

## Prologue

I lay there on the ground, feeling weak. I felt like I was hyperventilating, but I wasn't. I couldn't breathe. I could feel my heart beat slow and it scared me. It was the worst feeling in the world. At one point it felt like I was going to die. I was so sure of it. But with my weak body I saw Samuel, my best friend, come running up to me. I could hear his voice faintly. It sounded muffled and far away. But, I could hear the fear in his voice. I could tell he is as scared as I am. But still, I lay there not knowing what to do. Not knowing what would happen to me. Would I die? I could feel my body tense up so much. My head was pounding, giving me a headache. I closed my eyes. Knowing there was nothing I could do. If I die, I die. There was nothing to stop it. Concentrating on Samuel, I could hear him talking to me. His voice became less muffled. I couldn't move and my body ached from Samuel trying to get me to stand up. He shook, but I couldn't budge.

"Come on! Get up!" His voice was squeaky and tears rolled down his cheeks. "After everything that happened. Everything we've been through. You're going to leave me? Now? You can't." His shirt was drenched from the tears and his eyes were puffy from crying.

He laid his head on my hip and cried. I knew this hurt him as much as it hurt me. We've been through so much together. And we both knew it was going to end. I loved the feeling of his body right next to mine and I knew that if I died, I would want Samuel to be right there beside me. I focused on my breathing. Long, deep breaths. That would help. But, I knew the fate that awaited me. So now I lay there. Waiting to die.

What felt like an eternity probably was only fifteen minutes. Samuel sat up and looked at me with a half smile on his face. There was something in his eyes that made my heart skip a beat. It was...relief. But, that wasn't what made my heart skip. It was then I realized that I was breathing better. I could feel my body loosen up a bit, but I still could hardly move. Samuel sat there, waiting for me to get up, but I still couldn't. It was too hard. My body still ached. Hope ran through every part of my sore body. I was going to live. I knew. And so did Samuel. He kissed my cheek and held my hand in his. "I love you," he said. "I would die if you left me." I knew by his voice that he wasn't saying it as a friend. I wanted to tell him that I loved him back, but I couldn't speak. I knew he saw it through my eyes, though. We were both happy that I was okay. Everything would be fine. Everything would be alright.

# Chapter 1

February 14, 2011

Akron, Ohio

It's been seven months since I almost died. It was the turning point of my life. Nothing has been the same since. Instead of me dying, it seems that everyone around me is. My mom died from a heart attack three months ago. My best friend died in a car crash along with her father just last month. And now, my cousin in Mississippi is in the hospital dying of breast cancer.

The day I almost died was a curse on the ones I love. Will it ever end? Will anyone ever be safe? My older brother, Tom, came back home (from his house in California) with his new wife to take care of me. Now that our mother has died—since our father left when we were little—there is no one to look after me. Not that I need to be looked after. But, of course, after our mother's death, my brother needs to make sure nothing happens to me. If only he knew that I, Charlotte Gwen, almost died not too long ago. But, that would only make it worse, so no one tell him. Samuel, my best friend and one true love, has been watching my every move ever since.

He won't leave me side. Although, I do like to know that I'm safe with him. I don't want him to ever leave my side, of course, metaphorically though. Literally, it can be irritating. He does it because he loves me and I appreciate that he doesn't want to lose me, but I don't need anyone to watch over me. Honestly, I think they need to be watched since everyone I love is dying around me. If I lost Samuel, I would never recover. I would put a gun to my head rather than live without him. But, that's another story I will tell another time.

Now it's one week until Valentine's Day and I'm not at all excited this year. Usually I love V-Day, but after what happened in July, nothing could ever make me as happy. Samuel says he has a surprise for me to get my mind off of everything, but there's nothing in this world that could get my mind off of the worst seven months of my life.

It was about 12:45 (lunch time in school), a February Tuesday, and really cold outside. Even with the sun out, shining bright enough to make you go blind, there was still white, glistening snow on the ground and it was windy. Still cold enough to see your breathe. Samuel was cuddled up to me so tightly before school began because we were so cold. I'm just glad I had him right beside me to keep warm.

"Babe? You need to stop thinking about all of this. That is why I have a surprise for you on Thursday," Samuel told me as I rolled me eyes and took a bite out of my sandwich. He sighed. He knew what I was thinking. Sometimes it creep me out or annoyed me. Otherwise, I kind of liked it.

"I know you try to get my mind off of it," I said looking intently into his eyes. "But, what if I don't want to get my mind off of it?" He looked back into my eyes with love and passion. "You don't get everything you want. It's better if you don't think about it too much though. I don't like to see you bothered by it." He smiled a little and I couldn't help but smile, too. Then, he switched the subject all together.

