
THE STICK HANDLER

CATHRYN FOX

Cathryn
FOX
NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

COPYRIGHT

The Stick Handler
Copyright 2018 by Cathryn Fox
Published by Cathryn Fox

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. Without limiting the rights under copyright reserved above, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form, or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise) without the prior written permission of both the copyright owner and the above publisher of this book.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, brands, media, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. The author acknowledges the trademarked status and trademark owners of various products referenced in this work of fiction, which have been used without permission. The publication/use of these trademarks is not authorized, associated with, or sponsored by the trademark owners.

This e-book is licensed for your personal enjoyment only. This e-book may not be re-sold or given away to other people. If you would like to share this book with another person, please purchase an additional copy for each recipient. If you're reading this book and did not purchase it, or it was not purchased for your use only, then please return to your favorite e-book retailer and purchase your own copy. Thank you for respecting the hard work of this author.

ISBN Print: 978-1-928056-95-9

ISBN ebook: 978-1-928056-96-6

“It’s over, Arianna.”

“Over?” she spits out, her eyes venomous as they hold my stare. “Oh, we’re far from over, Luke.” As I square off against Arianna in her waterfront suite, the moonlight shimmering on Seattle’s Elliot Bay below, she points a finger at me, then wags it back and forth between the two of us. “In fact, you and me, we’re just beginning.” With that, she gives a defiant lift of her chin and flicks her long blonde hair over her shoulder, a dismissive gesture that I’ve grown accustomed to over the last six months. “Now go home, get a good night’s sleep and I’ll see you at the altar tomorrow afternoon.” She offers me her back and picks up her champagne glass, shutting me out, and this conversation down.

I glance at my watch, take in the late hour. Yeah, okay, putting the brakes on our relationship the night before our wedding is a dick move on my part, but isn’t it better to make a clean break now, before we find ourselves old and miserable and totally hating each other? Come to think of it, do we even like each other now?

“Ari—”

She spins to face me. “Do you need a Midol, or something?”

For fuck’s sake. “No, I don’t need a goddamn Midol.”

“Then stop acting like you’re PMS’ing!” she shouts back.

I shake my head. She might be a girl used to getting what she wants, but after overhearing her tell her friend she doesn’t love me, and revealing a few other facts that surprised the shit out of me, she can’t expect me to show up for the ceremony tomorrow. You’d think I’d be furious to find out her true feelings, right? But the funny thing is, I’m not really angry or upset at all, which says a lot about the state of our relationship. I guess I’m grateful that I walked into the room during her private conversation. It snapped me the fuck out of the damn trance I’d been in for the last few months.

“You and I both know this is a mistake,” I say.

“A mistake?” she seethes. “How can you say that?” She finishes the champagne in her glass and struts to her kitchen to refill it. I pace her living room, glance out the floor-to-ceiling window. My gaze goes to the spectacular view of the waterfront ferris wheel at Pier 57, with the Washington state ferry in the background. Too bad I can’t quite seem to enjoy the Seattle Great Wheel, beautifully lit up this time of night. The tapping of Ari’s shoes reaches my ears as she comes back into the room.

“Why are you still here?” she asks.

“Because this conversation isn’t over.” I spin and point to the cellphone that never leaves her hand. “You just told your best friend that love isn’t important in a marriage.”

She glares at me for a long moment, the anger leaving her baby blues as dark lashes fall slowly, only to flicker back open over come-hither eyes. “Luke, honey, you know I love you. What I said, it’s just that Kari is just jealous of our relationship and I was being flippant. You know, to ease her pain, because she’ll never have what we have, baby.”

“What exactly do we have?” It’s a question I’d been asking myself all day, long before I ever learned Ari valued money over love.

She sets her glass down and sidles up to me, rubbing her lithe body against mine, another little ploy she uses when things aren’t going her way. “Together we can have it all. Remember that first weekend we spent in Boston?”

Boston? Oh yeah, I remember Boston. Remember opening the door to my hotel room after our game, and finding a naked Ari on my bed. I thought I was concussing. That maybe I’d taken one too many hits to the head earlier that night. Either that, or she’d stumbled into the wrong room. I was a rookie, and a girl like Ari, well, she could have any guy on the team—one with much more power and play than me. But no, she assured me it was the Stick Handler she was looking for—my on-ice nickname.

