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The
CHARLIE METHOD
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*The*
# CHARLIE METHOD

ELLE KENNEDY



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Acknowledgments

*This book is for all the people who are really, really bad at making decisions.*

# CHAPTER ONE

## CHARLOTTE

*Some might say I lead a double life*

NEVER HOOK UP IN CARS WITH FOOTBALL PLAYERS.

That's what my mother always told me.

Fine, I'm lying. Mom never said that. But I can say with absolute certainty that my mother would not approve of what I'm doing right now.

Or rather who I'm about to do.

Isaac Grant is six foot six, muscular, and barely fits in the front seat of his own car. It's a sports car, of course. A silver Porsche 911 coupe that made me lick my lips when I pulled into the lot behind the Hastings seniors' center and saw it parked there. This car is so sexy it makes me shiver.

Or maybe it's Isaac who's making me shiver, on account of his tongue exploring my mouth, teasing mine with slow, skillful strokes. He's a good kisser. Meanwhile, his fingers are moving inside me. He's good at that too. He curls those two fingers to find my sweet spot, and the resulting torrent of pleasure has me clenching around his hand.

"Mmm, baby," he groans against my lips. "I can't wait to feel you squeezing my cock."

A bolt of desire shoots through me. Dirty talk is *such* a turn-on. My inner muscles do indeed squeeze at his wicked words, as if trying to capture his fingers inside me. Isaac releases another strangled sound of need. I'm shameless as I grind against him, but he doesn't seem to mind my total lack of control.

He starts kissing my neck. Goose bumps rise along my flesh, transforming into a flurry of shivers when I feel him against my thigh. A

long, hard ridge that seems to never end, confirming my best friend Faith's theory that the size of a man's hands correlates to the size of the D.

Speaking of Faith, I'm about ten seconds from a raging orgasm when her ringtone slices through the fog of heavy breathing in the front seat.

"Shit," I mumble, the movements of my hips stilling.

"Don't answer it," Isaac mumbles back.

"I have to."

With great regret, I lean toward the passenger side, where I left my phone.

Faith Grierson is the only person aware of my current location. The only person privy to the clandestine hookups I occasionally like to engage in. Sure, I could've met Isaac tonight without alerting a single soul and saved myself the good-natured jabs I'll receive later, but on the off chance that the star wide receiver of the football team also masquerades as a murderer, it's better to let Faith know where I'm going to be. She won't judge me.

"Nooo," Isaac complains when my fingers close around my phone.

"I'm sorry. Could be an emergency." I lift the phone to my ear. "Hey, what's up?"

"Sorry to interrupt, but apparently we've got a Presidents' Gala meeting tonight."

"No, we don't. It's tomorrow."

"Well, you see, Charlotte," Faith answers in her trademark dry inflection, "*I* know it's tomorrow, and *you* know it's tomorrow, but you know who *doesn't* know it's tomorrow and has decided to gaslight the entire house into believing *we're* in the wrong?"

"Fuckin' Agatha," I grumble.

"Fuckin' Agatha," she confirms. Her laughter tickles my ear. "I told her you're on your way, so you'd better book it over here if you don't want a two-hour scolding session tomorrow."

"Ugh. I'll be there soon. Thanks for the heads-up."

I end the call and curse under my breath. Agatha Buckley-Ellis does this shit on a regular basis. The president of Delta Pi, Briar University chapter, is incapable of admitting when she's wrong or if she's made a mistake. Instead, she'll dig herself into a hole so deep, it's a wonder she doesn't wind up in another state.

The meeting was 100 percent, unequivocally, tomorrow. My calendar is not the Wild West—not a single item makes it on there without proper confirmation. It's probably not something I should brag about, but I'm a straight up anal-retentive psycho when it comes to my calendar.

Besides, we never hold meetings on Friday nights. Everyone knows Agatha's right-hand woman, Sherise, has a standing Friday night appointment at the salon in Hastings to touch up her grays. Sherise claims she started going gray at the temples in the tenth grade—supposedly early female graying runs in her family—but Faith and I like to think it's on account of Agatha. Our sorority president is capable of inflicting a staggering amount of stress.

"I'm so sorry," I tell Isaac. "I totally forgot about an important meeting."

"What are you, some high-powered businesswoman?"

"No, but I'm on the Delta Pi exec board, so I need to be there."

He stares at me. A glance south reveals that his erection is deflating, though even in its semisolid state of matter, it remains impressive.

"Are you okay?" I ask as I climb off his lap. The passenger seat doesn't provide much room either, but I manage to wiggle back into my lacy white underwear and smooth my pleated skirt over my thighs.

The football player beside me continues to stare. "I need you to be honest with me."

"Okay?" I finger-comb my hair before tucking it behind my ears.

"Do I repel you?"

"I'm sorry, what?"

"Do I repel you?" he repeats through clenched teeth. The veins in his forearm bulge as he rubs the bridge of his nose. This is clearly painful for him.

"Isaac…you just had your fingers inside me," I remind him.

"Yeah, and now you're running away. Is it because I didn't make you come?"

Oh my God. I know laughter is not the appropriate response in this situation, but it's getting more and more difficult to contain mine. It bubbles deep in my throat, demanding to be free.

"Is that it?" he pushes.

"No." I inject as much reassurance into my tone as I can. "I was seconds away from coming, I promise."

“Really.”

“Dead serious. I just forgot I have a house meeting tonight.”

As if I hadn’t even spoken, he says, “Am I undesirable?”

I gape at him. “You’re Isaac Grant.”

“Well, yeah, I *thought* I was. Usually I can pull chicks without even trying. I walk into a room, and there’s, like, five thousand women ready to go home with me, and all of a sudden, one of them *isn’t* into me? Suddenly someone is, like, *wait, are you flirting with me? Sorry, I have plans, see you later*.” He moans in outrage. “I thought I was Isaac Grant!”

“Oh, sweetie. Is someone making you doubt who you are?”

“No.”

He’s obviously lying. The example he gave was *very* specific.

I reach over the center console and pat his huge bicep. “Whoever she is, she’s not worth this turmoil.” I wave my hand to gesture at his broad, muscular frame. “You’re a god. Your body is…” My eyes glaze over for a second, and I find myself leaning in as if to kiss him before realizing what I’m doing and snapping myself out of it. “Trust me. You’re gorgeous. And your finger game is stellar. Forget this girl.”

His lips curve into a hopeful smile. “Do I have to forget you too?”

“Huh?”

“That’s what you said outside the Coffee Hut yesterday, remember? That you’d meet up with me tonight and then we’d forget it ever happened.”

“*Pretend* it never happened,” I correct.

It’s the standard line I offer my hookups. If you see me on campus again, pretend we don’t know each other. I don’t need a gaggle of smitten men waddling up to me raving about our one-night stand when I’m with my prissy Delta Pi sisters.

Although to be honest, the last person I expected to arrange a hookup with was Isaac Grant. When he started flirting with me at the campus coffee shop yesterday, I was prepared to brush him off. Instead, he won me over. I’m still confused about how he did it. The guy has nothing to worry about in the charm department, that’s for sure.

“Technically, this doesn’t count as a proper meetup,” he tells me, waggling his eyebrows. “On account of neither of us finishing.”

“Maybe, but this was my only free night for the next few weeks, so…” I lean in and kiss him on the cheek. “To be continued. And if not, it was nice

meeting you. But I really have to go now."

"Drive safe," he says.

"I will."

I hop out of his Porsche and dart toward the hand-me-down sedan I got from my sister Ava when she graduated from Briar four years ago. Everyone in my family has attended this university. My mom is a legacy at Delta Pi, which is why I had no choice but to pledge freshman year. If it were up to me, I wouldn't have joined a sorority. Or at least I'd have picked a more fun one. Instead, I'm forced to race home from Hastings because our president is a tyrant.

Only ten minutes from the Briar campus, Hastings is a quintessential East Coast small town complete with an idyllic main street, one-of-a-kind shops, and a historic town square. Isaac and I met behind the senior center tonight, since the parking lot there turns into a ghost town the moment the clock strikes four p.m. and Hastings's elderly flock to the diner for their early-bird dinners. He lives nearby on one of the tree-lined residential streets, but I didn't want to go to the house he shares with three other football players, because I don't need that kind of visibility.

Some might say I lead a double life.

Fine. Faith says that.

But my best friend is only half-correct. It's not a double life so much as an extremely private one. There are activities I like to partake in, risks I sometimes take, that aren't in line with the image I'm expected to maintain.

To my family, I'm hardworking, responsible Charlotte. I'm their perfect daughter, their darling sister.

To my sorority sisters, I'm a legacy who's strong but demure, confident but chaste.

I'm supposed to make my parents proud and serve as a role model for my freshman sisters. And I'm pretty sure banging a hot football player in a deserted parking lot isn't role-model material.

I guess when it comes down to it, though, I hate disappointing people. The mere notion almost makes me break out in hives. So really, if I'm to avoid the crushing sensation of seeing deep disappointment in my family's and friends' eyes, then keeping my less-than-respectable extracurriculars under wraps is critical.

I make the quick drive back to Briar, slowing the car when I turn onto the broad streets that make up Greek Row. Most of the houses here only offer permitted street parking, but Delta Pi sits on the end of the street and has its own parking area for our members' cars.

The Delta Pi house is also undeniably the most impressive of Greek Row. It's a stately three-story mansion with white columns framing the entrance and ivy climbing up one side of the brick exterior. The ivy isn't green anymore, no longer the vibrant full bloom of spring and summer, but the browned strands refuse to relinquish their grip on the brick exterior, stubbornly clinging to the walls.

I grab my laptop bag from the passenger seat, then hurry up the wide steps toward double doors adorned with gleaming brass knockers. The knockers are deceptive—to get inside, you need to enter a passcode into the far more modern keypad affixed to the frame. Above the front doors, our Greek letters are proudly displayed in gold.

Everything about Delta Pi exudes an air of elegance and exclusivity. We are not a party sorority. We're the sorority of senators' wives and First Ladies. Sometime in the last few decades, it was decided we could be politicians and careerwomen ourselves, but don't go too hard on the feminism, girls. We're still expected to submit to the patriarchy. Agatha literally said those exact words to our pledges back in September.

Ugh. I can practically hear her condescending voice. It makes me want to turn around and run back to my car.

But I draw a breath and accept my fate, entering the code to unlock the front door. The moment I step inside, I hear the loud chatter of female voices drifting out of the dining room.

I can't deny that living in a house full of girls cramps my style. There is zero privacy. Nil. Which means zero shot of bringing my hookups home. In fact, men aren't even allowed upstairs. The patriarchy doesn't condone sleepovers. Can't have all these future wives banging horny frat boys and hipster art majors. We don't throw parties either, except those of the dinner variety, which our house hosts twice a year. I'm talking fine china, full catering, and cocktail attire.

At our last dinner, Faith committed a severe infraction by sneaking her date upstairs. They fooled around until one of Agatha's minions narced on

her, and Faith had to attend a meeting with the executive board to determine her punishment for such a heinous act.

As vice president of finance, I was part of the grueling deliberations. I voted against logging a warning in Faith's file but was outvoted by the others. I sit on an exec board that thirsts for blood.

My ballet flats snap against the hardwood floor in the foyer as I race past the sweeping staircase that spirals up to the second floor. A crystal chandelier hangs from the ceiling, casting a silvery glow over the space. The interior of the house is as pristine as its exterior. Agatha runs a tight ship, so our chore schedule is nonnegotiable.

The dining room features a long mahogany table that can seat up to thirty members for formal dinners and weekly meetings. More chandeliers hang overhead, and across the room are two sets of french doors that open out onto a large back porch with wicker furniture. Everything about this place screams East Coast wealth.

When I enter, everyone is already seated around the table. Our chapter has about a hundred members, but only thirty live in the house, and there are never more than fifty who attend any given meeting.

Everyone's gazes shift toward me. Agatha, our illustrious president, raises an impeccably plucked eyebrow.

"Look who decided to grace us with her presence." Her voice drips with faux sweetness.

"I'm so sorry," I tell her. "I had this on my calendar for tomorrow."

I paste on my most apologetic smile as I rush toward my usual seat next to our VP, Sherise, a gorgeous Black girl with dark, studious eyes and lips that curl in disapproval at my tardiness. The members of our exec board take these posts *very* seriously.

The girls who don't have chairs, mostly pledges and underclassmen, stand against the walls during these meetings like they're toddlers on a time-out.

The moment my butt hits the chair, I bend over to pull my laptop out of my bag. I can feel Agatha's gaze boring into me the entire time.

When I look up, she tilts her head and examines me like I'm a bug she's debating on squashing. "Punctuality is a key virtue of a Delta Pi sister, Charlotte. Particularly for our VPF, who we're supposed to trust above all others."

Above all others? Why? Am I the pope?

I'm just the money man. I prepare the annual chapter budget. I monitor all revenue and expenses. If I'm lucky, sometimes I get to audit the books, but even I know that my role in this sorority could be performed by anybody who knows how to do basic math.

Hell, I didn't care about the post in the first place and probably wouldn't have leaned into the whole "Asians are good at math" stereotype if not for the fact that my mom was VPF when she was a member here. And she really wanted me to be on the exec board. I mean, she didn't *say* that, but I knew it would mean a lot to her if I followed in her footsteps, especially since my older sister wanted no part of the sorority experience.

"Understood. I'll do better at managing my calendar," I say while avoiding Faith's eyes. I can feel them gleaming with humor.

Agatha squints slightly as if she's trying to figure out if I'm being sarcastic. She's obviously disappointed I didn't grovel more, but the entire dining room is waiting on us, so she nods and says, "Let's get started."

She takes her seat at the head of the table and clasps her hands on the gleaming tabletop, her French-tipped fingers lacing together. She's wearing a strand of pearls around her neck.

I swear, only Agatha Buckley-Ellis would wear pearls to a house meeting. Her entire life revolves around maintaining an impeccable image. Her wardrobe is a curated collection of designer clothes, all perfectly coordinated in pastels or preppy patterns, and she never leaves her bedroom without flawless makeup and perfectly styled hair.

We're discussing the Presidents' Gala tonight, an annual event we hold in January to celebrate former Delta Pi presidents. Normally I would tune out Samantha, our VP of programming, who oversees the planning of all chapter events, but it just so happens that one of the two honorees at this year's gala is my mother. But as Samantha drones on about guest lists and potential venues, inside I'm rolling my eyes so hard I'm at risk of spraining my optic nerve. She always speaks in this deeply serious tone, as if planning charity events and mixers is on par with brain surgery.

For the next hour, I take notes, speaking only when someone asks whether we can afford something. When the meeting finally adjourns, I'm one of the first people out of my chair.

Faith grabs my arm in the hall and brings her head close to mine, her dark curls bouncing and sending a whiff of strawberry shampoo into my nostrils.

“Please tell me you were at least able to have one orgasm before I interrupted,” she whispers in my ear.

I glumly rest my head on her shoulder. “Nope.”

“I’m sorry. I felt so bad bothering you.”

“No, it’s fine. I never would’ve heard the end of it if I missed the meeting.”

I catch sight of Blake Logan in the spacious foyer, waiting for me. I lift my hand in a quick wave, then glance at Faith. “I need to talk to Blake. Wanna chill in my room afterward and watch something?”

“Can’t. I’m going to Fairview House to hang out with some friends from class. You’re welcome to join.”

“Thanks, but I don’t feel like going back out.”

“Are you still going to see your family tomorrow?”

I nod. “Heading out in the morning.”

She gives me a pointed look. “And this time you’re going to tell them?”

“That’s the plan,” I say lightly.

It was also the plan *last* weekend. Instead, I made the two-and-a-half-hour drive to Connecticut only to chicken out and not share the real reason for my visit. I simply ate lunch with my parents and then drove all the way back to Briar. A five-hour commute for an hour-long lunch. And people think I’m intelligent.

“Okay, well, if you need the moral support, secretly put me on speakerphone, and I’ll send you waves of encouragement through the phone,” Faith promises.

“Deal.”

After she hugs me goodbye and darts off, I join Blake in the foyer. The pretty, freckle-faced brunette is my Little this year. I’ve always disliked that term—she’s a freshman, not a preschooler. Alas, you can’t fight tradition. Delta Pi even holds an entire ceremony for the Big-Little reveal after pledge week. It’s nauseatingly sweet, involving themed gifts and an elaborate unveiling like we’re new parents popping balloons to see if the glitter inside is pink or blue.

I don’t mind the mentoring element of it. My job this year is to guide her, and we try to meet once a week to talk through her goals, academics, or whatever else might be on her mind.

“Hey,” I say, squeezing her arm in greeting.

I notice the bracelet around her wrist—it’s the one I gave her at the Big-Little party—and I’m touched to see her wearing it. The smooth teal stones are meant to help you find clarity, or at least that’s what the lady at the holistic boutique in Hastings claimed. It seemed fitting for Blake because she admitted during rush that she has no idea what she wants to do with her life. She still hasn’t picked a major, which is normal for most freshmen, but Agatha is very strict about the Delta Pi sisters having purpose, structure, and a Plan, capital P.

“How was your week?” I ask her.

Blake doesn’t live at the house—Briar freshmen are required to live in the dorms—but it’s mandatory for new sisters to attend all meetings. They pretty much must be dead or dying to skip one.

“It was good. I wanted to talk to you about my broadcasting class, though. Maybe we can meet for breakfast on Sunday—” She jerks abruptly, reaching into her pocket. “Sorry. Vibrate mode. That scared the crap out of me.”

I grin, watching as she pulls out her phone. She checks the screen, rolls her eyes, and slides the sleek black device back in her pocket.

“Who was that?”

“Nobody important. Well, someone who wants to be important,” she amends. Before I can question her further, she says, “Anyway, Sunday breakfast? I could come here, or we could meet at Carver Hall. I heard their omelet station slays.”

“Let’s do Carver. Should I bring my laptop? Do we require any in-depth list writing?”

She presses her lips together as if stifling a laugh. “I just need you to know that the orgasmic look you get when you talk about making lists is a bit…scary.”

“I know,” I sigh. “I’ll try to contain my arousal.”

Blake snorts.

“C’mon, I’ll walk you out,” I tell her.

We reach the front doors at the same time as Noelle and Veda, who thought they were being stealthy about sneaking out.

“Going somewhere?” I ask in amusement.

They both spin around, guilt etched into their fair faces. I note that neither of them is wearing Agatha-approved attire.

“There’s a party at Sigma.” Noelle lowers her voice, glancing over her shoulder to make sure the warden isn’t in earshot.

Fun fact: some Ivy League colleges discourage or explicitly restrict participation in Greek life. At Briar’s Delta Pi chapter? The sorority itself restricts it.

Delta Pi is considered one of the top sororities for philanthropy, leadership development, academic excellence—and sheer tedium. But while we’re discouraged from attending Greek Row parties, not even Agatha can stop college girls from wanting to enjoy themselves at college.

“Wanna come?” Noelle is practically whispering now, while sharp-eyed Veda runs point by scanning the staircase to make sure Agatha doesn’t make a surprise descent.

“We’re good,” I answer, and the two girls flee the house like fugitives.

I say goodbye to Blake, lingering in the doorway to make sure she gets into her Uber safely, then head upstairs to my bedroom. Everyone on the third floor shares a room, but upperclassmen and board members have priority and get dibs on the solo rooms on the second floor. Including yours truly.

In the hall, I pass Jia, the other Korean American sister in the house. We’re not the only Asians, though. For all Agatha’s obnoxious flaws, she’s happy to welcome BIPOC members into Delta Pi…so long as they come from means. Our esteemed leader isn’t racist. Nope, she’s classist. Your family isn’t well-off? Forget about pledging here.

I kick off my flats and lock the door—at least we’re allowed to have locks. Although Agatha did once try to propose a new house rule banning them. It happened after Fareeda’s boyfriend locked himself in her room and wouldn’t come out until she agreed not to break up with him. We had to call the fire department to pry the door open and get the dumbass out.

Everyone laughed at Agatha when she suggested getting rid of our locks. It was nice to see my Delta Pi sisters are capable of rebelling against the queen’s wishes, at least when our privacy is threatened.

After changing into pj’s, I slide under my thick white duvet and scroll on my phone. It’s barely nine thirty, but I have to wake up early tomorrow to drive to Hamden.

A few notifications pop up while I’m scrolling, all from my dating app.

Fine. It’s a sexting app. Dating? Who has time to date? My workload is intense, which is what happens when you’re in STEM. Besides, I don’t want a boyfriend right now. They require way too much work, if we’re going by my last relationship.

Mitch required constant reassurances and an inordinate amount of ego stroking. He had issues, which I don’t judge because everyone has their shit, myself included. But Mitch deserved someone who could give him a lot more than I could give. Someone more patient. Someone who didn’t accidentally blow him off because she was working late nights at the lab and lost track of time. Someone whose stress-induced libido wasn’t on constant overdrive, causing them to show up at his dorm and jump on his dick often without even saying hello.

These days, I’m happy to settle for casual sex, but it’s a fine line because I do have a reputation to uphold. A Delta Pi girl can’t be going around banging her way through campus.

Luckily, sometimes sexy texting is all you need to scratch the itch.

I open the app and enter my inbox. There’s this one guy I was talking to for a while, but his dirty talk is abysmal. I check his most recent message and have to swallow a giggle.

**I’m fully engorged and throbbing for you.**

How on earth is anyone supposed to get aroused by that?

Clearly, it’s time to find a new chat buddy.

I spend the next ten minutes on a swiping journey that brings a few potentials, but we’re not matches. At least not right now. I’d probably match a lot more often if I uploaded a photo with my face on it. Faith says most guys think the cute-body-no-face pics are bot accounts.

But there’s no way I’m advertising my face on a hookup app. My profile features two photos: a headless bikini shot from last summer’s family vacation to the Bahamas and me lying on my bed in a purple lace camisole and skimpy matching panties.

The latter photo is risqué, but I ensured there was nothing identifiable about it before uploading. If it does wind up online, it's just a faceless girl on a nondescript bed. Very minimal risk of someone tracing it back to me. Or at least that was the ultimate conclusion determined by the Method, and I trust my method explicitly.

Faith makes fun of me for it, but she honestly shouldn't knock it till she tries it. The Method has never failed me. And yes, there's an entire document on my laptop full of Method write-ups, including whether to post sexy pictures of my body on a dating app.

I am and will forever be an obsessive nerd.

Yet I also hook up with football players in parking lots.

I'm a hot onion, as Faith once said. Layers upon layers.

I swipe through more profiles. I'm inundated with several tempting bare chests, but none of the faces are doing it for me. I'm swiping on autopilot until the app throws me a curveball: not one but *two* bare chests in the same photo.

The name on the profile reads **LARS & B**.

Okay. Color me intrigued.

I click to read more, though truthfully, it's less reading and more drooling. Those are two extremely hard bodies. I can count the individual abdominal muscles.

One of the guys has a tan and scarcely any body hair save for a faint dusting on his arms and legs. He's blond—I can tell because his hair comes down to his chin, which is right where the photo cuts off. I envision a Thor type, based on the size, coloring, and muscles.

The other one is also fair-skinned, with a bit of chest hair between his defined pecs and a dark, appetizing treasure trail leading to swim trunks that ride low enough to show off his man vee.

Thor has a man vee too.

We're drowning in man vees here.

I can't stop staring. These are literally the sexiest bodies I've ever seen, which means their faces probably suck. Nobody can be genetically blessed with that much hotness.

Holding my breath, I swipe to the next picture, prepared to find two grinning ogres.

Nope. Just another headless shot. This one shows the blond solo. He’s in gray sweatpants. More oblique goodness entices my eyes.

The third photo is of the other guy, wearing ripped jeans and a snug polo shirt that shows off his sculpted arms.

Their bio is equally intriguing.

> **Two guys, one profile. Twice the charm, double the trouble. Looking for one girl who can handle twice the fun ;) So if you’re the kinky type, let’s chat.**

Let’s chat, huh?

I mean, I guess I am the kinky type. But…

But nothing. It’s not like I’m signing a blood oath to meet these guys. There’s no obligation here other than to chat with them on the app and delete them if I don’t want to keep chatting. We’re not entering into a digital marriage contract.

My finger hovers over the heart icon. I lick my lips and…tap.

Nothing happens.

All that buildup, and we’re not even a match.

# CHAPTER TWO

## BECKETT

*Thinking is overrated*

WE LOSE TONIGHT'S GAME, BUT WE'RE NOT ALLOWED TO ACT LIKE IT, because we've been ordered under threat of death-by-coach to be positive. Instructed to visualize radiant waves of energy shooting joy all over the locker room like we're in a positivity gang bang.

In other words, the team building and morale consultants who wreaked havoc on the Briar U men's hockey team last season? They're back to torment us.

As my teammates and I trudge out of the tunnel and into the locker room, Jordan Trager, our resident hothead, glares daggers at a freshman left winger.

"Fuckin' hell, Ingram! You fucking blew—"

"Hey!" The sharp rebuke comes from Assistant Coach Maran, who frowns at us from the doorway. "Be positive, assholes."

Trager quickly backpedals. "You blew…a bubble of hope when you took that shot on net and missed instead of passing it to the Kansas Kid who —"

"Who was joyously calling out that he was wide open," finishes Patrick Armstrong, the wronged party.

Our co-captain, Case Colson, turns to Maran with a pained expression. "Come on, Coach. How long do we have to do this sunshine and rainbows routine for? Why are Sheldon and Nance doing this to us?"

"Don't blame those goofballs. You can thank UCS for the administration bringing Sheldon and Nance back into our lives."

Goddamn UCS. It's only October, and the season's barely started, yet the University of California, Sacramento Campus has completely imploded.

Their entire men's hockey program was shut down due to a dangerous hazing incident that ended with a rookie falling off the roof of their rink.

To his death.

The scandal has so many he-said, he-said, they-said elements, it's hard to know what the real story is anymore. But considering the endless parade of aggro douchebags I've encountered during my hockey career, I tend to believe that the freshman who died was absolutely being hazed.

With their program suspended, UCS is forced to forfeit every game, and while their college and the Sacramento police investigate, the NCAA isn't taking chances with any of their other Division I schools. They've been sending reps to every program, casually popping in to say hi and observe. You know, make sure we're not daring drunk kids to jump off buildings. The usual.

Our head coach, Chad Jensen, held a team meeting last week and told us in no uncertain terms that he wants us looking, sounding, and acting like choirboys for the rest of the season. Apparently even trash talk now qualifies as potential bullying and/or hazing.

I doubt it was Coach's decision to bring back Sheldon and Nance to morally guide us, though. Jensen hates those dumbasses as much as we do.

I peel my sweaty jersey off my shoulders, grumbling when it snags on my chest protector. I can already feel a bruise forming on my left side, right below the rib cage. I took a nasty hit in the second period when the Yale defender smashed me into the boards.

With Shane Lindley and Luke Ryder on my tail, I head for the showers and push open the waist-high partition of the nearest stall. My buddies duck into stalls to the left of me, while Trager and Colson veer to the right.

"Okay, here's a great one," Shane says to me as he cranks the shower on. "You're approached by a mysterious British man in a trench coat—"

"What's his name?" Trager asks from my other side.

Oh, look who's suddenly invested in our thought experiments. Last season, when Eastwood College, my former school, merged with Briar, Trager was the first to mock us Eastwood guys about our dumb traditions. Now he's hanging on Shane's every word.

"His name's Albert," one of our d-men pipes up. "That sounds very British."

Shane rolls his eyes. “Sure, whatever. Anyway, he’s like, *G’day, my name is Albert*, and then makes you an offer. He’ll give you a thousand bucks a month for the next twenty years—”

“Dollars or pounds?” Trager asks seriously.

“Yeah,” Colson says, not as seriously, “what’s the exchange rate?”

“Dollars,” Shane replies. “One g a month, twenty years total.”

On Shane’s other side, Ryder ducks his head under the spray and drags his dark hair away from his face. His voice is muffled by the rush of water filling the steamy space. “What’s the catch?”

Shane looks mighty pleased with himself as he reveals, “To receive the cash, you have to watch your parents have sex once a year.”

The entire room breaks out in laughter, loud snorts bouncing off the tiled walls. I work the soap into a lather and start rubbing my chest as I consider Shane’s scenario.

Colson is quick to answer. “Pass,” he says, blanching. “I’d rather be poor.”

“You answered that too fast,” Trager chides him. “I have follow-up questions.”

“There aren’t enough follow-up questions on the planet that can convince me to watch my folks fuck.”

“Lindley,” Trager calls to Shane. “Is it in a dark room so they’re boning in the shadows?”

“Brightly lit room,” Shane calls back.

“Do they come?”

“Both of them. Her multiple times.”

“Do they make noise when they come?”

“They’re very loud.”

After a long moment of consideration, Trager sighs. “I’d do it. I can’t turn down free money.”

Grinning, Shane glances at me. “Beck?”

I face the spray to rinse the soap off my bruised, aching body. “Nah,” I finally answer. “I feel like I’m capable of earning twelve grand a year without having to hear my parents loudly orgasm. I’ll invest in myself.”

Ryder snickers.

As Trager throws out his own thought experiment, I shut off the faucet and grab my towel from the hook, wrapping it around my waist. I head back

to the locker room with Shane and Ryder on my heels. At the locker beside mine, I find Will Larsen still in full uniform, frowning at his phone.

“Everything okay?” I ask.

Even without the frown, I would know something’s bothering him. Larsen and I are just that attuned to each other. That’s what happens when you share enough women in bed. Which sounds sleazier than it is. We worship women. That’s why they keep coming back.

Will grumbles under his breath. “Fine. My dad being his usual jackass self.”

He tosses me the phone. I can’t help but laugh when I read the email on the screen.

> From: Alessia Mason-Bybee
> To: Will Larsen
> Subject: Meeting Request
>
> Hi Will,
> Your father would like to schedule a meeting with you at your earliest convenience. Please let me know your availability this week.
>
> Best,
> Alessia

“He gets his assistant to schedule visits?” I marvel.

“Of course.” Will’s voice is sarcastic. “I’m just another business meeting.”

“Bro, that’s intense,” Shane says, offering a sympathetic look.

Shrugging, Will sets his phone on the top shelf of his stall and starts undressing, tossing his jersey on the bench. “Whatever. It’s always been like this. Can’t even remember the last time we talked without a formal agenda. Alessia emails that too beforehand.”

Ryder grunts out a laugh. “Shit. I mean, as someone who doesn’t have parents, I can’t exactly attest to this, but I don’t think that’s how parent-child relationships are supposed to work.”

I hide my surprise. It’s rare for Ryder to mention his childhood, what with his mother’s murder and his father in jail for it. But we’ve all noticed he’s been much more open since he married Briar U’s golden girl, Gigi

Graham. Gigi is the daughter of the most famous alum this school has, and that's saying a lot because Briar has produced two actual U.S. presidents.

Thanks to Gigi, Ryder's on his way to becoming a changed man. He has a whole new family now, and I'm damn happy for him. Dude deserves it.

Larsen, well, I just feel bad for the guy. He moved into the house in August after Shane and Ryder moved out, and his dad hasn't visited him once. The man sounds like a total dickhead.

"Yeah, it doesn't work that way," Shane confirms, then holds up his phone as evidence. "See this? This is all my dad. Walls of text, bro." He scrolls through, like, three paragraphs. "And that's just him asking what I want him to barbecue when I go home in a couple weeks."