"You should be excited for Valentine's Day. You have been ever since you were six. Always hoping to find your 'Prince Charming'."

There was a little tease in his voice. Of course he had to bring up something from when I was little and idiotic.

"Ya, well you can change a lot in ten years. Besides, after finding 'my Prince', I learned it's not at all what I dreamed it would be."

He gave me a look that said *Oh, thanks. Love you, too.* Getting that look made me smile. Then, I realized that he made me forget about the horrible things in life. Just like he always does.

I knew it would piss him off if I thought about everything again, so I did.

He looked at me and I could see him frown in the corner of my eye. That made me smile mentally.

“You need to stop thinking about it. I can tell it hurts you.” He stared at me for me to say something, but I didn’t. “Stop thinking about it.” Samuel only tells me to do something when he knows what’s good for me. When I’m being stubborn and I don’t do something I know I should do, he always uses a sweet, soft tone and I know that I need to listen to him.

When he uses that tone, I know I can’t win against him, so I listen and do what he says. He knows me better than anyone, and sometimes he knows what I should do when it comes to something important. Like the time I was sick and we both knew I had to go to the hospital, but I was being stubborn and wouldn’t go. When he had that voice come out, I listened and went to the hospital.

So I turned to him and started talking seriously. “I can’t stop thinking about something that ruined my life and everyone else’s around me. I can’t stop thinking about the time I almost died. Its hard to stop thinking about the day your life turned around.” I could have kept going, but that was just enough for him to stop trying to get my mind off of it. I looked at him and saw...protection. That look sent chills down my spine. But, it also gave me love. That made me feel better.

“I know. I haven’t stop thinking about it either. I don’t know what I’d do if I lost you, but there’s a difference between thinking about it and letting it get to you. Ever since then, you’ve changed. You haven’t been so alive as you used to be. Now...you don’t talk to anyone and don’t do anything.” He trailed off a little, not knowing how to put the rest. That’s how well I know him.

I understood what he meant, but I almost *died* only a few months ago. What else would I be, especially when everyone I care about is suffering? True, usually people live their lives to the fullest when they have near-death experiences, but mine made me realized that I could die any moment, whether I wanted to or not. I used to think that people chose their own destiny’s, but my beliefs changed when I didn’t choose to lay on the ground, dying. If I did all I could and wanted to do and still not end up being who I wanted, then what’s the point?

Before July, I was popular and kind and I stood up for anything and everyone I believed in. I was outgoing. Now...I’m the total opposite. Why live life to the fullest when my life has been cursed and the people I love are getting the worst of it?

“Okay. I won’t let it get to me so much. But, I will never ever stop thinking about it.”

He nodded slightly and as the bell rang, Samuel kissed my forehead and stood up. “I’ll see you eighth period,” he said as he walked away in the other direction.

## Chapter 2

This was not the best time to be in school. A million things ran through my head. I was thinking of almost every possible thing wrong in my life (going as far back as when my father left us). I just wanted to be home in Samuel's arms, talking about nothing. Just being safe and out of my mind. Just being me. What I wanted to do the most was be at home sitting right beside Samuel as he strokes my star blonde hair and tells me that everything will be alright. That it is alright. I couldn't focus at all in class.

My friend Erika (who I talk to more, now that my best friend is dead) kept trying to get me to stop dozing off. But, the truth is no one could get me to focus. I knew I would have a lot of homework since I was not paying attention in class.

"Charlotte?!" I quickly turned my head to where the voice was coming from. Shit! It was my teacher. I didn't want to deal with her, but I had no choice.

Her dark brown hair and her hazel, narrowed eyes. Her hands on her curved hips. Her nice blue, silk jacket hanging over her cotton, black, summer top. Her multicolored, long skirt covering her legs. Her earrings were plain red studs and her shoes were just brown flats.

"Yes, Mrs. Jones?" Her voice was serious and annoyed (first time I've ever heard it like that, addressed to me).

"You haven't been paying attention," she said while walking up to my desk. I could tell she was angry (or was it annoyed) just by the tone of her voice. Her arms crossed over her chest and that confirmed it for me. Her eyes grew narrower and her cheeks got more red. I was actually starting to enjoy this a little. The first time in my life, I was happy to be making a teacher/adult mad and wanted to keep going. Who am I? What have I become? "I have no choice but to write you up and call your pare...brother," she continued.

And of course, she had to remind me that I have no parents. She gave me a look that said *'I'm disappointed in you, and you need to pay attention.'* But in that look, I could also tell that she was annoyed at how many times she's called my name. Of course, she went easy on me...again...because this is the first year I've acted out. And, again, its because I don't care.

I gave a sympathetic nod which was a total lie. I wasn't sympathetic toward hardly anything these days. Everyday is living hell for me. Ever since July that is. Honestly, before July I thought I lived in heaven. My life was so awesome. I loved it. Now it feels like hell. My life changed in the blink of an eye. Going from heaven to hell in one day. Could you ever imagine that?

