancing,” I say. “Actually, I know nothing at all, but I know that whatever you just did was beautiful. I had no idea the human body could bend like that,” I admit.

Sarah reaches out and pats me on the arm. “See, he gets it.” She turns to Charlie. “You have real raw talent.”

“I always stand by the fact that I teach much better than I perform,” Charlie states matter-a-factly.

Sarah laughs. “Are you kidding me?” She looks at me. “Do you have any idea how many competitions this girl has stolen?”

Charlie’s cheeks begin to turn a bright shade of red. “Trust me, it’s not that many.”

Sarah shakes her head. “Try twenty-four.”

My mouth drops. “Why are you



being so modest?” I ask her.

Sarah shakes her head. “She’s been that way ever since those damn fools at Juilliard turned her down.”

“Well,” I start, “it’s obviously their loss.”

She smiles at me and moves in for a quick hug.

“Oh,” Sarah starts. “We have some of your adult contemporary class coming soon. You should stick around if you can; I know the girls would love it.”

Charlie laughs. “Yeah, sounds like

they have it out for Anabelle.”

“Eh, you know how she is with the kids,” Sarah says. “She’s counting the days until you come back.”

“Hell, I’m counting the days until I come back,” Charlie says.

“How much longer do you think it will be?” She asks.

Charlie shrugs. “Not sure. Soon, I would guess. I seem to be healing physically; it’s the mental healing that I’m working the most on...it’s hard.”

Sarah gives her shoulder a gentle

pat. “You’re doing great, though.”

Charlie smiles and thanks her as a swarm of adults enter the room. I can only assume they’re Charlie’s adult contemporary class, as they all rush to greet, hug, and ask how she’s doing. She seems nervous and a tad overwhelmed at first, but it’s easy to see that the adults are quick to pick up on her uneasiness, and have no issues giving her a little space. It’s also easy to see that they’re all asking her to stay for a bit. She hesitates, and seems to think things over in her mind. She shifts her weight from

one foot to the other and rubs at one of the marks on one of her wrists.

Finally, she glances at me for a moment. “Feel up to staying for a bit?”

I nod my head. “Of course. I’ll just hide in the back somewhere.”

\* \* \* \* \*

I scurry to a back part of the room where a few chairs are lined. I begin to watch as Charlie carefully instructs the group of adults and reminds them where

they left off before her incident. I watch in complete shock as Charlie begins to Tango, Waltz, Jive, Quick Step, and move in ways I never knew existed. She praises each of the students, letting them know how well they're doing, and continuously apologizes for missing so much time with them. She looks exhausted by the time she begins to stroll toward me. She wipes at her forehead with her left hand for a moment and blows a strand of hair from her eyes that has fallen free from the bun.

I grin wide. "Do you know how

incredible you are?”

She gives me a funny look. “I was just dancing.”

“No,” I say. “It wasn’t just dancing, which was the most amazing thing I’ve seen. It was more than that. Much more. Your strength. You could have easily not danced for those girls. You could have not taught this class. But, you did. That’s incredible.”

Her cheeks begin to fill with color as they turn to a shade of pink that looks good on her. I open my arms for a hug, and she immediately accepts. I plant a

light kiss on the top of her head and she lets out a relaxed sigh.

“So,” I say. “Do you know how to dirty dance?”

She laughs and playfully pushes me away. “Have you even seen that movie?”

I nod. “For your information, yes, I have.”

She gives me a look of disbelief. I probably wouldn't believe me either. I'm not so sure many men have watched that on voluntarily, but I have a sudden feeling I will be watching it very soon.

“I have four sisters, remember?”

“Ah, in other words they tied you down and forced you to watch.”

“Pretty much,” I admit.

She groans for a minute and stretches her body. “I’m out of shape.”

“Nothing that I saw looked like you were anywhere near out of shape,” I tell her.

“Then why am I hurting all over?” She asks, rubbing her neck.

“Need a rub?” I ask.

She nods. “But do you realize how



much massage therapists are in this town?”

“I’ll do it for free,” I tell her.

She gives me a funny look. “You have got to be kidding. You’re a massage therapist too?”

“It was a course I took when I thought I wasn’t cut out to be a cop,” I admit. “Obviously you know the path I ended up taking, but I did take the massage course for just over a year.”

She brings her arms above her head,

giving them a stretch when one of them pops loudly. “Think I can take you up on that offer?” She asks.

I laugh and nod. “Of course. I should be able to remember a thing or two. If anything just enough to make some of your muscles feel better.”

“Just don’t break me.” She laughs, sitting on the hard floor to stretch her legs and back. She groans softly. “Maybe I’m getting too old for this.”

I laugh. “You’re joking right?”

She shakes her head as she raises

one leg in the air, keeping the other firm on the ground.

“Care for a little help?” I ask.

She thinks for a minute, and then finally nods. I take her extended leg and begin pushing it back for her.

She makes a face.; “Is it bad that I don’t remember it ever hurting this badly after?”

“You’re just getting back into the swing of things. It’s perfectly normal. After what happened your body is just healing, but you’ll be back to where you

were in no time,” I say, letting her leg down gently, allowing her to bring her other one up.

“I was thinking of maybe giving my family a call back,” she tells me suddenly. I look down at her, and I can tell she’s been thinking about this for a while. With everything that’s already on her mind, I’m sure calling her family is one that gives her quite the jolt of uneasiness.

“A call back?” I ask, finally catching the word.

She nods. “They called a few times,

but,” her face flushes pink, “I didn’t answer.”

“Why not?” I ask.

“Because I didn’t know what to say,” she admits. “And, I’m kind of embarrassed to admit what happened, since my mom was so against me moving here in the first place.”

“I’m sure they’ll be really happy to hear from you,” I tell her. “Maybe you should think about going back home, and see them.”

She nods as I gingerly lower her

other leg and help her off the floor.

“Maybe, as long as the police give me the okay.”

“Given that you have protection, I wouldn’t see why they wouldn’t,” I tell her.

She nods. “We’ll see. Maybe after all of this is said and done, and I know that I am truly safe.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Back at her apartment, she takes the

chance at a hot shower while I have a peek in her refrigerator. Even though I'm not entirely sure how to cook, surely there's something I can fix her without blowing up her kitchen. I hear a loud groan come from the bathroom, and I can only assume she's just stepped under the hot water. She sounds like I felt after my first day of police training. After what the two Loverboys have done to her body, I can only imagine that dancing has intensified her aches and pains. I continue digging around her kitchen and spot the fresh bananas on the counter.

Being a girl like she is, I'm sure I can find peanut butter easy. I begin digging through various cabinets until I find a jar of crunchy peanut butter. Bread is easier, just in the bread box by the toaster.

Peanut butter and banana sandwich; even I admit it's something a kid would make, but it's the least I can do. And, given my cooking skills, it's safe.

The water stops shortly after I finish her sandwich. I begin cleaning up the mess I made, including the trail of peanut butter on the counter and bread crumbs. I hear her bare feet head to her bedroom



for a quick change, and I place the sandwich at the table with a glass of milk for her.

“What’s this?” She asks, standing in the doorway, smiling.

“I figured after all that dancing it’s the least I could do,” I told her. “Sorry that I can’t cook.”

She smiles. “Nick, this is really sweet. Thank you,” she tells me, walking over and standing on her tip toes to kiss my cheek. “And, by the way,” she says, “I happen to love peanut butter and banana sandwiches.”

“You’ve done all of the cooking really, and we are...” I run a hand through my hair nervously and let out a little laugh. “We are dating. Or trying to at least. I wanted to do something nice for you.”

She gives me a bright smile another soft kiss on my cheek.

I smile and tug a chair out for her just as soft music begins playing. Her cell phone. She excuses herself for a moment to get it.

“Hello?” I hear her say as she’s

coming toward me. She takes a deep breath in and her eyes quickly meet mine. “Who is this?” Her body freezes and her mouth drops. Her breathes become ragged, and I suddenly recognize the look in her eyes; in two steps I rush over taking the phone and press it to my ear

*“I got you once, and I will do it again. This time, you won’t be so lucky, pretty girl.”*

I squeeze the phone hard in my hand. “Who the hell is this?” I look at Charlie, whose lip is beginning to quiver.

“Hello?” I yell once more to realize the phone line is dead. I glance at the screen to see ‘call ended’ flashing in red letters.

I look at Charlie, who collapses to her knees, her eyes filling with tears and her entire body beginning to shake. I kneel in front of her, putting my hands on her shoulders. “Charlie, look at me.”

“Nick, that was one of them,” she says. “My number,” she stammers. “They have my number.”

I pull her tightly into my arms as she

begins to weep. “Charlie, listen to me, they won’t hurt you. They won’t ever hurt you again. I’m here. I’m right here.” I take her face in my hands. “C’mon, Charlie, Baby, look at me.”

Her sobs increase as she begins to gasp for air. “Nick.”

“Shh,” I say. “I’m right here, Charlie, no one is going to hurt you.”

She shakes her head. “Nick, what if,” she pauses. “They know where I live.”

I shake my head. “They don’t.” I

reassure her. “They don’t know.”

She throws her body into mine, nearly knocking me backward. “Please.”

“I won’t let him hurt you again,” I tell her. “C’mon, take some deep breaths for me,–” I tell her, wrapping my arms around her tightly. “Don’t let them take it back, Charlie. Look what you did today. Fight them, Charlie.”

She listens and slowly begins to draw a long breath in and release it slowly. “Nick, what if...”

I stop her. “No ‘what ifs’; I’m not

letting anyone get near you,” I say, helping her off the floor. “I do have to notify someone at the department.”

She nods as I lead her over to the couch. “Need anything to drink?” I ask.

She nods again slowly as she curls herself up in the corner of the couch. “Water.”

I pull my phone from my pocket as I grab for a bottle of cold water and return it to her. I calmly explain what had happened, and within moments, an unmarked car is on it’s way. I hear Charlie take a few gulps of water and a

few more deep breaths. I return my phone to my pocket as I head to the couch with her. She looks up and into my eyes. Hers are already streaked red from tears and her nose is beginning to shine red as well. I quietly take a seat next to her and pull her into my arms.

“Things were just beginning to feel normal again,” she says.

I shake my head. “Don’t let them take that away again.”

“I can’t live like this, Nick,” she says. “Who knows what they will do



next.”

“Don’t think like that,” I tell her.

“We’ll get them.”

“When?”

“I wish I had the answer,” I say. “I really do.”

“Then how can I live a normal life? How can I go on like nothing happened, when I have no idea what they’re capable of doing next?”

Before I can answer her, the knock at the door interrupts me. “Andrews!” I hear my name called from the other side,

and immediately recognize the voice.

She looks at me, wiping at her eye.

“It’s okay, go on.”

I take wide steps to the door and unlock each dead bolt. Sergeant Wilson doesn’t waste a moment stepping in and past me.

“A phone call?” I hear him ask as I glance back at Charlie, who is curling herself up in the corner of the couch with her bottle of water. I want nothing more than to go over and take her in my arms, and I can’t.

I nod.

“Where’s the phone?” He asks.

I retrieve the phone from where we’d left it on the floor and bring it to him.

He glances down at the smart phone in a clueless way. If I wasn’t so angry, I would almost laugh at him. “Biltmore,” he calls over to the accompanying officer. “Monkey with this thing, pull me any information you can.”

He takes the phone and begins pressing a few buttons. Within seconds,

he makes a strange face. “Charlotte, was this the number where the call came in from?” He walks the phone to her, showing her the exact number.

She rubs at her eyes and then finally nods. “Yeah, that’s it.”

“That’s not possible,” he says.

“But, it was!” She yells. “Why the hell would I lie!?” She looks up at me now, infuriated. “Nick!”

“Hold on,” I say. “What’s the issue with the phone number?” I ask.

Biltmore checks the phone once

more, plinking away at the touch screen. “Look, the time and date stamps match her story, but,” he pauses. “I don’t even have to run a tracer on this number.” He looks up. “It came from the department.”

“As - as in,” Charlie starts, “The police department?”

He nods. “I think it’s the number for the records department.”

“So, you’re saying this guy might be a cop?” Charlie asks.

Wilson only shakes his head.

“That’s not possible.”

“Well, the number is to the department,” Biltmore says. “We’ll still contact your phone company, obtain records, and follow procedure. But, these guys may have the intelligence to cover every little track.”

Charlie’s lips turn down. “In other words, they could end up running the streets forever?”

“No,” I say. “Don’t think like that.”

“They somehow got my email, my phone number,” she says. “What next, huh?”

“If we could get them to call back, we could always trace the call,” Biltmore says. “Pin point their exact location.”

“How can I just get them to call back?” She asks. “I don’t think it works that way. And, I don’t want to talk to either of them ever again.”

“Well, how about this, did you notice any back-ground noise, any distortion; anything that would give away where he was?” Biltmore asks her.

She shakes her head. “You could

hear a pin drop behind him,” she says.

“The only thing I heard was his voice.”

“What did his voice sound like?”

The Chief interrupts.

Charlie looks over at him. “Like a normal man. Deep; not very rough.

Seemed to articulate his words well.”

“These guys could very well have an advanced program that allows them to call a number and simply display a number of their choice,” Biltmore says.

“So, in other words, even with phone records and tracking, you might



not be able to find a damn thing out?”  
Charlie says.

“We don’t know until we try,”  
Wilson tells her.

She purses her lips and gets off the couch. “I just need a minute. I’ll be in my room.”

I give her a nod, and we all watch as she disappears down the hallway and into her bedroom.

“We’re running ourselves in circles,” I tell them. “You either find these guys or you don’t.”

“It’s not that simple, Andrews,”

Andrews says, “You know we’re doing everything we can, around the clock.”

“I don’t know how much more of this she can take,” I admit, crossing my arms in front of my body. “She was just starting to feel like life was normal, and then this happens.”

“Look, I can tell you’ve gotten attached to this case,” he says. “But, we are doing our jobs. Just as well as you’re doing yours.”

“Then find something; anything,” I

yell. “You find one; you’ll find both of them!”

“Andrews, I’m sorry we didn’t catch these guys on the first night. I know things aren’t going how you want them, but, you have got to control your attitude.”

I look up and nod. “I just think we’re running ourselves in circles, and that’s what these guys want. Didn’t you ever think that they could be putting themselves out there like this just so they can tease us?” I ask.

Wilson only nods. “Of course we

thought of that.”

“These guys are obviously smart,” I say. “But, we can’t keep letting them run the streets.”

“What else can we do, Andrews?” he asks. “What exactly do you propose we do?”

“Find them! Why is it so hard?” I yell.

“Look, I know you have a lot of time invested in this, and you’re doing a remarkable job, but leave the hard work to us,” he says, heading for the door as

he motions for Biltmore to follow.

“When we have the phone records, we’ll let you know.”

I fight the urge to punch something as I lock the door behind them. I take a minute to rub the sides of my head in hopes of preventing the headache that I can feel coming on. I make my way into Charlie’s room, and find her laying on the bed with her back to me.

“You didn’t have to get yourself in trouble on account of me,” she says softly.

I shake my head. “I didn’t get in

trouble.”

“So, yelling back and forth isn’t getting you in trouble?” She asks. “Or how about being asked to control your attitude?”

I laugh it off. “Do you know how many times a day I’m asked to control my attitude?”

“No.” I can tell in her voice that she’s ready to cry again.

I sit slowly on her bed and drop my hand on her shoulder. “If I had a nickel for every time I heard that I’d be a

billionaire.”

She slowly rolls over, her tear stained eyes meeting mine. “How is it possible that these guys are so good at hiding their tracks?” She asks.

“Baby, I wish I knew,” I tell her. “Some people just know technology. And, we have to figure out what they know before we do anything.”

She snuffles. “I can’t stay in this apartment, scared to death.”

I shake my head. “I don’t want you to.”

“I can’t just stop going to college, seeing friends, or work,” she tells me.

“You know, I actually thought I was going to go to my friend Maggie’s party this weekend. How stupid was I?”

“Why can’t you?” I ask.

“Nick, what if one of them is there?”

She asks.

“I’ll come with you,” I say. “As a date.”

She shakes her head. “I can’t.”

“You can,” I tell her. “I don’t even want to hear you say something like that



again.”

“How can I set foot out that door again, knowing that two men in this city want to kill me?”

“Easy,” I tell her. “Because I’m with you.”

“Nick.”

I stop her. “You said yourself that things were just beginning to feel normal again,” I say. “I’m not about to let these bastards take that back from you. If you want to go to the party, we’ll go. If you want to go to work, we’ll go. I won’t let

either of them take that back from you.”

She sat up slowly as she pulls me into a hug. “I just wish I knew why it had to happen to me,” she says into my ear.

I feel a surge of pain in my heart. Of all the things I have been asking myself, one thing was “why Charlie?” After growing so close, I find myself asking myself the same thing over and over with no real answer. I let out a breath and give her a little squeeze. “I wish I knew, too.”

“I will think about the party,” she says. “Maybe later I’ll feel differently

about going.”

I run my hand up and down her back. “Just don’t let these guys take back what you worked so hard for.”

She gives me a nod. “It doesn’t make it hurt or suck any less.”

“I know, but, who knows, maybe we’ll catch that break in the case that we need.”

She nods, giving her hair a push from her eyes. “You don’t think these guys could really be cops, do you?”

I shake my head. “I doubt it. Cops

are the good guys, remember?” I smile. I can only hope I’m correct in my theory.

\* \* \* \* \*

After some hard convincing over the course of 48 hours, I had somehow managed to convince Charlie to go to her friend’s party. After whining, begging, and pleading with her, she finally caved and has agreed to go. It’s easy to tell that part of her is excited about it and the other part completely dreads it. She’s

been scampering around the apartment, moving from one room to the next to make an attempt to get ready. Her nerves seem to be doing a number on her as she fights what I can imagine is a slight panic attack.

“Nick, I don’t think I want to do this,” I hear her grumble from inside the bathroom.

“Charlie, it’ll be fine,” I call to her from the living room, where I make an attempt to dig through my things. “Don’t worry; if it’s not what either of us expect, we’ll leave, get some take out,

and come back here. Simple as that, and you'll see your friends." I take a moment to shift through the various shirts I have on hand; I was trying to not look like a cop. That part is easy. Trying to look like a guy in college? Not so easy.

I hear her bare feet step back into the bedroom. "I don't think I've showed this much skin in months," I hear her mumble. "This is ridiculous. I can't wear this."

"Isn't it the top that you purposely bought for this party?" I ask.

“Well, yeah,” she says. “But, that was then. This is now,” she tells me. “Things are just different now.”

I yank a simple white polo shirt from its resting spot at the bottom of my bag. I find Charlie in her bedroom, standing in front of her dresser mirror, examining herself closely. Her jeans were well worn and faded, but paired with a green, fitted strapless top. She crosses her arms, giving the sides a tug up.

She turns to stare at me. “How do I...”

I don't let her finish. "You look beautiful; it's okay to show a little skin," I tell her. "Don't let what happened effect who you are, how you act, or dress." I step closer. "What you're wearing is perfect, and you *do* look stunning."

Her cheeks flush as she slowly lets down her arms. "I just feel like sometimes I should just wear sweats all the time."

I shake my head. "Don't ever think that. Wear what you used to wear; don't change your life for anything or anyone."