"Must be nice," Will says wryly.

I grin at him. "So are you going to send him your schedule?"

"Nope." He clicks his phone off and shoves it in his pocket.

Most of the guys are heading to Malone's, the sports bar in town, but Will and I have plans, so we part ways with our teammates in the parking lot behind the Graham Center and get into Will's shiny black SUV. Courtesy of his father, of course.

Will slides into the driver's seat and glances over. "When's Caitlin coming over?"

"I'm not sure. She texted during the game. Let me check."

But all her message says is: **Call me.**

"Yo, turn that shit down," I grumble, referring to the country track blasting from the car speakers. I'm more of a rock and rap guy, but Mr. Boston over here, for some inexplicable reason, enjoys country music. But his car, his rules. Fucker.

"Hey," I say when Caitlin picks up. "What time are you heading over?"

There's a beat of silence.

"Caitlin? You there?"

"Yes. Sorry. I'm here. Um…I don't think I'm coming."

I wrinkle my forehead. "Why not?"

After another long pause, a heavy exhalation meets my ear.

"I've caught feelings."

"You've caught feelings," I echo.

"Yes."

"For which one of us?"

That gets me a snicker from the driver's seat. Will and I exchange a grin.

"For *you*, you idiot."

I nod to myself. It's usually fifty-fifty which one of us a girl decides she's madly in love with.

Not once has the answer been "both."

Not that I want it to be. I mean, that would be fucking weird. Sure, we share similar kinks in bed, but we're not two dudes on the hunt for that one special girlfriend to complete our triad or whatever the hell people are calling it these days.

"I know we were just supposed to be having fun," Caitlin continues, embarrassment lacing her tone. "And it *was* fun, the three of us fooling around. I honestly didn't expect feelings to develop."

She didn't?

I mean, *I* expected it. I can't remember the last time I met a woman whose emotions didn't enter the equation during anything beyond a one-night stand. Oh, right. Never. That's how many emotion-immune girls I've met. Zero.

I love women. Truly. I would get down on my knees and worship at their shrine of womanhood. I love how they look, how they taste, how they smell. How soft they feel in my arms. How they sound when they're moaning in my ear.

And yes, I don't doubt there are some exceptions, but in my twenty-one years of existence, I've yet to meet someone who didn't eventually catch feelings.

"So…" She sighs again. "I don't know… Maybe instead of me coming over, you and I can catch a movie or something? You know, like…" She trails off.

"Like a date?" I supply.

Will glances my way again, intrigued now.

"Yes," she says. "Would that be so bad?"

"No, I'm sure it would be fun, but…" I steel myself for the reaction my next words will trigger. "I don't want a girlfriend."

Silence.

The tension emitting from the phone fills the car. Will actually rolls down the window as if it's something tangible that he can feel. The little hiss of cool air is nice against my face, though.

“You’re not interested? Not even a tiny bit? What, I’m not girlfriend material?”

“That’s not it at all. If I wanted a girlfriend, you would be at the top of my list,” I assure her. “Hell, you’d be the only one on the list. You get my jokes and put up with the time-travel movies. Do you know how rare that is?”

From the corner of my eye, I see Will grinning again.

“Those movies are so boring,” she informs me.

“I know, and I love that you sit through them despite that. Trust me, Caitlin, I’d be all over you if I was looking for something serious. But I don’t do commitment. I’m not good at it. All I want to do for my senior year is play hockey and screw around.”

I’m nothing if not honest. It’s how I’ve always operated when it comes to women, especially after the way my last relationship ended. I’ve been single since my senior year of high school and have no intention of altering that status anytime soon.

I wait for some sort of backlash, but Caitlin proves to be as cool as I knew she was.

“Fair enough. But with that said, obviously I can’t see you guys anymore. I hope you understand.”

“I get it.”

“I really did have a good time, though.” She sounds wistful.

“Yeah. Same.”

“Say hi to Will. I’ll see you around, Beckett.”

“See you, babe.” I end the call and turn toward the driver’s seat. “I just dumped a girl I wasn’t even going out with.”

Will snorts. “Welcome to the club. Remember Felicity from the spring? Bro, she cried when I told her I didn’t love her back. You got off easy.”

“True.”

We reach our town house, which is a lot quieter without Shane living there. Ryder, well, I barely notice that Mr. Silent and Broody is gone, but Shane is another story. The dude’s personality fills every room that he’s in. Will and I are more chill. Probably why we got along so well when our two hockey programs merged.

From the moment I met the guy, I felt like we’d known each other for years. Unfortunately, the Eastwood players weren’t allowed to like the Briar

bros—mortal enemies and all—so we kept the friendship on the down-low for months. But once Ryder started hooking up with Case Colson's ex, Gigi, all bets were off. If he was allowed to fraternize with the enemy, then fuck it, I was allowed to ask Will to hang out and watch some cool sci-fi movies.

Larsen's the kind of guy you just feel comfortable with, no matter what you're doing. But the first time I woke up and found a naked woman *and* a naked Will in my bed, I can't deny it was…jarring.

The night preceding that awkward morning after had been fun as hell, though. When it comes to sex, I subscribe to *the kinkier the better* camp. And as it turns out, the more the merrier. I was rock-hard that night as I watched a hot brunette ride Will like he was her champion racehorse and she was aiming to win the Kentucky Derby. Then she leaned over and swallowed my cock as she rode him, and everything became a thousand times hotter.

I'd had a couple of threesomes before, but none as scorching as that one. And it only got better. Until this summer, when Will decided our naughty activities were a little *too* naughty for him. *Deviant* is the word I believe he'd used.

I understand where it came from. Will is analytical. He overthinks things. My opinion? Thinking is overrated. Do what feels good. The end.

"Should we go to Malone's?" Will kills the engine and unbuckles his seat belt.

"Yeah, might as well."

We don't have a game tomorrow, no morning skate either, and if Caitlin isn't coming by, then there's no reason not to get totally wasted tonight.

It's only a ten-minute walk to Main Street from our house, so we decide to walk to the bar instead of ordering a car.

As we fall into step with each other down the sidewalk, Will says, "So you really don't want to go out with Caitlin?"

"Nah, mate."

He rolls his eyes. "Commitment is not as bad as you think it is."

"Yeah, it's not bad. It's god-awful."

Only ends in the pure and utter destruction of one's soul and faith in all that is good, as I can sadly attest.

Well, fuck that. After the way Shannon ripped my heart from my chest the week before high school graduation, I don't plan on getting serious with

another woman for a long, long time.

Maybe in the distant future. Someday. Some vague, undetermined future day.

But definitely not tonight. Nope, tonight I'm pulling up our favorite hookup app, Caitlin already firmly in the rearview mirror of my sex life.

"Are you on our profile?" Will sounds amused as he peers at my phone.

"Yeah. Just checking messages."

We created a joint profile a few weeks ago, mostly because it's awkward to be out somewhere flirting with a girl and find a way to gauge if she's interested in both of us without appearing like sleazeballs. A hookup app feels like an efficient way to vet someone beforehand while sparing yourself the embarrassment of rejection or horrified outrage.

Not that I embarrass easily. It takes a lot to make me care about shit. My default state has always been unfazed.

"Anything good?"

"I think these messages are from a bot."

I delete them, unmatch the girl, and am about to exit the app when the profile on the main screen catches my eye.

"Fucking hell, Larsen. Look at this."

When I show him the photo, he shoots me a knowing grin. "The bow?"

"The bow," I groan.

The girl in the picture is lying in bed, wearing a purple lace bralette and a pair of panties in a matching shade of purple with a little pink bow in the center of the waistband. I am a sucker for bows. I want to capture that bow between my teeth. Nibble on it. And then nibble on every inch of that body. Small, perky tits. Tucked-in waist. Long legs.

I don't even care what her face looks like. Her body's a weapon. I want my mouth all over it.

"Yeah, we're liking her."

Will is chuckling to himself. "Do you ever not think about sex?"

"I don't understand the question."

I tap the heart in the corner of her profile photo, praying she liked us in return. A second later, my favorite alert pops up.

**It's a match!**

# CHAPTER THREE

## CHARLOTTE

*My inner critic is such a belligerent bitch*

I WAS SIX YEARS OLD WHEN I FIRST REALIZED WHAT IT "MEANT" TO BE adopted. It dawned on me during a playground argument with another girl in my class. Stacey. Goddamn Stacey. I don't remember how it started, but it was the most asinine fight, each of us arguing that our parents would buy us anything we wanted. Which was an absurd sentiment because I was in no way a spoiled child.

Stacey bragged that *her* parents would go buy her ice cream in a blizzard if she asked. After I gave an equally ridiculous comeback, she argued, "Yours would *never* do that."

And then, with a smirk, she threw out the careless remark that shattered my world.

"You're not even their real daughter."

Her words were like tiny daggers into my heart. I'd known I was adopted since I was old enough to ask why I looked more like my friend Daisy Jeong and her parents rather than my own family. But I don't think I ever truly grasped the concept, not until that fight with Stacey.

I ran away, tears streaming down my face. I was so upset that the teachers had to call my parents to come pick me up. It was Dad who drew the short straw of leaving work in the middle of the day. I refused to tell him what was wrong, refused to let him console me. But later that night, when he was tucking me into bed, I burst into tears, finally breaking down and confessing what Stacey had said. Mom came rushing into my room, and the two of them proceeded to comfort me and explain that just because we weren't related by blood didn't mean I wasn't their real daughter.

But their words couldn't erase the terror that had taken root in my heart.

*What if they decide they don't want me anymore?*

I tried to bury those fears, but growing up, they always found a way to resurface. Every time I misbehaved, every time I brought home a bad grade, a voice inside me whispered that they might send me back. I began to watch their every move, analyzing their words and actions, searching for signs that their love for me was conditional.

Now, I'm twenty-one, turning twenty-two next summer, and for the most part, those fears have vanished. It's been a very long time since I looked at the family photos lining our mantel and questioned if I truly belong in them.

But it's times like these, when we're going around the dining room table and everyone lists one goal they've set or an accomplishment they're proud of this month, that I wish the people who adopted me weren't so fucking perfect.

I love them dearly, but my entire family is a bunch of overachievers.

Mom can whip up a soufflé from scratch and has a PhD in mathematics. She doesn't make people call her *doctor*, though. She's not that pompous.

Dad runs his own multimillion-dollar cybersecurity firm from his upstairs office.

Ava, who's four years older than me, landed her dream job right out of college, with a salary so high she can afford to live in a two-bedroom apartment in Manhattan instead of a roach-infested studio.

Oliver, six years older, is on track to become the youngest partner at the firm where he practices family law.

They're nauseatingly successful and well-adjusted, every last one of them. Even Katherine, Oliver's wife, fits that mold. Kat works for an organization that fights child trafficking and reunites survivors with their parents. Oliver literally chose to marry the one person who's even more perfect than he is.

"That's fantastic news." Mom is beaming at Ava, who just shared the news that she's in line for a promotion. Because of course she is. "I'm so proud of you, honey."

"What about you, peanut?" Smiling at me, Dad slices off a piece of apple crumble using the side of his fork. "Any accomplishment or met goal?"

"I got an A on my last bio test."

The answer feels like a cop-out.

But what else am I going to say? I accomplished a car hookup with a wide receiver?

Dad would probably choke on his dessert. He'd be all right, though, since everyone in my family is trained in life-saving techniques, including the Heimlich maneuver. It was Mom's idea to take a family CPR and rescue skills class one summer—for fun. Her idea of fun differs greatly from mine.

*You can always tell them you accomplished sending a DNA sample to a genealogy site.*

Ugh. My inner critic is *such* a belligerent bitch.

Fine. Fine, okay? I suppose this is a solid opening. Segue from accomplishments to an exciting new development in my life.

Guess what! I'm looking for my *real* family!

Oh my God. What if they take it that way? I don't want them to think I'm ungrateful or like they're not enough for me.

This is just something I'm compelled to do. Something that's haunted me for the past few years. I was adopted when I was eight months old. I have no idea where I came from. And for the longest time, I didn't care to find out. There were questions in the back of my mind, of course, but seeking answers didn't feel necessary, critical. I was happy with my friends and my family and my life. I'm *still* happy with all those things.

But lately, the need for answers won't quit nagging at me.

I want to understand, I suppose. I want to know who my birth parents are. Or were, if they're no longer alive. I want to know why my birth mother abandoned me. Why she felt it was the only choice for her.

My parents said she dropped me off at the orphanage in Seoul in a plastic laundry basket, a blue stuffed bunny tucked against my side. I still have that bunny. His name is Tiger. Oliver named him. My parents told me that when they brought me home and introduced me to Oliver and Ava, my new siblings were besotted with me almost immediately.

And they *are* my siblings. They *are* my parents. I've never referred to any of them as "my adoptive brother," "my adoptive mom." Screw that. They're my mom and dad. Oliver is my brother. Ava is my sister. They're the only family I've ever known, and I love them dearly.

A groan gets stuck in my throat. Damn it, why did I join that site? I *hate* emotional chaos. Or any chaos, for that matter. Only when I'm living my

other life, the one where I'm not expected to be flawless, am I allowed to welcome the anarchy. That life is chock-full of risk and excitement.

This one…not so much.

I snap out of my thoughts, realizing my perfect opening has closed and the spotlight is now on Kat, who says she reached her goal of walking ten thousand daily steps for a week, and then we're done.

Our table tradition is cheesy, I know, but it's not as pretentious as it sounds. My parents want us to feel proud of ourselves and what we do, even if the accomplishment is something minor, like *I went for a walk today, and the air felt nice on my face*. The exercise is about embracing the positives.

As we clear the table, Oliver and I chat about a brutal custody case he's handling at his firm. It's uncanny how much he looks like our dad, down to the natural part of his sandy-blond hair and the shape of his fingernails. And Ava is a carbon copy of Mom—same thick, light-brown hair, impossibly long lashes, even the flecks of gray around her blue irises.

Then there's me. When I was younger, I used to stare at my reflection in the mirror and wonder which one of my biological parents I looked like. I don't think it matters, though. They didn't want me. So why would I want to look like them?

I'm not bitter about it. Not really. I know some people harbor complicated feelings about their adoption, but I'm genuinely grateful for the life I've been given and the family into which I was welcomed. They treated me like one of them, a full-blown Kingston, from the moment they laid eyes on me.

Oliver and I carry the dirty dishes into the kitchen, where Mom is rolling up her sleeves in front of the sink.

"Go hang out with Dad," I tell my brother. "I can help Mom in here."

"Thanks, kiddo."

Once he's gone, my mother and I stand side by side at the sink, rinsing plates. She makes the mistake of asking about Delta Pi, causing me to groan and complain about Agatha for a good ten minutes.

"You think *she's* bad?" Mom says when I come up for air, passing me a plate to load into the dishwasher. "Her mother is a hundred times worse."

"That doesn't surprise me in the slightest."

Agatha's mother, Lillian, is one of our alumni advisors. She's there to "support" the executive board, but really, she uses the monthly check-ins as opportunities to stick her nose into every minute detail of the house and lecture us about what we're doing wrong. The apple did not fall far from the tree in that family. They're so alike they're still sharing the same branch.

"God," Mom says with a groan. "Lillian used to conduct this thing called a shine test."

"What do you mean? Like for your shoes?"

"For your hair."

"Seriously?"

"Yup. Before an important dinner party or an event, she'd have all the sisters line up outside our bedroom doors while she moved down the line and examined our hair. She'd make us tilt our head until it caught the light in *just* the right way and assess how shiny it looked. And if you didn't pass the shine test…"

"What would she do? Beat you?" I gasp.

"Yes, Charlotte, she beat us."

"What?"

"No! Of course she didn't do that!" Mom starts to laugh. "If there was enough time for us to redo our hair, she would allow that. If there wasn't, we wouldn't be permitted to attend the event."

"That's all it takes to skip out on those boring things? Have your hair at eighty percent shine instead of a hundred? Why can't Agatha be like that?"

After we finish loading the dishwasher, I wash my hands, then reach for a floral-patterned dish towel to dry them off.

"You know," I tell her, "the only reason I'm even paying attention in these meetings is for you, Madam President."

"And I very much appreciate it."

She comes up behind me, wrapping her arms around my shoulders to give me a tight hug. Then she smacks a kiss on my cheek and goes to wipe down the counters.

*Do it now, when she's in a good mood*, an inner voice implores. *Tell her you want to find your biological relatives.*

Another opportunity has presented itself. We're both calm and content—the perfect time to drop a bomb like the one I'm sitting on.

*Do it.*

*Tell her.*

"Come on," Mom says, heading for the doorway. "Let's go see if your sister and Kat still want to go for that walk."

The opportunity once again slips through my fingers.

I chickened out again.

Disgusted with myself, I check my phone while she ducks out of the kitchen to find Ava. There's a notification from my hookup app informing me I have a new match.

Curious, I tap it to discover I've matched with the owners of the two ludicrously ripped chests. I open the chat thread, assuming I'll see a picture of a veiny penis or some lascivious line like *Hey baby, show us your tits*.

Instead, they throw me for a loop.

**LARS & B:**

Do you believe time travel is possible? And if the answer is no, how does it feel to be so monumentally wrong?

I bite my lip to stop a wave of laughter. I…was not expecting that. I actually have to think about it for a minute before formulating a response.

**ME:**

I think it's possible, but I don't believe you can change the past. Otherwise there's no way to reconcile all the time-travel paradoxes. There's this physicist, Novikov, who has a whole theory about it.

To my surprise, someone starts typing back immediately.

**LARS & B:**

Holy shit. You know about the Novikov self-consistency principle?

**ME:**

Who doesn't? I feel like it's just common sense.

**LARS & B:**

Will you marry me?

**ME:**

It depends. Who am I speaking to right now? Lars or B?

**LARS & B:**

It's B. Lars is around here somewhere.

**ME:**

Do you guys go to Briar?

His current location is now far enough away that it tells me he's likely back in Hastings. When we matched, we were only a couple miles apart, so it stands to reason he and Lars live near Briar.

**B:**

Yeah, we both do. How about you?

**ME:**

Same.

**B:**

Junior? Senior?

My age on the app is listed as twenty-one, so I could be either. I decide to say I'm a junior, since I always tell a few little white lies when it comes to these types of apps.

**ME:**

Junior. You?

**B:**

We're both seniors.

He's typing again. I hear my mom and sister in the hallway.

The next message appears.

**B:**

You read our profile, right? Just wanna make sure you won't freak out if Lars pops on here later and starts chatting with you.

**ME:**

I read it.

**B:**

And?

**ME:**

And what?

**B:**

Have you been with two guys before?

I'm about to respond when Ava pokes her head into the kitchen.

"You coming—" She stops, narrowing her eyes. "Why are you blushing?"

I have been genetically cursed to transform into a tomato when one, I've consumed more than half a glass of alcohol, or two, I'm embarrassed. And since it's the middle of the afternoon and all I've been drinking is water, my older sister correctly deduces the cause.

"Are you texting with a boy?"

"No," I lie.

"You are! Those cheeks reveal all." She groans. "Oh no. Are you and Mitch back together?"

"I love how you prefaced the question with *oh no*."

It's no secret that Ava was not—and still isn't—a fan of my ex. I suspect my parents didn't love him either. They'd never say it to my face, but I used to catch them exchanging displeased looks whenever Mitch spent time with our family. Usually when he was being overly clingy, a behavior that

manifested closer to the end of our relationship and that I also wasn't thrilled about.

"He wasn't right for you" is Ava's response.

"I don't disagree with that," I say lightly. "Which is why, no, we're not back together. I was texting with Faith."

I tuck my phone in my pocket after closing the app. This conversation will just have to wait until later.

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"How did they take it?"

Faith pounces the moment I walk through the door that night. She's in a pair of pajama pants and a Delta Pi hoodie, her curls swept away from her face with a neon-yellow headband. Her dark-brown complexion, completely devoid of makeup, doesn't boast a single blemish. I'd kill for her skin.

As I head for the staircase, Faith trails after me like an eager puppy.

"They were cool with it, right?" she pushes. "Just like I said they'd be."

I stop on the second-floor landing, sighing. "I didn't tell them."

"Charlotte!"

"I know! But there wasn't a right moment."

I take off walking toward my bedroom, but Faith stays on my heels.

"You don't need a right moment. You're overthinking this. They're not going to care that you want to track down biological relatives. Like, if Ava sent in a DNA sample to try to find some long-lost cousins, they wouldn't even blink, right?"

We're stalled at my bedroom door because I stick the key into the lock upside down. I make a mental note to reraise the issue of installing keypad locks at every door at the next exec meeting. Agatha and Sherise vetoed the idea last time because they felt it would give our house "penitentiary vibes."

"What I'm doing feels ungrateful," I confess once I finally get the door open. "Like I'm not happy with the life they've given me. Like there's something missing."

"There *is* something missing," Faith says bluntly.

She hops up on my bed and stretches out, reaching for my stuffed bunny. Yes, I brought Tiger to college with me. He travels everywhere with me.

“You want to know where you came from,” she continues, playing with Tiger’s floppy ears. “That doesn’t take away from the fact that your family is fantastic. They love you, and they *are* your parents. But there’s this whole other part of you, a piece of your history floating out there somewhere, that you need to find.”

She’s right. This is something I needed to do.

My phone chimes.

When I check it, I’m provided with real, indisputable evidence that our phones are listening to us.

“Oh my God,” I tell Faith. “I just got a notification from BioRoots.”

She sits up. “What does it say?”

“‘Search completed. See your results.’”

She gasps. “You have results! That means the site must’ve found a relative or two, right?”

“Well, the results could be ‘zero matches,’” I answer in a dry voice.

“Open it. Let’s look!”

“I was going to wait until I told my family before I logged back on.”

“No, I think it’s better to look at the results first. Maybe there won’t even be anything to tell them about.”

Good point. I flop down beside her and open the app, logging on with facial recognition.

*Welcome back!* the screen greets me.

Underneath that is a button that says *See your results*.

“Go on,” Faith encourages.

Biting my lip, I tap the button. It brings me to a new page, which features a list of all the genealogical connections associated with my DNA. I take one look at the first entry and gasp.

“Holy shit,” Faith exclaims.

BioRoots had touted its comprehensive search engine’s ability to uncover links going back generations. I expected to find a great-grandparent maybe. A third or fourth cousin who’s vaguely related to another cousin. Someone who in turn might be able to point me in the direction of the biological parents who abandoned me at an orphanage.

The last thing I expected was a full biological brother.

# CHAPTER FOUR

## CHARLOTTE

*Dirty, rotten traitor*

MY BROTHER CALLS THE NEXT AFTERNOON.

My real brother.

Wait, but wouldn't my new brother be the "real" one because of our biological connection?

Then what does that make Oliver?

Oliver is *not* a fake brother to me!

*You're spiraling, Charlotte!*

Oh my God. I really am. I've been obsessing about this DNA bombshell since last night. The first thing I did when I woke up this morning was open the site to ensure the entry was still there and I didn't hallucinate it. Sure enough, there it was. One biological brother found—and his location is the United States. Is he an international student from Korea? Was he adopted too and grew up here? Did he move to America on his own?

My mind has been spinning all day, plagued with questions. But only one question really matters.

Should I reach out to him?

I was about to run it by the Method, my laptop open and fingers poised over the keyboard, when my phone started vibrating.

I close the laptop and lean back in my chair. It's big and comfy. Swivels too, which my dad considers a major hazard. We argued about it in the furniture store, which led to an intense debate about whether a swivel chair is more or less likely to lead to someone's death. Then Mom found a bunch of statistics about it, because that's the kind of family we are.

"Hey," I greet Oliver. "What's up?"

"You tell me."

“What do you mean?”

“You were acting weird yesterday. I figured I’d wait for you to get back to school, away from the watching eyes of Mom and Dad, so you can tell me why you were being weird.”

“I wasn’t being weird,” I protest.

“Yes, you were, and you’re still a terrible liar. What’s going on?”

*Oh, nothing much. Just discovered I’ve got a biological brother out there somewhere roaming the same planet as me.*

I swallow the words. I’m close with both my siblings, but probably not as close as we could be. I know either one of them would be there for me in a heartbeat if I called them to bail me out of jail or if I broke up with a boyfriend. But the deeper stuff? The insecurities and doubts that sometimes still nag at me in the night, like a dog working over an old bone? I don’t know if Oliver or Ava would be the first people I’d turn to for support.

It doesn’t help that they’re both older than me. By the time I was twelve, Oliver was already off at college, Ava gone when I was fourteen. They didn’t have to witness those years full of horrific things like puberty and crippling teenage angst, and I think because they missed all that, they’ve always treated me like a little adult. Strong and capable and entirely self-assured.

“Everything is fine,” I tell him. “I’m just stressed out with school. And then I was going over my grad school applications the other day and realized I’d been using the entry requirements from three years ago. A few of the programs require personal essays now.”

“A few as in more than two? I thought you were set on MIT with Cornell as the backup.”

Dad went to MIT. Mom was at Cornell. So of course, that’s where my family has been pushing me to apply. And yes, while it would be more convenient to stay on the East Coast, it would also be really nice to…go somewhere else. Maybe enjoy a different climate for a couple years. New England winters are the worst.

“I’m applying to a few others too,” I confess.

“Where? Yale? Brown?”

I love how he only lists places within spitting distance of our house. “Yeah, and some randoms.”

Random places like…you know…the University of Sydney. University of Melbourne. Oxford. An incredible program I found in Copenhagen.

Those are all a long shot, though. My GPA is exceptional, but biomed engineering is a highly competitive field. Those programs receive a ton of applicants.

"All right, well, if you need me to proof your essays, let me know. I'm happy to help."

"Oh. For sure, I will. Thank you."

"Of course. Love you, kid."

"Love you."

Guilt churns in my stomach as I open my laptop to resume my disloyal task.

I'm a traitor.

A dirty, rotten traitor.

Here I am telling my brother I love him, all the while trying to decide if I should reach out to another brother I didn't know existed. It feels like a betrayal to my family.

I focus on the document in front of me, the familiar template and its headings soothing me like a cup of hot cocoa. I don't care if it makes me obsessive. The Method works for me. It makes me feel better, more secure in my decisions.

Taking a breath, I go through the calming process, breaking down all the elements of the decision.

**ACTION: Reach out to biological brother.**

Next up is the pros and cons section. I start keying in points under each column.

**PROS:**
**Learning about my heritage**
**Possibly making a new friend**

**CONS:**
**Betraying family**
**What if they're mad?**
**What if they never speak to me again?**
**What if he's an asshole?**

I write as many pros and cons as I can think of, then lean back and rub my hands together. This is where the process goes from a regular old pros and cons list to the Method. It's Charlie's time to shine.

Since this entails dissecting the negative consequences, I copy and paste my list of cons into a new section and expand on each one.

The goal: determine the *worst possible outcome* of executing this action.

To make the best use of the Method, I tend to exclude things like "murder" and "tortured in serial killer's basement dungeon" from the worst-case list, because the stats for those outcomes are always too low to merit real consideration.

The purpose of the Method is to establish the worst outcome with the highest probability of occurring, then determine whether I can live with that consequence.

**OUTCOME #1: My family will never speak to me again.**

Yes, this sounds like a soul-crushing outcome. But how likely is it?

Time for the in-depth assessment. Sometimes, the answer relies on common sense. Other times, it's anecdotal. Most times, there's a level of research involved. And if there's one thing that gets me hotter than an organized calendar, it's research.

Realistically, I can't see my family never talking to me again. Dad still speaks to his brother even though Uncle Erik stole my father's credit card number and used it to rack up a year's worth of charges after Erik's wife divorced him and took all his money. If Dad can forgive that, he can forgive anything.

But of course, we never say never, so I hedge my bets and assign this outcome a 1 percent likelihood.

To the question *Can I live with this*, I write *NO*.

Moving on. What is the next worst thing that could happen?

**OUTCOME #2: Our relationship will be forever changed.**

I chew on the inside of my cheek. Definitely a strong likelihood here. And this is something I can more or less verify. I spend the next hour online, poring over stories from adopted kids who sought out their biological parents and how their adoptive families reacted. It seems, for the

most part, their families were supportive. Forever changed, yes. Bad? Maybe not.

I give the likelihood 90 percent, but since the stats tell me it probably won't be a negative change, I can live with it. Anytime I answer *YES* to that question, it gets removed from the possible outcome list.

On and on I go, assessing each outcome.

He might meet me and reject me. Medium probability. Can I live with that? *YES*.

He might ignore me altogether. High probability. Can I live with that? *YES*.

I'll meet him and won't like him. Medium probability. Can I live with that? *YES*.

When I'm done running the numbers, the Method determines that the worst possible outcome, which would be utterly devastating and unfathomable to me, is a 1 percent chance of my family never speaking to me again.

In other words, reaching out to the guy that the internet says is my brother won't be the end of the world.

My phone is all the way on the other side of the bedroom, so I load the BioRoots website on my laptop and create a new message. When you sign up, you have the option to make your name public, which I opted to do. The whole point of this was to find my biological relatives. If they exist, I want them to be able to contact me.

But those relatives have the option to remain anonymous, which is what this biological match chose. His username is HLS315.

I take a few minutes to consider what to write before deciding this isn't rocket science. Keep it short and simple. My fingers fly over the keyboard as I craft my message.

Hi there,

I'm sure you received the same notification I did. And if you didn't…well, looks like I'm your biological sister. Surprise!

I know this is awkward. And sort of nerve-racking. And I'm not putting any pressure on you whatsoever. I just wanted to let you know that I'm here and totally willing to chat, whether it's on the phone or just texting or if at some point you want to meet in person. I'm based outside

Boston and attend Briar University. Not sure what state you're in (your location just says USA), but if you ever want to meet or talk, please reach out.

Sincerely,
Charlotte

# CHAPTER FIVE

## WILL

*You asked how life is annoying. That's fucking how.*

MY FATHER THINKS HE'S THE MOST IMPORTANT PERSON IN EVERY ROOM.

Granted, in Della's Diner, on a Monday afternoon, he probably is. I certainly don't see another U.S. congressman occupying any of the red vinyl booths. The problem is this congressman is more pompous than most, which says a lot, because I've never met a politician who wasn't obsessed with himself.

Dad's in a self-absorbed class entirely of his own, though. Just because he might be more successful than most people that he encounters doesn't give him the right to puff out his chest and talk down to everyone. Or worse, dismiss them. Their presence, their opinions. I've been dismissed by my dad my entire life. He actually uses those words when I'm at home for the holidays. He'll look up from beneath his glasses and say, "Dismissed, William."

He's the only one who calls me William. And I suspect that's only because he likes hearing his own name come out of his mouth. Yep, I'm a junior. William Larsen II. Could be worse. At least he doesn't go by Bill. Then he'd be calling me Bill all the time.

Congress is in session, so the fact that Dad flew from DC to Massachusetts to visit his son at college tells me this is important—to him anyway. What I've learned in my twenty-one years on this earth is that my father and I rarely agree on what we deem important.

"Thank you," he says when the waitress delivers our coffee.

I ordered lunch but he didn’t. I expect he’ll be gone before my food even arrives, and I’ll be forced to eat alone. Which is probably preferable.

He gives the waitress his big fake smile that he always uses on the campaign trail. The one he saves for the little people.

“Can I trouble you for some sugar, young lady?”

This waitress is pushing fifty and should know better than to fall for it. Most women see right through the pandering and find it infantilizing when he calls them that. But the man’s instincts are spot-on. He can read people so well and tells them exactly what they need to hear at all times.