I wasn’t sure why she’d set her sights on me, and before I knew it, a few months had passed and she was planning an elaborate spring wedding, as soon as hockey season ended. I’m not even sure I ever asked her to marry me. But the next thing I knew we were picking out a ring, and tasting pound cake with buttery icing.

I scrub the back of my neck, work out the knots. “Ari—”

Her hands go to my face, and she presses her lips to mine. “Our wedding is tomorrow Luke. Now is not the time to be getting cold feet.”

“It’s not cold feet. I just heard you tell your friend I would make a suitable husband because I could keep you in the lifestyle you’re accustomed to.” Hell, maybe she picked me because, as the daughter of the man who owns the Seattle Shooters, she had insider information, knew I was about to land a significant contract and become one of the highest paid guys in the NHL. She sure as hell didn’t pick me out of love.

I shake my head, hating that I let things get so out of hand, that I let her lead me like a lamb to the slaughter. I'm a grown fucking man who can make his own decisions, so why the hell did I just go along with her, cave to everything she wanted? Oh, maybe because it was easier to be with Ari, and go with the flow—keep my mind off the one girl I've always loved, the girl who'd grown up next door to me, and who keeps me in the friend zone.

But now, I just can't bring myself to go through with this marriage. We both know we're not in love, and we'd be making a big mistake if we exchanged vows tomorrow. I remove her arms from my neck and place them at her sides. Her fingers grip her phone tighter, and her mood darkens.

I exhale slowly. "Why don't you call your friends. Have them come stay the night." I might not love her, but I care about her. And even though she just admitted she didn't love me, that months ago her father threatened to cut up her credit cards if she didn't settle herself into a career, I'm still a decent human being who doesn't want to see anyone upset.

"You can't do this to me," she says, her voice bordering on hysterical.

"Please, Ari." I put my hand on her arm, give it a reassuring squeeze. "You know in your heart this isn't right. You'll find the perfect guy for you in time." Although with her father threatening to cut up her credit cards, time is not on her side. I guess that's why she latched on to me so quick. She was desperate for a rich daddy figure who would help her keep the socialite lifestyle she's grown accustomed to, and never make her work for anything she wants. It's a role I can no longer go along with.

She steps away, and her high heels wobble slightly as she paces to her window. With her back to me, she says, "You're making a big mistake."

There is a calculated coldness in her tone that raises the hair on my arms. “I’m sorry, Ari. I never meant to hurt you.”

“Hurt me?” she shrieks. “You’re the one who’s going to be hurt, Luke.” She spins, and her eyes narrow in on me. Jesus, if looks could kill. “If you do this, I’ll make sure you never play hockey for the Shooters again.”

My heart jumps into my throat. Does she have the power to do that? Yeah, she’s the owner’s daughter, but can she pull his strings, too? Fuck, maybe she can. She sure as hell pulled mine for the last few months.

“If you don’t want me to destroy you and your reputation, I suggest you accept what I’m about to offer.” She folds her arms, and the pale blue dress she’s wearing climbs up her thighs. Since I’m a guy who loves a nice pair of legs, maybe she’s doing it on purpose, to lure me with sex like she did that first night in Boston. I fell for it once, and look where that led me. Then again, is the fault entirely hers? I went along with it, which means half the responsibility is mine. “Are you listening to me, Luke?”

I brace myself, almost afraid to hear her offer. “I’m listening.”

“Good. Take a week. Go, get your head on right.”

“Jesus, Ari, my head is on right.”

“No, it’s not, otherwise you wouldn’t be putting your career on the line like this. I can destroy you, Luke.” She snaps her fingers for effect. “Like this!”

Who the hell is *this* woman? For the last six months, she’d been nothing but charming. Then again, I’d given her everything she wanted, until now. Even before I heard her say those things to her friend, I knew I couldn’t go through with it, not when my heart belongs to another—despite the fact that I can never have her. Christ, what kind of fucked up mess have I gotten myself in to?

“Why would you want to do destroy me, Ari?”

She stands a little straighter. "Because no one embarrasses Arianna Moore. No one."

"Fine, we'll tell everyone it was your idea. That you broke things off."

"What we'll do is tell everyone I needed time to think. In the meantime, you have one week. One week to think about this mistake you're making, the future that will be ripped right out from underneath you if you don't do the right thing."