She glances down at her arms and chest as she runs her finger over one of the red marks on her arm. “You can see my marks.”

“Remember, they only show just how incredibly strong you are.”

She finally smiles. “I did pay an unholy amount for this top; might as well wear it.”

“And, you really do look,” I pause, looking her up and down. “I mean, wow, I don’t think I’ve seen you in anything like this before.” I take a breath. “You

look beautiful.”

She laughs softly, lifting my head up. I didn't realize I was looking down in the first place. “Nick, are you blushing?”

I simply nod.

She lets out a soft laugh. “Why? I don't think I've ever seen you blush. Well, any guy for that matter.”

“I know I see you every day, I'm fully aware that you're,” I pause. “Well, I mean you're certainly not lacking in any department.” I can feel my cheeks heat up even more than they were before.

“Oh please,” she says. “I’m short and stout.”

“Five-foot-seven is a very respectable height,” I tell her. “And, please don’t tell me for one second that you think you’re fat.”

She shakes her head. “No, but I am short.”

“More like,” I pause. “Fun sized.”

She laughs. “You don’t do well with the compliments, huh?”

“You are very beautiful,” I say, looking at her. “And I admit, sometimes

I don't know how to say something, since I've never been able to give someone compliments like you."

Her cheeks flush as she moves in to stand on her toes to press her lips to mine.; "Thank you."

I smile, wrapping my arms around her waist.

"You should finish getting ready." She smiles. "If we're really going to this party."

I smile and nod. "We're really going, even though I wouldn't oppose

keeping you here to myself.”

She blushes for a moment, pushing herself away. She reaches for a few pieces of jewelry and a pair of brown heels. “Will I be okay doing this?” She asks. “I mean, *can* I do this?”

“You know you can do anything,” I tell you. “You’ll be okay, don’t worry.”

“I’m just scared,” she admits, slipping the first shoe onto her foot.

“I know,” I say, “and it’s normal to be.”

“Is it normal to feel like I’m going to have a panic attack?” She asks, sliding into the other shoe.

“It’s even normal if you *do* have a panic attack.”

She takes a deep breath and swallows. “Well, we better go before I change my mind and hide in my closet.”

I smile and take her hand as she reaches for a white jacket. If anything, having her arms a little covered will ease her mind a little more. She relaxes in the seat after clicking on her seat belt

and hands me the piece of paper with the address. It's a ways upstate, but the drive with Charlie should be nice. She lets out a long breath and pushes a few tufts of hair from her face. Since I ask her more often than not, I fight the urge to question if she's alright, and, instead, grab for her hand. She happily squeezes mine, and I feel her begin to relax. Maybe being close to me really is her best comfort right now.

\* \* \* \* \*

I was told that the party was being held in a little house. But, when we finally pull up in front of the “little” house, I’m surprised to see that *massive house* is a much better description. I’m not surprised, however, to see cars parked everywhere. Some new, some old, some parked perfect, and others parked lop-sided. I find a spot off to the side to pull in my truck, and Charlie takes one last glance at me. “Do I really want to do this?”

“You did before anything bad



happened,” I tell her. “You even bought that top for the occasion.”

She lets out a comforting breath.

“You’re right. I can’t stop living my life. Can I?”

I shake my head.

“Well, then,” she says. “Let’s do this.”

I smile and climb from my seat and meet her just as she opens her door. I take her hand, helping her down, and lock both doors behind us.

“So, what can I expect at a party like

this?” I ask.

“Anything wild usually goes,” she admits. “I only go for Maggie; she was my first real friend when I moved here. She would do anything for me, and I would do anything for her.”

We’re not even ten feet from the front door, and I can already hear a loud crowd and the blaring music. Charlie takes a breath as we head up the cobblestone steps to the large red, front door. She glances over at me, and I give her a little nudge as she rings the doorbell.

Within a few seconds, a guy about Charlie's age was at the door.

“Charlie!” He yells, the beer smell obviously making Charlie feel a little ill.

“Hi, Derek,” she says. “Maggie here?”

He nods, taking a gulp from the red plastic cup in his hand. “She's in the back, been asking about you,” he tells her. “You know she's been worried.”

“Thanks,” Charlie says, giving his shoulder a pat as she begins pushing past him, still holding onto my hand as she

leads the way through the noisy, college student filled house.

It's packed from shoulder-to-shoulder as we both wiggle and dodge our way through, but when a crowd of people realize that Charlie is there, it becomes more overwhelming than she can take. They all quickly embrace her without stopping to think that she may need distance. They begin asking question after question in such a way that Charlie doesn't know how to cope. She looks flustered and panicked by the time I push my way to her.

I hold up my hands. “Look, she’s been through a lot, best to give her some space,” I holler above the music as Charlie lets out a sigh of relief. They apologize and she accepts as I reach for her hand. She gives it another tight squeeze in appreciation as she and I begin heading for the back portion of the house. Her cheeks are a tad pink now, and for some reason I do get the feeling that she is dazed with the party. There seems to be a lot more people here than either of us really bargained for. When we both hear a sudden screaming sound,

we turn, and I see a blonde girl much shorter than Charlie run up to embrace her I am sure we've found Maggie.

She begins jumping excitedly. "You actually made it," she says over the music. "I'm so happy you're doing okay."

Charlie nods. "Thank you."

She glances at me and back to Charlie. "Who's the hunky?"

Charlie smiles. "This is Nick," she says. "Nick, this is Maggie," she tells me. "Maggie, this is Nick, my..."

“Her boyfriend.” I smile, extending my hand. “Nice to meet you.”

Her eyes widen. “Wow, Charlie, I didn’t know you were seeing anyone.” She eyes me up and down for a moment. “I’d say he’s a keeper.”

Charlie laughs softly. “Thank you.”

“By the way, Professor Montoya has been wondering when you’ll be back in class,” she says. “He has no one to correct him in class, which means, he has no one to fight with.”

Charlie laughs again. “Baby steps

for me, Mags.”

She smiles, leaning in to hug Charlie once more. “I know; please call me if you need anything. I miss you, and I worry about you.”

Charlie nods. “I’m sorry. I know. I should call more.”

“Yes, you should,” Maggie tells her. “We can talk anytime; you know that.”

Charlie nods.

“Help yourself to anything,” she says. “And Charlie, don’t forget you owe me a dance.” She grins. “I’m going



to go find Chris.”

Charlie nods, waving her off.

I lean next to her ear. “How you doing?”

She shrugs. “I’m still deciding.”

The screaming distracts us as we both turn to see an extremely inebriated young guy run past us completely naked. Charlie rolls her eyes, making a disgusted sound as I begin laughing.

She looks at me, shaking her head. “I am so sorry.” She laughs. “I told you this wasn’t a good idea.”

I laugh. “It’s okay,” I tell her. “I kind of figured it would be like this.”

“Well, we’re here,” she says. “Now what?”

I glance around and notice the kitchen is the next room over. “C’mere,” I say, taking her hand. “Do you drink beer at all?”

“Not as much as these people do,” she says. “Just one.” She glances down as she steps over piles of red and blue plastic cups.

“Same here,” I tell her, heading for

the refrigerator and opening the door. I pull out two bottles of beer. “Here, want to find a quiet spot?”

She nods and glances around.

“Please.”

I smile as we trek back into the rest of the house, finding a flight of stairs. We head up them, and I open the first door to find a couple a tad too comfortable with one another on the bed to have not locked the door. Charlie covers her mouth laughing as I slam the door shut.

“Well, next room,” I say. “Shall

we?” I laugh.

We find that whoever is occupying the next few rooms was actually smart enough to lock the door. Especially if that had the same plans as the first couple we had found. As we came to the end of the hallway, we swing open the last door, which seems to lead to a guest bedroom. It's dark and quiet with no one in sight. I have one last look around the corner before leading her inside, where she turns on the dim overhead light.

I sigh. “You weren't kidding.”

She shakes her head. “Told you.”

She walks over, having a seat on a large hope chest at the foot of the bed. She takes a few breaths. “I didn’t think I’d actually come here tonight.”

I crack open the two beers and place their tops in my pocket. “One step at a time,” I tell her, sitting next to her as I hand her a drink. “And, even if you’re not mingling with,” I pause. “Well, what’s downstairs, you’re still out.”

She nods. “You’re absolutely right. And, as crazy as it is down there,” she tells me, “I’m glad you had me come

tonight. If anything, to see Maggie. I've really missed her."

I take a sip of the beer I'm holding and smile. "See? It's nice to see friends."

"Especially ones like Maggie," she tells me, bringing the long neck bottle up to her lips.

For the first time in my life I have a brief moment where I want to be that bottle, if anything to feel her lips again. I snap out of it to smile. "She's been really good to you," I say. "Hasn't she?"

She nods. “I knew absolutely no one when I got here. She helped me get my apartment and get my first job up here. Even though it wasn’t the most,” she pauses. “Ugh, the nicest job, it paid the rent and bills until the studio picked me up.”

“Then it’s a good thing you came to see her tonight,” I tell her. “Some friends are worth doing anything for.”

She nods and smiles. “And, that would be Maggie.” She glances around and makes a rather strange face. “We’re in someone’s house, in their spare

bedroom, with two stolen beers from the fridge, and we have no idea who they are.” She laughs.

“Do you really think they’re going to miss two single beers with that mess down-stairs?” I ask.

She laughs. “You know, I do believe you’ve committed a crime, officer. Isn’t that theft?” She winks.

“And, that would make you my accomplice,” I tell her.

“Oh, ouch,” she says. “That truly hurt.” She brings the bottle up to her



mouth and has another drink.

“Stolen beers taste better, don’t they?” I ask, making her laugh so hard she needs to cover her mouth.

“You’re the one who gave it to me.”

I laugh softly and move in closer to her. “You know, if there’s one thing I never did at parties,” I say, “It would be this. Apparently as you saw from two doors down, it’s all the rage.”

She giggles softly. “Until someone pops in.”

I laugh. “Well, not my fault; there’s

locks,” I say. “So, here I am, in this room, alone with a beautiful woman who has completely stolen my heart.” I push her hair back showing off her face. “I should have you arrested.”

“For drinking stolen beer, or stealing your heart?” She asks.

“Both.” I smile. “This is okay, right?” I ask, realizing that I am very close to her, and if there is one thing I don’t want to do, it’s make her panic.

She smiles and leans in closer to me, pressing her lips softly to mine. I take this as it’s perfectly fine, and I bring a

hand up to her face. She smells like vanilla, and despite the taste of beer on her mouth, it's the sweetest kiss I've had in a long time. I hear her let out a little sigh as she wraps her arms around me. I repeat her action and feel her body relax as I do. It's not long before a loud banging at the door makes her jump. She gives me a funny look, but manages to shrug it off. I lean in for another kiss as the loud banging continues. I take a long breath in before sitting my beer down to go answer the knocking. I'm surprised to see the same scruffy kid from her

apartment; Jason.

I turn back to glance at Charlie, who's dropped her head and is holding her face in her hands. "What do you want, Jason?"

"Maggie said you came with your boyfriend. Is this guy your boyfriend?" He looks directly at me. "The cop who's supposed to be guarding you."

She nods. "He is. It's a long story, and one that I'm sure as hell not telling you."

"What the hell, Charlie?" He says,

taking a few steps toward her.

I extend my arm across his chest and look down at him. “After hearing about you, you obviously have no right to even look at her, let alone think twice about her,” I tell him.

“And just what did little-miss-perfect tell you?” He mocks. “If it was that time I slept with Nicole...”

Charlie looks up. “You slept with Nicole, too?” She rolls her eyes. “Seriously, what does that bring your total to?”

He looks up at me. “You’re a man,” he begins. “You have to understand from the get go Charlie isn’t exactly the type who just runs and jumps in the sack,” he explains. “And, if you’re not getting it from home you get it from somewhere else.”

I shake my head. “No, I wouldn’t understand,” I tell him; “If I had her waiting on me at home, I sure as hell wouldn’t be digging up something off the street,” I growl. “And furthermore, I’d be happy to have a woman who respects herself like Charlie does.”

“You think she respects herself?”

Jason laughs. “Guess you never told him about working at Hooters.”

I turn to see Charlie’s head drop completely. “It was a job. It was just a job. One that Maggie helped me get, so I could have some income, especially after you cleaned me of all my savings!” She yells.

“Oh yes,” he says. “Boo-hoo about it why don’t you.” He inches toward her to be blocked quickly by me. “I needed the money.”

“For a prostitute!” She screams.

“You told me it was for your grandmother.”

He looks up at me with a serious face. “Strippers are not prostitutes.”

At that very moment I want nothing more than to punch him in the face. Would serve him right. For a moment I can feel my fist beginning to tighten as Jason pushes closer. I block him again, this time harder. I’m quite infuriated that he’s even thinking about her after what he’s done to her. I don’t know the kid, but I can honestly say that I don’t like



him.

I hear Charlie sigh, and I turn to see her look up at him. “Why can’t you just leave me alone?”

“Because we should fix things.” He smiles wide. “Don’t you believe in second chances?”

“Sounds like you had one too many second chances,” I snarl. “And it sounds like she’s very much too good for you,” I grumble. “I think you need to get the hell out of here.”

“You’re not exactly tough without

your uniform,” he shoots.

“I don’t need a uniform to kick your ass,” I say roughly.

Within a split second he is out the door for me to shut and lock it again. I head for the hope chest to sit next to her. She looks up at me, and I can tell tears are straining against her eyes. I push her hair from her face, letting it fall down her back.

She lets out an awkward laugh. “Hooters.” She licks her lips. “The job Maggie got me when I first got here. I needed a job,” she says. “I just don’t

like to admit having a job there to anyone. I mean, guys go there for the wings, right?”

I smile wide and take her hand in mine. “Guys just go there for the wings,” I tell her.

“It’s embarrassing.”

“You needed a job,” I say. “A job is a job. It paid, right?”

She nods. “But still embarrassing. I’m not really that type of person.”

I press my finger to her lips. “Shh.”

“Nick,” she starts.

I shake my head. “Shh.”

“But, Nick...” she begins again.

I laugh and shake my head. “Charlie, just shh. Close your eyes.”

She hesitates, but finally listens and closes her eyes.

“Charlie the past is exactly that, it’s in the past,” I tell her softly. “Don’t think about it. Think about you and me. We’re starting something brand new.” I can see her body beginning to relax as I speak. “We’re starting something amazing for us.” I press my lips to her cheekbone and

then her eye lids. “Nothing is going to hurt you anymore.” I press my lips to hers, and she immediately loops her arms around me. I pull her close to my body and run my hands down her back. I pull back slowly. “Please don’t let that idiot hurt you.” I cup her face in my hands. “Open your eyes.”

She opens them slowly and looks right into my eyes. Her bright blue-green eyes no longer fight tears as the dim lighting makes them glimmer from all angles. She smiles wide. “Thank you.”

“I’m sorry tonight ended up being a

dud,” I tell her.

She gives her head a shake. “It’s okay. At least with me, things are certainly eventful.” She laughs.

“You do have a point,-” I tell her.

“I just really like to keep things interesting.” She laughs.

“I am sorry about Jason. He really seems like a jerk, and even I can’t stand him.”

“An even bigger jerk than my ex back from Indiana,” she admits. “At least it’s done and over with.”

I smile. “That’s one way to look at it.”

“Well, you said so yourself,” she tells me. “The past is in the past.”

I nod.

“So, would I be asking too much if I asked to leave?” She asks.

I shake my head. “No, I think that would be a good idea,” I tell her.

“Good,” she says. “Because, if you would have said no, I would have gone to begging.” She laughs.

“Aw, c’mon,” I say. “Was it really

that bad?”

“Well, this part wasn’t bad, and seeing Maggie wasn’t bad,” she admits.

“But, Jason didn’t help.”

She nods.

“Anything else you want to do tonight?” I ask.

She gives her head a shake as her hair bobs back and forth. “I think after this I’m plenty good.”

I give her time to say her goodbyes to Maggie before we head to my truck. Maggie gives her a tight hug and reminds



her several times to call her before we walk out the door into the chilly night air when Charlie shivers.

“I was leaving a party the night I,” she stops.

“I know.” I say, opening the door for her.

“I’m sorry,” she says. “I just couldn’t help...”

“Don’t worry about it,” I tell her, helping her in the truck. “I understand.”

She smiles as she reaches for the seat belt, and I shut the door.

“Nick,” her voice makes me turn as I shove the key into the ignition, “it can only get better from here, right?”

“Of course,” I tell her, “and it’ll just get easier.”

“It’s almost been a month since...” Her voice trails softly as she looks away for a moment.

“And you are doing extraordinary,” I tell her. “You’re healing, Charlie, you really are. Not just physically, but mentally.”

She leans forward and presses her

lips to mine for a moment. “Good things can come from bad.”

I give her a bright smile. *Really* good things.

\* \* \* \* \*

The next few days are quiet and relaxing. Charlie has made the choice to stay in, which I don't argue with, since she had made a point of going to the party when she didn't want to in the first place. She's sitting nestled comfortably

into her couch with a cup of hot Chai Spice tea as she flips aimlessly through various channels.

“Why is it, when you actually have the time to watch TV, there’s absolutely nothing on?” She grumbles, tossing the remote to me.

I shrug. “It’s a conspiracy.”

She laughs, blowing into the mug of tea before having a sip.

“You could always turn your Netflix on,” I remind her. “Pick a movie to watch.”

She nods and leans her head into the side of the couch. I can tell she really doesn't feel like doing much of anything, but she is quite happy just laying back on the couch with me. Though she does look quite peaceful, I know enough that I can tell something is on her mind.

“You feel okay?” I ask her.

She nods. “Just thinking I guess. We still don't know anything.”

“I know,” I tell her. “Sometimes it does just take some time.”

“And, what about all these unsolved

cases?” She asks.

“You just can’t think like that,” I tell her.

She looks at me out of the corner of her eyes. ”I know,” she says softly as she slowly sits up.

“There are far too many great people working around the clock on this case to think like this.”

She nods. “I know, I shouldn’t question what the police can or can’t do. I’m just ready for it to be done and over with.”

“If anyone is ready, I know it’s you,”  
I tell her. “But, chin up. For me?”

She nods again and smiles.

My phone seems to ring louder from  
my pocket as I work to fish it out.

Charlie leans back and takes a few more  
sips of tea as I slide the phone to  
‘answer’ mode.

“Good news?” I ask, already  
knowing that Sergeant Wilson is on the  
other end is.

“We,” he pauses. “Have someone in  
custody,” he takes a long breath. “He

turned himself in. The son-of-a-bitch is a cop, Andrews; she was right, he's a cop." My mouth drops and I glance at Charlie, who knows what the phone call is clearly about. "Can you bring her for a line up?"

"Yeah," I say. "I can, and we can be there shortly."

"We just want to see if seeing him will toggle that memory of hers," he says. "And, we have to make sure this guy isn't nuts."

I nod. "I understand. We will see you shortly," I tell him, hanging up the



call and turning to Charlie.

“Anything good?” She asks.

I take a long deep breath and let it out slowly. “They have someone in custody.”

Her eyes grow large. “They what?”

“They have someone in custody,” I repeat. “He apparently turned himself in, because his conscience was eating away at him.”