This one blushes like a fourteen-year-old girl and waves her hand demurely. “Oh, hush.”

I try not to roll my eyes as she saunters away.

“How are your classes?” Dad asks.

“Fine.”

“Alessia sent me your schedule. I noticed you didn’t enroll in Ethics like I recommended.”

*Yeah, because it’s my schedule, not yours*.

I bite back the retort. And I certainly won’t give him the satisfaction of admitting that the syllabus for Ethics looked pretty interesting. Doing the opposite of what Dad wants is sort of a knee jerk for me. But at least in this case, it didn’t backfire on me—the class I chose instead is equally interesting.

“Why would you take a biology class?” Dad pushes.

“It’s an engineering lab.”

“But why? I don’t see the rationale here. We talked about this.”

No. *He* talked about this. He likes to plan my life. Every time a new semester starts, I’m obligated to email a copy of my schedule to his assistant, who shows it to him so he can decide whether he deems it worthy.

I’m a political science major. Pushed into it by Dad, of course, who’s basically groomed me for politics since I was five years old. He thinks we’re going to be a presidential dynasty. Father and son. Which is unlikely, because one, that would require the voters electing his smarmy ass into the White House someday, and I like to think most of them can see through his fake bullshit. And two, it would require me wanting it—and I don’t. I have zero interest in being a politician.

It is my senior year, though, and I can't help but think about what the future would look like. Honestly, I have no fucking idea. Sometimes I think maybe something behind the scenes in politics. Campaign managing perhaps. Getting a candidate, a real one, into office. Someone who could make real change and not the fake promises that my dad and his allies like to sell to the hapless masses.

"William," he says.

"Sorry, what?"

"I'm saying you don't want to be a scientist. Why waste your time looking in microscopes and examining slides?"

"Because I find it interesting. Isn't that the point of college? To learn about shit you think is interesting?"

"Language," he says.

I try to change the subject. "How's Kelsey?"

Kelsey is my stepmother. They got married when I was four, so technically, she's the only mother I've ever known. I don't remember anything before her. Dad does keep pictures of Mom on the mantel, so when we get photographed for interviews, it shows that he has feelings. That he desperately loved his first wife. I'm sure he did. Although according to my grandfather, theirs was more of a beneficial marriage than one based on love. Mom came from another political dynasty and some nice money. Combined fortunes and all.

Kelsey doesn't have the fortune, but she has the connections. She was a law student when they met and now practices criminal law in DC.

Truth be told, I like my stepmother. She's cool. Warm. What she sees in my father, I'll never know.

"She's excited to have you home for Thanksgiving," he says. "All your cousins are coming too. It's perfect. We haven't had a good photo of the whole clan for a while."

Nothing like a photo op to make Thanksgiving magical and unforgettable.

I take a sip of my coffee. I could just blurt out, *what the hell do you want?* But Dad doesn't like to be interrogated. He likes holding the seat of power. If I asked him, he would just stall. Give me a lecture about how he wants to see me and then take an even more roundabout way to get to the

real reason he’s here. So it’s best to pretend I don’t know he has an ulterior motive. Then he’ll just reveal it faster.

“One of the reasons I wanted to see you—” he starts.

See? Wait, and he shall deliver.

“—is to pick your brain about this UCS mess.”

“What about it? It’s not my school.”

“No, but it’s your sport.”

“What the hell does that mean? A bunch of hockey players allegedly haze someone to their death, so that means I’m culpable too?”

“Lower your voice.”

I roll my eyes. “Contrary to what you believe, no one is eavesdropping on us or recording this conversation. Nobody in Hastings gives a shit. And Briar Hockey has nothing to do with UCS.”

“No. But this isn’t the first time an NCAA hockey team has gotten a bad rep for unruly behavior.”

“Have you met Coach Jensen? That man runs a tight ship. Briar players don’t fuck around.”

“That’s not the point.”

“Then what is the point?”

I’m starting to get aggravated. Why can’t he just be a normal dad who wants a pleasant visit with his son? A dad who asks how my game went this weekend, if I think we might make it to the postseason, if I’m dating anyone.

He notes my expression, and his lips tighten as he visibly grits his teeth. “William. No man is an island.”

He’s throwing rote phrases at me now? Deep Thoughts with William Larsen Senior?

“What the hell are you talking about?” I grumble.

“It means that it’s not only what I do that reflects on me. What my son does reflects on me. My son plays hockey. And my son goes to college. In a vacuum, that might be innocuous. However, at the moment, a college hockey program has been implicated in a hazing scandal that ended with a kid plummeting off a roof. And naturally, the vultures in DC have questions now. First and foremost: Congressman, what does your son think about it?”

“What do they care what I think?”

“Because they care about me.”

Me, me, me, me, me. That's what it always boils down to, isn't it?

"So you think this'll reflect poorly on you because I play hockey? Come on, Dad. Nobody cares."

"I truly don't know why you're being combative right now. One would think we'd be on the same page in our condemnation of the Sacramento program."

"Is that what you need? Like, seriously, get to the point. Do you want me to give a statement condemning it? Because, sure, I'll do it. I shall condemn."

He shakes his head at my sarcasm. "That's merely lip service. And in this political climate, we need to show more than lip service, so with that said…"

My stomach sinks.

"I've arranged for *Capitol Magazine* to write a profile about you."

"No," I say instantly.

"William. You don't say no to an interview with *Capitol*."

The waitress chooses that moment to return with my burger and fries. Joke's on her. My appetite has gone the way of the dinosaurs.

As she sets the plate down, Dad flashes his winning smile and thanks her, but the second she's gone, his scowl returns. Mine never left.

"I don't want a profile written about me," I say in a low voice.

"Well, it's already been confirmed, so…" He shrugs. "You can either gripe about it or you can behave as a congressman's son should behave and speak to the journalist."

I clench my teeth.

"I've also arranged for a camera crew to follow your team around," Dad says, casually stirring his coffee.

"I'm sorry, what? A *camera* crew? You said it's a written profile."

He eyes me over the rim of his mug, his politician's face set in that infuriatingly calm expression he always wears.

"It's both. You'll have a few sit-downs with the *Capitol* journalist—Alessia will arrange everything for you, so don't worry. It's all taken care of. But the magazine is partnering with Capitol TV to produce a short segment. They'll shoot footage of your next few games and conduct interviews with some of your teammates."

"Absolutely not."

“William.” His tone is firm. Impatient. “This is about ensuring there’s transparency, showing that your team is clean and aboveboard.”

“We are clean,” I snap, feeling the frustration bubble up. “And regardless of that, it’s not your job to dictate the level of transparency from the Briar Men’s Hockey Program. We don’t need a camera crew invading our space to prove anything.”

“Appearances matter, son. This interview will show the public that there’s nothing to hide.”

“You mean it’ll show that *you* have nothing to hide,” I mutter, unable to keep the bitterness out of my voice.

“Don’t be petulant. This is for the best.”

“The best for who, Dad? Definitely not for my team. We’re not some sideshow for your political image.”

He sighs, a familiar sign of his patience wearing thin. “I recognize this isn’t ideal for you or your teammates. But this isn’t merely about hockey. It’s about safeguarding our family’s reputation. One bad story and it’s a feeding frenzy. This way, we’re ahead of any potential issues.”

“You always care more about how things look than how they actually are.”

“That’s not fair. I care about you, and I care about our family’s name. Sometimes, that means making tough decisions.”

“And sometimes, it means making decisions that screw over the people you claim you care about.”

He doesn’t flinch, just stares at me with those piercing eyes. “You’re young. One day, you’ll understand the importance of managing public perception.”

I lean back in the booth, crossing my arms. “Coach is never going to go for this.”

“It’s already been taken care of.”

“You spoke to Coach Jensen?” I’m grinding my teeth so hard I fear I’ll crack the enamel.

“Yes. He’s agreed to let the crew into the locker room for your next couple of games and to give a few short interviews about college hockey. He thinks it will bring more recognition to the program.”

Bullshit. Jensen didn’t agree to it. I bet Dad went to the dean first.

He confirms that suspicion by saying, “Dean Allen is also on board. Anything to highlight and showcase Briar’s achievements.” He gives me a pointed look. “Now eat your food before our lovely waitress starts to think something is wrong.”

I offer a fake smile and shove a french fry in my mouth.

He nods. “There you go.”

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I have an afternoon class that doesn’t start for a couple hours, so usually I’d go home and grab a nap first. Today I decide to drive right to campus, heading for the Graham Center. The arena’s namesake donated a shit ton of money to Briar in order to upgrade the facility. We’re talking massive upgrades—a brand-new gym and training center, hot and cold tub rooms, two rinks, an entire corridor of media rooms. It’s probably the best hockey facility in the entire country.

I make my way to the coaches’ offices, reaching Jensen’s door at the same time as a man exits. He looks like he’s in his early forties, with hair that’s more gray than brown and blue eyes that give me a once-over when they land on me.

“I feel like I know you,” the man accuses.

I blink. “Oh. Maybe? I’m not sure.”

“Do you know a kid named Hudson? Fitzgerald?”

“No…”

“Yeah, I guess you wouldn’t.” He’s squinting at me now. “You don’t look like a freshman. Hudson’s a freshman.”

“At Briar?”

“No, he goes to UConn.”

*Then why would I know him?* I want to yell.

This entire exchange is baffling and uncomfortable, so I inch toward Coach’s door with a hasty, “Anyway, gotta go.”

I make my escape, knocking on the door even as I’m already opening it. Coach is at his desk, glancing up at my entrance.

“Coach, hey.”

“What is it, Larsen?”

“You spoke to my father,” I respond in a flat tone, because he didn’t mention anything about it at practice this morning.

He nods. “Come in.”

I close the door, then sit in the uncomfortable chair in front of his desk. There is no way Coach is going to offer comfortable visitors’ chairs. The man doesn’t want visitors. Everything about him, from his no-nonsense buzz cut to his perpetual scowl, screams *stay the hell away from me*.

I slump into the chair. “I’m sorry, Coach. I didn’t know he was going to do this. I tried to talk him out of it, but he wouldn’t listen.” I shake my head at Jensen. “Why would you agree to it?”

“The dean didn’t give me much of a choice. Besides, I’ve dealt with bigger nuisances, and I run a clean program with good men. We have nothing to hide.”

“I know, but it’s annoying.”

“There is very little about life that isn’t annoying, kid.”

My gaze flits toward the photographs on the shelves behind his desk, all featuring smiling members of his family. Jensen sports a smile in some of them too, which is, frankly, shocking.

“I don’t know,” I point out, nodding toward the frames. “Your life seems pretty good.”

Pretty *great*, in fact. He has two daughters. A couple of grandkids. A wife who’s still smoking hot even in her sixties.

“Trust me, they annoy me too. My daughter Taylor is throwing my granddaughter a unicorn party for her tenth birthday. Morgan insisted on it.” He scowls. “Everyone has to wear horns.”

I swallow a laugh. “Don’t worry. I think you could rock a unicorn horn,” I say helpfully.

He glares at me. “And then to add to the annoyance dogpile, my grandson decided he’s coming to Briar next year.”

That makes me raise a brow. “You mean Connelly?”

AJ Connelly is one of the most talked-about players in high school. That kid’s getting a full ride and four years of ego stroking at any college he chooses. Briar would be lucky to have him.

“I heard the NHL was trying to butter him up. He’s not going right to the pros?” I ask.

“No. My son-in-law wants him to earn a degree and let the NCAA develop him before throwing him to the wolves.”

I love how casually Jensen just drops this. The son-in-law in question is Jake Connelly. Literally a living legend. He led Edmonton to more than one Stanley Cup win.

“I’m confused. You don’t want AJ to come here?”

“Oh, I’d love to have him. This kid is faster than his dad ever was.”

Holy shit. That is saying a lot. Jake Connelly’s nickname was “Lightning on Skates” back in the day.

“I still don’t see the annoying part.”

“My goddamn son-in-law!” Jensen grumbles. “And don’t get me started on my daughter. Those two are going to be back-seat coaching the entire time.”

I snicker. “I mean, there are worse problems to have.”

“Yes,” he says, albeit grudgingly. “But you asked how life is annoying. That’s fucking how.”

“Honestly, Coach…” My shoulders once again sag in defeat. “I think I’d rather have your problems than an egomaniac dad who cares more about his image than his son’s privacy.”

# CHAPTER SIX

**B:**

Have you been with two guys before?

**CHARLIE:**

No.

**B:**

A virgin, huh?

**CHARLIE:**

Hardly.

**B:**

A three-way virgin then.

**CHARLIE:**

Yes.

**B:**

Do you like the idea of being with two guys?

**CHARLIE:**

Honestly, the mechanics of it freak me out.

**B:**

Ha! How so?

**CHARLIE:**

Like… There's just so many moving parts. I'm very good at multitasking, though, so I think I could probably be good at it. I should put that on my résumé. Skills: good at threesomes.

**B:**

"Proficient at taking one dick from behind and another in the mouth."

**CHARLIE:**

Oh my God, I can't believe you just said that.

**B:**

What? It's classic threesome pose. A staple.

**CHARLIE:**

Oh, there are threesome staples, eh?

**B:**

Oh yeah. That one is called spit-roasting.

**CHARLIE:**

Oh my God.

**B:**

I feel like you're blushing right now.

**CHARLIE:**

No.

**B:**

Are you lying?

**CHARLIE:**

Yes.

So did you open this account just so you and your buddy could find willing girls who will let you bang them at the same time?

**B:**

Sounds very sleazy when you phrase it that way. But honestly, yeah, it seemed like a good way to talk to someone ahead of time and find out where their head is at before we decide to meet up.

**B:**

So far, it's just been chatting, most of which has gone nowhere. We've never met anyone off this app. Have you?

**CHARLIE:**

Twice. First time was great. He looked like his pictures. Chemistry was there. Second time was an unmitigated disaster.

**B:**

Well, now you have to elaborate. What happened? Micropenis? Smelled like ass?

**CHARLIE:**

Funny you use the word ass.

**B:**

Awww he wanted to stick it in your ass and sweet Charlie was horrified at the thought?

**CHARLIE:**

No, he wanted me to stick it in *his* ass. Which, fine, to each their own. I support everyone's kinks. I mean, I'm on here

talking to a guy who has threesomes with his friend. But that didn't appeal to me at all. I don't want to be the one penetrating.

**B:**

Then you're in luck! I am happy to penetrate you.

**CHARLIE:**

This is the craziest conversation I've ever had.

**B:**

It's a lot more entertaining than other ones I've had on here, that's for sure.

**B:**

By the way, anything you say in this chat—Lars is going to read too.

**CHARLIE:**

Oh, is that so?

**B:**

Yep. It's his profile too.

**CHARLIE:**

Tell me the hottest sexual encounter you guys have had together.

**B:**

Sorry, baby girl. We don't kiss and tell.

**CHARLIE:**

Fine. I guess I respect that.

**B:**

But I can tell you what I want to do to *you*. I already have a whole fantasy about you.

**CHARLIE:**

I'm listening…

**B:**

It involves those panties you're wearing in your second pic.

**CHARLIE:**

Hold on. I don't even remember which ones they are. Let me look.

**CHARLIE:**

Purple. You like purple?

**B:**

It's not the purple—it's the bow. Lars can confirm how much I love bows on a woman. They look so fucking innocent.

**CHARLIE:**

Ooh, someone has a little virginal fantasy.

**B:**

Maybe.

**CHARLIE:**

Okay, stop teasing. Tell me the fantasy.

**B:**

So…I'm just getting out of the shower when Lars calls me into his room. He says he has a present for me. I approach the doorway and see you in the center of the room, with Lars behind you. I start to walk in, but he stops me. Tells me he needs to unwrap my present first. So I stand there and

watch as he starts undressing you. He unzips your skirt. He takes off your top. Undoes your bra. He takes everything off except those panties. I'm so hard it hurts now, but he still won't let me come closer. He moves behind you again, wrapping his arms around you to cup your tits. Then he drags his hands down your body until his fingers reach that goddamn bow. He plays with it, looking mighty pleased with himself as he offers you up to me. You look at me, waiting to see what I'm going to do next.

**CHARLIE:**

And what are you going to do next?

# CHAPTER SEVEN

## CHARLOTTE

*More like a Greek tragedy*

THERE'S THIS HOCKEY GUY IN MY CLIMATE POLICY ELECTIVE WHO thinks he's charming, but really, he's just obnoxious and full of himself. His name is Beckett. Of course it's Beckett.

And because the universe has a twisted sense of humor, we *always* arrive at the social sciences building at the same time. I swear he's stalking me. Fine. Probably not. He probably likes showing up ten minutes early every Tuesday morning, same as me. If I weren't in a toxic relationship with my schedule, I'd adjust my own habits and arrive fifteen minutes early or five minutes later. But I'm a ten-minutes-early girl, and no hockey player will ever make me compromise my principles.

Still, my least favorite part of the morning is reaching the limestone steps at the same time as him. The guy is more good-looking than he deserves to be, with blond hair, devilish gray eyes, and a broad frame always encased in denim and a black-and-silver hockey jacket.

He always flashes me a dimpled smile, and then, without fail, every single time I walk up, I'm ambushed with—

"Morning, sugar puff."

Because one day, one fucking time, I ate a sugar puff.

And I haven't even eaten one since! It was just a new pastry that the bakery in the student center had been advertising at the beginning of the semester. I kept walking by these signs with a picture of an oversize doughball shimmering with white sugar granules. It looked so delicious but horrifying at the same time, because it's a literal sphere of dough and sugar the size of a baseball, and I needed to know why it existed. So I went inside, and I bought one. I bought a fucking sugar puff. I brought it with me to this

building and walked to these steps, and I bit into it just as Mr. Hockey strode up. When he said hello, I could see how hard he was trying not to laugh at me, all the while feeling my entire face covered in sugar.

Something about his grin annoyed me, so I defensively blurted out, “It’s a sugar puff, okay?”

And to this day, I’ve hated him.

“Did you finish the carbon-pricing assignment?” he asks, his hair perfectly tousled like he just rolled out of bed looking like that.

“Yes.” I climb the steps, hoping he’ll get the hint, but he matches my pace.

“I sent mine in five minutes after midnight. You think she’ll still count it?”

He doesn’t sound overly concerned. I’m not concerned for him either. Our professor has the biggest crush on this guy. She makes googly eyes at him whenever she walks up to the lectern.

“You shouldn’t be submitting things at the last minute,” I tell him. “That’s a habit you need to break.” And I’m a massive hypocrite, because I turned my own paper in at 11:56 p.m.

But he doesn’t know that.

“Well, not everybody is as studious and punctual as you, sugar puff.”

“They could be if they made an effort, Ice Boy.”

I’ve spent a lot of time trying to find a nickname that bothers him as much as sugar puff bothers me, waiting to debut it at our next encounter. He has a faint Australian accent, so for a while, I was dipping into the Australia well. I’ve called him Dingo. Crikey. I tried Mr. Outback. Unfazed. So now I’ve moved on to hockey terminology.

Ice Boy is pretty lackluster. I accept this. I’m still workshopping.

“Kind of sounds like a superhero,” he says, thinking it over. “Ice Boy. I’m into it.”

“I’ll think of something else,” I grumble.

His phone vibrates in his hand as we approach the lecture hall. He checks the screen, then edges away from the doors. “See you in there.”

Ha. He wishes. The room has assigned seating by alphabetical order, which is a relief because it means I don’t have to sit with Agatha or our sorority sister Ciara. They’re in the front row with their B last names. As a K, I’m in the middle of the room, next to a redhead named Nikki Kepler.

I’m making my way to our row when a male voice says, “Hey, Char.”

I hide my reluctance and stop to greet Mitch. Of all the electives I could’ve picked this semester, I somehow wound up in a class with Ice Boy, Agatha, and my ex-boyfriend. It’s like the setup for a bad joke.

“Hey,” I answer, forcing a smile. “How’s it going?”

“Good.” He folds his arms against his chest, and while I suspect he’s trying to appear casual, the posture comes off combative.

For the past eight months, I’ve done my best to avoid conversing with him. Things didn’t end well between us, which makes every encounter with Mitch beyond awkward and often hostile.

This morning is no different.

I shift my feet as his dark eyes assess me. He’s lost a lot of weight since we were together, and he wasn’t exactly beefy before, so he’s giving off sickly Victorian prince now. What was that illness they were always coming down with back then? It was…consumption! Right. Mitch looks like he has that.

“Charlotte?” He sounds annoyed. “I asked how you’ve been.”

I blink out of my thoughts. “Oh, sorry. I’m great. Never been better.”

“Yeah?” He tips his head, a smirk forming. “Finally finished your exhaustive search?”

Confusion knits my brow. “Huh?”

“To find that one magical dick that can satisfy your uncontrollable needs.”

My mouth falls open. I shake my head, anger and disbelief warring inside me. “Fuck off, Mitch.”

“Jeez, relax. I was just kidding.” His arm snaps out when I try to walk away.

“Well, you’re not funny. And don’t touch me.”

I shrug his hand off me and stalk to my seat, inhaling slowly to calm myself. This is why I blocked his number after we broke up. Because of his snide little comments and total inability to accept that I hadn’t meant to hurt his fragile ego.

Sometimes I wonder if Mitch specifically wanted to date an Asian girl because he thought I’d be submissive or something. He never liked it when I argued with him or stood up for myself, and God forbid I have a high sex drive. Sex was only allowed when he was in the mood.

It must've really burst his tiny brain bubble when he realized I didn't quite live up to the stereotypes.

"Hey," I greet Nikki, taking my seat beside her.

She lifts her head from her phone. "Hey."

After sliding my laptop out of my bag and organizing my stuff, I pull out my own phone to check it for the hundredth time this morning.

My heart races as I wait for the BioRoots app to load. I sent the message to HLS315 on Sunday, and I know he read it because there's a little green checkmark at the corner indicating it was opened. He'll respond today. It's Tuesday. Clearly, he needed a couple days to let my message marinate, and now he's going to—

Zero messages.

Disappointment lodges in my throat. Damn it. Why isn't he responding?

My brain scrambles to reframe things. It's only Tuesday. Some people require more than a couple days to invite a brand-new sister into their lives.

He'll totally respond tomorrow.

I'm opening my laptop with my notes document on deck for the lecture when a disturbance in the force—otherwise known as my seatmate's dreamy sigh—has me lifting my head from the screen. From the corner of my eye, I see Ice Boy.

He swaggers down the aisle, while Nikki practically melts into her chair.

"Oh my God. He's like a Greek god or something."

I roll my eyes. "More like a Greek tragedy."

As if on cue, Mr. Too-Hot-For-His-Own-Good reaches his seat two rows below us and stops to unzip his jacket. He has a whole routine going, like he's a magician about to reveal a rabbit from his hat. Only instead of a rabbit, he reveals a well-defined arm as he shrugs out of his coat. I swear Nikki sighs like she's watching a scene from a romance movie.

"I want to be that coat."

I snort.

Beckett slings the coat over the back of his chair. Then he glances over his shoulder and catches both of us staring. A slow, lazy grin spreads across his face, and he raises an eyebrow.

"Glad you're enjoying the show, ladies," he calls out, loud enough for half the lecture hall to hear. "Especially you, sugar puff. I can take the shirt off next if you want?"

My face flushes as a few students turn to look at us. Including Mitch, whose lips thin in a slight frown.

Nikki swivels her head toward me. “Sugar puff? Do you know him? Oh my God, have you hooked up with him?”

“Ew. No.”

I direct a glare at Beckett, hoping my expression conveys how little I care about his stupid invitation. “Keep the shirt on, thanks,” I call back.

He grins harder, unbothered by my frosty demeanor. “Suit yourself.”

Nikki gapes at me like I just turned down an all-expenses-paid vacation to Fiji. “How are you not into this?”

“Into what? The self-absorbed jock show?” I ask, genuinely curious.

She shakes her head, exasperated with my lack of enthusiasm. “Not all jocks are self-absorbed, you know.”

“Right,” I answer with a smirk. “And not all puppies are cute.”

She huffs and turns back to her phone, but not before sneaking one last longing glance at Beckett.

I’m baffled by the general Briar population’s obsession with these hockey guys. But as the lecture starts and I try to focus on the professor’s words, I can’t help but notice how broad his shoulders are. Commanding. I take a deep breath, and my fingers hover over my keyboard.

Nope. Still unimpressed.

The next time he looks back at me, I make sure to glare extra hard, just in case he needs a reminder.

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To recap, I hate Tuesday mornings because of Beckett and his annoying sugar puffs.

But I hate Tuesday afternoons even more.

Normally, you’d say “cell and tissue engineering” and watch me orgasm at your feet. But this lab has been a total nightmare. In September, when I was still young and naive, I predicted this would be my favorite lab. Nearly two months later, I’m a grizzled old fool who prays for the semester to end.

My lab partner is an idiot.

Fine, maybe *idiot* is the wrong word. IQ wise, he’s probably intelligent because you don’t take a senior-level engineering lab if you’re stupid. So

perhaps the right word is…irritant. He's an irritant. Like birch during allergy season. I hate birch. And I hate George.

The guy seems determined to drag down my average by spending all his time mooning over his girlfriend, Lourdes. They even text each other in class, and she's only two workstations away. I feel bad for her lab partner. He and I are like soldiers in the same prisoner-of-war camp.

Except this afternoon, on a cloudy October day, something glorious happens.

"Charlotte," our TA, Monica, calls when I enter the fluorescent-lit laboratory. "You have a new lab partner."

I can barely contain my glee as I approach her workstation. "What? Since when?"

"The request was approved yesterday. Professor Bianchi deemed it necessary for the well-being of the student."

My brow furrows. "The well-being?"

She glances around to make sure nobody is listening, then lowers her voice. "It was a mental health issue."

"Wait." I stare at her in horror-tinged confusion. "I'm sorry—is George alleging I'm a danger to his mental health?"

"Oh, no, no! Nothing like that."

"Then why—"

Monica waves a hand, a wry smile playing on her lips. "Just take the win, Charlotte. You know you hated working with him."

I shrug. Busted.

"You'll be paired with Will for the rest of the semester."

She gestures to the table where Lourdes and Will usually work. I don't know anything about the guy other than he's a fellow senior and another hockey jock. He wears the same black-and-silver jacket as Beckett from Climate Policy, with the Briar U logo and two crisscross hockey sticks over the left breast.

I don't know a thing about the sport, and since my only example of a hockey guy comes from Beckett, I just hope this one spends more time working than flirting.

At the very least, I'm praying he's an upgrade from George.

I slide into the chair next to him and set my bag on the floor beneath our table, next to his backpack.

“Hi,” I greet him. “I’m Charlotte.”

“Will.” His voice is deeper than I expected. I realize I’ve never actually heard him speak.

His gaze sweeps over me, so I give him a once-over in return, because fair game. He has those classically good looks that most guys would kill for. Symmetrical features, straight nose, great jawline. And although his clean-shaven face and easy smile lend him that all-American vibe, he also has the jock build that fits my hookup criteria. But I’m not going to hook up with my lab partner, no matter how cute he is.

His brown eyes, intense and focused, seem to pierce right through me, revealing both intelligence and a hint of mischief.

“Why are you staring at me?” I ask him.

“Sorry, I was trying to figure out if that’s a beauty mark or a poppy seed over your lip. I didn’t want to be all, *hey, you have a poppy seed on your face* and then it turns out to be a beauty mark. I didn’t want to embarrass you.”

“It’s a mole.”

“See? Well, now I’m glad I didn’t say anything.”

I snicker. People are still filing in, but I’ve yet to spot our former lab partners.

“Do you know what that’s about?” I ask, gesturing to my old table, which sits empty.

Will grins. “George didn’t fill you in?”

“I’ve never spoken a single word to George outside this lab. Why? You talk to Lourdes?”

“You’re so lucky. Lourdes made us exchange numbers on the first day, and she texts me at least once a week begging me to do her homework for her. She sent me a whole update last night. Basically, they can’t bear to be apart, and it’s affecting their work. They wrote a letter to the department head insisting that’s the reason they’re doing so poorly in this lab, and if they were partners, they’d be able to pass every assignment with flying colors, fueled by their love.”

I can’t help but laugh. “You’re lying.”

“Nope. She sent me a copy of the letter.”

“Oh my God. Text it to me *now*.”

He grins at me. “If you wanted my number, all you had to do was ask. Didn’t need an excuse.”

“That wasn’t an excuse. I really want to read this letter.”

“Trust me, you *need* to. It’s the most melodramatic nonsense I’ve ever read. Beautifully written, though. Which I guess isn’t surprising since Lourdes is a writer.”

“She is?”

“Sort of?” His lips twitch with humor. “She writes historical romance fan fiction. Or maybe it’s a historical adventure? I proofed one of them for her. It’s about Queen Elizabeth—the virgin—getting deflowered by Alexander the Great.”

“I’m no history whiz or anything, but didn’t those two live, like, two millennia apart?”

“Yup.”

“Okay then. I guess time knows no bounds in love and fanfic. Anyway, it’s probably a good idea to exchange numbers regardless. You’re my lab partner now.”

“Yet you didn’t do that with George…”

“He seemed like the kind of person who would abuse the privilege.”

“Oh, one hundred percent.”

“And you seem like the kind of guy who won’t do that.” I pause. “Despite being a jock.”

“Despite? What, you think jocks are more likely to abuse phone privileges?”

In my experience, absolutely. Some of the ones I’ve been with *still* send me lewd messages in the middle of the night hoping for a repeat. But Will seems like a normal, noncreepy guy, so I’m willing to take the chance.

When our former lab partners finally walk in, hand in hand, George catches me looking at him and stops at the table.

With a dramatic sigh, he rakes his hand through his frizzy brown hair. “I guess you heard.”

Somehow, I manage to mask my amusement. “I did.”

“It’s better this way, Charlotte. You’ll see.” He pats my shoulder and continues to our old station, sitting next to Lourdes.

Will snickers under his breath. “That was truly brave of him to switch lab partners right before midterms, knowing it would leave you devastated.”

“Heartbroken.”

We’re starting a new unit today. Monica emailed us the experiment instructions this weekend, and it sounds straightforward enough. We’re supposed to create a tissue scaffold and determine its ability to support cell growth.

I give Will a stern look. “This is your first test.”

“What am I being tested on?”

“How well you follow instructions. And whether you love my jokes.”

“Loving your jokes is a requirement?”

“To being a good lab partner, yes.”

We organize our supplies and go over the experiment. The first order of business is to prep the polymer solution needed to create the scaffold.

“Want to take the lead?” I offer.

He narrows his eyes. “Is this another test?”

“Obviously. Don’t screw this up.”

“But no pressure, right?”

Grinning, he pours the solution into the scaffold molds, which are going to be placed in a controlled environment where they can solidify and form the scaffold.

“Hey, Will,” I say as I watch him pour. He has steady hands. I like that. “What did the biologists name their son?”

“I don’t know, what?”

“Gene!” I’m unable to contain my laughter.

He groans, but when he lifts his gaze, I don’t miss the smile that’s crept onto his face. “That was terrible.”

“You entered into a formal agreement to love my jokes,” I remind him.

“I propose we amend the phrasing of *love* to *tolerate*.”

“Motion denied.”

He returns to concentrating on the task at hand. When I hear my phone buzz in my bag, hope explodes inside me. I *knew* I’d get a message from him today.