Not having ups and downs day after day. But, having your life feeling like nothing could ever be wrong, to feeling like you don't care and all because of ONE thing? It sucks. I can tell you that. You feel like you can never be safe again. Like, nothing will ever be alright and after a while, you're so used to it that you don't care about anything anymore. Sure you still love and care for those around you. But, everything else is like *'Eh.'*

"I'm sorry. It won't happen again." She gave me a nod and had a look that said *'Okay.'* I could tell she didn't fully believe me though. I wouldn't either. The rest of the day was a big blur. I remember talking to Samuel and some teachers, but that's about it. So, when the final bell rang, I was up and out of the class faster than...whatever the fastest animal on Earth is. I think it's a jaguar. No, cheetah. That's it. Cheetah.

## Chapter 3

I didn't even wait for Samuel like I usually do. Usually I am the last one out of the classroom and/or to get to the lobby. Instead, he found me in the lobby. I wanted to get out of that hell hole as soon as I could. I didn't want to stay another minute. I wasn't going to take my time *today*.

"Wow. Never seen you move that fast before. Have somewhere important to be?" I knew he was teasing by the look on his face and the tone of his voice. He smile widely with a gleam in his eye that warmed my heart, but I didn't smile back.

"Ya. Its called a home," I said seriously, "Ever heard of one?" He nodded as his smile faded. He came closer to me. So close, I could feel his warm, comfortable breath on my face. At first I thought he was going to kiss me, but he didn't.

"I know you feel like nothing matters anymore, but you know that's not true. Erika told me you weren't concentrating in class." He explained it like I asked a question. I guess he saw the question in my eyes, yet I didn't because I wasn't even thinking about a question. But, he knows me better, so... Samuel stroked some pieces of my hair out of my face and looked deep into my eyes. I couldn't help but stand there, staring into those gorgeous eyes of his.

"Everyone is dying around me. That matters. And you." He smiled and nodded. Then, he finally kissed my cheek. He gave me a long, soft hug that gave me everything. It was perfect and comforting. I never wanted him to leave my side. When we finally split apart I felt alone. My body was cold and I craved for him to hug me again. We went straight to my house.

My brother was waiting for me in the living room. As soon as I saw the glare n his face and how his eyes were narrowed at me, I could tell he was irritated by me. *What did I do this time? Does he always have to make my life worse?*

"You are sixteen years old," were the first words out of his dip-shit of a mouth, "you're old enough to do chores around this house without being asked." He crossed his arms and gave me a look that said *What do you have to say for yourself?* I rolled my eyes and walked away into the kitchen to our left.

Of course, both Tom and Samuel knew what I mean, *I don't care.* They both followed me to the kitchen where I was getting stuff out to make a sandwich. Tom started lecturing me about responsibility and about being sixteen. Stuff like, *'I was sixteen too,'* and *'You may want to do whatever the hell you want, but that's not going to happen.'* He went on for about twenty minutes. I was mostly blocking out all of it. I did come back to hear the sympathetic part of the lecture. Tom (whom has a good five inches on me) walks up to me and looks down on me. His dark brown hair looking perfectly combed-probably because he does comb it-and his brown eyes looking into mine. I looked away to not see what his eyes tell me.

"Char...I know you're having a hard time. Especially the last few months. But, we need to move on the best we can. Nothing can change what's happened." He paused, half trying to find the words. Half waiting to see my reaction. I didn't say anything, couldn't say anything so I put my hand on my thigh. "I think it would be best if you try to get past this. *All* of it."

*'All of it'? What did he mean by that? Why so much emphasize on the 'all'? Does he know? Did someone tell him what happened in July? You didn't tell him did you? Because I said not to.* I started to freak out, but I didn't show it. At least, I thought I didn't. Tom, then, pulled me in for a hug. *Creepy!* When he pushed away and left, Samuel put a hand on my shoulder. I knew what that gesture meant. *'Are you okay?'* I nodded and turned around and gave him a hug. Just as forceful (but comforting) he hugged me back.

“He’s right, babe.” He didn’t push on like he usually does, and I loved him for that. My reply: \_\_\_ Nothing. I didn’t say anything. I just stood there in his arms. Where I’m meant to be. That night, Samuel and I were cuddled on the couch watching a movie. It was a horror movie called *‘Nightmare in the Woods’*.

I kept jumping out of my skin and Samuel would always pull me closer and hold me tighter. He would always whisper *‘You’re fine. I’m right here’* in my ear and it would make me loosen up and feel more safe. We finished two bags of popcorn about an hour into the movie and didn’t have any left (I love popcorn). When the movie was over it was about 6:45.