“So, what does this mean?” She asks.

“Well, they want you to go in for a

line up,” I tell her. “They know your memory is still hazy, but they at least want you to see if you can try to remember.”

“Why?” She questions.

“Because he turned himself in,” I explain. “Some people are crazy, and just want to take all the credit.”

“You’re serious, aren’t you?” She asks.

I nod.

“Well,” she says, reaching for the Victoria’s Secret jacket she enjoys

wearing. “Let’s get this over with; the quicker the better.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Walking into the police department when you’re under police protection can be a bit alarming. People know who you are, what happened to you, when it happened to you. So it’s only natural that you can feel a little awkward, which I can tell was exactly how Charlie is feeling. She gives her jacket a nice tug

and pulls it around her body as she crosses her arms in front of her. I glance over for a moment and let out a breath. She still has no idea that the man who turned himself in was a cop. I honestly don't want to tell her. I'm almost afraid to. I'm afraid that her opinion about me may change very quickly.

“Andrews,” I hear Wilson’s booming voice from just down the hallway. “Charlotte, how are you feeling?” He nods.

“Okay I guess,” she says. “How is someone supposed to feel after all of

this?”

He nods. “Are you ready for the line up?”

She shrugs. “Probably not, but I’ll do anything to get these guys in jail.”

He nods in agreement, and begins leading us into a small room, the two way mirror just in front showing the classic white wall and black lines indicating height. Charlie takes a moment to pause at the doorway. I place my hand on her lower back, giving her a gentle nudge and a smile. She returns the

smile and heads into the room, where she stares at the empty space ahead.

“Where are they?” She asks.

“We’ll bring them in,” Wilson explains, pressing a large button that sounds a loud buzzing noise.

Charlie jumps closer to me and squeezes her arms around herself tighter. I hear her sigh as she closes her eyes for a moment as men of all shapes and sizes walk into the line viewing.

“Can they,” she pauses. “They can’t see me, right?”

I shake my head. “It’s a two way;  
it’s just a mirror on their side.”

“But, they know someone is over  
here,” she says.

I nod. “More than likely.”

She looks up at me and makes an  
odd little face before returning her gaze  
to the line of men. Some were rough  
looking, beards, messy hair, and even  
dirty. Others were rather clean cut and  
nice looking. Not what you’d typically  
picture for a serial killer. She slowly  
brings a hand up and rubs at her eyes

before giving her head a shake.

“Is there any-way I can hear them talk?” She asks.

Wilson gives her a little nod and orders the men, through a one way intercom, to state their names loud and clear.

One by one, each man takes his turn stating his own name. Some have deep voices, some high voices, but it becomes clearer when number seven says his name in his smooth voice. Charlie drops to her knees and grabs for the metal trash can, where she immediately becomes



sick. Color drops from her face and lips as she closes her eyes and throws up once more.

“I think we have our answer,”  
Wilson tells me.

One of the men, in fact, was a cop.

I watch as the Wilson heads out of the room, closing the door tightly behind him. I can hear his naturally loud voice on the other side as he announces the information and barks a few orders here and there. I can now see the men in the lineup have all been ordered to face

forward as they're all being marched back to their cells. I can't help but to feel immense anger wash over me as I glance at number seven. I worked along side him. He isn't a friend, but I certainly knew him. And, now, I hate him. I hate him for what he'd done to Charlie. I give a few glances around the room and listen for anyone coming through the door before I kneel down next to Charlie and place a hand tenderly on her back as I pull her hair from her face.

She covers her mouth and looks up

at me. “I am so sorry,” she mumbles underneath her hand. “I just,” she pauses. “I know.”

I nod. “It’s okay.” I give her back a few more rubs. “Are you okay?”

She nods, only to pause and then shrug. “I don’t know.” She leans over the trash can. “I remember that voice,” she takes a deep breath. “Right in my ear. Those things he would say.” I can see the tears welling in her eyes. “The things he did.” She exhales and places her head over on her arm.

“They have him now, “ I tell her.

“He won’t hurt you anymore.”

She nods. She looks pitiful and weak. I’d give anything to take the burden of her thoughts and bad feelings away from her. To give her more peace than this. Even knowing that one of them is in jail just isn’t enough.

“Charlie, there’s something I have to tell you,” I say.

“What?” She asks, glancing up at me.

“The man who turned himself in,” I pause. “He is,” I stop again. “He was a

cop.”

“Was?” She asks.

“Well, he certainly won’t have a job now,” I say, rubbing her lower back.

She leans her head down again.

“What’ll happen now?”

“He’ll stay in jail.”

“No bail, no questions asked, he’s not getting out?” She says.

I nod. “He’s staying in on a more permanent basis.”

She sniffles and wipes at her eyes.

“Can I get you anything? Water?” I

ask.

She sits up more alert and places her hand on my arm. “Don’t leave me.”

I nod toward the water cooler. “It’s just right there,” I reassure her.

She finally nods in agreement as she pulls herself up and into one of the old metal chairs. I pull up a spare chair just next to hers and have a seat as I hand her the small cup. “Sip slowly,” I tell her. “I don’t want you to make yourself sick again.”

She nods and has one small sip.

“There’s just one more,” she says.

I nod and push more of her hair from her eyes. “Just one more.”

“And, this guy,” she says. “This cop, he knows who.”

I nod. “We just need to get him to confess who.”

“How can you do that?” She asks.

“We have people,” I tell her. “Good people. They’re trained for this. They can get it out of him, and we’ll have our guy.”

“Good people?” She asks. “Like, they’ll break his legs if he doesn’t talk?”

I laugh and take her face in my hands. “If I could break every bone in his body, I would, just for what he’s done to you,” I say, planting a light kiss on her forehead.

She leans into me a moment. “Nick, is it really almost over?”

“Yeah,” I say. “It is.”

She has another slow sip of water. “Can I break his fingers?” She asks.

I laugh again. “If it were legal, I



would let you.”

“Guess the police department would frown upon that, huh?” She asks.

I nod. “More than likely. But, I’ll put in a good word for you.” I wink.

“Am I allowed to leave?” She asks, drinking the last bit of water in the cup.

“Any time that you’d like.”

She nods. “Is it okay that I have some more water first?”

I nod, taking her cup and head over to the water cooler for a refill. “Are you feeling any better at all?” I ask.

She nods and takes the cup from me.

“At least, I think I am. I mean, he’s in jail. He’s not going anywhere anytime soon. I’m safe from him. It’s just,” She pauses. “There’s one more.”

“But, he knows who the other guy is,” I remind her. “We will get it out of him.”

“But, when will that be?” She asks. “How long will it take to get it out of him?”

I pull her in for a hug. “We got one; we will get the other one,” I reassure

her.

“I guess I’m just ready for all of this to be over,” she says. “I really want to forget that it ever happened.”

“I really wish none of this would have ever happened to you,” I say, softly.

She nods and pulls back from me slowly. “But, then I wouldn’t have met you.”

“And, just how do you know that?” I ask.

“Because, I’m the felon,

remember?” She laughs.

“But,” I start, “doesn’t that mean that you would meet me?”

“But, you certainly wouldn’t want anything to do with me.”

“I don’t know,” I say. “Men do like bad girls.”

She laughs softly and pushes a tuft of hair from her eyes. “Tell me that it’ll all be okay.”

“It’ll all be okay,” I say. “I promise.”

She nods and wraps her arms around

her body. “Care to get me out of here? I’m dying to brush my teeth,” she admits, making a face.

I nod. “Of course. And, just plan to stay comfy, we’ll stay in and relax.”

She smiles.

“And, I hope you don’t mind snuggling on the couch,” I tell her.

She shakes her head. “Not at all.”

“I’ll even let you pick some sappy chick flick,” I say, opening the door for her.

“Oooh,” she says as her eyes get

bigger. “Anything goes?”

“Why do I get the sudden feeling that I’m going to really regret this?” I laugh.

She shakes her head at me as we head back down the main hall to the exit. “Don’t worry; I’m thinking of just a good comedy.”

“One that makes fun of cops?” I ask, opening the door for her.

“Not even one that makes fun of cops.” She smiles. “Like Adam Sandler?”

I nod. “He’s one of my favorites.”

“Mine too.” She grins as we both trail down the cracked and worn cement steps. “So,” she says, glancing at me from the corner of her eyes, “since I’m a movie nerd, what is your favorite movie?”

“I don’t know,” I tell her, as we make our way over to my truck.

“That’s not a real answer.” She laughs.

“Then what is?” I ask, opening the passenger door for her.

“Your favorite movie,” she explains.

“One that you could watch all day, every day.”

“When I was younger it was *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*,” I tell her as she starts climbing into the truck seat. “Now, I would say it’s probably the same.”

“Big fan of Clint?” She asks, clicking on her seat belt as I prop myself against the door.

I nod. “Isn’t everyone?”

“No complaints here, but my brothers think that he’s overrated,” she



admits.

“And, what’s your favorite movie?”

I ask curiously.

“*The Goonies*, of course.”

“Which one is that?” I ask.

“Oh, what is wrong with you?” She asks.

“What?” I reply.

“You’ve never seen *The Goonies*?” She asks.

I shake my head. “Never seen any of the *Back to the Future* movies, either.”

“Did you grow up deprived?” She

questions.

I shake my head. “No, on westerns.” I laugh as I close her door and join her from the driver side.

“Ah,” she says. “A family of cops so you watched all westerns all the time.”

I nod as I place the key into the ignition to fire up the truck. “You got it.”

“So, you grew up watching John Wayne and Audie Murphy.”

“Of course,” I tell her. “I mean, what other movies were there?”

She laughs. “More than you know.”

“Maybe we could watch *The Goonies* or *Back to the Future*,” I suggest.

She smiles. “I would really like that.”

“How are you feeling right now?” I ask her as I stare forward at the road.

“I feel better knowing that he’s in jail, where he belongs right now.”

“But?” I say. “I can tell in your voice that there is a but...”

“I really wish I wouldn’t have had to have seen him,” she admits. “I never

wanted to come face-to-face with him,” she pauses. “He has done God only knows what to me and before, I had no idea what he looked like. Now I do. Now I have a face to put into the nightmares.”

“Hey,” I say, softly, reaching over for her hand. “There won’t be any more nightmares,” I reassure her. “I’m with you.”

She gives me a half smile. “What about the other guy?”

“Do you know how many guys are in on this case?” I ask. “I mean we have

detectives crawling all over it. People are losing sleep, working days on end to catch them. I mean, these lunatics have caused a stir.”

She nods as she listens contently.

“I won’t let anything happen to you, Charlie,” I tell her, giving her hand a light squeeze. “It’ll be okay.”

She lets out a deep breath, as if she had been holding it in for a while. “I guess it’s just best to go on with life right now and not really think about them.”

I nod. “It’s okay to keep moving forward. You can’t let them control your life.”

She nods.

“Hey,” I softly say. “We got one; we’ll get the other.”

She looks over and smiles. “I hope so.”

# - 9 -

## Charlie

By the time we make it back to my apartment it's both later and colder than we expect. I pull my jacket around me as Nick fumbles with the keys to unlock the security door. As he opens the door, we both run inside, letting it slam and lock

behind us.

“Cold?” He asks.

“More like froze,” I tell him as we start up the stairs. “What happened to fall?”

He smiles as he begins to unlock the door to my apartment. “Winter can come quick,” he says, stepping in before me to turn on the lights and have a quick look around. He gives me a nod and a smile as I walk inside.

“I’m just going to brush my teeth and change,” I tell him, slipping down the hallway.



He gives me a nod as I can only assume he's set off to change himself. I end up brushing my teeth twice and rinsing more than the recommended times with Listerine. Even then, I can't shake the dirty feeling in my mouth. Or all over my body for that matter. I brush my hair out and tug it up and into a messy bun before running down the hall to my bedroom. I throw clothes here and there in search of something both comfy and warm. Yoga pants, a tank top, and a cozy open sweater seem to be my best choice. I pull them on and give myself a

quick glance in the mirror to make sure that I don't look too terrible. Despite the circumstances, and what I've gone through, I am supposed to be dating him, right?

When I return to the living room, I see Nick has changed into a pair of sweat pants and a sleeveless tee shirt. He's standing at the balcony and staring contently out the large window of the balcony doors. For the first time, I can very visibly see his tattoo. I quietly make my way over to him and gingerly touch his tattoo.

“You should be proud to show it off,” I tell him. “It’s beautiful, with an even more beautiful meaning.”

Without a word he spins around and throws his arms around me, nearly knocking me off my feet. I can feel that his warm body is beginning to shake as he squeezes me into him.

“Nick,” I say, “what’s wrong? Did something happen?”

I can feel him shake his head in reply as he pulls me to him tighter.

“What’s wrong?” I ask. I feel his

chin now rest tenderly on my head as his body continues to tremble. “Nick, really, what’s wrong?”

I step back a few inches, enough for me to look into his eyes, and I can now see they’re red and streaked with tears. A chill runs down my spine as I bring a hand up to his cheek, wiping away at a stray tear.

“What’s wrong?” I ask.

“I haven’t felt like this since,” he pauses and brings his hand up to my collarbone where I still have a visible mark. “My sister.” I can feel his finger

tip shake as he tenderly traces where the large cut line once was. “And, tonight, when I saw your reaction and I saw him. I feel like it’s more personal now than ever.”

“But, Nick,” I start.

He shakes his head. “I didn’t plan any of this. Between you and me,” he tells me.

“It just happened,” I say. “Something good that came from something really bad.”

He nods. “I just feel that I need to

protect you even more,” he says. “I’ve gotten really close with you over this month, and I know that I have fallen for you really hard.”

“Well, you know I have, especially since the last thing on my mind was finding someone to date,” I admit, smiling.

“So hard, that I can say that I love you, Charlie,” he says, letting out a deep breath and running a hand down his face.

I feel taken aback for a moment and take a deep breath. I look into his eyes. There’s no denying just how sincere he

is. At the same time, there's no denying just how I feel, too. I finally smile and lean in to wrap my arms around him. I feel his shaky arms move around me and hold me securely. I reach as far as I can, moving my lips next to his ear. "I love you, too."

I feel him let out a long sigh as he pulls me in closer. "I'm sorry," he tells me.

"For what?" I ask.

"Crying."

"When I've been crying on you for

how long?" I ask. "That's nothing to apologize for," I tell him, pulling away slightly.

"I feel ridiculous, though," he admits.

I smile. "But, why?"

"Because men really don't cry," he jokes, taking a minute to run his hands down his face again.

I nod. "Real ones do."

He smiles wide. "I think I'm going to go wash my face."

I nod. "Okay, I'll start pulling some



movies out,” I tell him, and head off to, what I like to call, my movie closet.

As I shuffle through the various shelves of Blu Rays, DVDs, and the even old VHS tapes, I can hear the water running in the bathroom. I slowly drop to my knees and begin digging in the lower shelves for *The Goonies* and a few other classics I’ve grown to love. After all these years you would think that I would learn to alphabetize my movie collection and make things easier than digging through over 1,000 cases in search of the exact ones I want. My idea of organizing

my massive collection was turning the large hallway closet into, literally, a mini Blockbuster of sorts. I hear the bathroom door and his footsteps come down the hallway.

“What are you doing?” I hear him ask.

“Looking for my movie,” I say, as I feel the door move back farther.

“How many movies do you have?” He laughs.

“It’s my guilty pleasure, okay?” I laugh. “I told you, I really am a movie

nerd.”

I can feel him squat down behind me as he pushes up my tank top to touch the tattoo that has now been exposed. “This really is beautiful. How many hours did it take?” He asks.

I glance just over my shoulder. “Almost forty hours of laying in the chair,” I say.

“Brave woman you are,” he says, his eyes now returning to their normal shade of green. “And, on the back too.”

I nod. “Yeah, it did hurt. But, I

needed the space.” I laugh as I finally pull out *The Goonies*.

“Do you regret it?” He questions, tracing his finger along the wings as I adjust more to show him the skin ink.

I shake my head. “Never will.”

“Plan on getting any more?” He now runs his finger down the bird’s body and to it’s talons.

“I think this will be my one and only,” I admit. “But for the time and money put into it, it’s enough.” I glance back at him. “Ready for that movie?” I

hold up the blue case for him to see.

“So,” he says, taking the case as he helps me off the floor, “this is *The Goonies?*”

I nod. “That would be *The Goonies.*”

“And, it’s not a chick flick?” He asks.

“Read the back if you doubt me,” I tell him, making a face.

“Alright,” he says, “I believe you.”

I give my tank top and sweater a quick adjustment before taking the case

back from him and trailing into the living room. “You want some popcorn?” I ask.

“Sure,” he says, “but, you better make it. I might very well blow up the microwave or burn the popcorn.”

I laugh. “It’s popcorn; it’s easy,” I tell him, digging in an upper cabinet for a plastic wrapped bag of microwavable popcorn.

“Yeah, easy for other people,” he says, leaning on my open bar counter.

“How can you possibly burn popcorn?” I ask, peeling away the

plastic and tossing it into the garbage.

He shrugs. “Cooking it too long, I assume. I never know when to take it out; most of the time, I’m not even paying attention.”

I laugh. “Well, since you’re supposed to listen for the popping to slow down, you need to pay attention,” I say. “C’mon, it’s not that hard.”

“Want to bet?” He asks. “You ask my mother. She can tell you just how many microwaves I’ve blown up.”

I smile. “Come here,” I tell him.

He walks over and begins to watch as I unfold the bag of popcorn and lay it flat in the microwave. “The trick is just listening for the popping to stop. I just put in some random time and listen,” I tell him, dialing four minutes into the microwave and pressing *Start*.

“And, what happens when you’re just a shitty cook?” He laughs.

“Well, you’re learning, and pretty soon you won’t be a shitty cook,” I say, as the butter begins to simmer and the popping begins.



I see him listen intently to the simmering and popping noises as a few minutes in they begin to slow and ease up. He smiles. “Now, I think I may get it.” He laughs.

I smile and hit the *Stop* button as I open the microwave and pull out the steaming bag. “See? All you have to do is pay attention to me, and you will be cooking circles around me in no time.”

“Well,” he starts, passing me the popcorn bowl, “it might help that I do have a better teacher now.”

I feel my cheeks flush. “It’s just popcorn,” I tell him as I dump the entire bag into the red and white popcorn tub.

He shrugs. “Ever smell burnt popcorn?”

I nod and laugh. “I have all brothers, remember? I’m pretty sure their total of blown up microwaves will beat yours.”

“See,” he points out, “it’s not just me.”

I laugh as I wad the popcorn bag into a ball and toss it into the trash. I click the kitchen light off as we both trail into

the living room and nestle into the couch. I reach for the remote and click on the TV. It's set on a local station, and a news alert is on with bold letters at the bottom stating 'Breaking News.' The dark haired news anchor is standing outside, wrapped in a tan coat, with police lights flashing all around her. I give the screen a closer look. It's about Loverboy, and even before this I have come to realize that I will be constantly seeing headlines about these men on the news. It was something that I was going to have to accept until both men were

apprehended. But, this was something that I never expected. The headline flooded the TV:- Bodies of the 7<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup>-, and 9<sup>th</sup> Loverboy victims have been found. My eyes become glued to the TV as I stare in disbelief.