I'm not a violent man. Jonah, aka the Body Checker, takes care of anyone who gets in the way of my stick-handling skills, but suddenly my fingers are curling, the urge to put my fist through her wall pulling at me hard. I grew up with nothing, and spent my whole life working my fucking ass off, practicing every goddamn night, until I was good enough to be scouted at the Junior A level. My scholarship to Arizona State gave me a top-notch education and I made a name for myself in the rink. No fucking way am I about to let her destroy my reputation and take that all away from me, simply because she wants to save face. We're not right for each other and we both know it.

"One week," she says again. "Use our honeymoon tickets and get away for a bit, to think this over, and you tell no one what's really going on. No one. Not even that tomboy you hang around with, otherwise...." Her words fall off as she snaps her fingers again.

"Her name is Katee, and she's not a tomboy."

She rolls her eyes at me. "Whatever. Do we have a deal?"

I'm about to argue, but stop to think about that for a moment. Maybe a week away will do her good. Giver her clarity and help her see the mistake we'd be making if we went through with this.

"Fine," I say. "One week. Then we'll talk."

A small, triumphant smile tweaks the corners of her lips.

She obviously thinks she won the battle. I can only hope that after seven days, she comes to the same conclusion that I have. Still grinning at me, she slides her fingers across her phone, and puts it to her ear.

“Kari, I’ve been thinking.” A big sigh, followed by a long pause for effect, then she continues with, “I’m not so sure about tomorrow.” I stand there, taking in her expert performance as she tells Kari she might need more time before she walks down the aisle with me. Her best friend Kari is a blogger and a socialite. In all of five minutes, I expect the entire world to know that my fiancée has decided to postpone the wedding.

I leave her luxurious penthouse apartment, a headache brewing as I dig my phone out to call my folks and the guys who were standing up for me. I make the calls as I wait for the elevator, and oddly enough, no one seems surprised. My folks almost seem happy about it. I’m not sure they were ever big fans of Ari’s anyway. The elevator arrives, and I step on and make my way to the garage. I have one last call to make, the most important call, but I’ll do that from the privacy of my car. As soon as I step off, my phone pings. Dammit. I am not in the mood to answer any more questions tonight. I pull the phone from my pocket, about to power it down when I see who the text is from. My heart pounds a little faster, and no matter how much of a shit mood I’m in, Katee’s texts always brighten my day.

I just heard the news, where are you?

I hold my phone in my hand, my heart racing as I wait for Luke to reply. What the hell was Ari thinking, postponing the wedding at the eleventh hour because she was having second thoughts for reasons she doesn't want disclosed to the public. I wasn't too crazy about my best friend's fiancée before tonight and now, I hate her just a little bit more.

I rush around my apartment looking for my damn car keys. I don't care if it's late, Luke needs me, and no matter what, I'll always be there for him. Ever since he punched that bully on the playground and stood up for me, we've been the best of friends. I can't even imagine how devastated he must be. The news is all over Kari's blog, and because Ari is being so secretive, I'm sure half of Seattle suspects Luke was unfaithful. Every single player on the team has a reputation with the ladies. But I know Luke. I know he's a one-woman kind of guy and isn't a player off the ice, like the rest of his teammates. This must be so mortifying for him. As my heart aches for my best friend, my phone finally pings.

I'm on my way home. You don't need to come over.

I read his text, and my fingers fly over my phone. *Like hell. I'm on my way now.*

I find my keys at the bottom of my gym bag, and rush out the door. Since I have no time—or the patience—to wait for the slow-ass elevator to arrive, I take the stairs three at a time, and nearly tumble down the last flight when my foot goes out from beneath me. Damn slippery floors! Rain falls heavily as I push through the lobby door, soaking me to my skin as I race for my car. I climb inside and turn on the heat. Dammit, in my hurry, I forgot to grab my coat. I've only been in Seattle for a year, moving here to be closer to my best friend after he signed a contract with the Shooters, and I'm still not used to the weather. I jack the heat higher and back out into the street. Ten minutes later, I pull in to Luke's spare parking spot outside his apartment building.

I jump from the car and hurry inside the building. I press his button and he buzzes me up. I take his elevator to the penthouse suite and his door is open, welcoming me. For some reason, that always brings a smile to my face. It falls quickly when I remember why I'm here.