Perfect time for another movie. The best part: Tom was out working! As I sat up to put in another movie, Samuel grabbed my arm and pulled me closer. “I like it when you’re full of life,” he said straightly, but there was something in his eyes.

“You’re much more fun at home, than anywhere else.” He was being serious. I knew by the look in his eyes.

“I only feel safe with you. Not when there are so many *psycho* people around. I don’t have to hide my thoughts or feelings at home.” I was about to go on, but I stopped. I looked down at the space between us which wasn’t much. He picked up my chin and looked deep into my eyes.

“Why are you so different now? You don’t share your feelings like you used to. You keep everything locked inside. You’re not open anymore. What happened?”

I didn’t say anything for a moment; hesitating. He knew that I wasn’t going to answer, so he went on.

“There are always ups and downs. Lessons to learn. Mistakes made. You were just one of those people who got them all at once.”

I still didn’t say anything, so he smiled and kissed my forehead ever so softly. It hardly felt like there was anything there. But, I knew he was there. I know he’ll always have my back. I can always count on him. And I knew that is what he meant by the kiss. He was comforting me, like he always does. That’s all I can ask of him right now. That is all I ever wanted.

And I love him because he knew that. He always knows me. That is one of the most important reasons why I truly love him. He knows me better than anything else. We fell asleep about 11:20 that night. Well, Samuel did anyway. I didn’t get to sleep until I had 45 minutes to get up. I couldn’t sleep because of all of the things reeling in my brain.

Even though I was so comfortable and safe in Samuel’s arms, I couldn’t help but feel that something was wrong. Everything was wrong. There was this strong feeling deep in my gut that I couldn’t shake. Hopefully it will be gone by tomorrow. I still lay there going through 50 thoughts in 1 minute. I can tell you this; that is not a good feeling. I don’t think its good for you either (emotionally, I mean).

## Chapter 4

With a million things on my mind, I didn't want to even think about school. My luck sucks though because starting in ninth grade, all your class grades matter and count toward college. I don't understand why I need to have good grades. I'll probably die before I could even live on my own. I mean I almost died in July. *Hello!* But Samuel still wants me to do my best. He says he doesn't want to see me fail

Doesn't he know I already failed in life? Of course he does. He knows everything about me. He just wants me to turn it around. See how well I know him? I woke up around 6:50 in the morning to the sound of Samuel waking me up. He was getting dressed for school and I couldn't help but look at that perfect body. His muscles showing through his tight shirt. His amazing abs that I've touched a thousand times from laying with him.

"C'mon, baby. You got to get up." He had a big smile and it made me feel so safe when he stroked my shoulder. I just wanted to lay there, with him whispering to me that everything is perfect. But my fantasy life is never there for me. Always disappearing when I need it the most.

I got up and got dressed as quickly as I could while daydreaming the whole time. Half way through getting dressed I had to ask (even though it was a long shot).

"Sam..." Before I could go any further, Samuel interrupted me which got us into a different conversation.

"Uh, oh. What's up babe?" I puzzled his response for a moment. 'Uh, oh'? What was that suppose to mean? I didn't do anything.

"What uh, oh? What's wrong?" I could tell he was trying to give me some privacy of getting ready as we talked (looking toward the door every few minutes).

"I know you, Char. Every time you call me Sam, you always want something or want me to do something." I stayed silent for a minute or two, thinking about what he said.

But, he went on, "And by the sound of your voice, you want something." Thankfully, I was fully dressed when he came to the door of the bathroom. It wouldn't matter much since he has seen me getting dressed before. He gave me a huge grin. I thought for another moment and realized he was dead right. I smiled at the thought of him knowing me so well, that I quit brushing my hair for a second.

And the next thing I knew, Samuel was behind me, hugging me so tight with his hands wrapped around my waist. I put the brush to the sink side absent-mindedly and smiled bigger than I thought I could smile. He whispered softly in my ear, "So, what's up?" I sighed and hesitated for a minute.

"Can I stay home today? You're right. I just don't want to do anything today. I don't want to be bothered...well, except for you." He kissed my cheek and let go of me.

"Sorry, but if you want your surprise tomorrow, you have to go today." We went downstairs and into the kitchen where we made breakfast: toast and cereal.

"Who said I wanted the surprise?" He smiled his light, soft smile that made me have butterflies in my stomach.

"I did. You need it. After everything that's happened, it would be good for you to do something and focus on it."

The last few words made me worry. *What was he planning? Will I like it, or spas out?* I don't know how long I was out of it, but I came to when Samuel said, "You have to go to school today so you can get the surprise." He smiled again as he handed me some toast.

"Wait. What does going to school have to do with my surprise?" He didn't say anything

for a while and I thought he didn't hear me. But he replied, "We won't be in school at all for it."