I feel Nick's hand come down on top of mine and the remote. "Charlie, you don't have to watch this."

"I know." I say. "I just. I can't believe it. Three more." I look over at him with a gaping mouth and questioning eyes.

“I wish I had an explanation for this,” he says. “I wish that anyone in this city who’s gone missing returns home safely. There’s no excuse for this.”

I nod and fix my glare back on the TV. *“It’s being reported that all three women were found lying next to one another. Nude, but perfectly clean. It’s currently also being rumored that among the bodies were notes from Loverboy.”*

I give my head a shake. “Why?” I ask. “I just want to know why this shit happens?”

“With good comes evil,” Nick says.

“But, this is,” I point to the screen.

“Shit like this surpasses evil. How can people do this?” I say, dropping the remote into my lap and placing my hands over my face.

I feel Nick’s hand come down on my back. “It’s not fair that anything like this happens to anyone. And, it should never happen in the first place.”

“Then why does it?” I say. “That’s three more innocent women, probably in their late teens whose lives have been

cut short, because two men are insane.”

“You know,” he says, rubbing my back, “we did get one.” He reminds me. “Maybe his partner has gotten the scare of reality that he’ll be caught soon too.”

“So, he goes and kills all the girls that he’s holding?” I say as I look up again.

“He may feel the need to be getting rid of evidence and clean up his trail,” he tells me. “You know it’s not going to be long before his partner is talking.”

“But, all these women,” I say.

He nods. “I know. And, there’s been worse, and there will be more killers out there,” He tells me. “Jack the Ripper, the Green River Killer, Son of Sam. The world has its crazies. I wish it didn’t, but it does.”

I rub at my eyes and look back at the TV; a story like this will be running all night. And, I can’t help but to think how excited the reporter probably is that she got to report headline news. I shake my head. “Find him, Nick. Find the other guy,” I say, turning to him.

He leans in and wraps his arms



around me. “I will.”

“I just want him behind bars with his little friend,” I say. “Then, nothing like this will be on the news.”

“Why don’t we just watch the movie? Like we planned.”

I pull away and stare at him.

“I know it won’t make you feel better about tonight, but it may take your mind off things for a while,” he says. “And, you said so yourself, it is your favorite movie.”

I take a moment to think, and finally

give in by clicking a few buttons on the proper remotes to get the movie started. I lean back into the couch and let out a long breath.

I feel Nick's hand come down on my knee. "Stop thinking about it, you. Focus on what's in front of you."

I had to admit it was one of the harder things I have done. Thinking about those three poor women, all of whom were probably younger than me. I had known what they had been through. Their final moments before death had certainly not been happy ones. I could

feel the tears poke at my eyes when I realized that it could have very well been me. I remain focused on the TV and the movie. I take in each moment of the Fratelli's police chase as they dart through Astoria and pass each kid on their way. I can nearly feel myself breaking down until they pass Chunk and he smashes himself, his pizza, and the strawberry milkshake all over the window. Maybe that's all that I needed. I start to laugh. So hard in fact, that I snort.

I hear Nick laugh next to me, more

than likely at me and not the movie. I cover my mouth and remain focused.

“So,” he says. “Did the kid not see that coming?”

I give my head a little shake as, for some reason, I fight a little more laughter.

“And, you just find that hilarious,” he says.

I nod. “That’s right, I do,” I tell him, now bringing myself under some control.

“And, just how many times have you seen this?” He asks.

I shrug. “Way too many to count.”

I glance over at him as he smiles and gives his lips a lick.

“And, you could just watch this over and over,” he says.

I give him another nod as the main characters are all together and they’re currently trying to put the penis back on the statue upside down. I let out another loud laugh, this time controlling myself enough not to snort. I hear Nick let out a loud and comforting laugh as I feel his hand on mine suddenly. I glance over at

him as he smiles, and he motions for me to lean in closer to him. I feel my face heat up as I adjust myself on the couch to place my body against his. His arm falls around me, and immediately my head finds that perfect spot on his shoulder to settle in to. It's not even half way into the movie that I feel my eyes become heavy and I eventually let myself drift to sleep.

\* \* \* \* \*

It's the loud bang on the door that finally catches my attention. I let my eyes open, and see that the TV and Blu Ray player have both been turned off. The light above the stove has been turned on for a little light to see. Nick is off the couch, but the running water in the bathroom tells me exactly where he is. The knocking happens again, and without thinking I pull myself sleepily from the couch to unlock the door and open it. I'm greeted with such a force that I'm blown to the ground. I feel the back of my head and elbows hit the hardwood in such a

way that it stuns me more than hurts. I shake myself from the shock and sleep as I realize that there is a man on top of me. I stare up and realize he's wearing a black ski mask. He grins through the hole around the mouth. I open my mouth to let out a scream, and before I can his hand clamps on it hard. Immediately, I begin to cry, wiggle, fight, and squirm. His hand comes down and meets my face hard, and I let out such a loud whimper that can be heard through my entire apartment. I hear the bathroom door fly back and footsteps dropping heavy on



the floor as they become closer. I hear one loud click, and I know Nick is ready. I feel the man climb off of me, and I gasp for air as I try to crawl back on the floor.

“On your knees!” Nick calls out.

Without hesitation, the man in all black drops on his knees.

“Hands on the back of your head!” Nick says as he steps closer to him.

I can't help but to feel relieved as I realize it's all over. I run my hands down my face and feel that my cheek is

beginning to throb. I look up, and Nick already has him and he's pulling his hands behind his back.

“Look, I'm sorry, Man,” I hear the guy say in a familiar voice.

“You can tell that one to the judge,” Nick says as he reaches for the mask and begins ripping it from his face.

I look up and my mouth drops.

“Jason! What the hell are you doing?” I scream.

“Charlie, I...”

Nick doesn't let him finish as he

gives him a shake, and I now see that Nick now has his hand cuffs and he's tightly latching them to Jason's wrists behind his back.

“What the fuck do you think you're doing, Jason?” Nick asks, kicking my apartment door shut.

Jason looks up at him, but doesn't answer.

“Do you realize what the hell you're doing?” Nick asks.

Again, Jason only stares.

“You sit your ass right there,” he

says, pulling out his phone. “Get comfortable.”

Nick makes his way over to me and begins helping me off the floor. He begins talking to the police department on the phone as he silently but gently inspects the throbbing spot on my face. He swipes his finger across his phone when he finishes, and turns back to Jason. “What the hell is wrong with you?” He asks, as he rushes to turn on a few lights.

“I just,” Jason pauses. “I just wanted to scare her.”

“Scare her?” Nick asks. “You just wanted to scare her?” Nick lifts my chin tenderly with a few fingers. “This is scaring her?”

Jason shakes his head. “It must have been my ring; I didn’t mean to,” He says.

“You wanted to scare her, but you didn’t mean to hurt her,” Nick says.

“What are you fucking stupid?” Nick snaps at him.

“Will it work in my defense?” Jason asks.

Nick growls. “I should just fucking

shoot you where you sit, you little dirt bag!” Nick turns to me to look at my face again. “Are you okay?”

I nod. “I think so.”

He runs his finger over the worse part of the spot and I wince. He makes a face at me. “Anywhere else hurt?”

“I hit the back of my head,” I say, bringing a hand up to rub it.

“Charlie, I’m sorry.”

Before I can reply, Nick does. “You sit down and shut the fuck up.”

“Am I going to jail?” Jason

stammers. “I didn’t break in, I came in behind someone, and she answered the door.”

Nick shoots him a dirty look. “You bet your ass you are,” Nick answers. “I’ll make sure you get a nice cell mate too. One that thinks you’re real pretty.” He turns back to me and takes my face in his hands.

“Nick, I’m so sorry that I opened the door,” I say. “I was just so tired; I heard the knock and wasn’t thinking.”

He shakes his head. “It’s okay. I just want to make sure that you’re okay.”

I can feel my body beginning to relax and I nod.

“You might have a little cut on the spot on your cheek,” Nick says, looking at it once more. “I’ll take a closer look once Tweedledum here is gone.”

I nod as another knock on the door makes me jump. Nick eases me. “It’s just the police,” he tells me softly.

I nod and pull my sweater around my body as he lets them inside.

They move quick as they pull Jason from the floor and read him his rights.



He looks at me with scared eyes.

“Charlie, are you just going to let them take me to jail?”

I nod. “Yeah, I am.”

“It was all a joke,” he shoots back.

“Some joke,” I say as one of the officers is talking to Nick.

“Charlie, come on,” Jason begs.

“Goodbye Jason,” I say, giving him a little wave as Jason is ushered out of the door and down the stairs. I bring a hand up to my cheek and give it a rub as Nick is locking the door once again.

Nick heads toward me as I give my cheek another rub. “You sure you’re okay?” He asks.

“I really hope so,” I say, now realizing that the spot on my face is beginning to puff outward. “Is it bad?” I ask.

He shakes his head. “It’s not as bad as you think.”

“I’m sorry,” I tell him. “I don’t know what I was thinking.”

“It’s okay,” he says. “It’s not your fault at all.”

“Even though I’m the one who opened the door?” I ask.

“But, his dumb ass was the one acting stupid.”

I nod and straighten my sweater as I pull it back around my body. “I know.”

“Are you really okay?” He asks.

“I’m fine,” I snap.

“Charlie,” he says. “Do you need to talk?”

“I don’t always need to talk, Nick.”

He purses his lips and brings a hand up to rub the back of his neck. “I’m

sorry.”

I let out a sigh. “Nick, no.” I say, shaking my head. “I’m the one who should be sorry. I didn’t mean to snap at you.” I pause. “I just.”

“You thought it was him.”

I nod. “I was sure it was him,” I told him. “I was even more sure that when you had him that this would all be over.”

He licks his lips. “You should let me clean your cheek.”

“Is it really that bad?” I ask, bringing a hand up to rub it.

“Just a small cut in the center,” he explains. “Better to clean it, just in case,” he tells me, reaching for my hand.

I extend my hand to him as he trails me to the bathroom, where he instructs me to sit on the toilet. I obey, having a seat as I point to the medicine cabinet. “How old was your sister when she was,” I stop.

“She was eighteen,” he tells me, opening my medicine cabinet to pull out the first aid kit. “Just turned eighteen, in fact.”

“Um,” I take a breath, tucking a stray wad of hair behind my ear. “What happened?”

He squats in front of me as he dabs a cotton ball onto the top of the antiseptic bottle. “It was late,” he says. “She had just gotten off work, and she was walking in the parking lot to her car.”

“Wrong place, wrong time,” I say softly as he brings it to my cheek, swiping it a few times.

He nods. “Just like you.”

“I just can’t comprehend why this

happened to me,” I say. “Why it happens to anyone. To your sister, to those girls they found tonight. Why? Why?” I ask.

He blows tenderly on my cheek to help it dry. “I wish I had some kind of answer. I wish I could have given one to my sister, to you. But, I don’t. I can’t.”

“I’m just so angry and feel so,” I pause as I realize tears have now begun to roll from my eyes and down my cheeks. “Used. So dirty.” For the first time since I had been taken, I feel myself having a real break down. I finally let myself let everything go as I weep

uncontrollably. “Because I chose to go through a park that I loved, it made me some target for some sickos. They took me; they beat and raped me repeatedly. They tortured me. All because they got such immense pleasure from it.” I look Nick in the eyes. “They got pleasure, because they knew how much pain I was in, Nick.”

I can tell that, for once, Nick is unsure of what to say. He places everything in his hands on the ground and wraps his arms tightly around me as I have the breakdown that I needed



months ago.

**- 10 -**

**Nick**

I let her cry into my arms, releasing everything that needed releasing from her system. She talks to me until her tears take over and turn slowly into uncontrollable sobs. I run my hand up and down her back as I let her lean into

me and cry. She pulls away slowly, wiping at her red eyes and nose.

“I’m sorry.” She whimpers.

I reach behind her for the box of Kleenex and extend them to her. She quietly takes a few and wipes her eyes and nose. “Thank you,” she tells me, tossing the used Kleenex in the trash can behind me.

“I think you needed that,” I tell her.

She nods and laughs slightly. “I think you’re right.”

“Better to get it all out, than to hold it all in,” I tell her.

She nods and rubs at her eyes.

“Now you really have to be exhausted.”

She nods. “For once, I really am.”

“You should get some more sleep then,” I tell her, pushing her messy hair back.

She nods.

“You want to try sleeping in your bed?” I ask. “Might be more comfortable for you than the couch.”

She takes a long breath and thinks

for a moment. Finally, she nods. I smile, taking her hand and lead her to the bedroom, where her neatly made and untouched bed has sat for the better part of a week. She takes a breath and turns back to look at me. “Are you...”

I stop her. “I am sure you can do this.”

She slowly lets go and begins to trail to her bed. I stop her quickly, reaching for her hand. “Hey,” I say, softly. “I was wondering, do you have any nice dresses?”

She gives me an odd look. “Yeah,

why?”

“Well, I was just wondering, that maybe,” I pause to clear my throat as I feel a bit of nervousness wash over me. “I could take you on a real date. You know, go out for a nice dinner. One that requires more than just jeans and a tee shirt,” I tell her.

“Really?” She smiles.

“Yeah, really,” I say. “I mean, we’ve been out of this apartment before. Why not out to a nice place.”

“I would really like that,” She tells

me, smiling.

“I know a few places we could go,” I say. “I’ll make some calls; see if I can get us reservations. Does later tonight sound okay?” I ask her.

She nods. “Sounds perfect to me.”

“We’ll have to get ready at my apartment,” I say. “If that’s okay. I don’t have much here.”

She nods. “It’s okay, as long as you have a private place for me to change.” She laughs.

I nod. “So, it’s a date then.”

She smiles. “It’s a date.”

I smile and turn to leave her to go to bed when I feel my hand being grabbed. I turn to look at her, and she smiles. She steps close to me, stands on tip toe, and plants her lips to mine. “Goodnight, Nick.”

“Goodnight,” I tell her, smiling as I head from her room. I suddenly can’t contain that feeling that I’m walking on air.

I head into the living room and lay back on the couch. I stare at the ceiling



for a while, just to make sure that I don't hear Charlie stirring in her bed. Eventually, everything grows quiet and I feel myself falling into a deep sleep.

\* \* \* \* \*

I am completely surprised at how quickly the day has passed after the Jason incident, as Charlie has been calling it. I have managed to talk our way into some reservations at Giovanni's, an upscale Italian restaurant

that everyone wants to get into at least once in their life. Luckily, I know a few guys at my department who frequent it with their wives, so we were in the minute I called off their names. I sit on the couch, waiting patiently as I left Charlie in her room to gather the things together that she needs. The plan is for us to change at my apartment, since I have nothing appropriate to wear to this place, and head straight to dinner. I feel a little silly, despite being in this apartment with her for weeks, I am nervous for a first real date. A proper

one, anyway.

I hear Charlie's footsteps as she makes her way down the hall. I see that she's carrying a black garment bag, that's slung over her shoulder, and another small bag. She smiles. "I think I'm ready," she tells me.

"Okay," I tell her and smile.

"You know," she says. "I've never been to your apartment."

I laugh. "No, you haven't."

"You told me when I first met you that you're messy," she says.

“Remember?”

I nod. “I am; I wasn’t lying. I’m a guy, living by himself.” I walk over, taking the bags from her. “Are you sure you’re okay with going to my place?”

She nods. “It’s fine. I just realized I’ve never been there before.” Her lips curl up an into a little grin. “It’s kind of a big deal to me; I’ve never actually been in anyone’s house that I’ve dated.” She thinks for a moment. “If I didn’t want to, I would tell you; I’m just saying that I’ve never been before.”

“You really haven’t had the best

luck with guys, have you?" I ask.

She gives her head a shake. "And sounds like you haven't had the best luck with girls, huh?"

I take a moment to think to myself. "No, they ended up being," I pause. "A waste of time, to put it lightly. My prom date senior year for example," I start. "She ended up in the boys bathroom with the lead singer of the band that night." I let out a laugh. "But, enough about stupid ex's; this is all about me and you."

"So." She smiles. "I'm curious, you

said you play piano. I was wondering, do you have a piano?" She asks, sweet enough to change the subject of my bad prom experience.

I nod. "I do," I tell her as we make our way to the front door. "But, most of the time I don't have time to play."

"You do?" She asks. "As in, it's in your apartment?"

I nod as I make sure to triple check the locks on her door. "Yeah, collecting dust as we speak." I turn to face her.

"I don't know if I could or not," she

starts. “But, could I talk you into playing for me if we have time?”

I smile. “Do you really like piano?”

She gives me a nod. “Like I told you, I wanted to play, but didn’t have the knack or talent for it.” She gives me a smile. “Does that mean you’ll play for me?”

I grin. “How could I possibly say no to you?” I ask and smile. “But, only if we have time. Which we won’t have, unless we get going,” I tell her, reaching for her hand.

She gives me a bright smile that I love and nods.

\* \* \* \* \*

Naturally, when we reach my apartment and I unlock the front door, I realize that it's in much worse shape than I remember. And, that's being nice to myself. It's horrendous. Clothes seem to be lying everywhere, magazines are plastered all over the coffee table; it's definitely not how I wanted her to see it.



I kick a few random items out of the way as I invite Charlie in, who doesn't seem to pay any mind to the random spots of clutter.

“I'm sorry that it's a mess,” I tell her. “I normally would have cleaned it.”

She shakes her head. “Honestly, it's okay.”

“Well, first things first,” I tell her. “Let's get ready, and I should have time to play something for you. Might be short, though.”

She smiles. “That's okay.” She

glances around. “So, where can I get ready at?”

“Oh,” I tell her, taking her hand to lead her to the larger bathroom. “Right in here,” I say, locking the door that leads straight into my bedroom. “I’ll be right in my bedroom if you need me,” I point to the door, “right through here.”

She smiles and thanks me as I give her privacy and trail into my bedroom to get ready myself. I open the door to my walk in closet and begin digging for something presentable. I haven’t been in a real suit in years; surely I have to have

something in here. I begin pushing back random articles of clothing and come across a pair of black tuxedo pants. I step out and toss them onto my bed. I return to the closet in search of a shirt and tie. A white button up and plain black tie should do the trick. I try to keep in mind how long Charlie may take to get ready, but I still find myself finishing way before her. I head toward one of my counters where the friend I have watching my apartment has been piling mail. I begin shuffling the endless array of bills and junk mail, tossing the junk

into one pile and the bills into another. I begin opening a thick envelope of pictures from my mom when I hear the footsteps behind me. I turn to see Charlie in a black, long sleeved short dress. She's taken the time to carefully and neatly pull her hair in a fancy bun as well as make up. It's also the first time I've seen her in a dress.

“Do I look,” she starts.

I immediately stop her as I toss the envelope back onto the counter. “You look beautiful.” I feel my mouth hang open for a moment as I struggle to think

of how to make it close.

“Thank you,” she says, her cheeks filling with a light pink. “You don’t look so bad yourself.”

“Thanks.”

“You can’t notice the spot on my...”

I stop her again. “No.”

“So,” she says. “Do we still have time for you to play something for me?” She asks, staring at the old upright piano that had once belonged to my grandmother.