"Luke," I say and enter his place to find him standing by his window, a beer bottle dangling from his fingers.

"Hey," he says and taps his bottle against his leg. Worried eyes rake over me, take in my drenched, see-through blouse. "You're soaked."

"Way to state the obvious." I pull my wet shirt from my skin and as it makes a sucking noise, I shiver from the cold. "What the hell happened?"

"You read Kari's blog, I take it."

I nod. "Why does she need time to think about things? You're the best thing that has ever happened to that girl. Why is she getting cold feet now?"

He opens his mouth like he wants to tell me something, but shuts it again. What the hell? What is it he doesn't want to say? We've always been honest with each other. "What?" I ask.

He produces two e-tickets from his back pocket. "Want to go on my honeymoon with me?" He laughs, but it holds no humor. The poor guy is really hurting. I glance at the tickets as he tosses them onto his coffee table.

He's joking about me going, I know, but maybe getting away from here, from the rumors that are sure to spread, will do him good. As the cold rain seeps under my skin and chills me to the bones, I bend to read the e-tickets.

"You need to get out of those clothes." His voice sounds tortured and once again my heart goes out to him.

"You're right." I pop the buttons on my blouse. "I was in such a hurry, I forgot my coat, and my umbrella broke in the last wind storm." Then again, I'm used to being wet since I moved to Seattle from Texas. I peel my blouse from my shoulders, and reach for the button on my jeans.

"You didn't have to rush over here. I'm fine."

"You just got dumped the night before your wedding. Of course, I had to rush over here. You need me." I wiggle my hips, but the damn wet jeans won't budge. "They're stuck to me." I shoot him a pleading glance. "Can you help?" He scrubs his chin and I wiggle some more.

"Here," he says and goes to his knees before me. I grip his shoulder to hang on as he tugs. I move my hips and try to help. "Stay still," he grumbles. "This is hard enough as it is."

He's not normally grumpy with me, but I can understand his irritability. He must be devastated by the turn of events. He finally gets my pants to my ankles, and I lift one foot then the other.

"Much better," I say, as he gathers my clothes and takes them to the dryer.

“I’ll get you a towel.” He disappears down the hall and comes back with a big fluffy towel. “Here.”

He tosses it to me, and doesn’t bother to avert his gaze as I dry my body. I rub my hair before bending forward, sticking my ass in the air as I twirl the cotton around the wet strands. My eyes go back to his, take in the way he’s looking at my near nudity. Seeing each other naked is nothing new. When I first moved to Seattle, I shared this place with Luke and he walked in on me a time or two when I was changing. When he had emergency appendectomy at Arizona State, I flew out to take care of him. I even helped him wash, and changed his clothes. It was impossible not to see him naked. But none of that matters because we don’t look at each other with interest, or inappropriate thoughts. No, we’re friends, best friends, and we don’t think about each other as anything other than that.

Not that he would look at me like I was a woman, anyway. I’m sure he still sees me as that chubby girl from the playground. I might have lost the weight, but I’ll never be as lithe or paper-thin as Arianna, or any of the other girls he’s been with over the years. I’m far from his type, but that’s okay, though. I’m happy with who I am, and it would be weird if Luke stopped treating me like one of the guys. I actually like being one of the guys, and always preferred climbing trees to playing with dolls.

“I’ll get you a shirt,” he says.

“Just give me yours.” I love wearing his clothes, love the way they smell after they’ve been on his body.

He tugs it off, and I pull it on, breathing in his scent. I plant my hands on my hips and glance around his suite. Okay, what can I do to cheer up my best friend? “Want to get drunk, and have a Die Hard marathon?” I ask.

He laughs. “No.”

I pick up the e-tickets, look them over again and check

out the destination. Cortina d'Ampezzo, Italy. "I get that you were kidding, but maybe we shouldn't let these tickets go to waste."

He angles his head, a smile playing with the corners of his mouth. Dammit, he doesn't need to fake a smile with me, doesn't need to hide the pain of his breakup.

"You want to go on my honeymoon with me, Katee?"

"To be honest, I'd rather go to Bali." I shake my head. "Who the hell would choose skiing on the slopes over a bikini on the beach?"

"Not me."

I toss the ticket back to the table, like they're diseased. "Then why did you agree to this?"