That was the end of our discussion. He would only tell me that I would have to 'wait and see'. This, as you can see, made me nervous (and a little anxious). Samuel knows surprises make my stomach turn. When he keeps talking about something I don't know, my head spins out of control and I go crazy. I *hate* not knowing things people know about. Especially when it comes to Samuel.

## Chapter 5

The ride to school was oddly quiet. No matter what goes on between us we can still talk to each other. Usually because he can always distract me so we talk about something else entirely. But the whole ride was silence. I was wondering if he was okay, but I didn't say anything. I was lost deeply in my thoughts. After a few minutes in my own world, I realized that we were parked on the side of the road about...a fourth a mile from school.

I looked up at Samuel with a question on my face. But, he wouldn't know because he wasn't looking at me. His eyes still faced forward on the traffic in front of us. I touched his shoulder slightly, but he quickly shrugged it away. What the *hell* is wrong with him? "Sam? Babe, is everything alright?" My voice was soft and hesitant, exactly how I wanted it to be. His voice on the other hand was exactly how I *didn't* want it to be; quiet. Half of me wanted to be angry and jump out of the car to walk the rest of the way. The other half wanted to be a nice girlfriend and bother him until he would talk. The nice side of me won that.

"C'mon Sam. Honey, let's talk." He turned his head to me slowly, but he didn't smile. I could see in his eyes trouble and confusion. Was he sharing *everything* with me? Was he telling me all he felt and thought? Or is he holding back on me? Keeping things from me? Again, I was back in my thoughts *too* deep. I came back when Samuel finally spoke,

"Would you care if I died? How would you react? Do you want me here?" That answered my questions. So he *was* holding back on me? But, why? What for? He should know that he can always trust me. He doesn't have to keep things from me. And what was with the questions? Of course I want him here. I love him more than anything.

Why was he asking me this? "Of course I want you here. I love you with all my heart. If you died, I would most likely kill myself than be without you." He gave me a half smile, but it didn't fool me. It was fake. I knew he didn't fully believe what I said. But, I didn't know why. Why wouldn't he believe me? Does he truly think I don't love him? Does he believe that I wouldn't give a shit if he dies?

We arrived at school much less to me being pissed off and in my own thoughts, my own world. And, as soon as first period started, I went to auto mode. Not like I usually am everyday. No, auto mode is when I do everything without knowing because I'm in my own mind. The only time I would come out of my thoughts and pay attention was when Erika tapped me to help me out, or when I was with Samuel. We have four classes together and lunch, so I get to see him half of the day.

In class, we put the conversation we had earlier away. It was like everything was back to normal, but we both had thoughts of our own that we could not shake and just couldn't share. I could tell that he had a lot on his mind by the way his eyes moved around a lot. I still liked him there beside me. I love him being beside me all the time. The way he pulls me in when we are already sitting so close together. I could never get enough of Samuel. I thought I lost him in July. And because of that I don't like to be away from him.

Especially like this; not talking to each other about what's going on. It scares me to think that I could lose him in so many different ways. If he dies, I die. And I know it goes the same for him. But, lately it doesn't seem like he would do the same. Just this morning he didn't think I loved him enough. Is he having second thoughts about us? Why is he acting this way? Why won't he tell me anything?

Sam is really making me confused and upset. Because of this, I'm getting angry that he is doing this to me. He's never done this before, not even when we were friends. We have been best

friends since we were six and he has never even been close to doing any of this.

I've always felt like I've known him my whole life, but its only been ten years. You're probably wondering why we haven't been friends forever, right? The reason: I moved here from Colorado when I was six. Do you want to know the story?

## Chapter 6

Okay... My father had left us two years before (when I was four) and my mother couldn't keep a job. It was hard for her to care for two children when the father left. She had trouble getting enough money to pay for us. But, after we settled in here; having a fresh start, my mother could take care of us better. It was still hard with no man in the house, but it wasn't as hard as it would have been. I don't like to think about what would happen if my mother still couldn't afford the things we needed.

I blame my father for leaving us and I blame him for leaving mom with a broken heart. She hardly ever talked about him. She would only say that we were perfectly happy without him. I remember sitting on her lap asking why he wasn't here. She was right. We didn't need him to be happy. We only needed the love between us.

But, I could see in mom's eyes everyday that she missed him and wanted him to come home. I could see that she dreamed that one day she would wake up to find him smiling at her in bed. Or that when she opens the front door he'd be standing there. But, he never did come back. No one knew where he was. After a while of giving up our hopes, no one cared.

Living without him for twelve years took its toll. I just wished mom would have known better than to believe that he would come back. It would just make things worse. That is what she didn't understand. He left for a reason. No one knows that reason, but mom always thought it was because of her. That it was her fault. Sometimes, I could hear her crying in her room, blubbering about how she was sorry.