I nod. “Actually, we’re going to play

something together.”

“Play, together? Me, play the piano?” She shakes her head. “Oh no, Nick, I can’t play, I shouldn’t. Matter of fact I have no idea how.”

I smile wide and offer her my hand. “I’ll show you.”

She takes my hand and begins trailing behind me as I lead her to the piano. I motion for her to sit before sitting down next to her. I lift the lid off the keys and place my hands on them before I let my fingers start dancing across the keys. As soon as I start, I stop

and smile. “Okay, now you try,” I tease.

She looks at me as though I have lost my mind. “I can’t even play chopsticks.”

I smile. “Here.” I stand and motion for her to do the same. I turn the piano bench around and have Charlie sit on the edge, closest to the piano. I carefully straddle the bench and sit behind her. “Give me your hands,” I say into her ear.

She obeys, and I gingerly place her hands over mine as I work them over the correct keys.

“This really isn’t such a good idea,”

she warns.

I begin slowly playing a few notes, moving slowly and carefully so her hands stay on top of my mine. Her hands and arms move in sync with mine as I continue to play. “See? Not that hard.” I smile.

She turns to look at me for a moment. “Does this really count as me playing?” She laughs softly.

I smile wide as my playing slowly stops. “You really are beautiful.”

I can see her cheeks beginning to fill



with color once more as I move in slowly to press my lips lightly to hers. She turns slightly, to face me more as I my hand moves up to her cheek. I feel her adjust once more on the small space enough to get her arms around me. I can feel her heart thumping deep in her chest as she leans in a little closer. I feel her hands begin to shake as one trails up my back, slowly past my neck and into my hair.

I pull away slowly. “Are you okay?” I ask. “I’m sorry if I,” I pause. “I’m not going to do anything you don’t want to. I

just really wanted to kiss you.” I smile nervously.

She blushes and smiles nervously. “It’s okay. It’s just that...” She stops and bites down on her lip for a moment. “It’s that I want to. And, I don’t know if that’s the right thing to be feeling right now.”

I smile and run my thumb along her cheek. “I would say it’s the right thing, since both of us feel that way.”

She grins wide and moves back in to plant her lips to mine. Her arms find their way back around me. Her fingertips find their way to dig in my hair in such a

way that I can feel my own body shake. For the first time, I let my hands trail down to her waist and give her a nudge toward me. I hear her make a slight noise, and I yank myself back and lick my lips. “I’m sorry.”

She smiles and moves her lips back to mine. I take a moment to comprehend and now feel my own heart thumping in my chest. I push into her and feel her body give and press into the piano. I hear a few random keys as this time I decipher the noise from her to be a soft moan. I pull away again, this time out of

fear of not being able to stop if we go further. I take a long breath and stare at her. Her bright blue-green eyes smile happily at me. She gives me a little knee-weakening grin, and gives me a slight nod as her cheeks turn bright red.

“Are you...” She stops me with a silent nod and smile. I take one of her hands in mine and bring it to my lips, placing a kiss on the back before getting off the bench. I help her up and slowly lead her into my bedroom.

Her soft moans feed me for hours. I touch and kiss every inch, every curve, and every exposed spot of her body. The large Phoenix on her back whose wings trickle around to her hip, her smooth belly that would rise and fall quickly as I find spots she enjoys my hands and lips on. My favorite by far was the way her back would arch, pushing herself into me as her nails would dig into my back, raking downward and back up again.

I lie comfortably on my side, sweaty and completely exhausted, as we both catch our breath slowly. I pay full attention to her as she lies on her back, staring up at my ceiling. I watch carefully as her stomach rises and falls. How her lips part slightly every so often. I trace my finger tip around her lips and make a trail down her chin to her neck. I find another red mark just near her collar bone, and I let my finger pass over it and move further to her breasts. I graze just over her nipple that rises against my skin, meeting my touch

as I move to her belly where I concentrate on her slow, relaxed breathing.

“What’s on your mind?” She asks.

“You.” I smile. “What else?”

“You must be thinking about something else,” she says, laying a hand over mine where it rests on her belly.

I look down at our hands before speaking. “Can you remember how you got the marks?” I ask.

She gives her head a shake. “Guess

it's probably better that I don't," she admits.

I tenderly pull her into my arms. "As long as I'm here, I promise that I won't let anything or anyone hurt you again."

I feel her as she tenderly begins tracing her nail over the lines in my tattoo. "Nick?"

"Yeah?" I reply.

"Where do you see us?" She asks. "I mean, you see us having a future, right? Is that crazy to ask? Am I crazy for thinking that this soon?"



I nod. “Of course, I do. I really meant what I said before, Charlie, that I love you. I wouldn’t have said it otherwise.”

“I’m sorry if I’m interrogating you,” she says. “I just need to know.” She lets out a breath. “I’m not the type to be jumping in some guy’s bed. And, after what happened, the last thing I expected was to want to be in yours.”

I use my index finger to adjust her gaze to meet mine. “We’ll go as slow as you like.”

She smiles, and I feel her body relax as she rests her head back on my chest. I reach blindly to my night stand for my watch.

“What time is it?” She asks.

“Eleven-thirty,” I say. “So much for taking you out to dinner.”

“Well,” she says softly. “I’m not really that hungry. But, if I do remember, you said you give a great massage.”

I laugh. “Is that a hint?”

“A very subtle one,” she says, tracing her finger along my stomach in

such a way that it gives me chills, and I have to fight the urge to keep her up for a few more hours.

“Alright, you.” I smile. “Roll over and get comfortable.”

She obeys, moving to lay flat on her belly. I immediately begin working on her shoulders and upper back, where I find a few more red lines that had once been deep cuts. I knead my thumbs into her spine and slowly work to her lower back. I hear her let out a low groan. “I do love you, Nick,” she says, in a sleepy voice.

I move my lips to her ear. “And, I meant it when I said I love you, too, Charlie.”

I continue to rub her back as her body falls limp and her breathing slows. She falls into a peaceful slumber quickly. I smile, as I begin working the blankets around her while I change my position and get comfortable myself. I find myself playing with her hair until I drift to sleep myself.

\* \* \* \* \*

Bright sunlight in my face wakes me slowly. I move slightly and feel Charlie's hair brush along my chest. I rub my eyes and look down to see that she's curled up into my body and her face is completely buried against my chest. She moves slightly, letting out a soft noise as I move to stretch for a moment. She wiggles for a moment and pushes herself closer to me, letting one leg flop over onto mine. I smile. I didn't want to move anyway. I settle back into my pillow, brush her hair from her face,

and tug the blanket up and over her bare shoulders. She lets out another soft moan and wiggles. This time I can tell she's just starting to wake up. She rolls away from me slightly and stretches her arms slowly above her head. Finally, her eyes open slowly and she looks up at me.

“Nick,” she says, her cheeks growing pink.

I smile. “Good morning.”

She blushes. “Good morning.”

“Did you sleep well?” I ask.

She nods. “I did. I really did.” She

bites her lip for a second. “That massage must have really worked.”

“Just the massage?” I tease.

Her cheeks turn crimson within a second. “Among other things,” she admits. “How did you sleep?”

“Best I’ve slept in a long time,” I admit. I lean in to kiss her forehead and run my hand up and down her back.

“What do you say, since we skipped dinner, that we get up and get dressed, and I’ll take you to this great donut shop I know,” I tell her. “Everything is homemade.”

“So, it is true.” She smiles. “Cops do like donuts.”

I laugh. I didn’t catch myself in the cliché comment. “Yeah, I guess we do.”

She smiles and nods. “I think I’m going to shower first,” she tells me. She takes a moment to glance at me, and then lifts the blanket up. I see her cheeks grow red again as she slides herself slowly from the bed and hurries behind the bathroom door. I lie back in bed and relax until the sound of the running water stops. I hear the shower door click open



and shut again. She emerges from the bathroom sometime later, completely wrapped in one of my large black towels and carrying a small pile of folded clothes.

I smile at her as I reluctantly pull myself from the bed and into the bathroom. I make it a point to shower as quickly as I can. Washing myself head to toe and even shaving within fifteen minutes. A new record for me. I quickly dry myself and wrap the towel around my waist. I find Charlie, dressed only in her jeans, on her hands and knees

peeking under the bed.

“Lose something?” I ask.

She quickly stands and crosses her arms in front of her. “My shirt. I can’t remember what I did with it. I know I had it somewhere around here.”

“You know,” I tell her, turning to my dresser, “I think under the circumstances, it’s okay to let me see you.” I yank open a drawer and pull out a fresh white, V-neck tee shirt.

She blushes again. “I’m sorry. I’m just not used to this,” she says, letting

her body relax and her guard down.

I extend the shirt to her and grin.

“Besides, I really don’t mind seeing.”

Her cheeks turn such a shade of red; I’d have sworn they were on fire. She lets out a breath and pulls the shirt over her head.

She reaches for the hair brush she’d brought with her and takes a seat on my bed, as I grab at one of my uniforms and begin working the badge off to slide into my pocket.

“You’re wearing that?” She asks.

“I am on duty,” I tease, giving her a bright smile. “They do pay me to wear this, you know?” I wink. “I’m only getting my badge. I’m supposed to be low key, remember?”

She glances down, closing her eyes for a moment, biting down on the corner of her bottom lip. Finally, she looks up and smiles as she runs the brush past a wad of tangles.

My mouth drops as I walk over to her. “I know that look.” I say. “I absolutely know that look,” I tell her, walking closer.

“What are you talking about?” She asks, working the brush through another spot of tangles.

“That look you just gave me,” I say. “I know that look.”

She shakes her head as she begins carefully pulling her hair into a messy but cute up do, letting the remaining curls fall around her face. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Oh yes you do.” I smile. “You have that look,” I say, wrapping my arms around her waist. “When you,” I pause,

leaning my face next to hers, letting my lips find her ear. “Like something.” I finally breathe.

She protests, shaking her head and laughing. “I do not.”

I nod. “You do.” I run a hand up the back of her shirt, finding her lower back, one spot in particular that I became very familiar with last night and I graze my finger tips along it. I feel her body go weak as she leans her body into mine. Within seconds she glances downward and closes her eyes to bite on the corner of her bottom lip. “Why, Charlie,” I

smile, whispering into her ear, “do you like it when I’m in uniform?”

She shakes her head slowly.

“Are you sure?”

I run my fingers over her lower back again before she finally gives in.

“Maybe.”

She looks up at me with her lip still between her teeth, her breaths slowly picking up speed. I lean in and press my lips to hers before pulling back and smiling at her again.

“It’s not like I’m the only woman in

the world,” she finally shoots back. “There are plenty who love men in uniform.”

I laugh softly. “So it is true.”

She takes a moment, and then nods as her cheeks fill with a bright pink color.

“Checked me out in the uniform once or twice, huh?” I wink.

Her cheeks flush more. “Maybe; you did barge into my hospital room wearing it,” she admits. “But I’m not the first woman, and I won’t be the last.”



I smile, taking her hand. “I won’t tease you anymore,” I tell her. “Let’s head over to that little donut shop.”

“You are going to be *that* cop, and have donuts?” She asks as she follows behind me.

I laugh. “Is this what I get for teasing you about checking me out?”

She nods.

“Fine, yes I’m going to be that cliché cop who goes into donut shops and loves donuts and pie; you cannot forget pie,” I tell her, giving her hand a little squeeze.

She lets out a laugh as I hand her a jacket, since it's more than likely colder than we expect outside, but we barely make it to my living room when my cell phone begins ringing. I reach into my pocket and suddenly realize that it had been on the counter all night long. I make a mad dash, grabbing it and sliding the '*answer*' key.

“Andrews!” Wilson yells in my ear. “Where the hell have you been? I’ve been trying to reach you all night!”

I hold up my finger to Charlie. “Sorry, I’ve been having some phone

issues,” I lie. “Good news?”

“Look, Lockland isn’t about to talk,” he tells me. “But he did give us a little piece of information.”

“What?” I ask.

“The other guy is a cop,” he says. “And, he works for our department. I have no idea who this guy is, but he could very well know that Charlie is under your protection,” He tells me. “So, do not under any circumstances let any other officer into her apartment unless you run it by me. From here on out, I’m

the only one you talk to,” He orders.

“Sure thing, Wilson,” I  
reply.

“You keep her safe, Andrews.” And,  
with that my phone flashes ‘*call ended.*’

I push the lock button on my phone  
and slide it into my pocket. I look at  
Charlie, who stares at me. “Everything  
okay?” She asks.

I nod. “It’s fine. It’s just that,  
Lockland, the cop you identified, isn’t  
talking. But, he did admit to the other guy  
being a cop. Sergeant Wilson, my boss,

just doesn't think it's too safe right now," I tell her.

"So, in other words, no donut shop."

I nod. "I just don't feel safe trying to take you out right now. He said the other guy could very well know you are under my protection. If he does know, then he could know my cover, and how we are keeping things low key for you."

"It's okay," she says, frowning.

"Charlie, I really would give anything to take you out on a real date, I would," I tell her. "But, I just can't,

knowing that it's not one hundred percent safe."

"Nick, it's okay, really. We could order take out, watch a movie. I could even cook something."

"Well, we could fix something together," I suggest, reaching for her hand and leading her to the kitchen.

She smiles. "I would really like that."

"What can we fix?" I ask.

"Well, what do you have?" She asks.

“I know I have everything for grilled cheese and tomato soup,” I tell her. “It’s not gourmet, but I’m a sucker for grilled cheese and tomato soup.”

She grins wide. “It’s one of my favorites too.”

“Does that sound okay?”

She nods. “It sounds perfect.”

“And, how about one of those goofy chick flicks?” I ask.

She laughs. “You would really sit through one?”

“Hey, I’ve done it for you before,” I

remind her.

I begin helping her pull all the needed things from the cupboards and the refrigerator. I pile them in a neat row on the counter. She smiles as she reaches for the bread, taking out a few slices to get the ready for the frying pan.

A soft knock on my door interrupts us. I glance at Charlie and bring my finger to my lips as I head over to answer it. It is a strange surprise to see Edmunds, one of the guys from the department. I answer immediately, but heed to Wilson's warning and



immediately find an excuse to wave him away. “Edmunds, I was just on my way out; I’ve got to get back to work.”

He glances over and past my shoulder, and luckily enough, is unable to see Charlotte. “Oh, it’s not a problem; I just wanted to see if you were going out tonight?”

I suddenly hear a loud thump and the sound of glass breaking coming from the kitchen.

I shake my head. “I can’t; I have duty. I do have to go, but I’ll catch you

later.”

He nods as I shut and lock the door behind him. I turn to see Charlie frozen with her mouth gapping wide open as she stares toward the door.

I rush over to her and place my hands on her shoulders. “Charlie,” I say. She doesn’t reply. “Charlie, what’s wrong?” I give her a light shake. She’s completely frozen and in shock. She’s staring passed me as I give her another light shake. “Charlie, Baby, you’ve got to talk to me.” She blinks, but she can barely move as her body begins

trembling. “Charlie, you need to sit down,” I tell her, making an attempt to guide her to my couch. Luckily, she is able to move. She immediately sits and sinks into my couch. “Charlie,” I say again, pushing a few stray hairs from her eyes. “You have to talk to me. I don’t know what’s going on.” I feel worry wash over me as she stares blankly ahead. “Come on, Baby, talk to me.”

“Nick,” she finally says, her voice shaking.

I take her face in my hands. “What’s wrong? What happened?” I feel her

entire body begin to shake. “Charlie, talk to me.”

“Nick.” I can see the tears well up into her eyes and her lip begins to quiver.

“Charlie, Baby, can you talk to me?” I ask, softly.

She sucks in a deep breath. “That’s him.”

“Who?” I ask. “Edmunds, who was just here?”

She forces herself to nod.

“Are you sure?” I ask.

She nods again as she begins to openly cry. “I think I’m going to be sick.”

“Shh, it’s okay,” I tell her, pulling her into my arms. “We’ll get him.” I plant a kiss on the top of her head as she looks at me with big, tear filled eyes. “Give me just two minutes,” I say. She gives me a nod in response as I head to my front door. I look out the peephole to double check for an empty hallway. I pull my phone from my pocket, and quickly redial the number that Wilson had called from just minutes before.

“Andrews, talk,” he says.

“Look, you’re going to be pissed at me when I start talking,” I start. “But, you need to know. When you called me, Charlie and I were at my apartment. That’s the part that’ll piss you off, but,” I say quickly, “it might be a good thing that we were. While here, Edmunds stopped by. Charlie heard him speak, Wilson. She recognized his voice. It’s him. Edmunds is the other guy.” I let out a much needed breath.

“Goddamnit Andrews! Edmunds?” I hear the line click dead.

I find my way over to the couch where Charlie is as stiff as a board, sitting straight up and staring down at her feet. I lift her chin with my finger as I kneel in front of her. “We’ve got him. We’ve really got him,” I tell her. “This will all be over soon.”

She flings herself into me, throwing her arms around me with such a great force that I nearly fall back.

“Why did he come here?” She asks.

I rub her back for a moment before answering. “I don’t know. Like my boss

had said, maybe he knew that I had you. He came to see. Maybe it's a good thing we were here, since it may have very well sent him on another trail."

"So, right now he may think that someone else has me?" She asks, pulling away to wipe at her face.

I nod. "It's a good possibility."

She lets out a breath that she was beginning to hold. "It could be over."

I nod. "We'll get him."

She sighs. "Nick." She says my name in such a way that I feel like a pile



of butter that's beginning to melt.

I bring my hand up to her face, and she tenderly nuzzles her cheek into it. She closes her eyes for a moment and bites on her bottom lip. "It's all over," she says, softly.

"Soon," I tell her. "Very soon. We'll get him."

"Where he can't hurt anyone anymore. He's done," she says, returning her eyes to mine.

I nod. "He'll never hurt you or anyone else again."

She smiles.

“And, tonight, you and I will celebrate,” I say. “We’ll see if I can actually let you put that dress on, and let you keep it on.” I laugh.

She lets out a soft laugh as she wipes away at a few stray tears. My ringing phone interrupts us. I grab it and quickly glare at the screen. It’s Sergeant Wilson again. I slide the ‘*answer*’ key and press it to my ear. “Hello?”

“The son-of-a-bitch is gone, Andrews. We can’t find him,” he yells.

“What do you mean? He was just here!” I yell back.

“We can’t reach him on his phone, the GPS locator in his car is down; he’s running,” he says as I hear a loud thump in the background.

“He’s been planning this,” I say.

“Have you tried his home address?” I ask.

“Someone is on the way there now,” he tells me. “Look Andrews, this kid isn’t right. You stop at nothing to keep

Charlotte safe. You stay with her. Do not, and I repeat, do not let her out of your sight,” he says sternly. “Do you understand me?”

“Yes, sir,” I reply. “It won’t be a problem.”

I hear the line fade as my phone flashes *‘call ended.’*

“What’s wrong?” Charlie asks.

“They’re having problems finding him.”

“What?” She jumps. “Nick, he was just here!”

“I know, I know,” I tell her, taking her face back in my hands. “From the way things look he’s been planning this for weeks.”

She sighs and places one of her hands on top of mine. Another knock at my front door makes her jump in such a way, my hands pull away from her face.