Noting that Will has everything under control, I fish out my phone and check the alert.

My excitement dissolves.

It’s not from BioRoots.

Once again, disappointment flutters through me, but it's not as crushing as before because the notification is another I've been awaiting. A message from one half of my abs sandwich. I think about this chat so often, it's starting to get embarrassing.

**LARS & B:**

Hit us up later tonight if you're around—B

My heart does a teeny flip. I've still only spoken to B, who told me he's the one with the blond hair and gray sweatpants. Which feels all wrong, because Lars fits the blond bill better with his Swedish name.

Then again, who's to say B doesn't have a Swedish name as well? Ooh! Like Bjorn.

I mean, if it's *not* his name, it is now.

I slip my phone into my bag, a small smile playing on my lips. Then I look over to find Will watching me.

"Who was that?" He raises an eyebrow.

"Nobody. Just a friend."

"Just a friend who makes you smile like that?"

I feel a blush creep up my cheeks. "Shut up."

"Boyfriend?" he guesses.

"No."

"You're blushing."

"No, I'm not."

"Your face is bright red."

"Whatever. Get back to our scaffolds, or I'll ask to work with George again."

He laughs. "All right, I'll drop it."

We return to our work. It's quiet for a while, until Will breaks the silence.

"So…if a plant is depressed, do you think its other leaves photosympathize with it?" he asks with a straight face.

I groan. "Oh my God. That was atrocious."

"Hey, just trying to keep up with the queen."

After class, we walk out of the lab together into the usual buzz of chatter filling the hallway. We won't be able to seed the cells until tomorrow, since

the process we're using for scaffold fabrication takes up to a day for the solvent to evaporate and everything to solidify.

As we head out of the building, we make plans for Will to pop in to check on the scaffold in the morning. It's windy outside, and the late-afternoon breeze snakes underneath my hair and whips it into my face.

I shove it away in time to catch sight of a few hockey guys at the bottom of the front steps. One of them calls out to Will, and I stifle a groan when I realize it's Beckett from my morning class. Ugh, I hope he doesn't notice me.

Sadly, any hopes of flying under his radar are squashed when another gust of wind buffets into me and lifts up my skirt.

I smack the gray wool skirt back down, but not before I'm subjected to an exaggerated wolf whistle from Ice Boy and a few grins from his friends.

"Control your dogs," I grumble to Will.

He gives a sheepish look. "I mean…your skirt just flew up."

"Not that you noticed," I say dryly.

"Of course not. I would never notice the color underwear you're wearing." As he ambles down the stairs, I hear him coughing, "Pink."

I'm pretty sure I'm blushing again, but I manage to keep my composure as I pass the group of hockey players at the base of the stairs.

"Later, sugar puff," comes Beckett's drawl, followed by chuckles from his friends.

I keep walking without turning around.

Dear Dr. Eckhart,

We hope this letter finds you in the best of health and high spirits. We write to you today not just as students but as two souls irrevocably intertwined in both academic ambition and profound love.

As you know, the rigorous demands of the STEM program tests both our intellectual capacities and our resilience as human beings. We are proud to say that we have risen to the occasion in every way possible. However, there is one aspect of our academic journey that has been a source of considerable distress: the separation imposed upon us by the current assignment of lab partners in Cell and Tissue Engineering with Professor Bianchi.

Our relationship is not an impediment to our learning but an asset. It's the very foundation on which our academic success is built. When we work together, our intellects flourish in ways that defy the ordinary. Because of this, we ask you to reconsider the current assignment of lab partners and allow us to work together going forward.

To further substantiate our plea, we have attached a letter from our therapist, a credentialed and respected professional, who has astutely observed the symbiotic relationship between our love and our academic performance. Our therapist attests to the fact that our emotional well-being is intrinsically linked to our ability to work together. The mutual support we provide each other is unparalleled, and it fuels a kind of intellectual synergy that results in work of the highest caliber.

According to this expert, our separation would be detrimental to our mental health and could potentially lead to a significant decline in our grades—a scenario that would be devastating not only for us but for the reputation of this esteemed department.

Thank you for your understanding and consideration.

With the deepest respect and hope,
Lourdes and George
Forever United in Love and Learning

# CHAPTER EIGHT

## WILL

*The mysterious Lars*

I'M STRIPPING OUT OF MY SWEATSHIRT WHEN A TEXT FROM MY NEW LAB partner lights my phone. Tossing the hoodie on my bed, I tap the notification and grin.

***CHARLOTTE:***

This Lourdes and George letter is a work of art. Pure genius.

I take off my pants and kick them away before responding.

***ME:***

I told you. Lourdes has skills.

***CHARLOTTE:***

Do they seriously have a therapist??

***ME:***

Nah, I think they got one of those unlicensed online shrinks to write a letter on their behalf.

***CHARLOTTE:***

OMG and the line about the therapist observing the symbiotic relationship between their love and academic performance. It's my favorite part.

***ME:***

My fave is the sign-off. Forever United in Love and Learning.

***CHARLOTTE:***

So brilliant. And it worked! Professor Bianchi actually reassigned us.

Naked, I stride into the hall bathroom and turn on the shower. Beckett is out with some of our teammates tonight, but I was too tired and lazy to hit up the bar. Besides, we have an early practice tomorrow, and I don't want to piss off Coach by showing up hungover. Unlike Beck, I don't bounce back as easily after a night of drinking.

Still, when Case texts as I'm getting out of the shower, asking if I want to chill, I tell him to come over. Hanging out with Case is a hell of a lot more convenient than putting on real clothes and trekking to Malone's. Case lives down the street from us, sharing a house with Trager and two

sophomores on the team, so in less than five minutes, he's walking through my front door.

"Hey," I say, poking my head out of the kitchen. "Want something to drink?"

"Water's good." Like me, Case doesn't go hard on the drinking during the hockey season.

I meet him in the living room with two bottles of water, tossing him one. Case and I have been friends since freshman year, but our paths had crossed dozens of times before that, as our high school teams faced off often over the years. I'm the one who introduced him to Gigi Graham, who attended the same high school as me.

And whom Case cheated on…but that's none of my business. I don't stick my nose in other people's sex lives. Besides, everything worked out for the best in the end. Case has moved on, and Gigi is married to Luke Ryder now. It's obvious she's happier with Ryder than she ever was with Case.

He slouches back on the chaise while I idly flip through channels on the TV. Beck and I don't even need cable—all we do is stream content anyway—but I like knowing that my father is paying for this huge cable bundle that we barely use other than for sports channels.

"Have you talked to her lately?" Case asks.

"Who?" I genuinely don't know who he's talking about.

"Gigi."

I don't miss the wistful note in his voice.

Oh.

Okay then.

Guess I was wrong about everyone having moved on.

"What?" he says awkwardly. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

"You were at their wedding, bro."

A frown knits his brow. "What does that—I'm not still into her."

"You had a weird tone when you said her name," I say.

"I mean, fuck. I'm not going to lie. I miss her sometimes. We don't speak anymore."

I nod slowly. "Probably for the best, don't you think? She's married."

"I know. It's just…" He trails off.

For a minute, the only sound is the muffled voices from the TV. Then he speaks again, quieter this time.

“I regret it. All the fucking time.”

“The BJ?”

He sighs. “The BJ.”

Of all my friends, Case is the last person I would’ve ever expected to cheat on a girlfriend.

“I think about it a lot. Like, what if I hadn’t messed up? What if I hadn’t gotten loaded and made out with that girl? What if I’d stopped her when she started unzipping my pants? I keep wondering how things would be different if I hadn’t been such an idiot.”

I don’t say anything. There’s nothing to say. He fucked up big-time and lost one of the best women he’ll ever know. It feels cruel to rub it in, so I just wait for him to continue.

“I was stupid, man. I threw away something good because I got scared or bored or whatever the hell was wrong with me. And now she’s happy with someone else. And I’m happy for her, really. But sometimes…it feels like there’s this whole parallel life out there, one where I didn’t screw things up.”

I smirk at him, trying to lighten the mood. “See? This is why we need time travel. So you can go back, slap yourself in the face, and not be an idiot.”

He chuckles, but it’s a hollow sound.

We lapse into silence again.

“What about you?” he asks, changing the subject. “You ever think about settling down?”

“Nah, not right now. But someday, I guess. When I’m older and wiser.”

“So never?” he cracks.

“Ha ha. I’m just saying, there’s no rush. I want to enjoy my life, have fun. But yes, eventually, I want something serious. Just gotta find the right girl.”

Case slides lower on the chaise, propping himself up on his elbows. He’s in one of his rare serious moods, the kind where he actually opens up instead of deflecting with jokes.

“So…uh…you and Beckett. You guys seem pretty close these days.”

I can’t help but laugh at his diplomatic tone. “Are you asking if I’m gay?”

He grins sheepishly. “It crossed my mind.”

“I’m not. But…” I hesitate for a second before continuing.

I’ve never spoken with Case about this stuff before. Ryder and Shane know because they’re Beckett’s boys, but I haven’t really talked to my own friends about it, the Briar crew before the Eastwood guys came over.

“Beck and I aren’t into each other like that, but sometimes we…share.” I shift awkwardly. “Women, that is. It’s just, ah, something we do.”

Case rolls his eyes at me. “No kidding. It’s not exactly a secret, you know. People talk.”

“It’s not something we advertise, but we don’t really hide it either. People can think what they want.”

He purses his lips in thought. “So no jealousy? No weirdness?”

“Nah,” I say, shaking my head. “It’s not like that. We both know what we’re getting into, and the girls do too. It’s just fun. No feelings, no drama.”

“As long as everyone’s cool with it, I guess.” But he wrinkles his forehead.

“What?”

“I don’t know. Just doesn’t seem like something you’d be okay with. You’re, like, the poster child for good boy.”

“I fought it for a while,” I confess. “I thought there was something wrong with me that I enjoyed that kind of stuff. But now I’m trying not to overthink it. Keeping things light, you know? No reason to complicate shit if you don’t have to.”

“Sure, but what about down the line? You ever think about how that’s going to work if you do settle down?”

I shrug as if it’s of no concern to me. But I’ve thought about it often. And it is.

Concerning, that is.

I don’t want to be single forever. Eventually I do want to settle down, get married. I don’t know how I feel about having kids—I’ve never really seen myself as a father. I don’t think fatherhood is something I’d be good at or enjoy. But I want the rest of it. I want a wife, a partner, someone to grow old with.

I suppose all I can do is hope that I'll get this out of my system. The group sex. The excitement I feel when Beckett and I are teaming up to make a woman whimper with pleasure. I like having him there. I like it when he watches. I like it all.

Beckett doesn't want a girlfriend, let alone marriage. The notion probably makes him nauseous. I've never been dumped, so I don't know what it's like, but I've also never loved a girl enough to care whether she dumped me.

I was shocked, not gonna lie, when I realized how deeply Beckett loved his ex. The guy was head over heels for her. Worshipped her for four years, his entire high school experience, and she ripped his heart out.

I don't blame him for doing a one-eighty once he hit college. He's a fuckboy now and utterly unapologetic about it. He doesn't want to be in love. Doesn't want a serious relationship.

But I'm not Beck. I *do* want that. And I know that once I find someone, a woman I feel the same way about that Beckett felt about his ex, I can't have my best friend be a fixture in our bedroom. No woman would ever be okay with that, and I wouldn't fault her for it.

"I guess I'll cross that bridge when I get to it," I finally say. "For now, I'm just enjoying life. I'm not in a hurry to figure everything out."

"I hear you." Case chuckles. "Honestly, I sort of admire the way you can keep things so simple. I'm over here still beating myself up over the past, and you're out there living."

"We all deal with shit differently, man. Just don't let the past mess with your future, you know?"

Things are starting to feel a bit too heavy, so we put on a video game, the latest release from Orcus Games, which features the most jaw-dropping artwork I've ever seen in an RPG. Hats off to the designer.

Case heads home a couple hours later, but I keep playing until my phone lights up with a message. I pause the game to check it, discovering it's from the girl Beck's been chatting with.

I scan their chat history, and my dick thickens. Okay. Yeah. That's hot.

Her newest message says, **Hey, either of you around?**

Setting aside the game controller, I lean back against the couch cushions with my phone in hand. I figure it's as good a time as any to introduce myself.

**ME:**

Yup. It's Lars.

**CHARLIE:**

Ooooh! I finally meet the mysterious Lars.

**ME:**

Mysterious?

**CHARLIE:**

Totally. Where have you been hiding?

**ME:**

Nowhere, really. Just haven't been on my phone much. I'm here now. Catch me up. What kind of lies has B been spreading about me?

When we created this profile, Beck and I agreed not to reveal our real names unless we decide to meet in person. Not that our "aliases" are espionage worthy. All one of us has to do is slip up and say we play hockey, and anyone could easily put two and two together, realize Lars is short for Larsen, and connect the dots from there.

Still, better safe than sorry. You can never be sure who you're talking to online these days. For all we know, this Charlie chick is a fifty-year-old man named Aldo. Or a bot. Or a black widow trying to lure us to our deaths.

**CHARLIE:**

We haven't spoken about you much, to be honest. We've been…busy.

**ME:**

Oh, I know. I just scrolled through your messages.

**CHARLIE:**

See anything you like?

**ME:**

All of it. I fucking liked all of it.

**CHARLIE:**

LOL You're welcome :)

**CHARLIE:**

So who convinced who to set up this joint account? I bet B convinced you.

I grin at the screen. Good guess, Charlie. But I'm curious to hear her reasoning, so I quickly type a response.

**ME:**

Why do you say that?

**CHARLIE:**

You sound more…reserved. He sounds more free. Like he's down for anything.

**ME:**

Pretty much. I didn't need much convincing, though. Threesomes are fun af.

**CHARLIE:**

Do you guys hook up too? Like on your own?

**ME:**

No.

**CHARLIE:**

Do you want to?

I think it over. If she'd asked me that question a year ago, I probably would've felt uncomfortable. Brushed it off with an "of course not" and a

joke.

Now, I consider it for real.

I've seen Beck's cock enough times. It doesn't scare me. But I've never thought about sucking it. Never craved it in my ass. Even with those images planted in my head now, my dick doesn't so much as twitch.

**ME:**

I don't know. Probably not?

**CHARLIE:**

*Probably* not?

**ME:**

It's not something I've given much thought to. I guess it depends on the situation. On how I feel in the moment. If the three of us were hooking up and he grabbed my dick, I might not push his hand away.

**CHARLIE:**

Fair enough. What about my hand? Would you push that away?

**ME:**

I don't think I have that kind of willpower. Although I'd probably prefer your mouth.

**CHARLIE:**

And what's B doing while you're enjoying my mouth?

**ME:**

Well…obviously…he's enjoying your pussy.

Three dots pop up to indicate she's typing. I absently reach down and rub my erection over my sweats.

**CHARLIE:**

I’m so turned on right now.

**ME:**

Yeah? Did that make you wet?

**CHARLIE:**

Soaked.

I’m suddenly very grateful that I decided to stay home tonight.

# CHAPTER NINE

## BECKETT

*Leave my Little alone*

"I MEAN, IF COACH SAYS IT'S ALL RIGHT, THEN TAKE HIM AT HIS WORD for it."

"We both know he has no choice." There's a loud clatter from the kitchen.

Will is pissed. I don't blame him. His dad's TV crew showed up at our opponent's rink tonight to interview Coach Jensen before our away game, which obviously guaranteed Jensen would be in a foul mood before the first puck even dropped. Then they shot B-roll footage of our warm-up, enraging the Boston College coach, because it turned out they never asked anyone at BC if it was all right to film them.

Oh, and then we lost the game. So Will is doubly pissed.

If my parents were constantly sticking their noses in my life, I wouldn't be thrilled either. Luckily, my mum and dad are terrific people who are very good at minding their business. Will's dad, not so much.

I still haven't even met the guy, and Will has been living with me since the summer. It's late fall now. Not a single appearance from Mr. Congressman, though we did receive a gift basket as a housewarming gift. It was full of local jams and artisan breads, along with a typed message that some aide probably recited to the order taker at the jam shop.

Will's dad sounds like a total dickhead.

Meanwhile, Will's still clanging around in the kitchen like a toddler who just discovered pots and pans.

"Mate, what are you doing in there?" I call. "I thought you were getting your phone."

"I was. And then I saw the sink."

“Yeah, my bad.” It was my turn to do the dishes. “But we can do it in the morning.”

“No way. I’m making breakfast tomorrow. I need a clean kitchen when I cook.”

“So we’ll clean it later tonight when we get home.”

“We’ll be too drunk for that.”

“You are such a diva.”

“Fuck off. I’ll be, like, three minutes.”

I grin to myself. Will was such a choirboy when I met him. Now he tells me to fuck off on a regular basis. It’s great.

I flop down on the couch and pass the time by checking my messages. There’s a text from a cute sophomore I met on campus a few days ago, but I’m more interested in my ongoing chat with Charlie. I open it to find that Will has finally gotten acquainted with our match.

Leaning back, I scroll through their chat thread, raising a brow when one message catches my eye.

*If the three of us were hooking up and he grabbed my dick, I might not push his hand away.*

Interesting. It never even occurred to me to grab Larsen’s dick. He’s straight as an arrow. So am I, for the most part. I’m just more open-minded than most, and nothing gets me hotter than heightening someone else’s arousal. So if it was something Charlie fantasized about, then who knows, I might not push his dick away.

I lick my lips and do a little rearranging below as their conversation becomes full-on X-rated. Speaking of fantasies. Look at that. Charlie has a car fantasy. Our kinky, sexy girl wants to get drilled on the hood of a sports car.

I’m sitting there with a semi when Will appears in the doorway.

“What’s wrong with you?” he asks, noting my pained expression.

I hold up my phone. “I see you’ve met Charlie.”

A sheepish grin touches his lips. “I like her.”

“Yeah, same.”

“Yet you haven’t asked to meet her in person,” he points out.

“Neither have you.”

Will shrugs. “She’s not ready for it.”

“Exactly.”

I swear we share a brain. I feel like we're one person sometimes. Or maybe not one person so much as complementary persons. We've got a nice balance going on. He can be intense. I'm too laid-back. He likes to call the shots when we've got a girl in the bedroom. I'm perfectly cool following directions. "Eat her out, Beck." "Fuck her from behind." Don't mind if I do.

I'm dying to meet Charlie. She's funny. Cute as hell. I appreciate that she types in full sentences and uses punctuation. I'm not one of those "R u up? I'm so hot 4 u bb" sort of guys. In the age of autocorrect and voice-to-text, there's really no reason to be typing in abbreviations.

"Car's here," Will says, checking his phone.

I haul myself off the couch and follow him to the front hall. It's too windy to walk tonight, so we decided to play high rollers and order a car. Will can afford it. His dad's credit card pays for everything. I was starting to feel like some broke-ass loser every time Will pulled out that card—he won't let me pay for groceries, gas, all the streaming subscriptions—but I think Will enjoys sticking it to his father. I'm surprised the congressman hasn't started paying *my* phone bill yet.

The car drops us in front of Malone's exactly four and a half minutes later. The bar is loud, crowded, and chaotic when we walk inside—just the way I like it. Bodies fill every inch of space, forcing me to elbow my way through to create a path for us. Whenever a hockey fan spots us, we're greeted with backslaps and cheers, which is nice considering we sucked absolute balls tonight. The best thing I did on the ice was smash a Boston College d-man into the plexi to create a rebound for Shane, who scored the only goal of the night. We still got our asses handed to us, 3–1.

The air in here smells like beer, sweat, and faint traces of perfume and cologne. Passing one couple, I make the mistake of taking a breath at that moment and end up inhaling a gust of the guy's musky bodywash. Jesus. Everything in moderation, mate.

A glance at the bar shows a line snaked around it, people waiting impatiently for their turn to order.

"I'll grab a pitcher," Will offers, raising his voice over the music. "Go find the boys."

"On it."

Every booth and table is taken, occupied mostly by Briar students. I wander through the main space toward the adjoining room that houses a

few pool tables and another long line of booths. I scan the crowd for my teammates. I always look for Patrick first because his bright-ginger head is easiest to spot. Jackpot. He's in the middle of the room, crammed into a booth with Nazzy, Nick Lattimore, and a few other teammates.

I push my way toward my boys but slow when I glimpse a familiar face. Charlotte from class.

Our eyes lock, and she frowns at me. I respond with a grin. This girl hates me for no good reason other than I embarrassed her on the first day. Which, all right, I guess is a good reason—if I intended to embarrass her. I didn't realize she was allergic to jokes. Instead of laughing, she turned beet red while trying to scrub sugar off her face.

I would've dropped it, but annoying Charlotte Kingston is honestly the most exciting part of Climate Policy. Those lectures are beyond boring. In fact, nearly all my classes are comprised of long, boring-ass lectures instead of fieldwork. I thought as an environmental science major, I'd be doing cool shit like hanging off windmills and single-handedly saving beached whales.

I was lied to.

"Sugar puff," I say, nodding in greeting.

"Ice Boy."

It's too bad she's always scowling at me, because she's actually incredibly hot. I heard her tell someone she was born in South Korea but adopted as a baby and raised in Connecticut. She certainly fits the Connecticut bill with the little sweater sets, the pleated skirts. I'm surprised she doesn't wear shiny Mary Jane shoes. But she prefers these little suede booties. Ankle length. Very proper of her, covering up her ankles. Wouldn't want the men to get too horny and whip out their dicks at the sight of them.

I'm about to keep walking when her companion catches my attention. "Hey, I know you," I say with a grin.

The girl sitting across from Charlotte is a slender brunette with big blue eyes and a smattering of freckles on her dainty nose. But her cute girl-next-door face is belied by a body that won't quit, wrapped in tight jeans and a tiny crop top that shows off a flat stomach and perky tits.

"Go away," Charlotte chides. "Leave my Little alone."

"Your Little?" I raise a brow.

"I told you not to call me that in public," the brunette sighs.

"Blake," I say, her name coming back to me.

She rode with us to a party a few weeks ago. She came with Diana Dixon, Shane's girlfriend.

Charlotte's suspicious eyes shift between us. "You two know each other?"

"Gigi's cousin, right?" I say to the brunette, ignoring Sugar Puff's death glare.

"Family friends," Blake corrects. "We're not actually related."

"Your dad is John Logan," I accuse.

She looks amused. "Why do you say that as if I've committed some sort of crime?"

"I'm just saying, how dare you be raised by that man? He should be my dad."

"You can have him," she says graciously. "He's super overprotective."

"I think I'd be cool with John Logan protecting me. I could curl up in his arms and bask in all that hockey greatness."

Charlotte speaks up, annoyed. "We're sort of in the middle of something here. Can you just…" She makes a little skedaddle gesture with her hand.

"One of these days, you're gonna stop being mean to me," I tell her.

"I'm really not being mean."

I turn back to Blake. "Normally, I would do your dad a solid and not leave you at the mercy of a bunch of horny guys at a sports bar dressed like that, because you're either leaving here with a boyfriend or a one-night stand. But you're with Charlotte, who I'm pretty sure is a man repellent. So…"

"Ha ha." Sugar Puff gives a big, fake laugh. "Go away, Ice Boy."

"Yes, Your Majesty." I wink at her, then keep going toward my booth.

# CHAPTER TEN

# CHARLOTTE

## *Super Magnums*

"THEY'RE AN ACQUIRED TASTE," BLAKE TELLS ME.

"Who?"

"Hockey players. They can be very annoying, but they usually make up for it with oodles of charm."

"I mean, he *thinks* he's charming…" I nod in the direction Beckett Dunne went.

"You might be the only person who is immune to it then." She laughs and brings her straw to her lips, taking a sip of iced tea.

I offered to buy her a beer. Hell, she could have bought it herself, seeing as how they let her in here without even checking her ID. But Blake admitted she's not much of a drinker. Neither am I, on account of the hot flashes it gives me. Like I'm going through fucking menopause.

Ergo, she's sipping on iced tea, and I'm sipping on a Coke. Just two wild gals partying it up on Saturday night. I would've taken her to the diner, but it's closed tonight for a private party.

"Are *you* immune to his charms?" I ask Blake, narrowing my eyes at the freshman.

She offers a shrug. "I think he's hot."

I grumble under my breath. Traitor.

"Come on, Charlotte. You know he's hot."

"Objectively, yes."

"Oh, fuck off," she laughs. "Subjectively too. Beckett Dunne is gorgeous."

Fine. She's not wrong. He's tall, athletic. He's got all that tousled blond hair. Those striking gray eyes, forever glinting with mischief. The cocky

smile and killer jawline.

“Don’t get sucked in by his charm,” I caution. “He seems like the kind of guy who breaks hearts everywhere he goes.”

“Eh, he’s too old for me. My dad would literally murder me if I went out with a senior. One time, he heard me telling my mom that I think Gigi’s brother Wyatt is cute, and he almost had a heart attack.”

“Does Wyatt go here?”

“No, I think he’s in Nashville now. He’s a tortured musician.” She sighs. “Speaking of hot.”

Ugh, that does sound hot.

And *why* are we such walking clichés? Why do women always go for the brooding bad boys? I suppose it’s because we want to fix them. Tame them. But haven’t we learned our lesson after centuries of anecdotal evidence? These guys can’t be fixed. They’re walking red flags.

“So yeah, no seniors for me. Or hockey players.” She pauses. “Not anymore.” She’s trying to hide a smile as she takes another sip.

“Not anymore?” I prompt.

“I lost my virginity to one,” she confesses. “Last year.”

Ha. Knew it. “Was it good?”

“Shockingly good.”

“Lucky. My first time sucked,” I admit. “I was wound up so tight, terrified that my parents were going to come home early from their anniversary spa weekend. I couldn’t relax, so I was just lying there, every muscle in my body tense, and the gentler he tried to be, the more stressed I became, until finally I blurted out, *just get it over with already!*”

Blake bursts out laughing. “Stop. You didn’t.”

“I totally did. But I didn’t mean get the *sex* over with. I just meant, get the penetration out of the way—”

She’s shaking with laughter now.

“—break the hymen, and let’s move on to the part that’s supposed to feel good.”

“Did it? I mean, did it at least feel good after the hymen part?” She’s still giggling.

“No. It was awful all around. The condom broke, and he only brought one.”

“You didn’t buy your own condoms just in case?”

“Oh, I did, but…”

“What?”

I bite my lip to suppress my humor. “They were too big for him.”

That gets me another howl. “What? *How*?”

“I bought the wrong kind,” I explain. I can’t stop my own giggle now. “So basically, when I was twelve, my older sister was dating this guy in high school, and I found a box of Super Magnums inside her nightstand drawer when I was snooping around—”

“*Super* Magnums?”

“Yeah, they’re twice the size of regular Magnums. Ava caught me snooping, and we ended up having a whole birds-and-bees talk, including how a woman should always have agency over her own birth control and keep her own box of condoms on hand. I asked why she bought that brand, and Ava said those were the most comfortable.” I snort. “I thought she meant more comfortable for *her*. I didn’t realize she meant more comfortable for his ginormous penis. So the day my parents left for their trip, I went to the drugstore and bought a box of Super Magnums. When the condom he brought broke, I gave him one of mine, and I swear to God, this thing was hanging off his penis like a loose plastic bag.”

Blake collapses on the tabletop, shuddering with laughter. “I *can’t*. I’m gonna pee my pants.”

“Okay, I gotta hear this punch line,” says a male voice.

I freeze in my seat when I realize it’s Isaac Grant.

What is he *doing* here?

The one and only time we hung out was in a clandestine parking lot. Like some sort of hostage exchange, if the hostages are bodily fluids. He knows better than to talk to me in public.

Only…he’s not looking at me.

“You left me on read,” he says in accusation.

I try very hard to keep my jaw shut. Huh? How do these two even know each other?

For a second, I feel prickle of jealousy and maybe a tiny bit insulted that he’s pretending not to know me. But when his gaze flicks toward me and he gives the most imperceptible of smiles, I realize he’s simply doing what I asked. *We don’t speak in public after this* was one of the rules I gave before I stuck my tongue in his mouth.

“Who’s this?” I ask Blake, playing dumb.

Now his smile fully takes hold. “I’m Isaac.”

“He plays football or something,” Blake tells me.

I clamp my teeth down on my lip. *Plays football or something*. This is literally the star of the team. Last season, he was voted MVP over the team’s quarterback.

Isaac narrows his eyes on her. “You wanna dance?”

“I don’t like to dance.”

“Cool. Then we can just stand there.”

“I don’t like to stand. Also”—she gestures toward me—“we’re in the middle of a conversation.”

“Come find me after your conversation?”

“Sure, I’ll text you.” With a pointed look, she waits for him to leave.

I can practically see a vein throbbing in his forehead as he stalks off.

I lean out of the booth to peek at where he’s headed. The game area, where two very large linesmen are circling one of the pool tables. They’re out of place here. Probably because this isn’t their place. Just because I don’t watch hockey doesn’t mean I’m not aware that Malone’s is the hockey bar. The bar down the street is where the football players gather, at least when they leave their houses. Those guys tend to keep their partying more discreet, while the hockey guys don’t care about being rowdy in public.

“What was that about?” I ask in amusement.

“My friend Diana introduced us at a frat party, and now he has a crush on me.”

I’ve never heard anyone sound more unenthused.

“You realize ninety-five percent of the women at this college—and probably general society—would be thrilled that Isaac Grant has a thing for them?”

“Ha! So you *do* know who he is?”

I roll my eyes. “Of course I do. There aren’t a lot of campus celebrities at Briar.”

Part of me is tempted to reveal I hooked up with him in his car last week, but I have a reputation to uphold. Charlotte Kingston is a respectable sorority girl whose mother is a former president. She is going to be a biomedical engineer. She has a 4.0 GPA.

She doesn’t indulge in dirty conversations before bed with two faceless hotties on an app. And she’s not going to admit to an almost one-night stand with a football player in a parking lot. Nope.

My phone chimes with a message from yet another person I’m not going to be telling Blake Logan about.

***DANTE:***

Are we still on for tonight?

“Sorry, I need to respond to this. Study group,” I lie as I unlock my phone.

***ME:***

Yeah. See you at midnight.

***DANTE:***

Can’t wait.

Blake’s watching me as I put the phone away.

“What?” I ask.

“Why do I get the feeling there’s a lot more to you than meets the eye?”

I lift a brow. “Doesn’t that apply to everybody?”

“I guess.” She twirls her straw around in her glass. “But I’m usually a good judge of character.”

*You’re eighteen*, I almost counter. But I realize how patronizing that sounds. Eighteen-year-olds can be good judges of character. Being three years older doesn’t make me wiser.

“I don’t know what to tell ya,” I say lightly. “I am exactly who I seem to be. Now let’s pick up where we left off before Isaac so rudely interrupted.”

“What were we talking about again?”

“Um… you lost your virginity to a hockey player. You have a crush on a tortured musician. Super Magnums. Oh, right, the reason we’re actually

here—whether you want to declare a communications major."

I steer us back to safety, because that's what I'm supposed to be doing with this girl. Mentoring.

We stay at Malone's for another hour, then grab the bill. Blake has to use the ladies' room before we go, so I make my way to the door to wait for her outside. Halfway to the exit, I spot a familiar figure. Will, my new lab partner.

He's the kind of guy who commands attention because of his height and build. The powerful shoulders tapering down to a lean waist. The muscles rippling beneath his blue long-sleeved shirt.