But, it wasn't her. It was dad. He was ignorant. I'm glad he's not here. Mother never trusted guys again. Never dated. She was so heartbroken, she didn't want anyone else, but dad. The first time she met Samuel, she despised him. Never gave him or his parents a chance. That changed after what I did. Flashback time!

*A week or two after school started, my mom picked us up. At the time, I was talking to Sam. I didn't notice her until she came up to me and said, very angrily to a six-year-old, "C'mon. Let's go before this boy starts being mean." She took my wrist and started dragging me, but I didn't want to leave. I wanted to stay and talk to Samuel. "No, mom? He's nice. I want to stay a little bit," I would scream. Soon everyone turned their heads toward us. Before my mom or I knew it, one of the teachers pulled me back out of my mother's grasp. She turned around with a look on her face that scared the hell out of me that day. I never did hear the conversation between the two. I was too busy crying about Samuel, too busy crying about my mom. The next thing I know was; Samuel was there trying to cheer me up as his parents tried to convince my mother to give their son a chance. "Ma'am, I've seen our son with your daughter," she started, "and she's a very nice girl. So is our Sam. We raised him well. He would not hurt anyone." Before Lucy, Samuel's mom, could go on, my mother interrupted. She blurted, "No daughter of mine will ever acquaint with a boy. They will just grow up to be jerks and hurt her." I didn't hear much after that either, as I was talking to Samuel. But, after a while, my mom agreed to let me have a 'play date' with Samuel and his parents. But, my mother had to be there also. If she didn't, I think the teacher would have filed her as child abuse. My mother loved me very much, she gave Samuel a chance.*

That turned out well, didn't it? Now, Samuel and I are a couple, so in love, that we would die without one another. Well, it seemed that way until now, anyway. I wonder what's going on through his head with all this. Its getting weird and he's starting to scare me the more I think about it. Alright, its time to put it away. I'll think about something else instead. But, what?

## Chapter 7

I can't take it anymore. I need to talk to Samuel. I need to know why he's acting this way? So, after school that day, I couldn't resist the temptation to talk to him. In the lobby, I saw him walking down the staircase. I quickly walked over to him and made him stop almost directly in front of everyone coming down. "What the hell?" His tone was rude. I never have seen him rude before, especially not towards me.

I hated it and was about to snap all hell on him (like he wanted it) but I looked in his eyes before I did anything else. His voice said he was annoyed and angry. But, his eyes. His eyes said that he was scared and lost, like he didn't know what to do. Then, I realized everyone was screaming at us to get out of the way, so I pulled him over. "What is going on with you today Sam," I had said in a sweet, caring, loving voice I rarely use now-a-days. He didn't say anything for a moment. I kept looking into his eyes as they darted around the room as if something or someone would give him the answer.

"Sam...?" As you know; the only time I call him Sam is when I'm really upset (and that takes a lot now, since July). After a minute or so, he finally caved. He knew he couldn't win this time. Either I would have kept bothering him until he talked to me. Or I would get pissed and stomp off and wouldn't speak to him. I could tell he didn't want either, by the way he sighed.

"I don't know, Char," he said softly. I barely heard him over the loud roar of other students. I looked deeper into his eyes, and more intently. He went on, "Everything has been *screwed* up. I just want things to go back to normal." The way he said 'screwed' made me jump. He definitely put emphasize on it. It made me wonder why. I gave him a gigantic hug to make him feel better. But he hesitated to hug me back, so it made me feel worse. I went on anyway. I would worry about that later. I didn't let go of him, but I wanted to keep going with our conversation.

"C'mon, babe. What's wrong?" He pushed me away softly, but knowing that he did just broke my heart. He sighed and hesitated before speaking. Just then, a loud group of kids went by and I couldn't hear one word Samuel said, but I saw his lips move. Yet, I couldn't make out what he said. I'm not the best at reading lips. "What," I asked as the lobby fell quieter. Samuel just shook his head. "It doesn't matter. Let's get going." He made his way out the front door and after a minute of just standing there, rethinking what just happened, I quickly followed him.

As soon as we got inside his navy blue convertible, I asked him, "Why won't you tell me what's going on? You've never kept secrets from me before." Without saying a word he put his keys in the ignition and started the car.

"Yeah. Well, you didn't almost die before either," he said while backing out of the parking lot. I could tell he was trying not to meet my eyes. It would only make him cave into me. He went on,

"Things change, Char. You of all people should know that." His voice sounded angry and irritated, but I knew it was just a cover up for the hurt inside him. Question is: Why is he hurting? We kept going back and forth in our conversation. It almost seemed like a fight to me, but I didn't want to believe it. "I know this. Everything changes. Its part of life.