I bring my finger to my lips, signaling for her silence. She nods in response as I walk quietly to the door and glare just out the peephole. From my field of view I see nothing, but I’m smart enough to know not to trust it. I step back

slowly and take a look around for Charlie's tennis shoes. I run quietly down the hallway and grab them, returning to her, and motion for her to put them on. She gives me a frightened look, but quickly obeys as she slips her bare feet inside and ties the thin laces. I reach for her hand quietly and pull her toward my bedroom and to the farthest window from the front door.

“We have to get out of here,” I say, as the pounding at the front door grows more intense. “We’ll get out by the fire escape.”

“The fire escape,” she repeats.

“Nick, I don’t do so well with heights.”

She swallows hard.

“It’ll be okay,” I reassure her. “I’ll be right behind you,” I say, pushing the window up.

I guide myself over the edge and out the window onto the small fire escape. I lean my upper body back in the window, taking both of Charlie’s hands as I help guide her over the edge and onto the escape. We slowly work ourselves down the tiny, metal stairs that in the zigzag pattern almost makes you dizzy as

you look down.

Coming to the end and the four foot drop, I stop to look at her. “I’m going to jump down,” I say. “You come right after me. You have to trust me; I’ll catch you.”

She gives me a nervous look, but nods as I slide myself to the edge and hop to the ground. Charlie follows my exact motions and slides herself forward enough to where I grab her hips and guide her to the ground. She lets out a long breath and looks up at me. “You did perfect.”



“Do you have your gun?” She asks.

I nod. “Don’t worry, though. We’ll get to my truck and get to the department. I’ll notify Wilson right now that he has to be in this area. We’ll get him,” I tell her as I lead her around to the parking lot. I pause at the corner of the building long enough to see that Edmunds is standing by my truck, watching every angle around him. Charlie jumps and latches hard onto my hand as I push her further back toward the building. I turn to face her. “You have got to stay close

to me. We'll have to go by foot," I say. "I don't see him moving. He thinks I'll be heading to the truck. I'm sure he knows you're with me."

She nods slowly as a few tears trickle down her face. "Just don't leave me."

I shake my head. "Never."

A few more tears make their way down her face. "Nick, whatever happens to me, know that I really have fallen for you. And, that I do love you."

I pull her in, pressing my lips to hers

and I feel her shake as she holds to me tightly. I bring my hands to her face.

“Hey, we are not saying any goodbyes. I promise when this is over we’re going to Central Park.” I can see tears beginning to roll freely down her face.

“And, a very long vacation together, alone.” She lets out a soft laugh over a sniffling noise. I wipe the few tears from her cheeks and nod. I give her one more kiss. I push a stray hair from her eyes.

“We really have to go,” I tell her.

She nods and begins following me across the street as we walk in between

various parked cars and disappear in large groups of people as they shuffle throughout the city. I can feel her heart beat through her hand as I keep her as close to me as possible. New York City in the middle of the day made it easy to lose Edmunds, but losing Charlie in any crowd can easily be devastating.

\* \* \* \* \*

I never thought I could be so happy to walk up the cracked cement steps to

my department. I hear Charlie sigh behind me, and I do the same. I take a look back at her, and she suddenly looks stressed and worn. I give her a nudge next to me as I head with her to Sergeant Wilson's office. For once, I don't bother knocking; I push the door open and barge right in. He stands behind his desk, looking just as stressed, if not more than Charlie and I.

“Andrews.” He lets out a huff of air, nearly falling back into his leather seat. “Charlotte,” he says, looking her up and down as if to inspect her. “Thank God.”

“He came back to my apartment.” I take a few relaxing breaths. “We had to use the fire escape, but by the time we got to the parking lot he was waiting at my truck.”

“Charlotte, are you alright?” Wilson asks.

She nods slowly. “I just,” she pauses. “I just need a minute.”

I can easily feel her body tremble next to mine as I pull a nearby chair closer to her. She immediately drops into it, wrapping her arms around her

body.

“Jesus H. Christ,” he huffs.

“Edmunds, a decent cop.” He looks at me. “Both of ‘em, cops,” he grumbles. “What is the world coming to?”

I shrug and shake my head. “I didn’t trust myself to take him out with Charlie, there.”

He gives me an understanding nod. He has killed women; there is no telling what he could have tried to do to me alone. “Andrews, if I could talk to you alone?” He looks at Charlie. “You’ll be okay in here, Charlotte.”

She nods slowly and moves her head to look up at me.

I take a moment to kneel in front of her. “You’ll be safe in here, and no one knows you’re here but us. I’m not going far, I promise.”

She leans in and wraps her arms tightly around me. “Please don’t leave this building.”

It was at that point that I didn’t mind the audience with Wilson. He knows, and there is no hiding it. If he rips my ass a new one, then so be it. I wrap my



arms around her and rest my forehead tenderly on hers. “I won’t set foot out of this building without you.” I lay one tender kiss on her lips. “You’re safe,” I reassure her.

She nods as Wilson and I walk from the room. He shuts the door behind us and ushers me a small way down the hallway. “Andrews.”

“Look, I got attached, we both did,” I say. “We didn’t plan it, it just happened.”

“Looks like you’re more than attached.”

“I’m sorry,” I say. “But things just happened; neither one of us sure as hell didn’t plan it. But, I’ve kept to my word and kept that woman safe. I’d have given my own life to keep her safe.”

He nods slowly. “Which is why I have to compliment you,” he says. “Given the, uh,” he pauses. “Situation between the two of you, you have certainly kept a level head, keeping her safe.” He glances over at me. “And right now, we’re hitting the nitty gritty, Andrews. Charlotte’s recognition of

Edmunds is crucial. Not only do we need to keep her out of harm's way, we also need to find Edmunds. I need your help on this." He purses his lips. "I don't think we can do this without you."

I nod. "But what about."

He doesn't even let me finish.

"Charlotte will be perfectly safe. We have the department on complete lockdown. No one gets in or out without Chief's full consent. He knows who is in here, and the minute someone goes to take a leak, he will know," he tells me. "Now, do I have you on board for this?"

I nod. “Where do we start?”

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## **Charlie**

I take a few more moments to just lean back in the chair and take a few more deep breaths. If it would have been easy, Nick could have gotten him at his apartment, I'm just not sure if he trusted himself to alone or if it was because he

knew he had to get me somewhere safe. Either way I feel a little out of sorts. I can feel my stomach beginning to churn as I fight another bout of nausea that is beginning to set in on me that is being accompanied by a strong headache, more than likely from the stress alone. I stand and walk in a few circles and I take a few more calming breaths. I step over the large window, making a crack in the bright red drapes to glance down for a moment. People walking every which way they can, on their cell phones and PDA's, some with newspapers in their

faces who are no more paying attention to where they were going than the person passing them.

When I hear the door of the office creak open, it makes me jump slightly and turn quickly. Another officer steps in, quietly shutting it behind him. I take a breath and I hold it. Nick had reassured me that I was safe.

“Charlotte Murphy?” He says, walking closer. “Andrews sent me for you.”

“Where’s Nick?” I ask, crossing my arms firmly in front of my body.

“He and Sergeant Wilson stepped out,” he tells me. “They said they might be a while, so Andrews sent me to take you elsewhere in the building.”

I shake my head; it wasn't right. *He* wasn't right. Nick had made a promise that he wouldn't set a foot out of this building without me. “Nick wouldn't leave without telling me.”

He nods. “It was an emergency.”

I shake my head again. “No.” He takes a few steps closer to me and I back around to the other side of the desk. “I



know better. Where's Nick?"

He continues to move slowly but steadily closer to me as I round the other side of the desk. "I told you, he and sarge stepped out," he says firmly.

I give my head a violent shake. "No! He wouldn't have left without coming to tell me himself," I protest. I finally see an opening and make a mad dash for the door. He's too quick for me, catching me and pushing me against the back wall in one quick movement.

"You scream and fucking Andrews dies," he says roughly.

My body completely freezes. There were three. This whole time, there were three of them.

He pushes me hard against the wall and makes my back ache within seconds. “Not one sound, do you understand?”

I can't move. I can't even speak.

He wraps a hand around my throat, and I feel my head slam into the corner where the wall met the window edge. I groan in pain and finally force myself to nod.

“Good girl,” he tells me. “I don't

suppose you remember me? I don't  
suppose you remember much of anything.  
You were so drugged it made it easier. It  
was nicer." He pushes against me. "I  
won't be so nice this time. You make  
one move that pisses me off, and  
Andrews dies. Understand me?"

I force a nod. "Where is he?"

"With Edmunds," he replies.

I feel my heart sink and my body  
locks in place. I can barely move, and I  
suddenly feel weak as tears came quick.  
The nausea is beginning to creep up and  
into my throat and the headache is

already worse. I feel another surge of pain shoot down my back as he tightens his grip on my throat.

“Oh, poor little girl,” he taunts.  
“Guess it makes it harder after you spend seven hours fucking each other. It makes you quite attached to one another.”

I suddenly feel ill as I realize that he had been watching us. I feel my body go limp quickly. He begins supporting all my weight against the wall as I suddenly have no strength left.

“It was just ridiculous with your little dates and flirting,” he says. “It was like watching the fucking *Days of Our Lives!*”

I begin crying as his hand tightens around my neck.

“Oh shut up. I can’t take your fucking crying. He’s fine,” he shoots at me.

“Depending on you; you’re going to stop crying and you’re going to walk out of this building with me. You will not scream, cry, or do anything that will alert anyone. Do you understand?”

For as much pain I am feeling, and the mess that I'm in, I think about Nick. If he is somehow with Edmunds, it could very well be bad. Even though these men have the strength to overpower me, I don't believe they would be able to overturn Nick. At the same time, I don't know if a gun is involved. Nick could be hurt, or worse, killed. My mind scatters for a moment, and his hand tightening around my throat pulls me back to my grim reality. Loverboy has me again, and this time, I don't think I'll make it out alive. He gives me a shake as he is

waiting on my reply to cooperate. I  
finally nod. For Nick's sake.

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## **Nick**

I lean back in the chair and look closer at Edmunds' photograph and file. I'll be the first to admit, that I'm not one who would help with something like this. Maybe they asked, because, now that Charlie and I are out, they know this



is personal for me.

Though I consider myself clueless compared to the people who do this all day every day, I am trying. And for the past half hour, I have ran my eyes over information that I've never seen before. I let out a sigh as I purposely push some papers over the printed photos of Charlie from her email. Though Lockland is in jail, Edmunds had to have guessed that his time was running short. His cell phone had been disconnected through the company a few days before. His apartment had been emptied. And,

his car had been found abandoned in some parking lot. It made it seem as though he'd been planning it for weeks. I rub at my eyes as they are beginning to burn from reading the fine black and white print. I toss the file on the table. "I think I need a break."

"It's fine, Andrews," Wilson tells me before directing his attention to the other men in the room who are going over tables and charts and files. "See how Charlotte is," He mumbles as one of them shows him something in one of the files.

I nod and head out of the room; we'd been buried in papers for a half hour at least. I stop by the lounge and grab her a cup of coffee. When I walk into the Wilson's office, I feel my heart rate speed up as it shoots up into my throat as I look into the empty office. The boiling cup of coffee dumps to the ground. "Goddamn, son-of-a-bitch!" I scream. I hear the footsteps pounding against the floor as I turn and see Wilson rushing up behind me. "I thought you said the department was on a fucking lockdown?" I yell.

“It is,” he tells me. “Everyone knows proper procedure. Unless...” His voice trails off.

“There’s fucking three of them!” I shoot. “You’ve got to be fucking kidding me!” I growl as I run down the hallway for the main set of doors.

“Andrews! Do you even know who it could be?!” I hear him yell.

“How the hell am I supposed to know?” I shoot back. “All I know is that I’m not wasting time. I’m taking a marked car!”

“Andrews, wait until we have something!” He calls.

I shake my head. “Hell no! I don’t have much time.” I start to push the door open and stop suddenly. “Carrington!” I yell. “He and Edmunds are always together! It’s got to be him.”

“Andrews, take one more step out that door and I’ll have your ass!” He yells to me.

I don’t have to think. For once I don’t care. There used to be a time when I thought my job here at the police

department was everything. There used to be a time when I would have given up everything for my job here. Things are different now. Charlie made me change. And, right now, all I can think about it getting to her. I made a promise to her. I told her I would never let anything or anyone hurt her, and I've failed. Without even replying to him, I continue to the door.

“I'm warning you, Andrews,” he says. “I will fucking destroy you.”

I don't doubt it. He probably will. But, right now, I ust don't care. I give my

head a shake as I reach one set of doors.

“Andrews, what in the hell do you think you’re doing?” He yells.

I look back for a moment. “I made her a promise. I’m keeping that promise. I’m saving her life,” I say, violently shoving the doors open and running outside, and then heading to the marked cars.

# **- 13 -**

## **Charlie**

My body aches from head-to-toe as he tosses me on the ground like some used rag doll. I glance around and see the room is wide open with windows that are set high on the walls. The ground is cold, hard cement, and some places



wet from some mystery liquid that's from the ceiling. For some reason, I feel a jolt in my memory. It's just like it was before. They've brought me to the same place I was before. An old mill that had once been booming, until sales shot up and they moved to a much larger plant somewhere to accommodate their needs. The ground is freezing and wet as I attempt to pull myself in a sitting position until his foot meets my body, kicking me over. I immediately crumple over, weak, and this time lay on the cold cement.

“You’re going to listen,” he says.

“You’ll do exactly as I say.”

I nod.

His foot slams into my side. “I didn’t quite hear you.”

I cough and groan loudly in pain.

“Yes,” I finally yelp with tears filling my eyes.

“Good,” he says, bending down and grabbing my wrists. I feel the first cuff latch tightly around my left wrist as he drags me a few feet over by my hand. The metal cuffs clang against something

as he grabs my other wrist and locks it in place. I lay back with my arms painfully suspended above my head and let my tears roll down the sides of my face. Handcuffs. I wasn't bound with chains or ropes...I was bound with police issued handcuffs.

“I can promise you one thing,” he says to me. “You won't get away this time, and Nick won't be able to make it to rescue you. Hope you enjoyed the time you had with him.”

I close my eyes and cry even harder. I feel his hands on me suddenly. I fight

the urge to throw up. I dare not move an inch.

I can hear a sick little smile in his voice. “You always were the prettiest; it’s why we kept you so long,” he says into my ear.

I can feel his hands move to the collar of my shirt. Nick’s shirt. I whimper, completely terrified to make the one wrong move that could hurt Nick. His hands grip the collar as he begins to forcefully pull. I feel the entire front of the shirt rip open, exposing my bra and bare upper body. I let out a loud

cry, leaving my eyes shut as I beg him no. His hand quickly meets my face with great force, making my cheek bone throb from the blow as he went back to inspecting me.

“No wonder Andrews had it out for you,” he tells me. “I bet you’re a model,” he says. “No, a dancer.”

I begin to sob uncontrollably in a way that I feel myself gasping for air.

“That’s it,” he says. “You’re a dancer.”

I feel so ill I can barely more.

Nausea is feeling my stomach and my chest, and I can feel my chin quiver as I fight hard not to throw up. He gives me another blow to the face before I hear him stand up. “Now, don’t you run off anywhere now.” He laughs.

I cry, sniffing as I listen to his footsteps disappear. The damp and musty room grows quiet again as I shiver from the cold. Suddenly, I hear the faint sound of whimpers and soft cries coming from another direction. It finally dawns on me that they have someone else.

**- 14 -**

**Nick**

I squeeze my hands into tight fists and make the knuckles turn white as I pound on the steering wheel of the black and white. I have no idea how long they've been gone and certainly no idea where he's taken her. Charlie had been

so drugged the first time so that she couldn't recollect anything of the old building she was in, other than it had been abandoned. She could remember the cold cement ground, leaky ceiling, and other attributes pointing to a condemned building.

I think long and hard for a moment, trying to at least concentrate on the traffic as I weave in between various cars and taxis that are stalled in the middle of rush hour traffic. I bring a hand to my head and rub at my temple as I feel the sudden headache beginning to



wash over my skull. I let out a long huff and pound on the steering wheel once more. “Damn it!” I scream as the side of my fist comes down hard on the steering wheel, this time sending a small pain into my hand.

I dig my phone from my pocket as the traffic rolls to a complete stop. I swipe my finger on the screen and dial Wilson’s office. “Wilson, look, I need some sort of layout of the city. Something that would show me old, abandoned buildings and their locations,” I bark.

“Andrews! You little fucking asshole,” he cracks. “You are one of the dumbest fucking individuals I have ever seen.”

“Look,” I say, “you have my full and complete permission to fire me, to tear me inside out but please, do it after I have her safe. When I have her safe, then you can throw my badge at me. Just help me.”

I hear him let out a sigh. “I knew you would get too fucking attached. I knew we should have put someone else on this.” I hear a rustling sound for a

moment. “I fucking trusted you, Andrews.”

“You trusted me to keep her safe, and that’s what I did,” I snap, “until you had her sit in your damn office!”

He mutters a few cuss words under his breath.

“Wilson, just help me,” I beg.

“Fine,” his voice rumbles. “She didn’t remember much, though.”

“The only thing Charlie could remember is how old the building was,”

I say. “It has to be some broken down old building.”

“And, what makes you think that they’re going to take her back to that pretty boy?” He asks.

“They’re not about to change what’s been working for them,” I tell him.

“They’ve been able to get by with too much. They’re too comfortable there,” I say. “And, it’s obvious there’s zero security; no one checks around it too much.”

His silence tells me that he is thinking, but I know that when all of this

is said and done, I won't have a job. As long as I have Charlie, it'll be worth it. "Whatever you want, whatever you need," Wilson finally says. "We'll get it for you. Remember, it isn't just me anymore; Chief will have your ass, too."

What's new there? Wilson is on my ass half the time and the Chief the next. I thought this special assignment was going to be my big break. My chance to be something, a detective; anything but some street cop. Instead, I fell in love. I guess it's true when they say loves makes you do crazy things.

I don't say another word; I end the phone call and toss my phone into the empty seat next to me. I glance back for a moment, just clear enough for a U-turn. I click on my lights and head back toward the department. Without maps and plans to the city, finding Charlie would be as difficult as finding a needle in the proverbial haystack.

# **- 15 -**

## **Charlie**

I lie still on the cold and wet cement. At this point it is all I can muster to do anymore. I have been beaten several times by both of them. I have various cuts all over my upper and lower body. This time I can feel

dribbles of blood seeping out. My hands would be aching terribly if it weren't for the fact that they are bound so incredibly tight by the cuffs they have gone numb. My eyes are burning and swollen so badly I can't see as well as before. My body is starting to shake uncontrollably, and I honestly can't tell whether it's from the cold of the cement or the pain. I groan as I move my right leg slightly. A sharp pain jolts all the way up to my hip. I lay still and quiet, fighting through the pain and I can now hear the two men arguing again. They liked to do that, it



seems. Fight that is. Whenever one isn't in here, he's in another room with the other, fighting over who knows what. Over the sounds of their argument I can hear the sounds of other whimpers, which at least means that their other victims are still alive. I stop and listen again. This time I can hear the footsteps coming closer to me. I stare off and into the distance where I know the door is, and I can see the shadowy figure walking toward me. I shudder, as this time it seems as though there's something shiny in his hands.