"Hey," he says, looking pleased to see me.

"Hey."

He leans closer so I can hear him over the music. "How did the samples look today?"

Will had hockey practice this morning, so I was tasked with going to the lab to check on our cells. We placed them in the bioreactor earlier in the week, a device that mimics the conditions that allow tissues to naturally develop, and now we're required to periodically remove samples and examine them under the microscope to assess our cells' overall viability on the scaffold.

"They looked really good!" I tell him. "A ton of them are attaching to the scaffold."

"Awesome." His expression strains. "Jesus, it's hot in here."

As he rolls up his sleeves, I can't help but notice his strong hands and the veins that run along his forearms. I imagine him gripping a hockey stick and slapping a bullet at the net, his entire body rippling with sheer power, and I suddenly see the appeal of hockey.

I'm surprised to feel a tingle between my legs. It's too bad I don't have time to hit up my sexy Swedes, indulge in an orgasm or two while Lars or B tell me all the things they want to do to my body.

But I have somewhere even better to be tonight.

# CHAPTER ELEVEN

## CHARLOTTE

*Better than orgasms and straight A's*

BLAKE'S DORM IS IN THE OPPOSITE DIRECTION OF WHERE I NEED TO GO, but she thinks I'm going home too, so I'm forced to make the drive to campus, then turn around and drive right back to Hastings and the interstate. I punch the directions into my GPS, even though I know the route by heart. Dante and I are old pros at this.

Since it's October in New England, the one-lane highway is pitch-black, and it suddenly occurs to me that if I get into a car accident right now, nobody will know why I'm all the way out here in the middle of nowhere. At least until they comb through my phone messages and see I was going to meet Dante. I don't even tell Faith about these midnight excursions. She supports me to a point, but I have a feeling Faith wouldn't approve of this.

I load a pop playlist and blast the first song, an up-tempo Mollie May track that has me drumming my fingers on the steering wheel as I sing along. Normally I'd listen to one of my audio textbooks, but the last thing I want to do right now is think about school.

It's been a stressful week. Midterms were more difficult than I anticipated, and I studied my ass off for them. I always do. But I'm worried I messed up my paper on the development of artificial organs. I don't think I included enough detail.

I can't afford to let my grade slip in that class, especially since I'm already finding my instrumentation lab a challenge. That one is even more terrifying, because my capstone project is directly tied to it; I'm designing a medical device not unlike the ones we test in the lab.

I was convinced my capstone would involve something in biotech. Hell, the syllabus for the bio lab had me at *cloning* and *gene editing*. I was solidly

invested in that direction—until I developed a fascination for the signal-processing techniques used in designing medical devices. I thought I'd be bored with all the diagnostics, but somehow, instrumentation ended up being one of my favorite courses. Underperforming in that class is not an option.

When the next song comes on, I turn up the volume. I can't let the stress get to me. I need to drown out my thoughts before—

Too late.

I feel the wave rising. It comes whenever I feel overwhelmed, but it's not quite a panic attack. No racing heart, no damp palms. Rather, it's a suffocating sense of pressure engulfing me from all directions. I call it the pressure wave.

And right now, it's cresting and threatening to carry me away as I remember all the things I need to do.

Maintain my grade point average.

Nail my capstone.

Run the Delta Pi finances.

Plan the gala.

Apply to grad schools.

God, I haven't even started on that last one yet, putting it off to the very last minute. I need to write three personal essays by next week. *Three*. Why is a personal essay even a requirement, damn it? I already did that for undergrad. I wrote about being an adoptee, the challenges of being disconnected from the culture I was born to but never got to experience. I suppose I could write something similar and then tailor it to fit the essay requirements for each program—

*Contain it, Charlotte!* an inner voice shouts as the pressure becomes more acute. Stifling.

I suck in a breath that doesn't quite reach my lungs. Usually when the pressure wave hits, I rely on a containment method. Just one of many different methods I utilize in my day-to-day life. It's nerdy, but they help.

With another inhalation, I visualize the wave and begin to gather it up. I push every ounce of pressure and heaviness into the little gray box in my mind's eye. I cram it in there, this enormous wave that I manage to squish and compress into the box until it's all contained. Then I pick up the box and place it in the microwave.

Yes, there is a microwave in my vision.

The screen doesn't feature any numbers, only a button that says BLOW IT UP. I press it, and as the screen counts down from five, I pick up the microwave and throw it into a swimming pool.

The heavy appliance sinks to the bottom and promptly explodes. All the pressure inside it dissipates into calming ripples that shoot through the pool in all directions, and I feel a pure rush of relief that I swear is better than an orgasm.

I'm not sure this is what my high school therapist had in mind when she encouraged visualization, but it works for me, and that's all that matters. I feel considerably lighter as I near the end of my ninety-minute drive.

It's so eerie coming here at night. Driving up in the dark, the first thing I always see is the towering floodlights that loom over the grandstand, their glow visible from a distance. They cast a ghostly light over the building, illuminating the edges of the track and the empty parking lots that stretch out like dark, open fields. My headlights cast long shadows across the asphalt as I pull in at the entrance, which is marked by a huge, weathered sign with fading paint from years of exposure to the elements.

AMATO RACING

The name is emblazoned in bold letters. Below the sign, a chain-link fence surrounds the perimeter, lined with a few security lights.

Gravel crunches beneath my tires as I park next to a familiar pickup truck. Dante's.

For a moment, I experience the usual flicker of trepidation about being here alone so late at night. But I'm as careful as I can be. I text Dante to let him know I'm here, then stay in the car with the doors locked until I see him exit the building. He always comes outside to escort me in.

Hopefully, any murderers lurking nearby will take one look at Dante and be smart enough not to mess with him. He might not have the height, but he's got the bulk, the tats, and the nasty scowl. If I didn't know what a soft teddy bear he is on the inside, the sight of him would definitely make me cross to the other side of the street.

I get out of the car and step into the cool night air that carries the faint scent of gasoline and rubber.

"Hey, princess," Dante says, slinging one bulky arm around me. "How was the drive?"

“Uneventful.” I lean in to give him a kiss on the cheek. “It’s good to see you.”

“Missed you,” he tells me, squeezing my shoulder. “But you chose a good night to stop in. I’ve got a surprise for you.”

Anticipation tickles my stomach. Dante’s surprises are the best kind of surprises.

I take his hand and practically drag him toward the entrance, eliciting a rumble of laughter from him. Every time Dante laughs, it sounds like it’s coming from deep in his chest.

We make our way through the main building and emerge out the back. The grandstand is partially lit by the floodlights, with most areas plunged into deep shadow, and the empty seats look so creepy in the darkness. To the left of the main track is the smaller go-kart track, its winding curves barely visible in the night.

Dante and I bypass both tracks and head to a well-lit area on the right.

AKA my personal heaven.

Dante’s family doesn’t just own a racetrack—they also run a side business that provides a luxury experience for customers who dream of driving high-end sports cars. I’m talking Ferraris, Lamborghinis, Porsches. Dante told me this service makes up nearly half of the track’s income.

And he lets me take advantage of it for free.

If he weren’t the owner’s son, he would totally get fired for this.

“How’s your week been?” he asks.

“Busy.”

I complain about midterms for a few minutes, and he indulges me, because he’s that kind of friend, the one who will show enthusiasm in your interests even if they bore him to death, just because he knows they mean something to you.

We met at a pool party in Boston when I was a sophomore. I went with a few girls from class, but they wanted to leave early, so I stuck around, activated Charlie mode, and flirted with a cute guy on the front porch. Cute Guy was midsentence when Dante pulled up in an Alfa Romeo like a fucking boss. I ditched the boy and went to admire the car. Dante asked if I wanted to go for a ride, and the rest is history. I left Boston that night with an adrenaline high and a gay best friend whose family owns an honest-to-God racetrack.

The first time Dante invited me here after hours, he was so paranoid it was almost comical. He sat in the passenger side of the white McLaren convertible, fists of anxiety clenched against his thighs. He refused to let me drive faster than thirty miles an hour until he decided whether I was worthy of second gear. With each visit, he increased my speed limit, and these days, he has no qualms about letting me zoom—solo—around the track.

My parents would kill me if they knew I was racing cars in an empty racetrack at midnight, but I'm a safe driver. I never go faster than I can handle, and Dante insists we wear helmets even though we technically don't have to.

"I'm so stressed," I sigh, my griping session finally coming to an end.

"Well, I'm about to make you forget all that nonsense for a while." Dante grins. "Come on. You're gonna love this."

He leads me down the row of luxury cars in the lot, their sleek, polished bodies gleaming under the lights.

Excitement bubbles up inside me when we stop in front of a car I've never seen here before. A cherry-red Corvette Stingray that looks like it was designed to break every speed limit in existence.

I moan out loud.

Dante shudders. "Jesus Christ, princess. I'm *gay*, and that sex moan just made my dick twitch."

"I want to marry this car." My voice barely contains my thrill. "She's the one I want to drive tonight."

"Figured you'd say that. Just don't go too crazy, all right?"

I grin at him. "No promises."

"Gear up," he says, tossing me my usual helmet.

The moment I slide into the driver's seat, the interior cocoons me in pure luxury. The leather seats are buttery soft. The dashboard looks like it belongs in a sci-fi movie. My heart starts pounding as I run my hands over the steering wheel, anticipation coursing through me.

Dante reaches over and presses the start button. The engine roars to life, a deep, powerful sound that sends a shiver down my spine and a tingle between my legs.

Cars make me hot.

Lab work makes me hot.

My onion has layers upon layers.

I glance at Dante, and he nods, giving me the go-ahead. I ease the Stingray onto the track, my foot hovering over the accelerator. The floodlights cast an almost surreal glow on the asphalt ahead, making it look like a ribbon of black silk unfurling into the night.

“Give it to her,” he urges.

I take a deep breath and press down on the gas pedal.

The Stingray surges forward, the force of acceleration pushing me back into my seat. Oh, hell yes. The world outside the windows becomes a blur as the speedometer climbs, and I feel an exhilarating rush of adrenaline. The tires grip the track with precision as I guide the sports car around the first curve. I’m in full control, completely in sync with the machine.

Dante whoops beside me, the sound barely audible over the roar of the engine. “Yes, baby, fucking *yes*!”

I laugh, the sound bubbling up from deep inside me. “I know, right?”

I push the car harder, faster, letting the speed take over. This is better than sex. This is better than orgasms and straight A’s.

This is heaven.

The track is a winding, twisting path, but I navigate it with ease, my hands steady on the wheel, my foot heavy on the gas. Every turn is like a dance between control and chaos. I’m giddy. The Stingray responds to my every move like it’s an extension of me, and for a few moments, it feels like nothing else in the world matters.

As I tear down the final straightaway, the car screaming at full throttle, the tension of the past few days melts away, replaced by a wild, carefree exhilaration.

Finally, I ease off the gas and bring the Stingray to a stop. The engine idles with a low, satisfied purr, like I just gave it a good, hard fuck.

I turn to Dante, breathless and grinning from ear to ear. “That was incredible.”

“Told you it’d be worth it.”

“Go again?”

“Hell yeah.”

# CHAPTER TWELVE

**CHARLIE:**

Sorry I didn't respond last night. I got in at like five in the morning.

**LARS & B:**

Sounds like an eventful night.

**CHARLIE:**

It was. Who am I speaking to?

**LARS:**

Oh sorry, it's Lars.

**CHARLIE:**

My Swedish heartthrob! How's Bjorn?

**LARS:**

Um…who?

**CHARLIE:**

Oh, I refer to B as Bjorn. I imagine you guys as two ripped Swedish boys. I envision glorious Viking men.

**LARS:**

I think most of the Vikings were from Norway, not Sweden.

**CHARLIE:**

Please just let me have this.

**LARS:**

Do you have a Viking fetish? Is that it?

**CHARLIE:**

I didn't *think* so, but now…

**LARS:**

You like the idea of being conquered.

**CHARLIE:**

OMG. I think I do.

**LARS:**

All right. Let's say B and I want to do some conquering. How does that play out?

**CHARLIE:**

Hmmm. Okay. I guess it starts with you kicking down my door and bursting into my bedroom.

**LARS:**

Do we find you on the bed? At a desk?

**CHARLIE:**

I'm lying in bed. Naked. Touching myself.

**LARS:**

We interrupted you getting yourself off?

**CHARLIE:**

Yes.

**LARS:**

Were you close?

**CHARLIE:**

So close.

**LARS:**

Ah, that's too bad. Because we don't let you finish, do we, Charlie? Your orgasm belongs to us now. You try to cover yourself up, but it's too late. We've seen every inch of that hot, tight body. And now you're at our mercy. I get on the bed with you, holding you down. B gets on his knees at the foot of the bed. Are you fighting us or are you begging for us?

**CHARLIE:**

Begging.

**LARS:**

Of course you are. We like to hear you beg. I slide my hand between your legs and hold your pussy open for him.

**CHARLIE:**

Oh my God.

**LARS:**

I whisper dirty things in your ear while he's licking you. Then I shove my fingers in his hair to hold his head between your legs, keeping him there.

**LARS:**

Babe?

You still there? Don't you dare leave me now.

**CHARLIE:**

Sorry. Back. I just had to take off my leggings.

**LARS:**

Are you touching yourself right now?

**CHARLIE:**

How can I not be? Are you telling me your dick isn't hard?

**LARS:**

Rock-hard. But it's still safely inside my pants.

**CHARLIE:**

Take it out. Please.

**LARS:**

Fuck.

**CHARLIE:**

Is it out?

**LARS:**

Yeah.

# CHAPTER THIRTEEN

## CHARLOTTE

*Imagine my glory at your table*

AFTER MORE THAN A WEEK, I CAN SAY WITH A HIGH DEGREE OF certainty that my biological brother is not interested in reaching out to me.

The Method told me I could live with that outcome, but…it still sucks.

I've never been an overly optimistic person. I'm not a cynic either. I suppose I'm just a realist. I recognize there's going to be really great things that happen and not so great things that happen. But I can't deny I was fully entrenched in the optimism camp with this one.

I truly believed he would want to meet me.

Faith knocks on my bedroom door on Wednesday evening, catching me mid–moping session. "Are you ready for the meeting?"

"No," I say glumly.

"Well, I don't mean figuratively, but, like, practically, are you ready to go downstairs, or do you need to pee or something?"

I climb off my neatly made bed and walk to the desk to grab my laptop and phone. "No, I'm fine. Let's go."

"What's wrong?"

"He left me on read."

"Who?"

"Bio bro."

"Ah. I'm sorry."

"It's fine. Whatever."

I smooth out the bottom of my white cashmere sweater. Faith always makes fun of me for how often I wear white. She has no idea how I manage to keep these things clean.

“No, it’s not *fine, whatever*,” she says in a firm voice, pulling me into her arms. “C’mere, Ms. Mopey.”

When I sag into her embrace, she rubs my shoulders in a comforting gesture.

“I’m sorry, babe. I know you really wanted this to work out. But just because he saw your message doesn’t mean he’s never going to respond. How long have you been on read?”

“Well, I sent the message ten days ago, and he read it nine days ago.”

“Oh.” She blinks. “Okay. Doesn’t bode well.”

I can’t help but laugh. “See?”

“Look, a week and a half isn’t unheard of for someone to not get back to you. But if he doesn’t, then he doesn’t. It’s his loss. You’re fantastic.”

“I *am* fantastic.”

She grins. “And modest too.”

“Most modest person you’ll ever meet.”

We link arms and head downstairs to endure another sorority meeting with Agatha being, well, Agatha. At least we have an interesting agenda this time. Yara, who’s in charge of the decorations for the gala, created a PowerPoint presentation, and I love me a good PowerPoint. Especially from Yara, whose slide headings are top-notch.

“All right,” she announces, standing at the projector while everyone shifts their gazes to the screen. “Centerpiece options forthcoming.”

The first slide appears.

**DO I BELONG IN THE CENTER OF THE TABLE?**

Faith leans into my arm and laughs against my sleeve. I hear some giggles from the freshmen, AKA the inferior scum of the earth leaning against the wall. When I glance over my shoulder, I see Blake standing behind me, grinning. She looks cute today, her hair arranged in two braids that hang down her shoulders.

“Okay, here’s option one,” Yara says.

The next slide pops up, showcasing a tall clear vase with a white satin ribbon around the middle, tied into a neat bow. It sits on a round mirror that reflects the blooms inside the vase: baby’s breath, fern fronds, and a few pastel-pink peonies for a pop of color.

Option one's heading reads:

**I'M NICE, BUT I COULD BE NICER**

"This doesn't wow me," Sherise admits, chewing on the cap of her ballpoint pen.

"It's the worst of the bunch," Yara agrees. "But it's the cheapest."

Option two is labeled:

**I'M NICER**

This frosted-glass vase, sitting on a lace runner, offers pink roses surrounded by sprays of white baby's breath. It's better than the first one but not as spectacular as option three, which draws oohs and aahs from everyone.

**IMAGINE MY GLORY ON YOUR TABLE**

This option sticks to our white and pale-pink color scheme, only gold accents have been incorporated into the palette.

"This one is a bit pricier," Yara starts, her gaze flitting toward me.

"How much pricier?" I ask, my fingers poised over my keyboard. I take my job as VPF very seriously. Because Agatha forces me to.

Yara stalls for time. "Well, I know we allotted a strict centerpiece budget, and this is definitely over budget, but—"

"How much over budget?"

"About twenty percent," she mumbles without looking at me.

"Absolutely not," I say instantly.

"But look at it!"

I glance at the screen, stifling a groan when Yara taps her laptop and another slide appears, featuring all three centerpieces lined up in a row.

There's no question the gold accents draw the eye.

Agatha tips her head toward me. "Can it be done?" she asks briskly.

"If you want to take that twenty percent from one of the other budgets, like music, then sure, we can make it work."

"Don't even think about slashing the DJ budget!" Robin exclaims. Music is her domain.

Agatha looks at me again.

I shrug. “There’s only a certain amount of money in the house bank account. I can’t just miraculously make money appear. So if you’re not taking from the other budgets, your only other option is to ask someone to chip in their own funds.”

“Let me talk to my mother,” Agatha says. “We’ll put a pin in the centerpieces for now and revisit next meeting. Maybe one of the alums will want to kick in some extra for the gala budget—”

A loud buzzing from Blake’s vicinity interrupts her.

Agatha gives her a withering look. “Silent mode.”

“Sorry,” Blake murmurs. She frowns at her phone before putting it on silent.

As the agenda switches to the gala menu and everyone starts arguing whether it’s a smart idea for one of the courses to be a spicy dish, I notice Blake constantly looking at her phone.

“Everything okay?” I whisper to her.

“Just my stalker” is what it sounds like she mumbles.

I don’t have time to question her because a screaming match has now broken out.

“No one is saying spicy food is bad, Dana! I love spice! All I’m saying,” Noelle continues in exasperation, “is that we’re dealing with a guest list full of old ladies, and not all of them might be able to handle spice. Old people can’t digest properly.”

“Ugh, that’s a fair point,” Dana relents.

“Great. Then let’s stick to fucking chicken marsala.”

“Fine.” Dana glances at her laptop. “Let’s talk about dessert.”

Blake clears her throat before Dana can continue. “I’m just going to step out for a second, if that’s all ri—”

“No,” Agatha snaps.

“Yeah, Logan,” Faith rebukes her. “Nobody leaves a meeting prior to dismissal unless it’s in a body bag.”

I almost choke on my laughter.

Agatha glares at Faith. “Just shut up, Faith. We don’t always need to hear your smart mouth.”

Fortunately, the rest of the meeting goes off without another hitch, and I’m breathing a sigh of relief after Agatha dismisses us. Blake seems eager

to leave too, though the agitation she's transmitting tells me she's stressing about a lot more than Agatha.

"What's wrong?" I ask, practically chasing her out of the dining room.

"I have to go handle something."

"That sounds fun," Faith chirps, coming up on Blake's other side. "What are we handling?"

"Oh God, nothing. Please don't make me do this in front of an audience."

Faith and I exchange a look.

Then walk even faster.

The freshman attempts to outrun us to the door, even tries closing it after her, but Faith ran track in high school, and I'm just freakishly fast. We hurry after her onto the porch, skidding to a stop when we spot the strawberry-blond giant on our front lawn.

"Do you ever give up?" Blake demands, stomping down the porch steps toward him.

Isaac Grant shrugs, emphasizing his impossibly broad shoulders. "No. I play football. It's a game of inches."

She makes an aggravated noise, planting both hands on her hips. "What does that have to do with me?"

"You're my inch."

"I am not your fucking inch, dude. Go away."

Faith and I snicker from the porch, only to shut up when Blake turns to glare at us.

"I'm just saying, I *know* you like me." Isaac flashes a cocky smile, his perfect teeth gleaming in the moonlight. "So let's quit playing games. Here we are, inches from the end zone."

"Go home," she grits out.

"One date. Just agree to one date, and I'll go."

"Dude, this is *not* the way to convince someone to go out with you. *I'll stop stalking you if you let me take you to dinner.*" Blake snorts in irritation. "I'm not interested."

"Look, angel—"

"Angel? Don't nickname me."

"Too late," he says smugly. "Angel. Listen to me. I'm only asking for one date. Oh," he amends, "and you have to promise to actually have a

good time.”

“I can’t promise to have a good time. What if it’s a shit date?”

He capitalizes on her error, beaming at her. “Excellent. So you’re agreeing to the date.”

“What? No!”

They’ve attracted an audience, and I’m not talking just me and Faith. Other Delta Pis have streamed out to investigate the commotion, along with a handful of curious people from other houses on the Row.

I have to admit, Isaac does pose a pretty delectable sight. Six foot six. Muscular. Piercing eyes and square jaw. The guy is a walking wet dream.

For most women anyway.

“One date,” he pleads.

“I don’t even know you,” Blake grumbles.

“That’s the purpose of a date. To get to know me. I promise you, I’m tremendous.”

“Who refers to themselves as *tremendous*?”

Faith snorts against her hand.

“Come on. What will it take? Do you want me to shout it out to the whole street? Get on my knees?”

“Please don’t—”

He drops to his knees. “Blake Logan,” he declares. “Angel. You’re the most beautiful girl I’ve ever seen.”

Wow, he’s laying it on thick.

Wait. Should I be jealous here? I mean, he and I were hooking up only a couple weeks ago, and he’s not even looking my way.

Do I *want* him to look my way?

*Are you nuts? Of course you don’t.*

Common sense returns to me. Right. Just *look* at the guy. I don’t need this kind of drama in my life.

“Please put me out of my misery and go out with me,” Isaac is imploring.

“Dude, I don’t—”

“Help me out here!” Isaac’s arms are stretched wide as he addresses the onlookers. Man has the wingspan of a jetliner. “Citizens of Greek Row!” he shouts like a Roman gladiator. “I enlist your help!”

There’s a beat of silence, and then someone from the direction of the Sigma Nu house hollers, “Jesus fucking Christ, just go out with him and make this stop.”

“Angel,” Isaac says again.

“Oh my God. Fine,” Blake blurts out. “*Fine*.” She stalks over to him and tugs him by the arm, forcing him to stand.

His face lights up. “When is our date?”

“I don’t know. Just go away.”

“Friday night. I’ll text you.”

“Whatever. Just leave.”

She spins around and marches back to the house.

Grinning from ear to ear, Isaac struts to the sports car I’m very familiar with and peels away.

In the foyer, Blake seeks out Agatha’s disapproving gaze. “I’m sorry. In case you couldn’t tell, I didn’t invite him.”

Our VP, Sherise, grins at Blake. “Girl, that was Isaac Grant. You get yours, Logan.”

“No,” Agatha says tightly. “We don’t need these football behemoths sullying our house name.”

Sherise surprises everyone by talking back to our president. “Come on, Agatha. Even you have to admit, that was pretty impressive.”

“Hard disagree. Those football fuckboys are embarrassing.”

“Well, we can’t all be courted by the unsullied lacrosse guys,” Faith pipes up.

“Shut *up*, Faith,” Agatha growls before huffing away.

After the group disperses, I pull Blake aside, lowering my voice so nobody overhears us. “You know you don’t have to go out with him if you don’t want to, right? You can say you only agreed to shut him up. You don’t need to follow through.”

She shrugs. “Might as well. He’s at least entertaining.”

“I know. Just be careful, okay?”

“What, you’re worried I’m going to fall in love with him?” Blake sounds amused.

“He’s Isaac Grant. I’m pretty sure half this college is in love with him.”

“It’s one date, Charlotte. You don’t have to worry.”

Maybe, but I am. I'm worried this is nothing more than a thrill-of-the-chase thing on his part. I've heard about this guy's sexual escapades for more than two years now. Hell, his sluttiness is what attracted me to him in the first place. Isaac doesn't do girlfriends. And yes, there's always the possibility that he's met the one woman who will capture his heart and end his man-whore ways, but that usually only happens in rom-coms and romance novels. The jerk usually remains the jerk, and a fuckboy doesn't change his stripes.

"Blake. Do you still need a ride to the dorms?" asks Dana, striding toward us. Like Blake, she also doesn't live in the house.

"Yes. Thank you." Blake glances at me. "Oh, before I go, I forgot to ask you. Do you want to come to the game tomorrow night? I'm going with my cousin."

"What game?"

"Hockey."

I make a face. "Pass."

"Oh, come on," she coaxes. "It'll be fun. I promise."

"Maybe. I'll text you in the morning."

Once I'm in the privacy of my bedroom again, I open the BioRoots app to check my inbox. Still empty. Although the lack of notification could've told me that.

I distract myself by opening the app that *does* have a notification, which I ignored when it came in last night because I was working late at the lab.

I will say, I've been getting quite a lot of mileage out of this chat. To the tune of at least two orgasms each time I talk to Lars or Bjorn. My Swedish heartthrobs. My online lovers.

But this new message changes the game.

They're looking to take this offline.

They want to meet up.

# CHAPTER FOURTEEN

## WILL

*Save it for the ice*

"DUDE, IS THIS GOING TO BE ON, LIKE, TSBN? IS YOUR FATHER-IN-LAW going to be talking about us on *Hockey Kings*?"

"It's a political piece," Ryder says, rolling his eyes at Trager. "Why would *Hockey Kings* talk about it?"

"I don't get it." Trager turns to me for guidance. "What do they want to interview us about?"

I don't even lift my head from my stall. I've got my phone in hand, checking the app for the tenth time today.

"College hockey, the culture, how you got into the sport," I answer absently. "I'm sure there'll be some bullshit questions about what it means to be a leader and how hockey builds great men."

"Like Lego?" asks Patrick. He's not bright, but he's a great guy.

"Yes, like Lego," Beckett says solemnly. "They want to interview you about building Lego hockey men."

I open the message thread and stifle my disappointment. Still no response from Charlie. Last night, Beck and I extended an invitation to meet up for real, and it's been crickets ever since.

"Guys, it's just a puff piece, all right?" I set my phone on the top shelf of my locker and turn to face my teammates. "My father wants to show his constituents that his son is an upstanding college boy with upstanding college friends on their upstanding college hockey team. That's all."

Coach Jensen enters the locker room with our assistant coaches, Maran and Peretti. I take one look at his face and know he's pissed off.

The source of that anger saunters in a second later: the producer of the video part of this shit show my dad has inflicted upon us.

Her name is Marjorie Neven, and she's a tall, skinny blond in her fifties whose face doesn't move. Literally. I can't tell if she's happy, mad, sad, disappointed. Her facial muscles are frozen in place by what must be pounds of filler.

She walks up wearing a powder-blue pantsuit and an excessive amount of gold jewelry that keeps catching the fluorescent lights, hurting my eyes.

"All right, boys," Marjorie says, either smiling or frowning. "We're going to shoot some more B-roll tonight of you getting into uniform, so no one take your pants off yet. Shirts are okay."

"You mean this isn't going to be full frontal?" Beckett drawls, making a big show of unzipping his jeans.

Nobody's immune to his charm. Not even a fifty-something producer who clearly hasn't gotten laid in at least twenty-five of those fifty years.

She titters with delight at his lewd remark. "As appealing as that would be to the female demographic—"

"And the LGBTQ+ demo," says the cameraman.

"—I'm afraid that this is a family show," she finishes.

Beck winks at her. "Their loss."

Marjorie claps her hands. "All right, everyone. Ignore the camera—it's not here. Act natural. Pretend like you're getting ready for the game."

Coach growls from the doorway. "They are getting ready for the game."

"I know. I just mean—" She notices his face, that deadly Jensen stare, and stops talking.

"Listen, lady."

Uh-oh, Coach busted out the *lady*. From the corner of my eye, I see Shane struggling not to laugh.

"You're here as a courtesy," Coach continues irritably. "We are under no obligation to let you into the locker room and invade the privacy of my men."

She's brave enough to voice a protest. "They all signed releases—"

"They didn't know what the fuck they were signing. They're idiots."

Shane snorts loudly from his locker, no longer able to contain it.

"You're distracting us, lady. Warm-ups are about to start. My men need their heads in the game. So get on with your little 'segment.'" He uses air quotes. "Get your 'B-roll,' and get the hell out."

With that, he stalks across the room toward the corridor leading to the PT rooms.

“I think I made him mad,” Marjorie says, looking around uncertainly.

“That’s just his personality,” Case assures her. “But yeah, I suggest you get your shots quick.”

My irritation only grows as the cameraman starts filming our pregame prep, being as intrusive as he possibly can. Meanwhile, we all “pretend” AKA actually get ready while Marjorie orders us not to look directly at the camera.

I’m on the bench, lacing up my skates, when Marjorie’s shadow falls over me. “William. Is this a good time to ask you a few questions?”

No, *lady*. It’s fucking not. I’m about to face one of the toughest opponents in our conference.

“Sure,” I lie.

She clips a tiny mic to the collar of my jersey, then steps out of the frame as the camera lens focuses on me. I expect a softball question.

“Tell me, William, do you think hazing is a necessary part of team bonding, or is it an outdated and harmful tradition?”

That was not a softball.

I tamp down my annoyance. “We don’t do hazing of any kind at Briar. Never have, as far as I know.”

“Then you haven’t experienced any hazing rituals during your three years here?”

“Nope.”

Marjorie throws me another hardball. “Hockey is known for its physicality. Do you think the level of violence on the ice has crossed the line in recent years?”

“Seriously? Look, I’m about to play three periods of hockey. It’s a mental game. And I don’t have the brainpower to waste on these questions.”

“It’s a violent sport,” she points out. “The fights—”

“There’s no fighting in NCAA hockey. They’re strict about that shit.”

Marjorie winces. “Can you repeat that without the profanity?”

I grit my teeth. “I’m done. I need to focus.”

“What if I feed you the lines?”

A laugh flies out. “Are you serious?”

“Your father sent us some talking points, all right?” She looks as annoyed as I feel. “So just put on a solemn face and say this: *As athletes, we know that a lot of young players and fans look up to us, and that’s something we take seriously—*”

“This is ridiculous.”

“Just say it. And then say… How about… *Hockey is a physical game, but it’s important to show young players that aggression should be kept within the rules and used in a controlled, respectful way*.”

Through clenched teeth, I repeat her little speech back at her. And it’s ironic to pontificate about the need to rise above the violence when I’d like nothing more than to hit that camera out of that dude’s hands right now.

“Perfect. Thanks, William.”

“Will,” I mutter as she strides off.