My whole life just had many changes at once. It just took a turn for the worst. And I know you know this." I couldn't stop there. I was on a roll. I knew I was going to win this.

"Our relationship is what I didn't want to change. I hoped that it wouldn't change. I believed it. We were so close for such a long time. I didn't think it could have changed at all." Now I would have kept going, but he interrupted me. Big time! "You said it yourself. 'Everything changes'. You really believed our relationship wouldn't? You probably just didn't want it to change for the worse. You didn't care if it was a good change. After July, nothing has been the

same. Your mother died, Susan died, you almost died yourself. Who knows what's going to happen. Who even knows if anyone else won't die?"

He said, practically screaming at this point. It pained me to see him this way. It hurt me to hear him say these things. I stepped in before he could go any further. Anyone could win this one.

"You're right. No one knows for sure. But, if there's one thing I learned over the past several months: Its that no one knows what going to happen. Life is a mystery. You have to find out what it means to you. You choose what kind of person you are, but you never know what might happen. There will always be some things in life you don't expect, or don't like. You just have to wish for the best."

Those words were meant for me the most. What I said was also supposed to reassure me. I've been thinking way too much. Now that I've said it, I know its true. Samuel didn't say anything after that. I knew the words I had said were sinking in. He was thinking deeply about all this. So, I let him be. For once, I wasn't bothered by the silence between us. That was our ride home.

## Chapter 8

I knew that Samuel wanted to think and sort things out. Alone! So, I told him to drop me off at home and we'll talk more tomorrow. And, by the time he was gone for about a good twenty minutes, I wondered what the effect on the surprise would be. Samuel was so excited for tomorrow, giving me a special surprise to get my mind off of things. But, it wasn't me who needed it now. After several months, this conversation opened my eyes. It told me that I never truly realized what July meant. It was giving me a lesson. All of this was.

The changes in my life tried to teach me that we don't necessarily choose when we die. When we're born and when we die are already set. It's what we do between them that counts. Whatever else that happens is up to us. You're parents probably tell you that everything you do affects the people around you. It affects the people that care about you more.

We'll I can tell you; they're right. And they might have said that everything happens for a reason. That everything in life teaches you a lesson. Right again. In life, you make mistakes. Many, maybe. That's how you learn. Everyone learns to be a better person from the mistakes they make. Making mistakes is part of life. See, my mother never told me this. She didn't learn it herself. She didn't believe it because all she knew was her heart was broken. Again, I blame my father.

Learn your lessons. Learn from your mistakes. And learn what life is about. It won't be difficult if you learn your lessons over time before you get older. It sucks having to learn all this at once. Having everyone mistake and lesson come to you in one year. That's where I went wrong. It took me seven months and many horrible changes to learn that. And I'm sixteen. I'm more than sure that Samuel knows this, but I don't know why he's acting the way he is.

I'll just let him cool off tonight and see where it leads us, tomorrow. Hopefully he'll be back to normal. Ever since our conversation, I know I'll be back to the old me. The Charlotte everyone knew before July. Well, a little, anyway. Now, I'm really anxious (and excited) to see what the surprise is. I hope its something to get his mind off of things.

## Chapter 9

The next day, I didn't get up at my normal time for school. Samuel said he had a surprise for me and we won't be going to school at all. Even after our conversation, I just hoped he was okay. I hoped he was still going to give me my surprise. I called him about twelve times and text him probably several times. He never answered. After a while, I gave up on reaching him. What was he doing? I thought he had a surprise for me. Where is he? Why hasn't he come over yet? I was now really mad at him.

Sure, I've been mad at him before, but not like this. I was becoming pissed. Never before did I get pissed at Samuel. My brother and his wife were at work so when I got angry I punched a wall. Half the day I sat in my room, watching romantic movies and chugging down ice cream. All I could do was hope Samuel would finally come and get me.

Come to apologize and give me my surprise. I couldn't believe how upset and angry Samuel was making me. I've never been this bad before. Yeah, I've sworn and felt upset about a guy. But, this was something different. Finally, I calmed down and I just laid in my bed, thinking. It was probably about 11:30 that morning when Samuel text me back. This is his reply to many, many worried and angry texts. 'Hey, sry I didn't txt u. in skl. Turned my phn off.'

And there went my mind. In school? Like nothing happened? Everything is fine? *AHH!* Wait for it... One, two, "AHHHHH!!!" My voice was so high pitched and girly that it scared me for a split second. But, that wasn't important. Usually Samuel would be at home, thinking if things were this bad. Not at school like nothing was wrong. Especially since its me. And *especially* since he had a surprise for me and needed to cheer me up.

