

## Slow Healing

"Where are we going mommy?" seven-year-old Charlotte asked her mother. It was past her bedtime and the silence and shadows of the dark street they were walking down were scaring her.

"We're going to see a friend of mine," her mom replied, glancing over her shoulder yet again.

"I want to go home," Charlotte whispered. Her mom always seemed scared, but now Charlotte felt scared too, and she just wanted her warm bed.

"We're nearly there," her mom soothed her, squeezing Charlotte's hand a bit rmer as they crossed the empty street.

They walked up to a double-story house and Charlotte's mom rang the bell twice, glancing around nervously as they waited for someone to answer the door.

An older lady who was already in pajamas opened the door with a frown. "Vivienne, what are you doing here?" she asked.

"I know it's late, but I need your mother's help," Charlotte's mom explained, sounding desperate.

The woman looked down at Charlotte and her face softened. "Come in," she sighed. "I'll go get her."

"Thank you, Dianna," she replied in relief while she led Charlotte into the house with her.

The furniture was all old-looking and there was a big glass chandelier hanging in the entrance hall that looked like it might fall to the oor at any second. The woman walked off into another room, leaving Charlotte and her mom under the rickety chandelier.

Her mom knelt in front of her and cradled her face in her warm hands. "I need you to be a good girl for me, okay. Just do what mommy tells you," she told her daughter.

Charlotte bit her lip and nodded, wondering if she was there to do some sort of new training. She didn't really like ghting, but her mom insisted that she do it every day after school anyway. She wasn't even supposed to tell anyone about it except for her brother, who sometimes joined them if he wasn't playing with his friend, Damien.

Dianna returned a few minutes later, emerging from the room she had walked into with an elderly lady next to her.

"I hope there's a very good reason you came at this hour, Vivienne," the white-haired lady said in a croaky voice. One of her hands was braced on Dianna's arm, but she was also using a walking stick to help her move forward. The woman's lined face reminded Charlotte of how her ngers would get wrinkled if she stayed in the bath for too long.

"It's about my daughter," Charlotte's mom explained.

Charlotte shrunk back like she had done something wrong as the old lady's cloudy eyes moved down to her. She didn't understand what was happening and just wanted to go home.

"Dianna, would you go put on the kettle for some tea," the old woman croaked, her gaze still on Charlotte.

"Let me stay and help with whatever's going on," Dianna started to argue.

"I need to speak with Vivienne alone," the old lady insisted sternly.

"We've been over this before," the old woman croaked, returning her gaze to Vivienne. "I won't do it."

"You don't understand," Charlotte's mom said in a voice choked with tears and desperation. "Her father--"

The sound of Greg's obnoxiously loud alarm jarred her from her dream before she was ready to leave it. Once the beeping had stopped, she closed her eyes and futilely tried to fall back into the dream with no results. With an annoyed groan, Charlotte sat up, having to use the muscles in her stomach to lift her back off the mattress. Since she was already awake, she thought she may as well get up.

She couldn't change without someone's help, so she stayed in the annel pajamas she was in and simply walked out of the spare room as she was.

"Morning, Charlie," Greg greeted her chirpily from where he stood at the kitchen counter in his boxers and an old ratty shirt. "I thought you'd still be sleeping since you went to bed so late," he noted as he poured protein powder into the smoothie machine.

"I would have been if your alarm wasn't so loud," Charlotte told him with a glare.

She had been up late nishing an assignment for culinary school. It had taken her a frustratingly long time to do it with how sluggish her brain felt and how hard she found it to focus after the rst hour. Claire hadn't lied when she'd said Charlotte might have concentration issues. Her chefs had been happy to welcome her back as long as she caught up everything she missed in the next three weeks, which after the previous night seemed much harder than she thought it would be.

Charlotte's plan was to stay in Seattle until Liam had to leave for Boston, but a week of that time had already come and gone far too quickly for her liking. She didn't think a month was long enough for her and Liam to really get to know each other, and the added pressure of needing to catch up all her work didn't help matters.

"Sorry," Greg apologized with a wince. "I'll make sure to turn the volume down."

"Thanks," Charlotte replied, her annoyance already forgotten.

"I assumed you'd have a smoothie for breakfast again?" he asked, pointing to the machine.

"I guess," Charlotte sighed.

"Banana and peanut butter okay?"

"Yeah," she agreed unenthusiastically. "I just can't wait until I can use cutlery again," she said as she took a seat at the dining room table in the open plan area. A person could only survive off smoothies and soup for so long. Even though she was getting all the nutrients she needed, she still felt like she was starving.

"If all goes well, that could be today," Greg reminded her with a grin.

"I just don't want to get my hopes up," Charlotte told him with a small smile. At her check-up with Claire three days previously, the woman had told her that her arms might have healed enough to take off the splints. 'Might' being the key word.

"Positive vibes, Charlie," Greg said with a pointed look.