Beckett, who’s been lurking nearby, joins me on the bench. His lips quirk at whatever he sees on my face.

“Save it for the ice,” he murmurs.

He knows me well.

I try to shut out the voices. Marjorie is now interviewing Austin Pope, a sophomore forward, who looks like a deer caught in the headlights. He keeps fidgeting with the microphone on his jersey until Marjorie finally snaps, “Stop that.”

The woman recovers fast, taking a calming breath before donning her professional journalist voice.

“So, Austin,” she says. “You played for Team USA in the World Juniors last year?”

“Yeah.”

“How did it feel to represent your country in such a prestigious event?”

Austin blinks. “I dunno. I, uh, I just, you know, played hockey.”

Someone snickers.

“That wasn’t the question, Pope,” someone else calls out.

“Sorry, what was the question?” He rubs the back of his neck. “I don’t like interviews. Sorry. Can I just go now?” He glances at me with a silent plea for help.

I feel my patience reaching its breaking point. This is supposed to be our time to get in the zone, not to play nice for my father’s PR machine.

Marjorie gives up, unclipping Pope’s mic and walking over to Ryder, who looks like he wants to murder me.

She introduces herself and practically forces the mic on his collar.

“Any pregame rituals you swear by?” she asks him.

Ryder shrugs. “Started listening to whale sounds this season. My wife is really into that stuff.”

The whole room erupts in laughter, and even I have to bite back a grin. The sad thing is he’s not even messing with her. Gigi is obsessed with soundscapes and got Ryder into them. He claims it helps him focus and relax.

Coach returns a few minutes later. His gaze falls on the camera, and I swear I see the veins in his neck throbbing.

“Why are you still here?” he bites out. “Go away. I need to address my men before the game.”

Marjorie’s eyes light up, but her face doesn’t move. “A pep talk? Wonderful! I’d love to get it on film if—”

“Get out!” he roars. “Now.”

The cameraman scrambles. Marjorie stammers out an apology as the duo flees the locker room. The door swings shut, its thud reverberating in the ensuing silence.

“Thank God,” groans Trager.

Coach jabs his finger in Trager’s vicinity. “Shut up. I’m talking.”

After a short and snappy pep talk containing zero pep, the room empties out. Guys lumber into the tunnel toward the rink. I linger, grabbing my phone.

Still no message from Charlie. I guess that meetup isn’t happening. The shitty notion matches my foul mood.

I call my dad and get his voicemail. Of course. Anger sizzles up my spine as I call his assistant instead. Alessia picks up instantly. Of course.

“Will. What can I do for you?”

“I need you to pass a message to my dad,” I answer curtly. “He needs to tell his camera crew to back off.”

“Have they been intruding?” She sounds startled.

“Of course they have!” I snap, then lower my voice after I hear it bouncing off the walls. “We’ve got a game tonight. We shouldn’t be answering dumb questions, okay?”

“Will—”

I don’t even know what I’m mad about, so I just hang up on her.

Fuck.

Even when I’m only speaking to his proxy, my father never fails to make my blood boil.

---

The obnoxious interviews should have been the end of it. But no. Dad’s cameraman isn’t done with us yet. Turns out Dean Allen gave the dude permission to film from our home bench, a last-minute decision that sends Coach Jensen into a rage spiral.

I can’t focus during warm-ups, knowing the camera is zoomed in on every move I make. Knowing I’m the reason Coach is pissed. I skate hard, trying to shake the tension. The sound of the puck hitting the boards is usually a comfort, a reminder that this is my domain, but today it feels like a soundtrack to a disaster waiting to happen. Every time I glance over at the bench, I see that damn cameraman. I didn’t even bother learning his name, that’s how resentful I am of his presence.

Finally, the first period starts, and we hit the ice, the crowd roaring. We’re facing Harvard tonight, whose roster is phenomenal this season. A lot of the juniors who weren’t quite up to par last year have developed into goddamn superstars.

The first few shifts are a blur of bodies crashing, sticks clashing, and the puck ricocheting wildly across the ice. I try to ignore the camera, but I keep catching sight of it out of the corner of my eye, like a persistent mosquito I can’t swat away.

“Larsen! Get your head on straight!” Nick Lattimore barks as we skate by each other during a line change.

I’m fucking trying. I play on the first line with our co-captains, Case and Ryder, and our two best d-men. It’s a powerhouse of a lineup, and tonight we’re not gelling one bit.

For the entire period, we’re on our heels, Harvard sensing our lack of focus and capitalizing on it. They’re relentless, ambushing our net and peppering our goalie, Nelson, with shots. I hear Coach yelling from the bench, his frustration boiling over as we struggle to keep up.

“Move the puck!” he shouts as we try to break out of our zone.

Midway through the second period, I get the puck on a rush. Normally, this is where I thrive. Speed, instinct, pure adrenaline. But as I barrel down the ice, ready to make my move, the camera flashes in my peripheral vision, and I hesitate.

It’s just a split second, but it’s enough.

The defenseman reads my hesitation, stepping up to poke the puck off my stick, and before I know it, I’m colliding with the boards, the puck flying the other way.

“Motherfucker!” I snarl, slamming my stick against the ice as I hasten to get back into the play.

It’s too late. They have a two-on-one, and Nelson doesn’t stand a chance.

The red light flashes as the puck hits the back of the net, and the crowd groans its displeasure.

“Get your head in the game!” Coach bellows from the bench as I skate toward him. “That’s on you, Larsen! On you!”

I know it was, and it burns. I slam onto the bench, ripping off my helmet and running a hand through my sweat-soaked hair. My chest is heaving, but not only from exertion. I’m livid. At the cameraman, at my dad, at myself.

The game continues, but I feel like I’m watching it through a fog. I hear the skates cutting into the ice, the shouts from my teammates, the echo of the puck as it rattles off the boards, but none of it registers. All I can think about is how much I wish my father were here so I could punch him in the fucking face in front of his fucking cameras.

Coach is losing it, pacing up and down the bench, barking orders. The team is out of sync, passes going wide, players colliding as we try to get something going. And all the while, the cameraman is there, capturing every painful second.

Another rush, another turnover. The puck is in our zone again, and we’re scrambling, trying to clear it. I see the puck bounce loose. Fucking *yes*. I’ve got a chance to get it out. I lunge for it—but before I can get my stick on it, the Harvard center swoops in and fires it past our goalie.

The horn blares, and the scoreboard shows we’re down by two, and the clock is ticking. The second period’s almost done.

I skate back to the bench, feeling the game slipping through my fingers. The cameraman has graduated from pesky mosquito to a swarm of bees, moving behind us to get his goddamn angles. He's distracting everyone, including Beckett, who's late for his shift because the camera guy is blocking the door when Jensen calls for a line change.

"*That's it!*" Coach looks like he's going to literally have an aneurysm. His face is beet red, his voice an incensed roar. "Get off my bench!"

The guy is wise enough to know when to cut his losses, disappearing into the tunnel. But the damage is done.

"Dunne!" Coach shouts at Beck. "If you screw up a line change again, I'm benching you for the rest of the game."

Even though it wasn't his fault, Beckett also knows better than to argue, but I can tell my boy is *pissed*. Jaw set in a tense line, gray eyes burning with anger.

Jensen switches up the lines again. Beckett and Shane, who are on the same line tonight, burst through the bench door. I can tell from Beck's body language that he's out for blood.

I wasn't lying to Marjorie earlier when I said there's no fighting in college hockey, but about twenty seconds after Beckett hits the ice, a fight breaks out.

# CHAPTER FIFTEEN

## CHARLOTTE

*Downright feral*

"I JUST DON'T UNDERSTAND WHY THEY KEEP JUMPING IN AND OUT LIKE that without anyone blowing a whistle," I complain.

"Because they make line changes during the state of play," Blake explains. Somehow, she's shown nothing but patience in spite of the thousand and one questions I've barraged her with.

"That seems incredibly dangerous. And in the two or three seconds it takes for them to jump in, you're, like, a man or two down!" I have to shout over the latest roar from the crowd.

"That's what makes hockey so exciting," she shouts back.

She's not wrong. This is way more thrilling than I anticipated. I've never actually been to a hockey game. But I have been to football games, where after literally every play, they blow the whistle and then everyone stands around for forty-five minutes while they reset.

That said, I have *no* idea what's going on down there. I agreed to come to the game because I'm trying to be a good mentor for Blake, but as I sit here in the stands, surrounded by die-hard fans in Briar jerseys, I feel like I walked into a secret club where everyone but me knows the handshake.

"You really do this in your spare time?" I call toward Gigi Graham, a fellow senior who's good friends with Blake.

"Hockey is life!" she calls back. She's on Blake's other side and hasn't taken her eyes off the game since we sat down.

Her intensity is a bit unnerving. Hell, so are her looks. This woman is stunning. She has big gray eyes, perfect features, and thick dark hair arranged in a side braid. She's wearing a Briar jersey with the name RYDER on it.

“Hey,” I say, poking Blake in the ribs. “You need to get a football jersey that says Grant on the back.”

“I’m sorry—what?” Gigi’s head swings toward us. She stares at Blake, and whatever she sees on the freshman’s face causes her jaw to fall open. “No! You agreed to go out with him?”

“Yes. And don’t you dare tell your parents. Then they’ll tell mine.”

I laugh at Blake’s deadly tone. “Your moms like to gossip?”

Gigi snorts. “Our dads. They have an entire group thread called Dad Chat.”

“Ha! That is *totally* something my dad would be part of,” I say with a grin.

“You want to know the most horrifying part?” Gigi says.

“I’m kind of scared, but yes.”

“Once a month, everyone has to post a picture in the chat for Dad Bod Day.”

Yikes. I’m picturing love handles and pot bellies when Gigi bursts that bubble by adding, “They like to argue about who has the most abs.”

“Oh, right. Your dad’s a hockey player,” I say to Blake. “Yours is too, Gigi?”

She shrugs. “Yeah, he dabbled.”

Blake snickers, which tells me Gigi is underplaying it and her dad is probably the greatest player of all time.

“Okay, back to this horrible decision you’ve made,” Gigi says. “You can’t go out with a football player, Blakey. He’s only going to break your —” She cuts herself off, eyes widening. “That was tripping!” she shouts, jumping to her feet.

Other fans are screaming their agreement. But there’s no whistle. The players keep skating and smashing into each other. It’s hard to make out the names on their jerseys. I can only catch a glimpse when they’re in the face-off, crouched over, but it seems like the one always handling it is Ryder.

“Don’t make me come down there!” Gigi yells at the ref.

“Uh-oh,” Blake says. “Wife mode activated.”

“Wait, what?” I’d noticed that Gigi was wearing a ring, but it didn’t occur to me it might be a *wedding* ring.

Although it *is* on her wedding ring finger…

My inner bitch is quick to mock me. *Sharp as a tack, Charlie. There's a reason you're in STEM.*

In my defense, I don't know a lot of married college seniors. I'm sure they exist, but nobody in my circle is married at this age.

"That's my husband down there," Gigi explains, flopping back into her seat after her tantrum. "Number 62. Ryder."

"So you're Mrs. Ryder?" I tease.

"Mrs. Graham-Ryder, thank you very much. I promised my dad that I won't drop the Graham unless Wyatt gets married and has kids to pass the name along to."

That sends Blake into a fit of laughter. "Because that's happening."

"Hey, there's a chance." Gigi grins at me. "My twin brother is not the settling-down type. So if he stays eternally single, my kids will just have to be Graham-Ryders."

As the two of them continue to chat about Wyatt, an itchy sensation travels along my spine. The feeling that I'm being watched.

I glance around, trying to pinpoint where the intense stare energy is emitting from, but everyone in my vicinity is focused on the game. The only exception is a solo guy whose face I can't make out because he's engrossed in his phone. All I see is a head of black hair and a dark eyebrow that either has a white scar running through it or it's just the bright lights reflecting off it.

I still can't shake off the weird sensation, but I force myself to ignore it.

There's a face-off on the ice below. The puck drops, and Mr. Graham-Ryder snaps it up. The players zoom after him with a speed that leaves me dizzy. I can barely keep track of who has the puck, let alone what they're supposed to do with it. I watch as the little black disc flies across the ice and players chase after it like their lives depend on it. Every few seconds, someone is slammed into the boards, and the whole crowd cheers or groans, depending on which team did the slamming. It seems like the whole point is to hit people as hard as possible and then occasionally remember to try to score.

"This is way more aggressive than I expected," I say over the cheers. "Why is it so aggressive?"

"Because it's hockey!" Gigi laughs, clearly loving my confusion. "It's all about getting physical."

Physical is one way to put it. I wince when I notice a particularly jarring hit against a Harvard player.

I raise a brow. “That seemed unnecessary.”

“Nah. Beckett’s just showing them who’s boss.” Gigi’s eyes are bright with approval. “Considering how laid-back he is, he’s a shockingly good enforcer.”

I grimace. “Ugh. Beckett? I know that guy. He’s in my environmental science elective.”

“Not a fan?” Gigi sounds amused.

“He flirts too much and thinks he’s more charming than he actually is.”

“I mean…isn’t that most men?”

“Fair point.”

Her gaze is once again drawn away from us. “Shit. Coach looks *pissed*.”

I lean forward in my seat, craning my neck to get a better look at the Briar bench. “Does he coach the women’s team too?”

“No. Our coach actually knows how to smile.”

“I don’t blame Jensen for losing his shit,” Blake says, also peering down at the ice. “Is that camera allowed on the bench?”

“Oh! Right!” Gigi says. “Will was telling me about this. His dad’s on one of his PR crusades and forcing Will to do a bunch of interviews, including a TV spot. I guess this is part of it.”

“Yeah, well, Jensen’s about to clock that cameraman,” Blake predicts.

She’s right. The angry man with the buzz cut is not having this. From up here, it looked like the cameraman just interfered with their line change. One of the players is late to get on the ice, and I fear the coach might have a coronary.

With his clipboard tucked against his bulky chest, he stalks to the other end of the cramped bench where the cameraman leans against the plexiglass. Jensen smacks the clipboard on the guy’s chest and gets in his face. I can’t hear what he’s saying but I can guess.

A moment later, the cameraman is scurrying to safety.

“That would have been Beck’s pass,” Gigi complains when the puck is scooped up by the other team near the home bench.

The opposing player goes tearing off on his own, all the Briar guys hurrying after him in a blur of black and silver. It’s no use. Harvard scores. The entire rink lets out a collective groan and series of boos.

While the other team is celebrating, a new kind of roar explodes from the crowd. Beckett is shoving one of the Harvard players. The guy stumbles but doesn't fall. Instead, he flings his gloves off and digs his fists into the front of Beckett's jersey. As he's being yanked forward, Beckett elbows the guy in the chin. Hard.

I gasp when the fists begin to fly. They're fighting. Like, actually fighting. Punches are landing, helmets knocked askew.

I should be horrified, and I am—kind of. But at the same time, this entire showdown is…

Hot.

They're so aggressive. Raw. A strange thrill shoots through me as Beckett lands a solid blow that sends his opponent on his ass, and the crowd goes wild.

I can't tear my gaze off him. Something about the way he holds himself, the sheer force of it all, keeps me riveted.

Maybe I don't understand all the rules of hockey, but I'm starting to get why people love it. There's something primal about it, something that crawls under your skin and makes you want to keep watching, no matter how brutal it gets.

"I thought they weren't allowed to fight," I shout at Blake.

"They're not." Her expression is grim. "He's going to get in so much trouble for that."

Sure enough, after the players and refs step in and pry the two young men apart, a panting Beckett skates back to the bench to suffer the wrath of his coach.

Beckett's face is downright feral. Will skates over, his boy-next-door features stretched taut. The intensity rolls off both guys in waves. It's incredibly sexy.

My pulse is still racing, and I'm more than a little embarrassed by how much I'd just enjoyed watching two grown men beat the crap out of each other.

Will stops Beckett before he enters the bench and whispers in his ear. Whatever it is, it seems to loosen some of the tension in Beckett's shoulders.

"Look at the dog whisperer over here," I remark.

Gigi snickers. "Yeah, Will knows how to calm him down."

“I still don’t get it,” Blake says. “They’re not hooking up?”

“I don’t think so. But they like to share.”

My head swings toward her.

I’m sorry—what?

She must mistake my shock for confusion, because she offers a smile and an explanation, “They enjoy, ah, threesomes.”

“With who?” Blake demands.

“No clue. They’ve never named names.”

My insides begin twisting into tight, uneasy knots. My gaze returns to the ice, where Beckett is being reamed out. The coach gestures for him to get out, his face red and sweaty.

“Shit, he’s been ejected,” Gigi says.

Beckett marches toward a shadowy corridor without a backward look. My gaze shifts from his retreating back to the line of hunched-over players on the bench. Will is taking a seat beside Ryder. I stare at the back of his jersey.

It reads Larsen.

Lars.

How did I not put this together?

Or maybe there *isn’t* anything to put together. Maybe it’s just a coincidence. Maybe—

*Lars and B!* my brain shouts at me. Larsen and Beckett.

The names line up. The abs line up.

Those tight, rippled abs…

A groan of distress rises in my throat. Is it possible that I’ve been chatting with two Briar hockey players?

# CHAPTER SIXTEEN

## CHARLOTTE

*The heart of the Method*

IT'S MIDNIGHT, AND I CAN'T SLEEP. NOT A WINK. NOT A SINGLE STUPID solitary wink. My mind is racing too hard. It's been spinning like a top since I left the hockey arena earlier.

I can't get the idea out of my head that I might be sexting with my lab partner and my annoying classmate who calls me *sugar puff*.

The moment I got home tonight, I reread our chats, searching for any clues that Lars and B are Will Larsen and Beckett Dunne. All it achieved was coming up empty-handed in the identity department and becoming extremely horny from the content of our chats.

Like the fantasy I confessed to Lars a few nights ago, when I revealed that while I've had sex inside a car, I've never done it *on* a car.

My cheeks grow warm as I read the exchange.

**LARS:**

Is that it, baby? You want to lie back on the hood of the car, legs spread wide while we take turns fucking you?

My thighs clench as I envision the dirty picture he painted. Except now the fantasy morphs. Instead of the vague, nondescript Viking faces I've conjured in my mind, the guy stepping in the cradle of my thighs is my lab partner, Will.

He runs his hands over my thighs, and I realize that if it really *is* Will, then I already know what his hands look like. Long, capable fingers. Short, blunt nails. He scrapes those familiar palms over my thighs as he stands there with his hard cock jutting out, a pearly drop pooled at the tip.

A moan slips out, and I cast a self-conscious glance at my bedroom door. I hate living in a house where ten other girls on the floor can hear every sigh and whimper that wafts out of my room. I'd much rather live in the dorms with a roommate. At least then I'd only have to be embarrassed about one person hearing me get myself off.

Which is precisely what I'm going to do right now, because the idea that I've been exchanging sexy messages with the two hockey players I watched tonight, one of whom tried to pound another guy's face into the ice like some wild animal…

Another moan is ripped from my throat.

Oh God, since when does the idea of violence turn me on? It shouldn't be getting me *this* hot. And I shouldn't be modifying my fantasy, turning up the heat. Will Larsen is still between my legs, but Beckett Dunne is at his side now, squeezing my breast, leaning down to kiss me while his friend gets ready to fuck me.

I bite my lip as I picture Beckett's teasing smirk. Will's gleaming eyes.

A warm shiver races through my body. My eyelids close before I can stop them. My hand slips inside my pajama shorts, beneath the waistband of my panties.

I imagine Will's hands on my waist as he pushes his cock inside me. I hear Beckett's drawl, soft and commanding in my ear, telling me how much he wants me. How he can't wait for his turn.

The heat between my legs intensifies as I rub slow, deliberate circles over my clit. I can practically feel the hood of the car, the cold metal against my back as Will presses into me. I feel his body against mine. His entire length filling me. I feel Beckett's thumb on my nipple, his lips tracing my collarbone.

I swallow my gasp, my hips rocking up to meet my own touch.

There's no stopping this. A swirl of X-rated images assaults my brain, but it's the thought of being with both of them at once that sends me over the edge. My body tenses, waves of pleasure crashing through me as I hear Beckett whispering my name, Will groaning that he's coming too. The orgasm is exquisite. It tingles in my fingertips and toes, sparks dancing all over my flesh and throbbing between my legs.

Oh.

My.

Fucking God.

It takes me a few minutes to catch my breath. Fine, I think, when my heart rate finally slows. Maybe the notion that my sexy Swedes are Will and Beckett isn't entirely unappealing.

Question is, is it a fantasy that should stay virtual, or should I act on this insanity and meet them for a threesome?

Because honestly, that sounds like the premise of a cold case documentary about the gruesome murder of a college girl.

There *are* ways to ensure my safety, though. I can ask for face pics to verify that it's them. Request a public place for our first meetup and make sure Faith knows where I'll be.

The logistics are manageable. It's the consequences that I fear.

Luckily, I have a tool that can help me decide.

Wide awake now despite the late hour, I hop out of bed to grab my laptop. Then I crawl back under the covers and open a new document.

**ACTION: Meet up with the Swedes.**

The pros include trying new things, college is meant for experimentation, and endless pleasure.

On the flipside: maybe it won't be at all pleasurable.

Really, I could be in store for a major disappointment, because we all know fantasies never live up to reality. A threesome sounds great on paper, but then you put it into practice, and suddenly you're drowning in a sea of awkward questions. Like where do all the body parts go? And what happens when one of them is fucking me? Is the other one just sitting there playing a video game, waiting for his turn? *Please, miss, may I penetrate you now?*

I choke down my laughter. Yeah…I suspect the mechanics might not be as smooth and effortless as the fantasy suggests.

But is that a reason *not* to do it?

I hit the return key and get started on the outcome analysis. The heart of the Method.

What is the *worst* thing that could happen if I do this?

**OUTCOME #1: I get an STI.**

Possible. But I feel like as long as we're using protection, I should be okay, right?

I pull up a web browser to look up some trusted statistics.

Two websites tell me condoms are 85–98 percent effective in preventing STI transmission. Another one says they're 97 percent effective with perfect use and 86 percent effective with typical use. As an overachieving perfectionist, I assign myself to the first camp. Perfect use, baby.

But fine, let's be pragmatic. I'll call it 90 percent effective. Although… that stat is lower for STIs that don't have full condom coverage. For those, the risk is reduced by about 70 percent. I also have a higher risk of oral herpes if I give a blowjob without a condom on. Which, let's be real, I'm not going to use a condom for a blowjob. So…let's lower that to a 30 percent risk during a condomless BJ.

My parents have no idea the kind of monster they created when they gave me access to the internet.

To the question *Can I live with this*, I write *YES*.

**OUTCOME #2: People will find out and judge me.**

This one bothers me a lot, and when I'm done assessing all the outcomes, it's the only one I answer *NO* to about whether I can live with it.

Because yes, I consider that outcome worse than chlamydia. I don't want people gossiping about me and my sex life. What if it snowballs into a college-wide rumor that eventually reaches the ears of a job recruiter? A professor whose recommendation I need for grad school?

I'm pacified by the reminder that when asked who they've hooked up with, Gigi *did* say they never name names.

Still, doing this would require a high level of trust in both guys. And I suddenly realize I'd feel better about giving out that trust if Lars and B *were* Will and Beckett. Because they're not complete strangers. They're people I could hold accountable if the rumor mill started churning.

And if all else fails—lie, lie, and deny.

I assign it a medium probability that people might find out. Let's say 50 percent. Can I live with that?

Maybe.

No.

Yes.

I think…yes.

My heart is pounding as I type a response to the invitation waiting on the app.

**ME:**

I won't meet without face pics.

It's nearly two in the morning, but I'm dealing with two college boys who are probably still out partying, so I'm not surprised to see someone typing.

**LARS & B:**

Fair enough.

There's a long delay. More typing.

**LARS & B:**

Incoming.

When the photo appears on the screen, my heart jumps into my throat and renders my windpipe useless.

Confirmation received.

It's them.

# CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

## WILL

*I don’t believe in fate*

CHARLOTTE HAS FORGOTTEN HOW TO DO SCIENCE.

No joke. This woman, who for the last couple of weeks has taken the lead on every project, now stares at me like she doesn’t understand the difference between green and red.

We’ve been monitoring cell proliferation in our hydrogel matrix experiment. It’s Day 3, and I’m using a fluorescence microscope to examine the stained cells from today’s sample. Live cells are a shiny green, dead ones red.

Yet as I recite the results that Charlotte is supposed to be jotting down in her notebook, I notice she’s clearly writing down the wrong shit.

“Put down the pencil,” I command.

“Huh?”

“You’re not even listening to me. That’s not the right cell distribution.”

She glances down at what she wrote. “Oh, you’re right. Seems like uneven distribution. Maybe there was inconsistent staining?”

“Or *maybe* you’re distracted and writing down the wrong results. You keep writing down red whenever I say green.”

“No I’m not.”

I lean over and take the pencil out of her hand. “You’re temporarily benched. Now tell me what’s wrong so we can talk it out and then go back to our work.”

“Nothing’s wrong.”

A female voice interrupts my grilling. “Will. Hey.”

I swivel on my chair to greet my former lab partner. “Hey, Lourdes.”

“I just wanted to make sure you got the, um, thing I sent you.” Her gaze darts toward Charlotte, but my new partner isn’t paying attention.

Charlotte has her eye glued to the microscope now. Yeah, something is definitely up with her today.

“I mean, the chapter.” Lourdes is pretty much whispering now. “You didn’t email back.”

“I’m still reading it,” I assure her. “I should be done tonight.”

She tucks her chin-length hair behind her ears and gives me a smile of gratitude. “Thanks. I really, really appreciate it.”

“No problem.”

Lourdes flounces back to George, and I wait until she’s out of earshot before turning to grin at Charlotte. My humor fades when I notice her stiff posture. And she’s avoiding my gaze.

“Okay, seriously, what’s bothering you?” I press. “Because the Charlotte I’ve been working with this month would’ve been all over that Lourdes conversation demanding to read the latest fanfic chapter. Are you having trouble in your other classes? Fighting with your friends?”

“My friends all love me.”

A laugh slips out. “Okay. Family problems?”

“No. Let’s get back to work.”

“No. Tell me what’s wrong.”

“I don’t have to tell you what’s wrong.”

I pounce. “So there *is* something wrong.”

She finally allows her gaze to meet mine. Then proceeds to stare at me for so long, I shift in my chair. I can’t look away, though. Her eyes are magnetic. A deep brown, like melted dark chocolate. And her skin looks so soft to the touch. I wonder if her hair is soft too. She always wears it in a bun when we’re in the lab, secured by a white hairpin, with long black wisps framing her face. My gaze travels to her mouth. She has great lips. Pale pink and pouty.

“You’re staring,” she accuses.

“You were staring first.” I grin at her. “I thought that meant it was cool for me to do it too.” When she starts to turn toward the microscope, I reach out and touch her arm. My voice becomes gruff. “Hey. Did I do something to piss you off or to annoy you? Because I was kind of digging this partnership, but if you want to switch lab partners—”

“No,” Charlotte interjects, eyes widening. “I don’t want to switch. It’s not that.”

“Then what is it?”

She falls silent again, glancing toward our TA’s workstation. Monica has her head buried in the stack of papers she’s been grading all afternoon.

Charlotte leans over her chair and slips her hand into the navy-blue canvas bag at her feet. She emerges with her phone, one dainty finger touching the screen. Finally, she slides the phone across the table, and I find myself looking at a picture of myself and Beckett, taken at a pool party at Shane’s place this summer.

“I don’t get it. I’m friends with Beckett? That’s the problem?” I smother a groan. “Did he say something to you? He’s a huge flirt, but I swear he’s harmless.”

She taps the screen with a polished fingernail. “How did I get this picture, Will?”

My brow furrows. What the hell is she—

Oh shit.

Understanding strikes like a bolt of lightning.

“Yeah,” Charlotte says, noting my expression.

She makes the picture disappear, leaving only the chat thread where it came from. The profile name at the top is impossible to miss.

**LARS & B**

Charlotte locks her gaze on mine again. “I’m Charlie,” she says, sounding so miserable I almost laugh.

My shock, though, eclipses the humor.

This must be a joke. Charlie, the sexy free spirit who fantasizes about getting drilled by two guys on the hood of a car—*that’s* Charlotte Kingston, the girl I’ve been sitting next to in the lab? The girl in pleated sorority-girl skirts and matching sweaters, whose makeup is never smudged and who never has a single hair out of place?

I’m stunned speechless. And while I sit there trying to make sense of this, she snatches the phone back and closes the chat.

Closes it…but doesn’t delete it.

I find that interesting.

“Will…” She bites her lip. “Don’t tell anyone about this. Please.”

“Tell them what? That you were trying to arrange a threesome?”

“I wasn’t trying—” She lowers her voice when we draw the attention of a few other classmates. “*You* were the one trying to arrange it.”

“You were into it.” I shake my head in amusement. “Well, shit. This is great.”

“This is not great,” she hisses. “It’s mortifying.”

“Or…” I slant my head at her. “Was it meant to be?”

“Meant to be?”

“Yeah, like fate.”

“I don’t believe in fate.”

“Really. So. For six weeks, you and I have been working with other lab partners and never exchanged one word with each other. Then we unknowingly match on the app mere days before our partners write a Romeo and Juliet letter demanding they be paired together. And now I’m your lab partner, and it turns out you’re the one I matched with and who Beckett and I are obsessed with.”

She blinks. “Obsessed?”

“Yes. Goddamn. We’ve been dying to meet you.”

Wariness creeps into her expression. “Why?”

“Because you’re awesome.” I lean closer to whisper in her ear. “And you’re hot as fuck.”

I don’t miss the way she shivers.

“You have no idea how many times we’ve jerked off to you.”

Her head snaps up, gaze finding mine. “Like, together?”

I chuckle. “No, separately. We don’t chat with you at the same time.”

“How does it work then?”

“Kingston, Larsen!” Monica chides from her table. “Less talk, more work.”

We busy ourselves with our results again, only the roles are now reversed. Charlotte is diligently recording everything, while I can’t focus on a damn thing.

“Charlotte,” I murmur. “Come on. Talk to me.”

Her body language conveys pure reluctance as she brings her gaze back to mine. “You still haven’t promised you won’t tell anyone we’ve been chatting.”

“I won’t. I promise. But…what about that drink?”

The invitation Beck and I proposed on the app hangs between us. Dangling like the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden.

I want her to take a bite. A big fucking bite.

But she simply shakes her head. “We’re not having drinks. I don’t even like your stupid friend.”

“Beck’s not stupid.” I grin.

“He annoys me.”

“You didn’t seem annoyed when you guys were chatting about him unwrapping you like a present.”

Her cheeks turn bright red. This girl cannot disguise a blush to save her life. I almost feel bad for her, except I don’t because it helps me read her. She’s trying hard not to show me how tempted she is. How badly she wants to see this thing through. But I can see it in the way she bites her plump bottom lip. In the way her pulse hammers at the base of her throat.

But she’s out of reach now. For the remaining twenty minutes of class, she goes out of her way to keep it professional. Focus on the cell samples. Record the results. No chitchat. And absolutely no eye contact. Charlotte—Charlie—has determined that eye contact is too dangerous.

When class ends, she gathers her stuff so fast, I barely have time to blink. I race to catch up to her in the busy hallway where I pull her toward the wall to let a group of people pass.

“C’mon, Charlie,” I say in a low voice. “You want this. You *wanted* to meet us.”