But, no. He's being an ass and pissing me all the way to hell. Screw him! Then, a text came in. Half of me wanted to check it, the other wanted to throw my phone against the wall. Reason: I knew it was from Samuel. Then, another text. That puzzled me, but I didn't care much. You want to know what side won? After a minute of thinking, I grabbed me phone...and opened it.

'Babe I did some thinking. A lot of thinkin actlly. I wnt the bst 4 u. U r my world. I luv u 2 death. Tats y if I tell u wats goin on I will hurt u and I dnt wnt tat. I wnt u'

It stopped there and I started to get angry again. But then, I remembered there was another text after this. A run on.

'2 b hpy. I fallen in luv w/ u the day I met u in 2<sup>nd</sup> grade. I'm sry my luv but I can no longer b w/ u. I will only hurt u. im only doin this 2 save u. I hope u can 4 give me'

I stood still for the next five minutes, thinking all about the text I just got. I realized that I was holding my breath and my heart was racing. I still couldn't get a grasp on what Samuel had sent me. I read the text another four times before I knew what he meant.

## Chapter 10

Samuel had just broke up with me. He said he was doing it to save me? From what? That lying, conniving bastard! “Who the fuck does he think he is?! Who the *hell* is he? I don’t even know who the *hell* he is anymore.” He has finally pissed me off. No, I am way passed pissed now. I will fucking *kill* that asshole. I knew that I had to go to his house and talk to him. I had to find out what the hell he is doing. And why. *Why* is he acting like such an ass? He is one of the nicest guys I know. Not now, that is. But, I know I have to calm down first.

I don’t know what time it was, but mid evening, Tom dropped me off at Sam’s house. Even though I had no way of getting home (Samuel wouldn’t drive me), I told Tom not to wait. I still couldn’t drive for another ten *freaking* months. I just hope I can keep my anger and not yell at him. But, I have to find out what the hell he’s doing. He isn’t the Sam I used to know. Screw him, now. I went up to the door and knocked about four times until Lucy (remember she is Samuel’s mother) opened it with surprise.

“Charlotte? Oh, what are you doing here? I haven’t seen you in a while. Come in, come in.” When she says ‘a while’ she means a day or two (which is weird since I’m over everyday). I stepped inside just a little, but didn’t want to go any further. For now. Maybe Lucy might know something about Samuel and how he’s acting. As soon as she closed the door and turned around, there was a confused look on her face. “Oh, honey. Sam’s in his room.” I nodded but didn’t say anything. What was I supposed to say? How do I ask her about what’s going on?

She still had that look on her soft, curved face. Her nice, warm eyes holding so much emotion. Flipping her dark blonde hair back over her shoulders. She towers over me almost two feet. She’s pretty tall (6”10). While I thought of how to talk to her, I told Lucy, “I wanted to talk to you first.” My voice was low and a little shaky. Why was my voice shaky? I chose my words carefully, not knowing exactly why. She led me into the kitchen and we sat down at the table.

“What’s going on Is there something wrong? You know I think of you as my own daughter. Hopefully, you will be someday.” I shook my head while looking down, saying nothing. Over the years, I’ve learned that Lucy talks a lot in awkward situations., especially when she’s confused.

She stopped and I waited to hear if Jimmy or Samuel knew I was hear. I looked up and saw disappointment in Lucy’s eyes. “Lucy,” I stopped, not knowing what to say next. I went on anyway. Choosing my words, again. I knew I had to get through this conversation and not back down. “Has Samuel been acting strange lately?” I stared fiddling with my fingers to avoid looking at her. She didn’t say anything for a minute, which scared me.

Finally, she said, “What do you mean by ‘strange’ honey?” I didn’t look up. I just couldn’t bare to see her face. That is one thing I have a problem with. Talking to adults openly. Especially when its personal, like boys. It didn’t help that this was Samuel’s mother and not my own. But, she is the closest thing to a mom I have now. She’s been like a mother to me since I was six and she’s the only thing I have left to feel like I have a mom.

I shrugged, buying some time to answer that question and how to keep the conversation going. “Like, not himself,” I said finally, “The opposite of how he usually is.” I kept talking quietly and carefully, taking my time to say what I need to say. I looked up just a tad. Enough to see Lucy shake her head, “No.” I nodded to show her that I understood.

She put a hand on my shoulder and started rubbing my back. “IS everything okay, Charlotte? Between you and Samuel?” I nodded again. I probably seemed upset to her. Of course I was, but I didn’t want her to know. I didn’t want to get her into it *too* much. Lucy got up out of her seat and gave me a hug. At first, I wondered why, but when she wiped my cheek and I felt

something wet, I realized a few tears rolled from my eyes. I wiped them quickly and stood up, knocking the chair down and almost falling over. I helped Lucy set the chair back up, but as she started to talk, I left.

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