He opens his mouth, but closes it again and instead of answering, he pinches the bridge of his nose. "Maybe I could use another drink," he says. He seems to be hedging a lot tonight, but I'll give him that. The break-up might just be too fresh to talk about.

"I'll get it." I walk to his kitchen, and grab two beers. I twist off the lids and hand one to him. As he takes a big swallow and downs half the liquid, I look at him, really look at him. Jesus, his shoulders are so tight they're practically touching his ears, and if he clenches any harder he's going to crack his teeth.

"Sit," I say and point to his sofa. "Your muscles are so tight, you're about to snap."

He walks to the sofa and a little sigh catches in my throat. Yeah, I know. We don't look at each other with interest, but how can I not admire a work of art when I see it? I take a big sip from my bottle, set it down and place my hands on his shoulders. The second I touch him, he tenses even more.

"You're in bad shape, Luke."

"Yeah," he grumbles, his voice dropping an octave. "Tell me something I don't know."

I work my fingers into the knots, and they soften beneath me. As a massage therapist—specializing in sports therapy—and Luke’s own personal masseuse, I intimately know every inch of his body. Well, not intimately in the way lovers know each other. I almost laugh at the thought of us being lovers. Ludicrous, right?

“That feels so good,” he mumbles and lets his head fall back. His mouth parts, exposing perfect white teeth. I let my gaze move over his face as his lids droop over deep blue eyes. How could Arianna be having second thoughts? Not only is Luke the nicest looking guy I’ve ever seen he has a good heart and would move mountains for those he cares about. I, of all people, know that. I was a chubby girl with a learning disability when I was young, but he saw past that, saw me for who I really was, and he liked that girl. When I was diagnosed with dyslexia, he learned everything he could about my disability, and I swear to God, I only made it through high school because of him. He pushed me, studied with me, and never gave up on me. When I didn’t have a date for the prom, he went with me, even though his friends teased him about it. But Luke never cared what other people said about him. If they said anything bad about me, however, they usually ended up with a black eye, and that was saying something, since Luke doesn’t much care for violence. But when push comes to shove, he’ll shove.

“This position isn’t working.” I run my fingers down his arms, and he moans his approval.

“Oh, it’s working.”

I laugh at that. “I can’t reach your back. Let’s move this into the bedroom.”

“My bedroom?”

“Yeah, my massage table is in the car, and I’m not running back out there. I have no interest in getting wet again.”

A strange groan sounds in his throat. "I'm okay. You don't need to give me a massage."

"Yes, I do. Now get up." I shove his shoulder, but he doesn't budge.

"Why are you so bossy?"

I laugh at that. "Would you want me any other way?"

"No, you're perfect just the way you are."

I whack him. "Yeah right," I say. He's always saying things like that to me. But we both know my flaws. "Get up."

He climbs from the sofa and my eyes go to his chest. My God, the man really does have a beautiful body. I sigh, and follow him into his room. He flicks the lamp beside the bed on, flops down onto the mattress and buries his face in his pillow. Since it's too difficult to work all angles from a standing position, I pull the towel off my head, and climb on top of him. Another little groan rumbles in the depths of his throat as my knees tighten around his sides.

"I know. I know. I'm not a lightweight. You don't have to drive the point home by groaning."

"I told you. You're perfect just the way you are. Why don't you believe me?" I wiggle until I'm settled on his firm backside.

His muscles ripple as I place my hands on him, working them over his body until he's a little looser beneath me. "Luke."

"Mmm..."

"I really am sorry about tonight," I say quietly. I don't want to press if he doesn't want to talk about this, but this is my best friend and I'm here to listen if he needs me. "Do you have any idea why Arianna needs time to think?"

He goes quiet. Too quiet, and once again I get the strange sense there is something he's not telling me.

"I think a week to think is going to do us both good," he finally says.

“I’m sure she’ll come to her senses,” I say. When Luke moved away to Arizona State, I was lost without him. Sure, I was busy getting my massage therapy certification, but my nights and weekends were lonely. I’d spent so much time at the rink watching him practice or play, I’d found myself wandering over, just to feel close to him. “After one week away, I’m positive Arianna will realize her mistake.”

“I hope so,” he says, and once again my heart breaks for him.

“Maybe you should go on your honeymoon. It’s all booked, and I can’t see the sense in letting it go to waste.”