She’s quick to deny it. “No. I didn’t. It was just chatting, okay?”

“You asked for face pics. You said you needed that before you agreed to meet.”

“Exactly.” She gives me a pointed look. “I never agreed to meet. I only asked for the pics because I was curious. I never planned on following through.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“I don’t care what you believe.”

“Why are you fighting it so hard?” Frustration tightens my chest as I stare at her for a moment. “You don’t seem anything like the girl from this app.” I hold up my own phone as if to punctuate that. “Where is this girl?”

“She doesn’t exist, Will. I was playing a part.”

“Were you?”

“*Yes*.”

Her vehemence gives me pause. I know better than anyone what it’s like to play a role. To be two people. I plaster on my bland, politician’s son smile for my dad’s constituents on the campaign trail. To my friends, I let them see my easygoing-with-a-side-of-sarcastic-quips side. But very few people are privy to a deeper look. Case, sometimes, but these days, it’s mostly Beckett. He sees the intensity I like to keep under wraps. He hears the thoughts and fantasies I’ve never shared with anybody else.

I wonder what parts of Charlotte Kingston are real and what parts are the act. She’s either the good-girl A student in the sweater sets, or she’s the sexy risk-taker who can make me laugh just as much as she turns me on. But I don’t think she’s both.

“Are you going to tell Beckett?” she asks, looking unhappy at the notion.

I nod. “Of course.”

“Do you have to?”

“I’m sorry, but it’s his account too. And I don’t keep secrets from my roommate.”

“Your roommate.”

“Roommate. Teammate. Best friend. Whatever you want to call it. I promise he won’t say anything, though.”

“Really? Because I know all about athletes and their locker room talk.”

“*Some* athletes. Not us. It’s nobody’s business what we do. Don’t get me wrong, people talk about us sometimes. But I promise they won’t talk about you.”

“Thank you,” she says, and my frustration returns when I realize this conversation isn’t going at all as I’d hoped.

“You’re really not going to see this through?” I ask her.

After a beat, she shakes her head, eliciting a deep pang of disappointment. “I can’t, Will. It’s just…not me.”

# THE VIRGIN AND THE BLADE/LOURDES

## CHAPTER 7

## I AM ENGLAND

The moon hung low over the city of London, its effulgent light casting long, slanted shadows across the palace. Effulgent and beautiful despite the deadliness of the night's task. And beneath that effulgent glow bathing the palace, he slipped past the guards, his every move as silent as a lion stalking its prey.

But he was not a lion.

He was even more dangerous.

He was Alexander. The greatest conqueror the world had ever known, with the most feared army at his disposal. That army waited just outside the city walls, ready to conquer on his command, but this was not the battle that occupied his mind tonight.

Inside the grand chamber, Queen Elizabeth stood by the window, outlined against the faint glow of the moonlight. She wore a regal gown of deep crimson. The color of defiance.

The color of England.

Her golden hair was carefully pinned, but, as rebellious as its owner, one defiant strand brushed her effulgent cheek. Her sharp, calculating eyes narrowed when she heard the faint creak of the door behind her.

"I thought you'd be more subtle, Alexander," she said without turning. "Sneaking into my palace? Bold, even for you."

Alexander's lips curled into a smile as he stepped forward. He was dressed in his warrior armor, glinting with the promise of conquest. Yet his eyes, those legendary eyes that had seen the vastness of the known world, softened as they fell upon her.

“Subtlety was never my strength,” he said, his voice low and rich. “Conquest, however, is. And I’ve got twelve inches of steel to back up that claim.”

Elizabeth turned, her heart thudding against her ribs as she met his gaze. His presence was intoxicating. So much danger. So much charm.

But she was a queen—England’s queen—and she would not be easily swayed.

“You’ll find London far less yielding than the other cities you’ve conquered,” she said.

“Perhaps,” he said, moving closer, “but I didn’t come here for London. I didn’t come for England. I came for you.”

Her breath caught in her throat as his hand brushed her cheek. His touch was electrifying. For all her power, all her famous control, she felt herself tremble beneath his gaze.

“I am England,” she whispered, her voice betraying a flicker of vulnerability.

“You are Elizabeth,” Alexander corrected, his eyes burning with intensity. “A woman, not just a queen. And even queens have hearts.”

He leaned in, so close that she could feel his breath on her skin.

“Surrender,” he whispered, his lips hovering just above hers.

Elizabeth’s heart raced, a storm of emotions raging inside her. She had faced countless enemies, defended her realm with unshakable resolve, but this—this was a different kind of battle.

“Never,” she breathed, though her voice wavered.

“Not the city. You’ll never surrender that.” He traced a finger along her cheek. “But your heart… That is another matter.”

Before she could respond, he kissed her, his lips capturing hers in a sudden, fiery embrace. The world melted away.

No kingdom.

No siege.

No war.

Just them.

Elizabeth’s hand rose to his chest as if to push him away, but her fingers curled into his armor instead. She could feel the power of

him, the raw, virile strength, and for the first time in her life, she felt small. Not weak, but small in the presence of something greater than herself. She could feel her body blossoming like a dewy flower, begging her to allow a man's touch upon her petals. She had deprived herself for so very long.

When they broke apart, her breath was ragged. "You would have me surrender my heart to you?"

"No," he said softly. "I would never force that. But I would have you give it willingly."

Elizabeth could feel the weight of centuries of rule, the legacy of her crown, pressing down on her shoulders.

But in this moment, all she wanted was him.

"I am the Virgin Queen," she said.

"You are a woman," Alexander repeated. "And no queen, no matter how powerful, should be alone. Ask me to share your chamber tonight, Elizabeth. Do not send me away."

He kissed her again, slower this time. It was a promise. A vow not just of conquest but of devotion. A promise to tend to the garden she'd neglected for so very long. A conquering gardener with molten desire in his eyes and a blade strapped to his hip, the famous dagger with which he had slit throats and gutted his enemies.

"Alexander," she whispered.

"Yes, Elizabeth. Tell me what you want."

"I…"

# CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

## BECKETT

*This slow burn is excruciating*

I DON'T HAVE ANY AFTERNOON CLASSES ON TUESDAYS, SO I HEAD HOME around noon and spend the day lounging on the couch in my boxers, watching dumb videos on my laptop and eating pretzels. It's one of the few snacks Will keeps in the house. He follows our nutrition plan to a T, which means nothing tasty roams these halls. Unless you're talking about my dick.

I'm surprised he even allows pretzels. I was reading the nutritional breakdown earlier, and the sodium content in one bag is fucking insane. These pretzels are delicious, though, so I'm not ratting myself out to Will by telling him about this new sodium development. If he's too lazy to read the back of the bag, that's on him.

Around noon, I finally drag myself off the couch and try to muster up the motivation to work out. It's a cardio day. I should probably go for a run, but the weather has turned on us. Winter has asserted dominance over autumn. So now it's fucking cold out.

It's times like these I wish I still lived in Australia. In fact, it's kind of shitty of my parents to grant me ten years of glorious sunshine and no blizzards, only to move us to Indianapolis, where blizzards rule the land. Granted, I'm the one who then chose to attend college in New England, so every nor'easter I've endured since is on my conscience, not theirs.

Speaking of my parents, Dad calls as I'm sliding into a pair of track pants. Fuck it, I'm facing the frigid wind.

"Hey, kid," he says. "Just wanted to check in. See how you're doing."

"All good. I'm about to brave the elements and go for a run."

"No practice today?"

"Had it this morning."

“Cool cool.”

“What’s wrong?” I demand.

“What? Why do you think something’s wrong?”

I snort. “Because you said ‘cool cool.’ You only say stupid things like that when you’re upset about something and don’t know how to bring it up.”

“I got a job offer,” he blurts out.

“For me?” I wrinkle my forehead.

“No, for me.”

“Oh. I didn’t know you were thinking of leaving Winchester Motors.”

Dad has worked for the Australian-founded car design firm since he was in his early twenties, climbing up the corporate ladder and reaching a rung high enough that when the company decided to open an American office, he was asked to oversee the entire division.

“I wasn’t. A headhunter contacted me.”

“Isn’t that, like, against the law? Can they really just poach you from other companies? It’s not some sort of antitrust violation?”

“Do you know what antitrust is, Beck?”

I sigh. “No.”

His laughter echoes in my ear. “Well, it has nothing to do with headhunters. But either way, this is a great gig. Twice my current salary. Not just corporate duties but the chance to work closely with the head of design. I didn’t realize until I heard the details how much I’ve missed being involved in that aspect of the job. All I do at Winchester these days is paperwork.”

“Whoa, this sounds awesome. What are you worried about? Leaving Winchester high and dry?”

“No, that’s not it.”

“Then what’s the issue?”

“It’s in Sydney.”

My breath hitches. “Fuck, really?”

I can’t stop the burst of excitement. I’d love it if my folks moved back to Sydney. I visit every summer and stay with my cousins, but if Mum and Dad lived there full-time, I’d be able to go home as often as I wanted without feeling like I’m imposing on Aunty Suzanne.

“This is excellent news,” I tell him.

“You think so?” He sounds hopeful.

“Hell yes. You’ve talked about wanting to move back home for years.”

“I have, haven’t I? See? I *told* her that.”

I fight a smile. “Her, as in Mum?”

“Your mother is very unhappy about this.”

“Why?”

“She doesn’t want me to take the job. It would be uprooting our entire life for a second time. She doesn’t want to go through that again.”

“But she’d be going *home*.”

“She said she doesn’t consider it home anymore.”

I suppose that doesn’t surprise me. Mum has lived in Indy for almost twelve years now. She’s become ingrained in the community, built real friendships, a solid career. She fixed up our house from top to bottom.

But Indy isn’t home. And it’s damn ironic that the guy who only lived in Sydney for ten years considers it more of a home than the woman who spent thirty years there before relocating.

Dad’s like me, though. Every year at Christmas, he and I stare at the snow beyond the window and get the same look on our faces. The one that says *we could be surfing right now*. Sure, snowboarding’s sick, but the holidays always fall in the middle of hockey season. Coach would break my leg *for* me if I risked breaking that leg on the slopes during the season.

“So, what? You’re not going to take it?” I grab a T-shirt and slip it over my head, then bring the phone back to my ear. “Just like that? You’re saying no because Mum says no?”

“I don’t want to say no. I really want this. But marriage is a two-way street.”

“Marriage is also about compromise.”

“She already did that once,” he reminds me. “Your mum compromised by moving to America when she didn’t want to.”

“Yes, and now she loves it here. Right now, she’s saying she doesn’t want to return to Sydney, but eventually she’ll love it there again too.”

“Why are you so gung ho about this, Beck?”

“I just like the idea of having you guys there.” I hesitate for a beat. “If you were, maybe I’d move back too.”

“Would you really?” Dad sounds surprised.

“Maybe. I don’t know. I’d have to think about it. But I definitely think *you* should do it. Do you want me to talk to Mum about it?”

“I do, but then she’ll think we’re ganging up on her, so let’s hold off for now.”

“When do you need to give an answer about the job offer?”

“They said I have until December to let them know. The starting date isn’t until the spring.”

“That gives you time to work on her. If you need to tag me in at Thanksgiving, give me the signal.”

He chuckles. “Thanks, kid. Now go on your run. I’ve kept you on the line long enough. Talk to you later.”

“Later.”

I pull a hoodie on and tuck my keys and phone in the front pocket. I hate running with my keys, but Will isn’t home from class yet. I pop my earbuds in and, for the next hour, try to blast away the sound of the keys jingling in my pocket. I return home sweaty and cold but feel better after a hot shower and some leftover pizza.

I resettle on the couch to find my laptop dead, so I grab Will’s off the side table because I’m too lazy to go look for a charger. I open his computer to find an unsaved document on the screen. Something called *The Virgin and the Blade*, by something called Lourdes.

What the fuck is he reading?

Curiosity gets the best of me, so I lean back and start to read. And… damn. This…sure is something. The author used the word *effulgent* three times in one paragraph. I don’t think I’ve ever used it once in one lifetime.

There’s a note in the sidebar. I click on it to find a comment from Will that says: **Lourdes, nobody uses the word effulgent. It’s very off-putting**.

I snicker under my breath. And for some inexplicable reason, I keep reading, getting sucked into the story. I had no idea Alexander the Great had a huge cock. Is that historical canon? I could look it up, but it’s more fun to text my teammate Nick, whose girlfriend is a history major.

***ME:***

Yo, ask Darce if Alexander the Great was known for having a big penis.

***NICK:***

No.

***ME:***

Please?

***NICK:***

ffs one sec

He texts back about ten minutes later. By then, I've already gone back to chapter one to read the story from the beginning. This is how I learned that the blade they keep talking about is sometimes an actual dagger and other times his hard dong. They still haven't boned, though. This slow burn is excruciating.

***NICK:***

She says no and why do you ask.

***ME:***

I'm reading Alexander and Queen Elizabeth fanfic.

***NICK:***

Why are you this way, Dunne?

I grin at the phone and go back to reading. A minute later, another message arrives.

***NICK:***

Darcy wants the link to the fanfic.

I'm a bit disappointed when I realize there's nothing after chapter seven. Will is apparently proofreading the story as it's being written.

Swear to God, though, if Lourdes throws in the twist that Alexander the Great is a time traveler, this piece instantly soars into five-star territory.

When I hear the front door opening, I snap Will's computer shut and reach for the TV remote. I did not just spend the past hour reading weird fan fiction. Nope.

"Hey." He pops his head into the living room. "I've got news."

"Yeah?"

"Oh yeah."

He saunters down the hall toward the kitchen. From the other doorway that separates the two rooms, I glimpse him at the fridge, grabbing a bottle of water. He twists off the cap, leaning against the doorframe.

I roll my eyes at him. "Are you going to share this news or keep me in suspense—"

"I know who Charlie is."

# CHAPTER NINETEEN

## CHARLOTTE

*Is this dumb jock bothering you?*

IT'S WEDNESDAY MORNING, AND THERE'S A MINI DOUGHNUT ON MY desk. It's small and covered in white icing sugar. *A lot* of icing sugar.

I look from the doughnut to the blond Australian sitting two rows below me. As if sensing my gaze boring into him, Beckett twists in his chair and flashes a smile.

"Morning, sugar puff. I brought you a sweet treat."

I wince. "Please don't say the words *sweet treat*."

"Why not?"

"Because it's creepy coming out of your mouth."

"Nah. You like the things that come out of my mouth."

He winks at me.

I glare at him.

Will warned me yesterday that he would tell Beckett I'm their match, but I was hoping Ice Boy would have the courtesy of not bringing it up.

With stiff, jerky movements, I sink down and pull out my laptop case, wishing I chose an elective that doesn't have lectures on back-to-back days and doing my best to ignore the "sweet treat" on my desk. It's sitting on one of those lacy, white doily papers.

It looks delicious.

"Did you know they don't actually sell the sugar puffs anymore in the student union?" Beckett says from his row. "I asked the girl why, and she said people were complaining it was too messy to eat."

I ignore him. Then I stare at the doughnut again, and my traitorous stomach growls. There's no way Beckett could have heard it, but his grin widens.

“Come on, eat it,” he taunts. “You know you want to.”

An internal battle commences, one side urging me not to waste a perfectly good doughnut, the other insisting I can’t give Beckett Dunne the satisfaction.

Hunger wins.

I snatch the doughnut and shove the entire thing in my mouth. I don’t even care that I look like a toddler with icing sugar all over my face.

Beckett lets out an amazed laugh. “Wow. I thought you would take a bite, not inhale it like a horse devouring a whole apple.”

“Charlotte?”

My head swings toward the aisle, where Agatha has just stopped in her tracks. My president stares at me in disbelief.

“This isn’t Delta Pi behavior. A lady eats her food, Charlotte. She doesn’t let her food eat her.”

I hear a snicker from Beckett’s chair.

Agatha turns to him and glares.

“Sorry,” I mumble through a mouthful of doughnut. “I have bad luck with pastries. Let me see if I have a napkin.”

“Please do.”

With an annoyed huff, Agatha continues down to the front row while I dig inside my bag and find an unused tissue. As she settles in her seat, she turns around to make sure I’m wiping my mouth.

I’m shoving the tissue back in my bag when Beckett’s shadow looms over me. “Did we teleport to a girls’ finishing school or something?” he says in amusement.

I give him a quizzical look.

“*A lady eats her food, Charlotte*. Why do you let her lecture you like that?” He nods toward Agatha’s turned back.

“I’m a Delta Pi,” I answer in a tight voice. “And she likes to remind us what Delta Pis are not supposed to do.”

“Like fantasize about getting railed by two guys?”

I suck in a breath. “Stop.”

“Why?” His eyes twinkle. “You seemed to enjoy it when we were chatting on the app.”

“The app isn’t real life.”

Beckett dons a thoughtful look. “So there’s this thing people do… I really don’t like it.”

“What are you babbling about?”

He keeps going as if I hadn’t spoken. “They think the internet isn’t real. That just because you’re hidden behind a screen and typing shit you’d never say to people’s faces, that means it’s not real. Thing is, the screen isn’t writing those words. *You’re* writing them.” He leans over my desk, his face so close to mine that a shiver runs up my spine. “You want every single thing you described in those chats, Charlotte. You *want* to swallow up my dick while Will fills your pussy.”

His soft-spoken, teasing words evoke an acute physical reaction. A bolt of lightning directly between my legs. A surge of heat throughout my entire body. It’s the kind of arousal that robs you of breath.

Beckett straightens with a chuckle. “It’s okay to want it.”

“I don’t.” I swallow the desperation rising in my throat. “Like I told Will, it was just a fun online thing. I was never planning on meeting you in real life.”

“Of course. A Delta Pi must never lower herself in that way,” he mocks. “A Delta Pi must maintain her air of purity at all times.” He suddenly chuckles. “Shit. I just realized something.”

“What?” I mutter.

“The initials of your sorority are DP.”

I make a choked sound. “Oh my God, Beckett. Stop.”

His lips curve into a smile. “That’s the first time you’ve said my name.”

“So?”

“I like it.”

The soft thud of footsteps interrupts us before an unwelcome voice joins the mix.

“Char? Is everything okay here?”

Mitch.

My ex looks tiny next to Beckett, which is absurd because five ten is by no means small. Mitch is taller than average. But at well over six feet, with his broad shoulders and muscled chest, Beckett seems huge in comparison.

“Everything’s fine,” I mutter.

“You sure?” Mitch’s suspicious gaze shifts between us. “Is this dumb jock bothering you?”

“Hey,” I say in rebuke, because that was just fucking rude.

Beckett is unruffled by the insult, laughing at my ex. “Charlotte was just explaining the concept of climate-related migration to me. On account of me being dumb and all. Thanks for clarifying, Charlotte.”

With a grin, he saunters back to his row, leaving me alone with Mitch.

“What the hell was that?” I hiss. “You were so rude.”

“The asshole was all up in your personal space,” an unrepentant Mitch retorts. “You can’t let guys slobber over you like that.”

“Why not?” I give him a smug, condescending look. “Maybe I enjoy it.”

His eyes flash. I think I hear him mutter “slut” under his breath, but I ignore the sting it elicits and watch as he turns on the heel of his sneaker and stomps toward his own row.

Fortunately, our professor arrives, putting an end to all further unwanted conversations.

But despite my best efforts to pay attention to the lecture, my gaze keeps drifting to Beckett two rows ahead. And it’s probably the dumbest thought to ever enter my head, but…

I like the way he sits.

It’s a massive turn-on, in fact. He has this way of leaning back in his chair with a casual confidence that makes my heart race. His shoulders stretch the fabric of his gray shirt just right. The way his muscles move under his skin when he shifts in his seat is almost hypnotizing.

When he turns slightly, providing a glimpse of his chiseled jawline and the hint of blond stubble that makes him look just a bit dangerous, my breath catches in my throat.

It takes even more effort to tear my gaze off him, but somehow I manage to do it.

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**LARS & B:**

Have a drink with us, Charlie.

**ME:**

I told you I’m not interested.

**LARS & B:**

And yet you still haven't deleted the app…

I've been staring at that text exchange all day. I'm pretty sure Beckett is the one who sent the invitation, since it came about five minutes after our class let out.

I want to scream.

Because he's right.

If I weren't interested in any of this, then I *would* be deleting the app. Or at the very least unmatching these boys.

So why are they still in my phone? Why am I still allowing them to message me?

Ugh.

Because it intrigues me. That's why.

The idea of being with both of them is the very definition of temptation, but now that our harmless cyber-flirting is veering into real-life encounter territory, I feel like I'm out of my element. Even my alter ego who loves to take risks is apprehensive about pulling the trigger on this one. And if *Charlie* is apprehensive, then, well, that definitely speaks to how crazy this is.

As I'm walking out of my last class of the day, I type out a brief text to Dante. It's only three thirty, so it's a long shot he'll be free, but I hit Send anyway.

***ME:***

Need to clear my head and maybe get some advice. Are you around?

***DANTE:***

Yeah, princess, come by. It's dead here on weekdays.

I shoulder my bag and take off down the path, my boots clicking on the cobblestones with every step. Gosh, I adore this campus. It's one of the oldest in the country, and everything about it, every winding path and iron bench and cavernous library, just oozes history. And wealth. I mean, Briar was clearly founded by rich people, but all Ivies are like that. You'll never find a humble Ivy.

I'm entering the parking lot when the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end, and I suddenly realize someone's walking behind me. Normally I'm very aware of my surroundings, especially when I'm alone, but Will and Beckett have muddled my brain and fried my instincts.

I glance at the guy who's now matching my strides. A frown digs into my brow. Either I'm imagining it or it's the same guy I saw at the hockey game the other night. He's got the same distinct gap in his right eyebrow, as if there's a scar bisecting it.

Or maybe not. Maybe he just likes to shave a line in his eyebrow. Could be something the kids are doing these days.

As I head toward my car, my peripheral vision catches him stopping in the middle of the lot. I can *feel* his eyes on me, and my frown deepens.

Gripping my keys between my fingers, I spin around to look at him. He's a few years older than me. An Asian guy with jet-black hair cut short at the sides and left long on top. Average height, lanky frame. He seems completely innocuous, yet my instincts are saying *stay away*.

"Can I help you?" I call out.

"No, sorry. I just couldn't remember where I parked. But I see it now." With a polite smile, he walks past me toward a red Toyota.

Suspicion prickles my gut. He forgot where he parked? That red car stands out in this lot like a signpost. But okay. I'm not going to question why he lied. He's getting in his car anyway. A moment later, he speeds out of the lot.

I follow suit, leaving campus with Amato Racing in my GPS. For the drive, I queue up an audiobook textbook. I hit Play, and the female narrator begins explaining one of the processes involved in designing electronic circuits for medical devices, which ties directly to my senior capstone project.

But I'm halfway to the track when I simply can't take it anymore. My brain feels like it's going to explode. It's weighed down by so much

information. My classes, my capstone, the thousand Method write-ups I've completed since finding out Will and Beckett are Lars and B.

I try to distract myself before another pressure wave can surface by blasting my go-to Mollie May playlist. I don't care if I'm a loser for liking her. There's a reason she's the biggest pop star in the world and plays sold-out stadiums. Her songs are catchy.

Dante meets me at the main entrance of the track, which is totally empty despite being open for go-karts.

"You weren't kidding about it being dead," I remark as I follow him inside.

"I keep telling my pops it's a waste of electricity to keep the place open when kids are in school. But the old man is stubborn."

Dante nods toward the sole employee at the indoor ticket counter, then leads me outside again through the back doors. We end up in a hangar-like structure about a hundred yards from the main track. It's a garage, I realize. The soft strains of country music waft out of a large external speaker. On the far end of the large space sits a black Ferrari with its hood propped open.

Dante swipes a wrench from a metal rack and wanders toward the sports car. "I'm going to keep working while we chat if you don't mind."

"You service these vehicles yourself? I'm surprised they let you do that. For insurance purposes."

"Nah, this one's mine."

"I'm sorry, what?" I exclaim. "This car belongs to *you*?"

"I mean, it's an older model—"

"It's a Ferrari, Dante!" My jaw is on the concrete.

"Yeah, but Pops was gonna get rid of it. Clients don't want to drive it. And it needs a lot of work."

"He just…*gave* you a *Ferrari*."

"Oh, trust me, I'm never getting a salary again. I'll pretty much be working here for free for the rest of my life but…" He shrugs. "I mean…"

"Totally worth it," I agree. "I'm going to borrow it. You do realize that, right?"

My friend snorts. "I'm not letting you drive this car. Ever."

"But you let me drive the other ones," I protest.

“Because you’re a client, and clients are insured to drive the track cars. This baby’s mine now. You’re not on my insurance.”

“Then add me! I’ll pay for it myself.”

He grins. “You are such a car slut.”

“I am a car slut. And I don’t care if anyone knows.”

Dante gestures to the foldable lawn chair against the wall. “Pull up a chair. Sit.”

“I’m too antsy to sit.” I wander around the garage, my boots wearing holes in the floor. “I need advice. I’ve been chatting with these guys online —”

“Nice. I was hoping this would be a man problem. All right. Let’s dig in.” He wipes his hands on a rag, then reaches into a nearby cooler. “What’s your poison?”

“Anything nonalcoholic.”

“You’re no fun.” But he tosses me an energy drink instead.

Great. That’s the last thing I need—to chug a Power Monster AKA Adderall in liquid form. My mind’s already racing as it is. But I still crack open the tab and take a long swig.

“Okay, so these guys you’re talking to… Are they hot?”

“Next level hot,” I moan. “And they want to meet me.”

“So what’s the problem—” Dante stops, answering his own question. “Right. You don’t like dating multiple people at the same time. I remember you said that once.”

“No, that’s not the issue. They don’t want to meet separately. This isn’t two different guys. It’s like one guy, but two.”

“You totally lost me.”

“They’re like one guy because it’s one account. They’re one account.”

“For someone who’s supposed to be super intelligent, you’re not articulating this well at all.” He sputters with laughter. “What the hell are you trying to say?”

“I’m saying that the two of them share an account the same way they like to share women.”

Dead silence falls over the garage.

Dante gapes at me. Then he breaks out in a delighted grin.

“You were shopping for a threesome?”

“Well, not actively. But I saw their profile and…like I said, next level hot. We matched, and we’ve been chatting for a few weeks, but now they want to meet in person.”

“Okay. Great. Do it.”

His lack of hesitation gives me pause. “Really? You think I should go and have a drink with them?”

“Why did you spend all this time chatting with them then? If you just wanted a little bit of cyber action, cool. But that’s a long time to keep talking to someone. Or someones, I guess.” He searches my face. “Do you *want* to have a drink with them?”

I bite my lip in dismay. “I’ve never done anything like this before, Dante.”

“First time for everything.”

“What if I meet them and don’t want to hook up?”

“Then I’m afraid to inform you, but you’ll have to lie there like a sacrificial virgin and let them run train on you.”

“What!”

He doubles over laughing. “Jesus, Charlie! If you don’t want to hook up, then you won’t hook up. No one’s forcing you to have sex with two guys. Where do they want to meet?”

“I don’t know. All they said was let’s have a drink.”

“Okay.” He thinks it over, then continues as if he’s reading from the official threesome manual. “I suggest doing it in public. Tell someone where you are—it can be me if you want. Text me their names, photos. Don’t drink anything they offer you, just in case. Suss them out, and then decide if you want to, you know, bang two dudes.”

I can’t fight my amusement. “Why are you being so casual about this?”

“Because I don’t think it’s a big deal.”

“I expected you to be more judgmental. Most people would be.”

“Screw most people. Whose opinions do you value? Truly value?” He winks. “Mine, obviously, since you drove all the way here for this chat. But who else do you care about?”

“My best friend at Delta Pi. Faith.”

“Would she ever judge you?”

“Never.”

“Then who cares? The people who matter won’t judge you, so stop judging yourself.”

*My family will judge me, and they matter*.

I swallow the words, along with the lump of embarrassment that lodges in my throat. The idea of my parents finding out about my weird fantasies—

*But why would they ever find out?* another part of me argues.

True. I’ve never spoken to my parents and siblings about my sex life. So unless one of the tiny minority of people who’ll know about this decides to tell my family, it’s unlikely they’ll ever find out.

“You know what? I’m doing it,” I declare.

I’m so firm in my conviction, I feel a surge of adrenaline from it. I chug the rest of my Power Monster, then crush the can and throw it into the trash, causing Dante to raise his eyebrows.

“You drank that way too fast,” he warns.

“Yeah. That’s why we’re going go-karting now.”

He grins. “Let’s do it.”

# CHAPTER TWENTY

## WILL

*All you have to do is ask*

**CHARLIE:**

One drink. Tonight.

She follows up that message with a time and a place, bringing a smile to my lips. It's Thursday, and I'm sprawled on a bench in the lobby of the environmental sciences building, waiting for Beckett so we can ride home together. Since his class lets out only forty minutes after mine, it's no sweat to wait for him. Evidently, he's not paying attention to said class, because his name pops up on my phone.

***BECK:***

Charlie's in.

***ME:***

I just saw.

***BECK:***

I guess we're going to Boston tonight…?

He leaves the question hanging. It seems a little ridiculous to drive more than an hour into the city proper and then another thirty minutes to the

suburbs. She picked the most out-of-the-way bar humanly possible. But if Charlie is willing to make the trek just to scope us out, then I suppose we can too.

When we get home an hour later, I kick off my shoes and head for the kitchen. We don't have to leave for a few hours, so I have plenty of time to cook dinner.

"What are you making?" Beckett calls from the hallway.

"I'm thinking stir-fry. Maybe some quinoa salad?"

"I'm totally ordering a cheeseburger at the bar."

"Go for it. You can explain to Jensen why you're sluggish on the ice tomorrow."

I swear, if Beck oversaw our meals, he'd set our team nutritionist's meal plans on fire and eat burgers for breakfast, french fries for lunch, and pizza and wings every night.

Anticipation builds in my gut with each passing minute. I shower after dinner, shave the five-o'clock shadow off my face. I throw on a striped polo and dark jeans, reconvening with Beckett downstairs to find him in similar casual attire. His shirt has the top two buttons undone. His jeans are so faded they're practically falling apart. He pulls it off, though.

He runs a hand through his messy blond hair. "You want me to drive?"

"Nah, I'm good."

We spend the drive to the Boston bar listening to the Bruins game on the radio. It isn't until we're nearing the suburbs that I turn to the passenger seat with a warning.

"Don't push her too hard."

Beckett glances up from his phone screen. "Who? Charlie?"

"Yeah, she's skittish. I think this embarrasses her."

"I know it does." He shrugs. "But I'm gonna act the way I always act. She can take it or leave it."

I suppose that's fair enough. If she does end up in our bed, she'll have to get used to the dynamic anyway. Beckett is an incessant flirt. You can't restrain that much charisma. Most women don't want him to. But Charlotte Kingston isn't most women. I get the sense she feels shame over desiring two guys.

It's a sentiment I understand well. This entire summer, I felt deep shame about…desiring the extra flavors of sex, as Diana would say. It took a

while, but eventually I reached the conclusion that it's nobody's business but mine what I do behind closed doors. If all parties consent and are enjoying themselves, then who are we hurting? Sure, some people might judge. Think us sleazy. But there's a reason "threesome" is a popular category on porn sites. It's a common fantasy for people.

It just so happens I've made the fantasy a reality.