He'd always encouraged her to look on the bright side of things and to expect the best, but that hadn't worked for her in high school when she was teased by their pack mates for being small and it hadn't helped her get out of her cell in Portland. And it wasn't going to help her arms heal faster.

"I just don't want to be disappointed if it doesn't work out," Charlotte explained with a shrug that belied just how down she'd been feeling lately. Things with her and Liam had been good, but she still didn't feel that close to him yet and he'd seemed distracted whenever they went out since that rst coffee date. It wasn't quite the fairytale she'd imagined. It felt more like she was invested in something that no one else was.

"Well, I think the splints are coming off today, and me and my positivity will be there to make sure it happens," Greg said teasingly, but Charlotte could see the icker of worry in his eyes. "Seriously though, is everything okay?" he asked when she didn't return his smile.

"Yeah, I just had a weird dream is all," she said, using the opportunity to bring it up. "Do you remember a woman called Dianna and her mother?" she asked him.

"Uh, no, but I think there's a place called Dianna's Bed and Breakfast in Hood River," Greg said uncertainly. "Why?"

"Just something from my dream," Charlotte murmured.

In all honesty, the dream had felt more like a vivid memory. She knew next to nothing about her father, so to hear her mom mention him, even if it was in a dream, was surprising. There couldn't be too many Dianna's in a town as small as Hood River though, so maybe the bed and breakfast was a lead. A lead towards what, Charlotte wasn't exactly sure, but it was worth investigating.

The loud sound of the smoothie machine tore her from her thoughts before she could get dragged back too far into the memory.

"Is Lily coming over today to help you get ready?" Greg asked over the noise.

"Yeah, she said she'd be here before she went to school," Charlotte replied in a shout. Lily had been an absolute godsend over the past seven days and she wasn't sure what she would have done without her.

"Cool, I need to pop into work for a bit, but I'll be back in time for the appointment," he explained as he placed a metal cup with its matching straw in front of her.

"Thanks," Charlotte replied with a grateful smile, thanking him for more than the smoothie. He had done a really great job of taking care of her.

"No problem," he told her with a dismissive wave of his hand.

"What did you put in it today?" Charlotte asked with a skeptical glance at the metal cup.

"Banana and peanut butter," he told her with the same sad look Charlotte had come to recognize as the one he used when she'd forgotten something.

"Oh, right," she said with a forced smile. "I remember now."

"I'm gonna go get ready for work," Greg said gently, clearly not believing her.

She didn't blame him with how bad she was at lying. Still, she hated the sadness she saw in his face whenever her memory failed her.

Charlotte took a sip of her smoothie after he'd left and decided that if she ever had to have a smoothie again, it would be too soon. She needed real wholesome food.

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"What's the verdict?" Greg asked when Claire came back into the doctor's room with the X-rays.

"I know I said we might be able to take both splints off, but I have some bad news," Claire said apologetically.

Much as she'd tried not to let her hopes get up, Charlotte felt like she'd been punched at the gut at the woman's words. The truth was that in the back of her mind, she believed that if she wasn't disabled, Liam might take more interest in her. She'd felt so useless every time they were together and she wanted to show Liam that she wasn't quite the awkward rambling mess she always seemed to be around him. That she was capable.

"It's okay. I can deal without my arms for a bit longer," she said, doing her best to keep emotion out of her voice. She wouldn't let Claire or her brother see how upset she was.

"No, Charlotte, it's not as bad as that," Claire rushed to say. "Your right arm has healed enough that we can take off the splint and sling, but your left arm still needs a day or two. The break was a bit more severe on that side."

Her left elbow was the one that Erikson had stomped on a second time, so Charlotte supposed she shouldn't have been surprised. "So we can take the right one off today?" she asked, wanting to make sure she had it right.

"Yes," Claire agreed with a smile.

"That's still good news, right?" Greg asked his sister with a hesitant smile.

"Yeah, it's great news," Charlotte agreed with a huge smile. Since she was right-handed, she would be able to do things like make herself food and lock doors and change and brush her teeth. She wouldn't be so incompetent anymore.

"Before we do that though, how has your head been? Any memory or concentration issues?" Claire asked.

"Some," Charlotte admitted reluctantly.

"What about headaches?" Claire asked.

"No," Charlotte replied honestly.

"Well the memory and concentration issues aren't that surprising and the injury to your head is looking much better, but you need to tell me if things get worse, okay? If you start getting headaches or if your memory and focus decline even more."

"Okay, I will," Charlotte promised.

"I know you're impatient to get back to your studies, but just remember that for the next month or two, it's not going to be as easy as it used to be," Claire added gently.

Considering Charlotte only had two and a half months until the end of May, which is when her nal exams would take place, that wasn't quite what she wanted to hear, but she had assumed as much already.

"I understand," she replied. "As long as I can use both arms before I go back in three weeks, I'll nd a way to cope."

"Alright, then let's start by giving you your right arm," Claire said with a warm smile.

Maybe hope wasn't such a bad thing after all.