He turns his head, and I work on his other shoulder. “I don’t even like skiing.”

“I don’t even know how, and will probably break my neck if I tried. But I’ll go with you. If you want. We can take lessons, or find other things to keep ourselves occupied.”

He shifts beneath me, and I go up on my knees as he rolls until I’m straddling him from above. “Oh yeah?”

“Lots of things. We always have fun together, no matter what we do. Besides, if Ari’s stupid enough to postpone the wedding, then she doesn’t deserve to go on any honeymoon with you—skiing or beach,” I blurt out without thinking. Shit, I shouldn’t have said that, but I’m angry, dammit. I might not like Arianna, but Luke is in love with her and that’s all that matters.

I fall forward, and lay my head on his chest, revel in his strong heartbeat beneath my cheek. This is one of my favorite positions with Luke. Many times, over the years, we’ve laid like this, and his heartbeat always makes me feel so safe and secure. His hand goes to my hair and he strokes the damp strands down my back, his calluses scraping against my flesh. I shiver from his touch, and he grabs the blankets and pulls them over me. I close my eyes for a brief second and as sleep pulls at me, I stifle a yawn.

"We booked the honeymoon package," he whispers, his voice groggy. "Lots of events with other newlyweds."

"So."

"I'm not interested in explaining to anyone why I'm on my honeymoon with my best friend, not my new wife."

"No one has to know. Besides it's Italy, no one is going to recognize you there."

Luke's hand slides lower on my back and his breath is hot on my face when I lift my head to see him. "We could have some fun and pretend we're the newlyweds," I say, wanting to lighten his mood. God, I hate seeing him like this.

He rakes a hand through his hair, pushing it off his face. "You want to pretend to be my wife?" he asks, with a quirk of his brow. It's that sexy look right there that has women throwing their panties onto the ice.

"Sure, why not." I shrug. "It could be fun, actually."

"I thought you were anti-marriage," he says.

I frown. Luke knows all about my father leaving my mother for another woman. It devastated Mom and me, but fortunately Luke was there to help put me back together. He was there again after high school when he was home for Christmas and the guy I was dating at the local technical college fooled around with another one of our classmates. Are there no faithful guys out there? I only know of one, and he's off limits. Not that I think of him as more, anyway.

"You know I don't trust guys," I mumble.

"You trust me, don't you?"

I yawn, unable to hold it back any longer. "Of course. But you're not a real guy."

"Ah, I'm kind of a real guy, Katee." He lifts his hips, and I feel the Stick Handler's...stick. Wait, is he semi-hard? Curious, I move a bit, and he groans, shifting me until my weight is half on his leg, half on the bed. With that, I push all thoughts of Luke's stick out of my mind. The last thing I

should be doing is thinking about what's between my best friend's legs.

"You know what I mean," I say.

"Actually, I don't."

I sigh. How do I explain this? "You're the best guy I know, Luke. And the *only* guy I trust, but—"

"Then maybe you should marry me," he teases as his hands go to my hips, and his big fingers biting into my skin.

I burst out laughing at that. "...but, I don't think of you as a *real* guy," I say putting emphasis on the word real.

"I could prove to you that I am a real guy."

"Stop it," I say, and whack him.

We both go quiet for a long time, then Luke breaks the silence. "You really want to go on my honeymoon?"

I put my chin on his chest and stare up at him. "Yeah, sure. I don't think I'll like skiing, but Italy..."

"If you're pretending to be my wife, does that mean I get all the benefits that come with it?" He wags his brows in a suggestive manner, and I'm happy to see him back to his old playful self. "You did say we could find other ways to pass the time."

"Of course," I tease in return. "You get all the benefits."

"Really?" His eyes go wide, like he actually believes I might want sex with him. Jeez, I get that he was kidding. He doesn't need to be terrified of the idea.

"God no," I say. "Now let's get some sleep. Tomorrow we have to pack and get ready for our fake honeymoon." His breathing changes, becomes deeper, but before sleep overcomes him, I whisper, "Luke?"

"Yeah?" he asks, his voice groggy.

"You okay?"

His arms hold me a bit tighter. "Yeah, thanks for coming tonight."

"I'll always be here for you. You know that."

“I know that.”

“That’s why you love me.”

“You think that’s why I love you?” he says, and I smile at his familiar response as I close my eyes and drift off to sleep.