He greets me with his foot barreling into my already sore and probably broken rib cage. I groan loudly and cough as my body involuntarily jumps forward until I'm stopped by the handcuffs. I can feel them grow tighter and dig even deeper into the cuts they were already making. Now I'm really starting to believe what Carrington had said before. It was nicer last time. Last time I was so drugged up I couldn't feel the pain. I couldn't feel anything. Now, I'm almost wishing for the drugs.

I feel him suddenly pounce hard onto

my body and knock the wind out of me. I cough hard a few times and suck in a huge gulp of air. It's Edmunds this time. I quickly realize that he is the one with the passion for sexual humiliation. Carrington is the one who had a love of torment and torture.

“Not much of a fighter now,” he says into my ear. “Are you, sweetheart?”

I've honestly been beaten so terribly; fighting isn't an option. And with Nick's life in danger it wasn't an option to begin with. Having Nick on my mind at this point is the only thing

keeping my going.

“Bet you’re wondering how Nick is?” He asks, as he pulls on what must have been rubber gloves.

I shudder and close my eyes, but manage to nod slowly.

“He’s doing just fine,” he says.  
“You’ve been fairly cooperative. He’s probably wondering the same about you.” He laughs.

I feel his hands at the top of my jeans; I cringe and fight off another round of nausea. I have thrown up

several times since being here. But, with how I am bound, the only thought that crosses my mind are all the drugged out rock stars who had choked to death on their own vomit. Even though, at this point, even that sounds like a more peaceful way to go. A fiery car wreck in the middle of nowhere would be more peaceful than this. This is just...this is hell.

I can now feel the button and zipper of my jeans rip down as he yanks them off my legs. I can feel the cold cement underneath me. My body begins to shiver

as I feel his gloved hands run up and down my legs. He gives my right thigh an encouraging pat. “You definitely are the prettiest, and I don’t say that to all of my girls, either.”

He brings a hand up to my face. “You are very gorgeous,” he says. “Quite the prize. Andrews must be happy he landed someone like you.” He takes a long breath. “I mean, after those train wrecks before. Lucky he snagged you.” He looks down at me as though he had a thoughtful moment. “He was always one of those guys who was

looking for someone in for the long haul. Blah, blah, fucking blah.” He cocks his head to the side. “What kind of man is that?”

“Why are you doing this?” I ask, my voice so low I was worried no sound actually came out.

He shrugs. “Because I can. And, I can get away with it.” He seems so confident of himself as he smiles down at me.

“Why are you doing this to me?” I ask. “Why me?”

He looks back down at me as I feel his hands at my panties. He takes a moment to think. “Before, it was because you are beautiful,” he says, running his hands along the lace and designs as he pushes my legs apart. “Now, it’s because Andrews wants you.”

I can feel my chin quiver. My eyes begin to well up with tears, blinding me. His touch makes me gag. I take a long breath in, swallowing hard. “What do you have against Nick?”

“The pretty boy; the one with morals. The one who wants to find the



right girl; he wants marriage, a family, wants to be a detective,” he pauses. “It makes me fucking sick. I’m surprised he even jumped in the sack with you. I’m pretty sure you’re his first lay. Wonder how he’ll feel, knowing that I had you first.”

I squeeze my lips together as my tears start coming on like a waterfall. Physical torture is one thing, mental torture is another, and at times, I don’t know which is easier to cope with.

“For guys like me,” he says, “it’s hard; always been hard to get a girl.

Unless you count hookers that lurk the corners.” He laughs. “I learned a few years back, sometimes it’s easier and cheaper to take the ones you want.”

I close my eyes tightly as he begins running his gloved hands up and down my bare skin. I cry harder. I feel his hands pause on my stomach.

“This isn’t so bad, now is it?” He says. “I figure I’d piss Andrews off more. Go nice and slow with you, since that seems to be his motto.”

I suddenly hear a loud, blood

curdling scream. I can now feel my cries coming from the pit of my stomach as my entire body shakes.

“Ah,” he says, finally moving his hands. “Sounds like it’s my turn in the other room. I will be right back, don’t you go anywhere now.” He laughs as he stands slowly, as though taking his time, and starts making his way in another direction.

I want to curl up and not feel any of this pain. I want to be somewhere else. Anywhere else. With Nick. I want Nick, I need Nick. I close my eyes and imagine

us the night before, lying in bed together, his arms around me. How safe I feel in his arms. How after a short month, after the worst tragedy in my life, I have fallen in love with him. I go back to our first kiss at the theater. The way he just knows how to comfort me. The way he always seems to sense that I'm troubled. I close my eyes and picture Nick.

# **- 16 -**

## **Nick**

I shuffle through every old map of the city, every old plan and every blueprint of old buildings that they had piled up for me. My eyes are burning as I toss another page of an unused subway plan into a useless pile. I pick up the

plans to an old abandoned mill, glancing at it for a moment before deciding to toss it into the pile of places to be searched. I had nearly twenty places in the pile. Time was running out. I run my hand down my face, take a breath, and pick up the pace as I survey the last pages in the pile.

“Any luck?” I hear Wilson’s voice and a few others behind me as I concentrate on the layout of the old building.

“Plenty of places,” I tell him. “It’s just narrowing it down to one.”

“Andrews, you’re taking on the burden of at least thirty men,” he tells me. “Let the teams do their part too.”

I turn to look back at him. “You don’t understand what she means to me.”

“I do understand,” he says. “But you can’t do this on your own. It’s why we have this entire department. Countless detectives. They all have jobs to do, Andrews. I am actually trying to be nice to you, given the situation.”

I admit, he’s only tore into me a handful of times this time around. He’s

pissed, make no mistake on that. He wants nothing more than my badge and my head on a silver platter at this point. But, given my closeness with Charlie, I see that he is at least trying to make an effort to give me a break. Though, I can tell, he's about ready to bite his tongue clear off. I shuffle through and pull a small stack of maps and plans to myself and push the rest toward him. "Just help me find her."

He nods. "You can't do it all on your own. There's no way you can do it on your own. One cop doesn't control



the whole city, now does he?”

While he may want my badge, I want nothing more than to smack him with the first item I can get my hands on. Though I’ve told him several times, the man just can’t grasp what she means to me.

Figures; I always knew he had a black heart. I stand and grab a few papers.

“I’m going to go look.”

“Andrews,” Wilson stops me, “at least wait for a team.”

I shake my head. “She doesn’t have the time. I’ll radio in if I need anything.”

“You do realize I am going to have your ass for this.”

There’s no denying that. I know I will be turning in my badge as soon as this is over. My badge for Charlie, I’d say it’s worth it. I give him a nod. “But, if I find her alive, it’ll be worth it,” I shoot back as I head for the door.

\* \* \* \* \*

Outside, the sun is already beginning to set, casting a beautiful pink glow over

the city. I can't help but to think for a moment about how much Charlie would love this. My mind races as I speed through the streets, weaving in and out of traffic and past bicycles. It has to be abandoned, dark, and well secluded. Some place that people don't go around. It has to be protected, maybe with a gate, something to keep people out. Definitely has to be in decent condition. No security at all. I glance for a moment at the pile of old papers. That rules out at least three. It's beginning to give me a headache. I glance at the clock on my

dash. They won't keep her alive for long. They may not let her make it through the night since she's escaped from them before.

*Just think Nick. Think. Think.*

*Think...*

Suddenly, I remember an old warehouse that's near Charlie's apartment complex. It was used as a factory in the late 60's, but when the company upsized they, of course, upgraded to a more modern and larger building. It was secluded, dark, and abandoned. No security and a large

privacy fence that surrounded it. It had been scheduled for demolishing countless times, but due to issues that had been put off and put off again. It was perfect for Edmunds and Carrington's ruthless scheme.

I don't bother with my lights or sirens; I reach for my radio and request backup to the old Johnson Mill as I check my surrounding and turn around in the middle of the street. She had to be at the old Johnson Mill. How else could Edmunds know we had gone to my apartment?

I park a couple blocks away and run toward the old warehouse. I pull my gun out and switch the safety off as I come to the fenced in grounds of the abandoned factory. Like I had suspected, two vehicles are parked on the grounds just behind the chain link fence and partially hidden by an old dumpster. Though I've never seen them before, I can bet money on who they belong to. I walk up to the gate and try to break the rusty lock before giving up. I tuck my gun away momentarily as I work at climbing over the fence. I crouch down behind the cars

as I pull out my gun once more. More than likely both men will be inside.

Next to the building I listen closely, straining my ears in the quiet for any signs of life. Almost immediately, I hear a faint whimper. A whimper that can easily be Charlie. I take a long breath in and exhale it slowly. I don't know what condition she's in or what they did to her. I don't even know that the whimper is her or that she's even alive. I don't know if I'll be able to see her like this... after all we've been through. I snap out of it and I move slightly as I search the

whole front of the building. I soon run into a pair of low voices. Edmunds and Carrington. I strain my ears to catch what they're saying as I spot a window, that can only lead to the basement, that's cracked open enough to where I can slide my body inside. For a brief moment, I hear one of them raise their voice.

“We have to act now!” He says.

“I'm not sitting around with Andrews on our tail. You know he doesn't give a fuck what Wilson or the Chief says; he's got it too bad for this chick. You'll kill



her and you'll kill her now."

Charlie.

I move quickly to the window and wiggle my body inside it. I drop off a few feet into a dark, damp, and musty basement. The cement is wet, pipes are leaky, and the smell of blood is strong in the air. The space I'm in is both large and empty. Broken shelves and glass shards are scattered on the floor. Dirt and garbage are lying everywhere. I move to a doorway and check an adjoining room. This one is smaller, but also empty. I pass through it to yet

another door. It's shut and presumably locked. I make my way over to the large door and give it a push. To my surprise, the old door creaks open slowly and I urge it open enough to slide my body through. Another dirty room like the others, but this time I see Charlie's bare body, handcuffed to one of the old pipes. I see her arms are hanging from her head as the rest of her lies on the cold and wet cement. I can tell now that she's lying in her bra and panties and covered in cuts and bruises. I can't even tell that's she's breathing. I feel my heart shatter and fear

course through my body. Finally, she lets out a weak whimper as she gives her left hand a wiggle.

I click the safety on and slide my gun into the back of my pants as I make my way over to her, checking every corner of the room as I do. I take a knee next to her, and she immediately flinches.

“Charlie,” I say.

She opens her eyes as much as she can, “Nick.”

“Oh, God, Charlie,” I say, now seeing she’s much worse than I could

see before. I quickly dig in my pocket for my cuff key. She cries out in pain as I touch her wrists to shove the key into the lock.

“Nick, it hurts,” she says, her voice so weak it’s nearly gone.

“I just have to,” I feel my heart sink. “It won’t work for some reason.” I try to the other side, to only find my key isn’t working.

“Please, Nick, get me out of here,” she begs.

I nod. “I promise I will.”

“And, the others,” she cries.

“The others?” I ask.

She tries to nod her head. “I can hear them. In the other rooms. They cry, and I can hear them scream.”

“We’ll get the others, too,” I reassure her as I glance around her for a key.

“He has the key,” she says.

I look down at her and have to fight my own tears. She looks as though she’s in worse shape than she was the first time. She’s covered from nearly head to

toe in her own blood. He body is battered, beaten, and already bruised with deep shades of blues and browns. I bring a hand up to her cheek, and she winces in pain.

“I’m so sorry, Charlie,” I tell her. “I should have never...”

She manages to shake her head. “It’s not your fault.”

Suddenly, the sound of footsteps scraping against the wet cement interrupts us.

“Nick, you have to hide.”

I nod. "I'll get him." I tell her before rushing to another door opening. I hear the sound of whimpering behind me, and I turn to see another girl sitting up and chained to the wall. I place my finger to her lips. "I'm here to help you. I promise."

She gives me a weak nod as a few more tears roll down her cheeks. I glance along the floor. I certainly can't shoot him. It would just alert the other one to come. Finally, I see a good sized brick. It's the only option I have. I take it in my hands and peer from the corner of

the door. I watch as Charlie's entire body shakes at the image of the dark figure that's approaching her.

“Still holding out that someone will find you?” He laughs. “Well, you shouldn't, because Nicky isn't coming.”

I hear Charlie's weak cries turn into full on sobs.

“Count your minutes,” he tells her. “You don't have many of them left.”

I creep up behind him just as he shoves his foot into Charlie's side. She coughs and tries to move as he laughs. I



poise the corner of the brick to the back of his head and bring it down forcefully where the skull meets the neck. He crumples immediately as blood begins to seep from the small incision the rough and old brick made. I toss it to the side and begin digging in his pockets for the key to Charlie's handcuffs. I find a small key ring that's filled with various keys, and I kneel next to her.

“I've got you now,” I tell her, trying the first key.

She winces in pain again. “Just hurry.”

I nod and move onto another key as I see how badly cut her wrists are, and then I move to yet another key. The fourth key is the charm, and the cuffs pop open. They're saturated with both blood and parts of Charlie's skin. Her arms crumple to her sides as she cries.

I help her sit up and throw my arms around her. "I've got you now," I tell her again as I feel her body shake and shiver in my arms.

"Well, well, well, isn't that just a sweet picture." I turn around and place Charlie just behind me. It's Edmunds,

and his gun is pointed directly at my head. “Don’t you just love a story with a happy ending?” He asks. “Too damn bad that this one won’t have one.”

“Edmunds, come on, Man. Don’t be stupid,” I tell him. “Put the gun down. You’re already a woman killer; do you want to add cop killer to that list, too?”

“Why the fuck would I listen to you?” He asks. “Are you trying to be the hero now?” He asks. “Are you going to arrest me?” He asks, laughing.

“If I don’t, then someone else will,”

I tell him. “You’ve been caught. It’s simple as that. Now put the gun down.”

He shakes his head.

“Come on, Man, you know how we do things.”

“I know how you do things,” he tells me. “You fuck her, and then you leave her alone. Nice move.”

I think back. I had been the one to leave her. I left her alone. I had been the one to listen to Wilson and leave her in that office when I should have made her come with me. This was all my fault.

“Oh that stings, now doesn’t it?” He asks.

“I’m here now, though,” I tell him.

“A little too late, don’t you think?”

He says. “Look at her.”

“She’s alive.”

“Barely.” He smiles.

“She’ll heal.”

“Are you so sure about that?” He laughs.

“Drop the gun, Edmunds,” I order again.

He shakes his head. “Not in this lifetime, pretty boy.”

I see the opening and go for it. I lunge forward, taking Edmunds by surprise. I hear the gun fire once and take the force into my own chest. I hear Charlie let out a shrill scream with what’s left of her voice. I completely twist his wrist, forcing the barrel of the gun at him. It fires again, this time making Edmunds crumble lifeless to the floor. I quickly turn to Charlie, whose swollen eyes have glazed over as she leans against the wall.

“Charlie,” I say. “Can you see to me? Flak vest. I’m not hurt.” I stare into her blank eyes. “Come on, Charlie, look at me. Come on, Baby. Look at me. Listen to my voice.”

I see her blink slowly as a few tears slide down her cheeks.

“Come on, that’s it,” I urge her as I take her face in my hands.

“Nick,” she finally breathes.

“That’s it,” I say.

“He shot you.”

I nod. “But I have my vest on.” I

point to the bullet hole. “I’m okay.”

“Vest?” She questions.

“Bullet proof.”

Charlie finally leans in and crumples into my arms. Her body is freezing as I wrap an arm around her. I yank out my cell phone and dial up the department. “The old Johnson Mill,” I say. “Bring medical care, and the coroner. I’ve got them.” I drop my phone on the ground and wrap her in my arms. “Think you can walk?” I ask.

She gives her head a feeble shake. “I



can't move.”

“It's okay,” I say, “I have an ambulance on the way.”

“Just don't leave me,” she mumbles softly.

“I won't,” I tell her. “You have my word.”

She pushes all of her weight into me, as she can barely hold her head up. Her breathing begins to slow, but her body trembles slightly as I rub up and down her back. I let out a breath as I can hardly open my mouth to speak. Instead,

I find myself just holding her as I trace along the lines of the Phoenix on her back. Now, this bird had a deeper meaning...Charlie is the Phoenix, and not only did she rise from hell once, I have every faith that she'll do it again. Soon, the dark old mill is filled with bright blue and red flashing lights. Uniforms flood the old mill. "It's all over," I tell her. "You're safe now. But, we have to get you to a hospital."

I feel her nod slightly as I'm sure that's all she can manage.

"Andrews," I hear Wilson's voice

just behind me.

I look down at Charlie, who gives me an understanding nod to greet him. Instead of standing, I keep my arms around her, letting her continue to rest against me. His eyes fall on the hole in my tee shirt. “I’m fine,” I say, tapping the flak vest underneath. “I’m not sure how many girls they have.”

A female officer steps in silently and finally drapes a wool blanket around Charlie’s body. “She’s alive,” I say again, “but, not in good shape.”

Wilson manages a nod.

“I’m sure the other girls are in the same, if not worse, state,” I say, wiping my face.

He only nods again. “Some congratulations are in order. You single handedly did what everyone in the city wanted to do.”

“I guess it’s true when they say love makes you do crazy things,” I tell him.

“Not to mention stupid,” he adds. “I should have your ass for this.”

I nod, “I understand.”

“But,” he begins, “I’m not going to.”

I stare up at him in disbelief.

“I would be the most hated man in New York City if I got the cop fired who took out Loverboy,” he tells me. “You do need to get her to the hospital,” he tells me. “Squads are here.”

I nod and watch as he heads in another direction. I kneel again in front of Charlie. “We need to get you to the hospital,” I tell her.

She nods. “Will you go with me?”

I nod. “Of course,” I tell her, now

listening briefly to the back ground. It had been confirmed that three other girls had made it out alive, but the body of their 10<sup>th</sup> victim had also been recovered. “The sooner we get you to the hospital, the sooner you’ll feel a little better.”

She gives me another slight nod as I begin to help her from the ground. But, we quickly find that she has been so beaten she just cannot move, no matter how hard she tries. I lift her gingerly in my arms and place her lightly on the stretcher as two paramedics mumble

their thanks. I give them a nod, and I suck back my own tears as she cries out every so often in pain.

“Are you riding along, officer?” One young paramedic asks as they begin to gingerly load the stretcher in the back of the ambulance.

Charlie’s eyes immediately shift to me. “Yes,” I say, following them into the back of the ambulance where they go to work on Charlie. Her body seems to sink comfortably into the fresh blankets and sheets that are on the stretcher, and I realize that I can’t imagine the relief they

must be from the cold and wet cement floor. I hear her sigh deeply; if anything, out of relief. She looks over at me and smiles slightly.

“Thank you,” she says, softly.

“For what?” I ask, taking her hand in mine.

“You saved my life, Nick,” she tells me. “On more than one occasion.”

I smile. “You don’t have to thank me for that.”

She nods as I move back to give the paramedics room, as they are now



beginning to take her blood pressure, run IV's, and a variety of other things. She grimaces out in pain every so often as they begin checking each of the deep abrasions and bruises that are lining her body. I watch closely as they carefully check her black and blue ribs by far the worst and most tender. Charlie slams her eyes shut and fights a round of tears. I take one long breath in and exhale slowly. This time, it really does feel as though it is my fault and seeing her like this is killing me slowly. I don't take my eyes off the paramedics, however, whom

seem to run down an entire list of tasks as we ride the distance to the hospital.

I can tell we've reached the hospital as I feel the squad's direction change as we begin pulling into the spot backward. I can see that Charlie's hands are beginning to shake, and she seems to appear even more fragile. One of the paramedics unlocks and pushes the back double doors opening, giving me the go ahead to step down. I obey and stand to the side as they begin wheeling Charlie through the set of emergency doors.

A nurse immediately allows the

paramedics and Charlie to pass through. She sticks her hand out in front of me. “I’m sorry, officer, I’ll have to ask you to wait in the lobby.”

I nod as she points to my right, and I head down the long, sterile hallway. It’s now that I see just how weak and tired my own body feels. I take another long breath and find an uncomfortable chair to sink into. I rest my elbows on my knees as I drop my head and place my face in my hands. I find myself starting to cry. Not just a few tears; really crying, sobbing uncontrollably, for the first time

in years. I think of Charlie and how happy I am that I found her. But, I think back to those horrible bruises, the deeps cuts, and blood all over her body. I sink further into the chair and I let it all go. I feel my body shake as my cries turn into much heavier sobs as I suck in a gulp of air, and for once I don't care if anyone is there to witness. I just cry. I cry for Charlie.

\* \* \* \* \*

It's funny how crying can wear down an already tired and weak person. I wake in a most uncomfortable position, to a hand coming down on my shoulder.

The nurse smiles. "You can see her now."

I nod and stand as she heads back to the nurse's station. I take a minute to stretch and walk to the bathroom to splash my face with cool water before looking at myself in the mirror. I look at the hole in the front of my shirt, and run my finger over the mark where the bullet entered the flak vest. I can feel the bullet

firmly lodged into the material. I let out a breath and shake my head before putting my back to the wall and sliding down it to sit on the bathroom floor. I pull out my phone, and, without looking at the time, I call Anna.

“Nick, it's almost one in the morning. Is everything okay? I told you, you don't need to check up on me,” her normal happy voice rings through the phone.

“I don't know what to do, Anna,” I say, beginning to cry again.

“Nick, what’s going on?” She asks.

“Anna, I was on the Loverboy case,”

I wipe at my face. “The girl who managed to get away.”

She takes a breath. “Charlotte Murphy,” she says softly.

“I was watching her, I did something,” I pause. “I got so close to her, I...”

She stops me, “Nick,” I can hear a little smile, “you fell for her.”

“I did.” I take a breath. “I told her I love her.”

“Nick, that’s great,” she says.

“That’s a good a thing.”

“I know,” I say, trying to breathe through my own tears. “But, she was taken again. She was taken from the police station. The things they’ve done to her. I’m terrified of walking into her hospital room, Anna; I can’t see her hurting.”

I hear a soft rustling noise on the other end of the phone. “Nick, she needs you right now. Probably more than ever.

“I know,” I admit. “But, I’m so afraid to look at her, let alone touch her.



If you could see her, Anna; her body, she looks...”

She stops me. “Nick, do you remember the weeks after I was attacked?”

I think for a moment. I didn’t like to remember it, but I could, quite vividly. “Yeah,” I reply.

“Do you remember how afraid you were to even come near me?” She asks.

I could remember it clearly. “You told me that all you needed was for me to be your brother again. To stop being

afraid and worrying, and then you hugged me.”

I hear a big smile in her voice. “You need to find the courage to not be afraid anymore. If you love her like it sounds like you do, then you should be with her. If anyone can do that, it's you, Nick. You're one of a kind, Nick; you can handle anything.”

“It feels so different with her Anna,” I say. “I don't know why.”

“It feels different, because the love you have for your sister is different from the love that you feel for her,” she tells

me. “Nick, go to her, be there with her, she needs you now more than she probably ever has.”

I nod, even though she can’t see it, and rub my face and eyes. “Thank you, Anna.”

“Anytime,” she says. “You be safe, and send my good thoughts to her, please.”

I smile. “I will.”

“Love you, Nick,” she says. “Bye.”

“Love you, too,” I say as the phone line clicks dead. I take another long

breath and lean my head back, looking at the ceiling before picking myself up off the floor. I splash my face once more before heading out of the bathroom and make my way toward the hospital rooms. The sterile smell wafts to my nose as the nurse at the nurse's station uses her pen to point toward Charlie's room, as she continues a conversation on the telephone. I knock lightly a few times on the door before stepping inside. Charlie is now lying in a slightly more comfortable hospital bed, and has been changed from her underwear and

blankets to the sensible hospital gown. Blankets are piled on top of her, and I can see the IV is now running up the length of a metal pole and several bags of clear fluids are hanging from it. All the blood and cuts have been cleaned and fresh bandages have been placed on the worst ones. Stepping closer, I can see her eyes are shut, but she's relaxed as her head falls slightly toward me. It's also easy to tell that she's gotten something for the pain, as now she really looks peaceful.

“Nick,” she sighs my name in such a

perfect way that I feel myself nearly melt as it takes me one more step to get to her bed.

“I’m here,” I tell her as I reach for one of her hands.

She smiles slightly, and I take a seat just on the edge of the bed.

“How do you feel?” I ask.

“They gave me something for pain,” she mumbles. “They said it would take the edge off. And, aside from a few broke ribs,” she pauses. “They said all my tests came back great.”

I smile. “That’s great, so you’ll recover in no time.”

She lets out a faint laugh. “I think it may take a while,” she says softly.

“Well, first you rest,” I say. “Rest is important. Let your body heal.”

She gives me a feeble nod. “Nick, he came in the office. He said that Edmunds had you, and if I cooperated, you wouldn’t be hurt.”

I lick my lips and look down. “I know.”

“I was dumb enough to believe

them,” she says, closing her eyes again. “But, I didn’t want to see you get hurt.”

I look down and feel a few questions weighing on my mind. I finally look up at her and see she’s opened her eyes once more. “They beat you?” I ask.

She gives me a nod and raises the hospital gown to expose her ribs that have been taped tightly. “Both of them; every time they came in the room.”

“Did they,” I stop. “They didn’t...” I stop again, unable to finish.

She shakes her head slightly. “No.



They just touched me. Edmunds kept saying that he wanted to go slow with me. He wanted to piss you off more.”

I pull the blankets up around her body more. “I am so sorry, Charlie.”

“Did they,” she pauses to swallow. “Did they save the other girls?”

I nod. “They sure did. They’re resting, I’m sure,” I tell her.

“Nick, let’s go to Central Park,” She says, softly.

“What?” I ask. “Right now?”

She nods. “Right now. I have to

make a better memory there.”

I can only assume it's the pain medication speaking on her behalf. “We will, I promise,” I tell her. “But, first you have to rest; you need to heal.”

“But, I need to go,” she tells me.

“I know,” I say. “But, I need you to get some rest for me. Can you do that?”

She nods sleepily as her eyes close again. “Stay here with me, Nick.”

“I'm not going anywhere,” I tell her. “I'll be right here all night and all day.”

“Just don't leave me,” she says. I

can tell that she's trailing slowly off to sleep.

“I won't,” I say, touching her cheek as she finally dozes off.

I rub my face for a moment and glance up at the clock. It's now nearing two in the morning. Even though my body feels exhausted, I'm not quite sure that I can sleep. I pull the only spare chair in the room next to her bed and sink into its uncomfortable, plastic feeling fabric. I stick my legs straight out, crossing my ankles as I rub my temples for a moment. I watch her as her

breathing begins to slow and steady out as she falls into a deep sleep. I tilt my head back against the hardest part of the chair and close my own eyes.

\* \* \* \* \*

I wake that morning with a ray of sunlight directly in my eyes and to the sounds of rustling in the room. The nurse from the night before is checking Charlie completely over. She tosses out the empty IV bags and replaces them with

new ones. She gingerly checks her blood pressure and other vitals. All the while, Charlie is still resting comfortably in the bed, wrapped up in the blankets with her head snuggled into the pillows.

The nurse turns and smiles. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to wake you.”

“It’s okay,” I tell her, stretching a moment.

“Are you her husband?” She asks, gathering up a few old bandages for the trash.

“Oh,” I pause. “No; her boyfriend.” I

smile.

“Well, she’s doing beautifully,” she tells me. “For what her body has been through, I have no doubt this one will make a full recovery.”

“She’ll really be okay?” I ask.

She nods. “She’s battered and bruised, but that core of hers, she’s made of steel.” She grins and places a few more odds and ends into the trash.

I smile and glance at Charlie before looking back at the nurse. “How are the others?” I ask.

“Doing as well as expected,” she says. “They were all in such bad shape. It’s just a waiting game.”

I nod. I figured as much.

“You let us know if either of you need anything,” she tells me as she makes her way toward the door.

I nod and thank her as I hear a slight sighing noise coming from Charlie. I glance over as she stretches slowly to not cause any pain. She glances around slowly and licks her lips as she sleepily looks over at me. “It wasn’t a dream?”

I shake my head. “It really wasn’t a dream,” I tell her.

“They’re,” she pauses. “They’re really...”

I nod. “They’re gone.”

“You killed them,” she says, softly.

I nod and look down a moment.

“You saved my life,” she tells me as she tucks a tuft of messy hair behind her ear.

“I still didn’t get to you fast enough,” I admit.

“But, you got to me,” she says. “I’m



here right now, because of you.” She smiles and gives the free space on her bed a light pat.

I get up slowly as I stretch out the aches and pains of an uncomfortable, but needed, sleep and make my way to have a seat next to her. Her eyes move to the tattered hole that the bullet permanently marked on my shirt. She reaches her unsteady hand to trace her fingers along the brown, burnt mess, and slowly slides her finger just inside, feeling the hard material of the flak vest.

“I could have lost you.”

“I could have lost you,” I say,  
moving her hand slowly.

“That morning,” she says, “all I saw  
you put on was the tee shirt. You  
didn’t.”

I stop her. “I put it on when I got to  
the department.”

“Nick, that shot could have killed  
you,” she says. “It was by your heart.”  
She points out.

I nod. “But, it didn’t. He didn’t.”

She looks down. “I just don’t know  
what I would have done if I would have

lost you,” she admits.

I lift her face in my hands. “But, you won’t. I’m not going anywhere,” I say, running my thumbs over her smooth cheeks. I stare into her eyes, as deep as I had before, past all her pain, past all the cuts and bruises, and past the entire trauma she just had to relive. I look down to see that a smaller white bandage on her arm was slowly beginning to let blood seep through. I move my hands to her arms, tenderly brushing over the bandages. “God, why did they have to pick you, Charlie?” I

look back up at her and see now that a few tears are dribbling down her cheeks. “I don’t know how to fix this,” I tell her, letting my finger graze over one of the bandages. “I want to. I just don’t know how.”

She leans forward slowly and wraps her arms around me. “You’ll fix everything. You did before, and you’ll do it again.”

I rest my chin comfortably on the top of her head. “I’ll try.”

“You know,” she says, “It’s going to be different. Not having you around the

apartment.” She pulls away slowly and eases herself back into the nest of pillows.

“Oh,” I say. I hadn’t really given it much thought that when the case was over, so was my time at Charlie’s. “I guess I wasn’t thinking.”

“I’m really hoping that the other night wasn’t just some game.”

I shake my head. “I was actually kind of hoping that,” I pause. “I know it’s crazy but people do crazier things. But, maybe we could be...”

“Exclusive?” She asks.

I nod. “Yeah. And, I certainly wouldn’t object to coming to your apartment, or even you coming to mine.”

“So, we would be a couple,” she says.

I nod. “As long as it’s not too soon. Especially after all this.”

“Well, your sister met her boyfriend soon after her attack,” she says. “Maybe some things are just meant to be.”

I smile. “So that would make you my girlfriend?”

She grins and nods. “I do believe that would be my title.”

I smile and push her hair from her face.

She smiles, and I can see the exhaustion wash over her face as she reaches out for my hand. “Can you just promise me one thing?” She asks.

I nod. “Of course.”

“Please, help me make a better memory of Central Park.”

I smile. “I will do everything in my power to give you a better memory

there.”

She smiles as she nestles herself back into her pillow to let herself drift to more much needed sleep.



# **Epilogue**

## **6 Months Later**

### **Charlie**

I begin digging for my keys as I sling the heavy bags back onto my shoulder. The heavy messenger and duffel bags begin to weigh me down as I make my way to my car. I finally give in setting

them both on the ground as I place the key into the lock.

“Why Miss Murphy,” I hear the voice behind me.

I turn to see Nick pulling into the studio parking lot in his police cruiser. I smile as he pulls his car into park.

“Did someone miss my phone call?” He asks.

“Sorry, I didn’t have time to check my phone,” I tell him. “Adult contemporary class was today, and the girls were nuts this afternoon.”

“Well, I called to tell you that I was meeting you here.” He smiles as he gets out of his car.

“Oh, God,” I say. “Please tell me it’s not about my apartment? Those people agreed to the sublet costs,” I grumble.

He laughs and shakes his head. “Everything with your apartment is great. And, the couple doesn’t want to bargain anymore.”

I make a face. “You didn’t blow anything up at your apartment, did you?”

Because, Nick, we have to live there, and I am not replacing another microwave.”

He shakes his head again, and this time laughs even harder. “I swore to you that I would only cook under your supervision,” he tells me as he lifts my large bags up and onto his shoulder.

“Then what?” I ask.

“Well, if someone would check her messages,” he says, extending his hand for my keys.

I laugh. “Oh yes, because I can take

a break in the middle of dancing to check a message.”

He unlocks my trunk, popping both bags inside with ease. “We just have something important to do.”

“It’s not the new furniture is it?” I ask, as he leads me around to his car.

“No, they’re delivering it on time,” he reassures me.

“And, this time in one piece?”

He stops and places a hand carefully on my hip and one on my cheek. “Just relax. For once. Everything is perfect.

Our apartment is coming together. Your apartment has been subletted. The new furniture will be here in one piece.”

I let out a deep breath that I realize I was holding. “I’m sorry, I’m just on edge. You do realize your mom, dad, and your sisters will be here in a week.”

He nods. “And your family the week after.”

“And, the girls have their big spring dance recital,” I say, finally draping my arms around his neck.

“It’s time to relax,” he tells me.

“Everything is falling perfectly into place.”

I smile, and finally have a light go off in my head. I glance over his shoulder at the police car and back to him. He’s still in full uniform. “I thought we both got off work at the same time today.”

He nods. “We did. I figured I would meet you here first.”

“You can do that?” I ask.

He shrugs. “We have something important to take care of first. So, like it

or not, I'll be heading back in a little late."

"Well," I say, "if it's that important let's get this show on the road."

He leads me to the passenger side of the police car and opens the door. I take a seat and reach for my seat belt. He soon joins me on the other side of the car as he slides in and clicks his seat belt on.

"So, where are we going?" I ask.

"You'll see," he says, pulling the car into drive.



I nod and watch as he pulls out into the street. But, make no mistake, I know where he's going after a few turns. I glare over at him for a moment.

“Nick.”

He nods. “Yeah?”

“Where are we really going?” I ask, now feeling my heart begin to pound.

He reaches for my hand for a brief moment and gives it a reassuring squeeze.

I shake my head. “Oh Nick, I don't think I can do this. Not today. Please.” I

watch as he takes a few more turns that I am familiar with.

“It’s been long enough,” he tells me. “You know you can do this. Stop putting it off. Look at you. Look how fast you’ve recovered.”

“Yeah, physically.”

“And, mentally.” He glances over at me. “Charlie, you’re ready.”

“Shouldn’t I be the one to tell you if I’m ready or not?” I grumble.

“You remember that night in the hospital?” He asks.

“I was so high on that pain medication,” I say. “Barely.”

“You told me that you wanted to go there and make a new, better memory there,” he says. “We’re moving in together. You finished up with counseling. You’re back to work, and you’re even back to school.”

I close my eyes. “But, I don’t know if I’m ready for *this*.”

“Baby,” I feel him squeeze my hand again, “you’re ready. You’ve been ready. It’s time, Charlie. ”

\* \* \* \* \*

I really haven't been near Central Park in months. Not to walk by it, drive by it, or even see it from a distance. I actually avoid it at all costs. I wouldn't be here right now if Nick wasn't making me. But, here we are, walking inside, hand in hand. I take a long deep breath and look around. The spring air was fresh, and the leaves on the trees were finding that perfect shade of green. I feel

a few tears prickle at my eyes as I look over at Nick.

“Nick,” I say, “I think I’m going to have a panic attack.”

“You’re not going to have a panic attack,” he tells me. “I’m right here with you.”

I nod as we continue down the path. The park is filled with people, kids, and pets. It’s loud and busy. It’s nice, and how I used to love it. We round a path, and I pause to glance around. I take a few long breaths to relax myself and close my eyes for a brief moment. I feel

Nick give my hand a slight squeeze, and I glance over to see he's no longer standing next to me. I look down and find him on one knee, looking up at me.

“I promised you that we would make a better memory in here together,” he says. “I never want you to think about what happened before. I just want you to think of us and this moment right now.”

I smile as he eases every fear I'd grown to have of the park.

“Which is why I knew I had to make this memory a really good one,” he

continues, as he reaches into his pocket.

“Oh my God.” My heart jumps high into my throat as I swallow hard.

He smiles and pulls out a rather shocking display of a diamond ring.

“Charlie.” He grins again. “I think you know what this is for.”

I cover my mouth as I feel my knees begin to grow unsteady.

“Charlie,” he smiles, “will you marry me?”

I can feel a few tears slide down my cheeks as I open my mouth to speak.

After a long breath, I'm able to speak.

“Yes.”

“Think I can put this on your finger?” He asks, adjusting my left hand to slide it on my finger.

My mouth drops. “Oh my God.”

He smiles. “Like it?”

“Oh my God.” I can feel my legs wobble as he stands up to wrap his arms around me. It's now I realize the small crowd of strangers are beginning to clap and cheer. “Oh my God, Nick.”

He wipes the tears off my cheeks



and smiles. “I told you that I would make a better memory here for you.”

“Nick.” I glance down at the large diamond ring that now covers my ring finger. “How long have you been planning this?”

He smiles. “A while, now. You needed a better memory here, and I wanted to propose. I figured what better memory is there to replace the other one that occurred in this park.”

I lean on my tip toes for a very public display of kissing that would have surely turned the average

grandmother red.

He pulls away slowly and smiles. “Oh,” he says softly. “It is from Tiffany’s. That’s every woman’s dream, right?”

I laugh and lean up and kiss him again. “You definitely just made a much better memory.”

It’s taken me a while to figure it out, but now I finally understand I’ve risen from hell, twice. Good things can come from bad. There is always hope. And, it may take time, but healing is possible.

As I lean in and kiss Nick again, I hear the words in my head...good things can come from bad...and, they have.

Dear Reader,

I sincerely hope you enjoyed the story of Charlie and Nick. I love hearing from my readers. Please feel free to leave a review on Amazon. Reviews are extremely important to an author, it lets us know our strengths, weaknesses and helps us grow as a writer.

Thank you,

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