Charlotte chose a bar in a small strip mall for tonight's meetup. The parking lot is packed for a Thursday night, likely because of the game. I'm not sure if that's a good thing or a bad thing. I suppose it depends on how much attention she wants to draw.

Since I have her phone number from class, I text her to let her know we're here. Inside, we find a typical sports bar, featuring a row of flat-screen TVs flickering with various games and walls adorned with framed jerseys and autographed memorabilia.

There's a mix of tables and booths, and as I scan the room for Charlotte, her response pops up.

***CHARLOTTE:***

> Corner booth near the front window. I got here five minutes ago.

I shift my head to the left and catch a glimpse of her dark hair and a flash of white. Her sweater. Man, this girl really likes to wear white. And of course she's early. She seems like the punctual type. Or at least *this* version of her is. The Charlie from the app would probably make us wait for an hour before she strutted over on a pair of high-heeled boots and said *sorry I'm late, boys*, enjoying the idea that she'd kept us at the edge of our seats, waiting for her.

She looks up at our approach, apprehension flickering in her eyes. Her outfit is trademark Charlotte: a short white cardigan with tiny pearl buttons, paired with a black skirt.

"Hey." I greet her with a wry smile.

I slide into the booth on her right, setting my keys and phone on the tabletop. Beckett slides in on her other side, which forces her to scoot closer

to me to give him room.

“Hey,” he says easily.

“Hi.” She sounds nervous.

Looks it too. She has both hands wrapped tightly around a water glass, her fingernails leaving streaks in the condensation from the ice cubes.

“I just got water. I was waiting for you guys to get here to order,” she explains, catching my gaze.

“You good?” I ask her.

“Fine.”

Because that was convincing.

“It’s just a drink, Charlotte,” I say. “No expectations.”

That seems to mollify her. Her shoulders relax. Then tense again when the waiter appears. A short, stocky young guy with a head of unruly, blond curls.

He glances at Charlie. “Has the rest of your party arrived or are we still waiting on one more?”

“Nope, this is it,” she says. “These are my…friends from class.”

There was absolutely no reason for her to qualify that. From the corner of my eye, I see Beckett trying not to laugh. He and I order beers. Charlotte surprises me by ordering a gin and tonic.

Someone needs the liquid courage, it appears.

After the waiter leaves, Charlotte spends several seconds clearly not knowing where to look. Her gaze is a Ping-Pong ball, darting from me to Beckett to her glass to the framed Bobby Orr photo on the wall, and then the cycle begins anew.

Finally, she groans. “This is weird,” she blurts out. “This is weird and it’s uncomfortable, and I think I should go.”

I bite my lip, barely able to contain my laughter in time. “All right. No one’s keeping you here.”

I start to slide out of the booth, only to stop when she says, “No. Don’t go.”

My ass plops back down. “Are you sure?”

“Yes, but…can someone just acknowledge that it’s weird?”

“I mean, you’re making it weird,” Beckett says, grinning at her. “But it doesn’t have to be.”

“How can it not? I’m on a date with two guys. I don’t know how to be on a date with two guys.”

“It’s the same as being on a date with one guy.” He shrugs. “What would you be doing if you were on a one-guy date right now?”

“I’d probably ask you questions.” She releases another groan. “Normal questions. But the ones I want to ask right now aren’t normal at all.”

This time, I can’t stop the laugh. “Ask what you want to ask,” I urge. “I promise you we won’t be scandalized.”

“You two really don’t hook up with each other? I know you said that on the app, but…”

I figured this would come up. Girls are always asking us that. Or actively encouraging it in some cases.

I shake my head. “We don’t hook up.”

“Yet?”

“Honestly? Probably not.” I glance at Beck, then back at Charlotte. “We’ve never been chilling in the living room or something when I’ve looked over and had an overwhelming urge to bone him. I’ve only ever been with women.”

“And you?” She turns to Beckett.

“Only women,” he admits. “I’ve kissed a couple dudes, but a girl was there both times.”

“So you’re bi?” She sounds thoughtful.

“I’m not much of a label guy. My philosophy has always been do what feels good and don’t do what doesn’t feel good.”

That brings a smile to her lips. She seems to be relaxing. So of course, the waiter picks that moment to return with our drinks. At the reminder that we’re not alone and anyone could be watching us, she practically snatches her drink out of the guy’s hand and takes a big gulp.

“What about you?” Beckett waits for the waiter to leave before voicing the challenge.

“What about me?” she says.

“Have you been with women?”

“No, and I wouldn’t consider myself bi. Or even pan. I don’t think I’ve ever been attracted to a girl, outside of a friendship sense.”

“But this you’re attracted to, right?” He gestures between the three of us.

Resignation settles in her eyes. “Obviously, since I’m here. But I’ve never done this before.” She sips her drink, then sets it down with a laugh. “I always knew I was an overachiever, but this is taking it to the extreme. My first date in eight months and I choose to have it with not one but two boys.”

“When was your last serious relationship?” I ask curiously.

“We broke up this past spring. We were together about a year and a half. How about you guys?”

I field the question first. “I was with someone in sophomore year, but it was more of a friends-with-benefits arrangement,” I admit. “The last time I called someone my girlfriend was probably high school.”

“Same,” Beckett says. “Dated one girl for all of high school.”

“All four years?” she exclaims.

“Why do you look so surprised?” He seems hurt for a second but then flashes his nothing-gets-to-me smile. “It’s because I’m too hot to be in a long-term relationship, right? Someone this attractive needs to be spreading his love around.”

Charlotte snorts. “Sounds like that’s what you’ve been doing since you got to Briar. Is that why you and Ms. High School broke up? So you could sow your wild oats in college?”

I don’t think she notices the way he tenses, but I do. Beckett hates talking about Shannon. The most I ever got out of him about his ex is that she crushed his heart to dust when she cheated on him.

“Nah, that’s not the reason for the breakup.” His hard jaw belies the light response. “But it was a nice side effect. Sowing oats is fun.” Before she can press for more details, he turns it back on her. “Why did you and your ex break up?” He suddenly curses. “Shit, wait. Don’t tell me you were with that douchebag from class.”

“What douchebag?” I ask.

“This macho a-hole named Mitch. Is that why he was acting like a possessive caveman when he saw us talking?”

“Mitch is my ex,” she confirms. “And yeah, he’s a bit of a dick. Now anyway. He wasn’t this bad when we were together. He could get clingy sometimes, but he wasn’t overly controlling or possessive. The only reason we broke up is because—”

She stops. And doesn’t continue.

“Because what?” I push. “You can’t leave us hanging like that.”

Charlotte takes another sip of her gin and tonic. “We, um, had some incompatibilities.”

“Some?”

“Well, just one.” Her cheeks turn red. “A mismatch of libidos.”

Beckett’s eyes gleam. “Whose libido was the more active one?”

I could take a guess.

Her even redder face confirms it. “Me, obviously. I…like sex.”

Damned if that doesn’t make my cock stir.

“How often do you want it?” Beckett licks the corner of his mouth. Like me, he’s clearly affected by where this has gone.

“Um.” She offers an embarrassed little shrug. “At least once a day.”

“At least?” we say in unison, then exchange a grin.

“Yes.” She heaves a heavy breath. “Even if I’m on my period.” When neither Beck nor I so much as blink, she narrows those big dark eyes at us. “That doesn’t gross you out?”

He shrugs. “That’s why shower sex was invented.”

I snicker.

“It’s really warm in here, right? Are you guys warm?” Her fingers are shaky as she unbuttons her sweater. “I feel like there should be air-conditioning.”

She peels the sweater off her shoulders, revealing a black tank with thin straps. She leaves the sweater on the bench seat beside her and picks up her glass again.

Someone else might think she did that on purpose. Trying to tease us. Seduce us. But Charlotte’s nerves are palpable.

I toy with the label of my beer, running my thumb through the condensation weeping from the bottle. The same riddle that stymied me in the lab takes root again.

Who is the real Charlotte?

And since I might never get this opportunity again, I decide to go ahead and ask her.

Her forehead grooves. “What do you mean, the real me?” she says after I voice the question.

“Yeah, I’m curious about this too,” Beckett pipes up. “Because on the one hand, we’ve got Charlotte.” His posture changes, straightening to look

all proper. “The very studious STEM student who can’t let her GPA dip below 3.9999 and who wears these little good-girl sweaters.” He picks up the sweater she just removed. “You wore white cashmere to a pub, sugar puff. It’s a little intense.”

She frowns.

“No, don’t misunderstand,” he says in reassurance. “That prim sorority girl thing is a huge turn-on. But that’s not who you are right now, is it? This”—he lightly runs his fingers over her bare arm—“is Charlie. Charlie’s tits are practically hanging out of her top. She chose not to wear a bra to her date—”

“This tank top is technically the bra,” she mutters. “I wasn’t planning on taking off the sweater.”

“Nah,” he says. “Charlie wears it as a top. I don’t think she cares if her nipples are practically poking through the fabric or that all Will has to do is rub his thumb over one and it’ll be harder than an icicle.”

She bites her lip at the image he painted. I can’t deny my cock twitches at the thought. I also can’t deny I’ve noticed the tight little beads straining against her tank top.

“Charlie confesses all her fantasies on an app,” Beck continues. “And Charlie drove an hour and a half from her sorority house just to meet us. You’re like a double agent. I dig it.”

He’s smiling as he takes a drink.

I search Charlotte’s expression. She seems shaken by his assessment but, at the same time, not shocked to hear it.

“People have layers,” she finally says. “Different sides they show to different people. Don’t you guys have layers?”

I think about it. “Yeah. I guess I do.”

“So how come you get to be multifaceted and it’s not strange?”

“No one is saying it’s strange. We’re saying we like it.”

“It’s hot,” Beckett says bluntly. “I like the idea of seeing you in class in your cashmere and pleats, knowing that you fantasize about having two dicks in you at the same time.”

She’s mid-sip when he says that, and his words trigger a coughing fit.

“Beck,” I warn.

“Sorry, mate. She’s just so easy to tease.”

Charlotte coughs, then clears her airways by draining the rest of her drink. “So you’re only teasing? That’s not a thing you do at the same time?”

Now it’s my turn to cough. “Are you asking us about double penetration?”

“At this point, is any topic really off the table?” She tips her head at me, then him. “Have you done that before?”

“We told you we don’t kiss and tell,” he chides.

“Fine, I’ll rephrase. Do you *want* to do that?”

All the blood in my body rushes south. From the way Beckett’s eyes flare with heat, I know he likes the idea too.

“Will?” she prompts. “Do you want to?”

“Sometimes,” I finally answer. “Or sometimes I might not be into it. Maybe something else will feel right. I don’t really plan sex.”

“Yeah, that seems like a Charlotte request. A sex agenda.” Beckett polishes off his beer, his lips curving around the neck of the bottle. “I don’t think Charlie cares. She would just go with the flow, wouldn’t she?”

Her hand trembles as she toys with the side of her glass. Unable to stop myself, I reach out to steady her, lacing my fingers through hers. She bites her lip.

“It’s just a drink,” I remind her, my voice soft.

“I know. That’s not… I’m not bothered anymore about being here. I’m more bothered about…”

“About what?”

She looks down at our entwined fingers. Her gaze remains lowered as she says, “I’m thinking about kissing you. Both of you.” She gives a strangled laugh. “Not at the same time, though. Because that doesn’t sound fun.”

Beckett chuckles. “Yeah. I think the only people into three-way kisses are the oiled-up couples on *Fling or Forever*.”

“Oh my God. Don’t tell me you watch that show.”

“No, but our friend does,” I say with a snort. “All he does is talk about that stupid show.”

“But back to this kissing thing…” Beckett says.

The air thickens with tension, crackling like static electricity right before a storm. My thumb is stroking the inside of her palm now. I hear her breath hitch when Beckett moves closer to her.

His lips quirk. “If you want to be kissed, Charlie, all you have to do is ask.”

# CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

## CHARLOTTE

*Kiss me good night, Charlie*

MY HEART IS GOING TO EXPLODE OUT OF MY CHEST. ON ONE SIDE OF me, I have Will discovering an erogenous zone I never knew existed as he rubs the center of my palm in a teasing, sensual glide. On my other side, I've got Beckett's warm breath against my neck, his lips tickling the shell of my ear as he offers to kiss me.

I didn't think tonight was going to go this way.

I truly thought I'd show up and it would be the most awkward date of my life.

I anticipated stilted, porn-level dialogue. *Oh, hello there, you sexy hockey players. Please, I am aching for you both. Take me here and now.*

Instead, it's been normal human conversation. Well, if you call double penetration and whether they hook up *normal*. But still. It felt easy. Comfortable.

Until I made the mistake of confessing that I want to kiss them.

Now, my pulse is racing faster than the go-kart I drove yesterday, and I'm practically crawling out of my own skin thanks to the waves of desire. Everything feels hot and tight.

Beckett's seductive words hang in the air.

*If you want to be kissed, Charlie, all you have to do is ask.*

Before I can answer, I notice the waiter trying to catch my attention to see if we need anything else. It's a reminder of where we are and what I should *not* be thinking about doing, so I blurt out, "No."

The guys instantly straighten up. Will releases my hand. Beckett shifts away from me. It's gratifying to see how quick they are to respect my boundaries, but they mistake my response.

“I, ah, meant not here,” I stammer. “Not in this booth.”

They’re both trying not to grin.

“This is a date, right?” I ask, shifting my gaze between them.

They nod.

“Well, I’m not one of those I-don’t-kiss-on-the-first-date girls. I’m fine with kissing. But…um…maybe when you’re walking me to my car or something.”

My heart careens at the idea.

What is wrong with me?

I really, really, really want them. God, even Beckett, who’s been annoying the hell out of me all semester. I want nothing more than to know what his lips taste like. What Will’s tongue feels like in my mouth.

They’re not wrong—I *am* two people. But, and it’s hard to put into words, it’s not like either part of me is fake. The straitlaced sorority girl is just a part of my personality that naturally comes out when I’m in that house, being judged and criticized by the likes of Agatha. And my overachiever side comes out around my family, because I want to…

Fit in.

I suppose that’s my biggest flaw. My Achilles’ heel. This deep-rooted desire to fit in among my peers, my family.

*This* part of my personality—Charlie, the girl sitting in a bar wearing a tank top with no bra—doesn’t fit in at Delta Pi. Doesn’t entirely fit in with her family. But here, in the presence of Will Larsen and Beckett Dunne, she’s never felt more comfortable.

The next time the waiter returns, the guys order another round of beers. I’ve maxed out my alcohol intake, so I ask for a soda.

“You’re thinking again,” Will accuses.

I meet his amused eyes and sigh. “I’m always thinking. My inner monologue never stops.”

“And what’s it saying right now?”

Warmth suffuses my cheeks. “That I like both of you, and I don’t think I want to choose.”

Beckett shrugs. “That’s the beauty of it. You don’t have to choose.”

“What if I decide I want just one of you?” I challenge.

“Hmm.” Will tilts his head in thought. “So you’re saying you want us to compete for your favor?”

A grin touches my lips. “If I did, how exactly would you compete?”

Beckett takes my hand, his thumb tracing slow, deliberate circles over my palm. “We could see who can make you come faster?”

I choke on a laugh. “That scenario still allows both of you to have me.”

“Oh, does it?” He blinks innocently.

Laughing too, Will brushes his fingers along my jawline while Beckett continues to stroke my palm.

My pulse quickens. The dual sensations of their hands on my skin trigger a flurry of sparks through my body. The thrill of being the center of their attention is intoxicating.

I don’t think I *could* choose, even if they asked me to. They’re both so different. Beckett with his buckets of charm. Will with the laid-back smile that covers the intensity simmering beneath the surface.

“You know what I think?” Will’s eyes lock onto mine. “I think you don’t want us to fight for you. I think you want to see what happens when we work together.”

I imagine myself, my naked body, being caught between them, and an honest-to-God moan slips out.

They both smile.

Beckett’s smile is all lazy confidence as he watches me with a look that promises very bad things. Will’s is subtler, more reserved, but no less charged.

A bout of activity across the room breaks the tension, drawing my attention away. A slender Black girl in a flowy skirt and white top is stepping onto the small stage, holding an acoustic guitar. She’s joined by a guy who settles behind a set of electric drums. She doesn’t introduce herself, just adjusts the height of the microphone and begins playing a slow-tempo folk song I’ve been hearing everywhere lately.

“I love this song,” I tell the guys. A smile stretches across my face as I start to relax again. “As my dates, one of you bears the responsibility of dancing with me. So which one shall it be?”

“That would be him,” Beckett says immediately, nodding toward Will.

I snicker.

“I mean, I *could* take you out there,” he relents, “but it’ll just be me grinding against you the entire time—” He cuts himself off. “On second thought, I would love to dance with you.”

“Sit your ass down.” A laughing Will is already getting out of the booth and extending his hand. “I got you, babe.”

After a moment of hesitation, I take his hand.

It’s literally the tiniest of dance floors, nothing more than a little square in front of the stage. At least we’re not alone out there. Another couple is also dancing, which makes me feel less self-conscious.

I loop my hands around Will’s neck. He places his on my waist and tugs me toward him. Our bodies aren’t flush, but there isn’t much distance between them. I feel the heat radiating off him. I run my fingers over the soft hairs at the nape of his neck.

He searches my face. “Are you okay?”

“I’m good.” My lips quirk in a wry smile. “Are *you*? Because you’re looking a little tense.”

“I’m trying very hard not to squeeze your ass right now.”

My smile widens. “I totally feel your hands hovering over it. They’re dying to move lower, aren’t they?”

“So badly,” he groans.

As we sway to the music, my gaze drifts toward our booth. Beckett was on his phone, but he must sense me staring because he lifts his head and winks at me.

“Do you still find him annoying?” Will asks with a knowing look.

“No.” In a grudging tone, I admit, “I like him.”

“Told you. He’s cool. Funny.”

“And I like *you*,” I say softly.

Will nods. “I’m also cool.”

“But not funny?” I tease.

“Probably more sarcastic than funny.”

I’d already pegged that Will is the more serious of the two. But what I didn’t expect is for him to be so…sexy. He’s exuding some serious sex appeal tonight. A far cry from the boy-next-door vibes he gives off in the lab.

As the song comes to an end, Will bends his head so he can whisper in my ear.

“You’re so fucking gorgeous, Charlotte. You have no idea.”

Like I said, serious sex appeal.

His husky compliment gets me all warm and gooey. My rational Charlotte side thinks he's probably just buttering me up so he can get me in bed, but when he pulls back and I glimpse the need burning in his eyes, I know he at least means what he says.

In this moment, he truly craves me.

So does Beckett, whose eyes drink me in when we return to the booth. He licks his bottom lip, and suddenly, I'm dying for a taste. Just a sampler. I don't have to gorge on the entire hockey player feast, but maybe just a bite.

I look from one guy to the other.

"Ask for the bill."

Will thrusts his arm up to signal the waiter before I can even close my mouth. Yeah. Someone's eager to leave too.

I slip my sweater on and button it up, then shoulder my purse and follow the boys out the door. My heartbeat is out of control again, ready to combust the closer we get to the parking lot. I didn't bring a coat because I'd only be walking from the car to the door, and the brisk November air chills my face and puckers my nipples. I wrap my arms around myself, shivering as we cross the nearly deserted lot to my car.

"You cold?" Beckett murmurs.

I nod.

"Come here. I'll warm you up."

The next thing I know, he's stepping up behind me. Two strong, muscular arms surround me. One locks around my waist, his hand resting on my upper thigh. He uses his other hand to sweep my hair away from my face, letting it fall down my back.

Then he rests his cheek against mine and whispers, "Give Larsen his good-night kiss."

Every inch of me throbs as I stand there flush with Beckett's body. I feel a hard bulge pressing against my ass, the heat of his heavy pecs against my shoulder blades.

Will moves in front of me. At five five, I'm taller than average, but I still have to tilt my head back to look at him. These boys are so tall. I feel miniature sandwiched between them.

Will takes another step closer. His hand lowers to my hip, while the warmth of Beckett's palm brands my other side. Will's other hand strokes my cheek with an almost possessive confidence.

“Kiss me good night, Charlie.”

He won’t do it without my permission, I realize. Without me initiating it. I appreciate that, but I also hate being thrust into this position, the one propelling the boat. I want to let the current take over and just be carried along with it. But I understand his need for total clarity. I already know that Will and Beckett want to kiss me. I have to show them that I want it too.

I rise on my tiptoes and close the distance between our lips. The move causes my ass to push back against Beckett’s growing erection, and I hear his groan in my ear at the same time as Will’s mouth covers mine. He tastes like beer and the mint that came with the check.

His kiss is not gentle, but it’s not rough either. It’s a kiss that says he knows exactly what he wants, and he’s used to getting it. The passion of it is almost overwhelming. I melt against him, my tongue eager to taste his, and I’m breathless when he finally pulls away.

Breathing hard himself, he squeezes my waist with both hands, slowly turning me around until I find Beckett’s silver-gray eyes dancing at me.

He drags his thumb over my bottom lip. “Kiss me good night, Charlie.”

Oh my God.

I’m nearing peak level arousal. I’m afraid that the moment our lips touch, a spontaneous orgasm might sweep through me. My clit is tight and throbbing. My nipples hurt. I’m breathing hard.

I gasp when Will slides his hands through my hair to tip my head back. I grab Beckett by the collar and tug him toward me, but unlike Will, Beckett teases me, his lips just barely grazing mine. It’s infuriating and thrilling at the same time, making me want him even more.

After what feels like an eternity of playful tension, he lets me have it. His lips move against mine in a slow, teasing rhythm, as if he’s savoring every second. Beckett’s kiss is as hungry as Will’s, as skillful. But he continues to tease, depriving me of his tongue until I’m the one chasing it into his mouth.

When our tongues finally meet, I release a satisfied moan and hear Will’s hoarse voice say, “Fuck. That’s such a sweet sound.”

I never want it to end, whimpering when Beckett ends the kiss.

“Come on, let’s get you home,” he says.

I blink. My heartbeat is still erratic. “What?”

“Unlock your car.”

I do it, my hand shaking as I click the key fob.

Beckett opens the driver's side door for me. "Drive safe, okay? Message when you get home so we know you made it back all right."

"That's it?" I say in confusion. "You don't want to…"

"What, you want us to fuck you in your car?"

My thighs clench.

"I mean, we could," he says, "but that's a real waste of a first time, don't you think?"

"He's right. A car quickie isn't it, Charlie." Will steps in to brush another kiss on my lips before guiding me into my driver's seat.

He and Beckett move aside as I start the engine, but they don't walk away.

"Are you just going to stand there and watch me go?" I ask.

"Of course," Will answers. "We're not leaving this parking lot until you do."

I can still see them in the rearview mirror as I drive away.

Will, with his boyish smile that I'm starting to suspect is a cover for the kind of passion that would make a woman blush.

Beckett, all sex and smirks, the kind of guy who leaves a trail of broken hearts and doesn't look back.

Even if they asked me to choose between them, I honestly don't think I could. And now I'm cursing myself for taking a bite, because that sampler was the most delicious thing I've ever tasted.

How the heck am I supposed to resist the feast?

# CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

## WILL

*My wife will murder you without hesitation*

I ARRIVE AT THE RINK FOR MORNING SKATE WITH A PEP IN MY STEP. I don't even care that it's barely past eight. I've got Charlotte Kingston on the brain. Haven't been able to stop thinking about the girl since Beck and I got home from our date last night.

Man, she can kiss.

I want to kiss her again. Everywhere.

But she left us last night with no clarity about whether she wants to pursue this. She wanted a good-night kiss, yes, but that doesn't mean she's interested in hanging out again. Taking things further. I'd love to blow up her phone asking to see her again, check how she feels about things, tell her how much I want her, but I don't want to scare her away.

Beckett doesn't want that either. He talked me out of double texting her after the **Glad you made it home safe, thanks for tonight** message I sent when we got home.

I would've loved to see her again tonight, but we're playing the first game of a two-game weekend series later. Coach Jensen, who's usually waiting for us on the ice at practice, is in the locker room today when everyone starts filing in. He's accompanied by a tall man with salt-and-pepper hair and bright blue eyes who I'm certain I've seen before but can't place. The newcomer wears a gray Briar U hoodie and has a whistle dangling around his neck.

Coach waits for the room to fill up before clapping his hands to get everyone's attention.

"Shut up," he barks, and within seconds, he's met with silence. "I've got an announcement to make. This is Coach Hollis. He'll be joining the

coaching staff as of today. Coming on board for the rest of the season."

Everyone waits for him to continue. He doesn't.

"See you out there," he says brusquely, then stalks off.

"He hasn't changed one bit," Coach Hollis says, beaming from ear to ear. He claps his hands too. "All right, I'll keep it quick. I'm Mike Hollis. You can call me Coach or Hollis or Mike—honestly, I'm not picky. Names mean nothing."

Beside me, Case lets out a soft snort.

"There's only one thing that matters," continues Coach/Hollis/Mike, "so I need all you boys to open your ears and really listen to me right now, okay? With your ears."

Case and I exchange a look. I'm still not quite sure what to make of this dude. He seems…colorful.

And I suddenly remember where I've seen him. He was leaving Jensen's office the day I came to talk to Coach about my dad's intrusive interviews.

Speaking of interviews, I have one today after practice. The writer from *Capitol Magazine* finally managed to pin me down with a date.

"My daughters are off-limits, you hear me?" Hollis's stern eyes conduct a sweep of the locker room. "The twins and Anika are too young for you, so don't even fucking look at them. But RJ is age appropriate—*especially* don't look at her. This is nonnegotiable. My wife will murder you without hesitation. She is a scary woman. Now what's the rule?"

There's a murmur of confusion. The rule? What is this man babbling about? Nobody cares about his daughters.

"Let's all repeat the rule," he says, gesturing for us to speak. When everyone continues to stare at him, he grumbles in irritation. "Say after me: your daughters are off-limits."

After a beat, a chorus of voices rings through the room.

"Your daughters are off-limits."

"…off-limits," finishes Patrick, who came into the chant late.

"You're good boys," Hollis says, nodding firmly. "All right, gear up."

Chatter fills the room again, everyone turning toward their lockers to get ready. In the stall next to me, Ryder peels his sweatshirt off. His head pops free at the same time as our new assistant coach ambles over.

"Hey! Luke! You remember me from your wedding, right?"

Ryder dons a blank face. I don’t blame him. There were about five hundred people at his wedding. Against his will, of course. Gigi’s dad was in charge of the guest list.

“My pants ripped on the dance floor when I did the splits?” Coach Hollis prompts. “Tore right at the crotch?”

“Oh yeah!” Shane exclaims from the other end of the bench. “I remember that! Those were some killer splits, bro.”

Shane sounds like he means that. Shit, I guess Diana really did turn him into a dancer. I’m both impressed and afraid.

Hollis takes another step, officially encroaching on Ryder’s space cushion.

Ryder’s expression doesn’t change, but I can tell he’s on the alert, wondering what this overly enthusiastic man wants from him.

“Listen,” Hollis says, his tone grave enough to raise my concern. “I need you to talk to Garrett for me.”

“What about?” Ryder asks, his forehead creased.

“I want access to Dad Chat.”

“Oh. Uh, sorry, Coach, but I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Dad Chat!” Hollis sputters. I can’t tell if he’s outraged or upset. Maybe both. “It’s by invite only, and those assholes won’t let me join. Fitzy got in because of the Di Laurentis connection. Connelly’s in because he’s basically trying to fight Logan for G’s number-one best friend slot, but Logan ain’t gonna take it standing up.”

“Lying down,” I correct.

Hollis blinks in confusion. “Huh?”

“The phrase is ‘won’t take it lying down.’”

“Why the fuck would anyone be lying down for a fight?”

I’m about to explain, but Hollis makes another impatient noise and continues.

“So I said, fine, I’ll be the bigger man. I don’t need to be in the chat. Me and Conor can start our own chat. We’re not close but we can be. Nobody says we can’t be.”

“Who is Conor?” I hear someone whisper.

I have no idea.

“And then I find out Conor got into the chat last year! Jake added him because they’re married to sisters.” Hollis growls. “How is it my fault I’m

not related to any of these assholes? What? I should have nailed Dean's sister instead of marrying my wife? Is that it? Do they want me to divorce my wife?"

"I'm going to leave now," Shane says, and then he brazenly just… leaves.

Ryder, Beck, and I remain, somehow locked into this conversation despite the precedent Shane just set. We could hurry up and throw our pads on, but nobody does.

"Uh, I can text him later if you want," Ryder tells our new assistant coach.

"Do it now. I'll wait."

"Um. Yeah. Okay, bro. Sure." Ryder gives us a look, then reaches for his phone.

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After practice, I shower and change into my street clothes and drive back to Hastings. I chose Della's as the venue for our interview because I don't want some random DC journalist over at my house.

The bell above the door dings when I enter. I stop, scanning the brightly lit diner until my gaze lands on the likeliest candidate for out-of-towner. The woman in the back booth has that city feel to her. Glossy, perfectly styled hair, impeccable makeup, and a white silk blouse that looks tailored to her slight frame.

She notices me at the door and lifts her hand in a brisk wave.

I unzip my coat as I walk toward the booth, nodding hello on my approach. "Ms. Diaz?"

"Call me Tessa," she says. "It's nice to finally meet you, Will."

I don't think it's meant as a jab, but it's definitely a reminder that I've been putting this off for weeks now.

The last thing I want to do is sit down for an interview, but this is my lot in life. To be jerked around like a marionette on a stage, my father peering down at me as he pulls my strings.

Tessa Diaz seems like a nice enough woman. Closer to my age than I expected—she can't be a day older than twenty-five. But she's still a political operative. A fixture in the DC media.

In other words, she can’t be trusted.

I settle in the seat across from her, running a hand through my hair to smooth it out after the November wind just had its way with it. I order a coffee when the waitress pops over, then make small talk with Tessa until my cup is filled.

Tessa places her phone face up on the table, open to a recording app. “Do you mind if I tape this?”

“Knock yourself out.”

“Great. Thank you.” She hits the Record button. “So. Will. Tell me about your mother.”

I give her a rueful smile. “I thought this was supposed to be about hockey. Because that prompt feels dangerously close to a therapy session with a stranger.”

She flashes a perfect, white smile. “Only if you have deep-seated issues about your mother.”

“No,” I say, chuckling. “I don’t. To be honest, I remember very little about her.”

“You were young when she died. Five?”

“Four.”

“That must have been tough.”

“Again, I don’t remember much. After she died, Dad hired a few nannies. I only really remember one—Jodie. She was nice.” I shrug. “And then about a year later, he met Kelsey. A year after that, he married her.”

“Yes. Your stepmother, Kelsey Lowen. She has an impressive résumé. Well-respected in the law circles. How do you feel about her?”

“Seriously, aren’t we supposed to be talking about hockey?”

“We’re talking about everything. I like to form a complete picture of the person I’m profiling.”

“Remind me again why I’m being profiled?”

“Well, technically, your father is being profiled.”

*So why the fuck are you talking to me?*

I plaster on a polite smile. “Well, I don’t know what to tell you. If the point is to unearth some family drama, dig up some skeletons—”

Tessa laughs. “That’s not the kind of journalist I am, Will. Did you not look up any of my previous work?”

I did, actually, and it *did* seem like her byline was attached to a lot of puff pieces, but that doesn't mean I can trust her. Who's to say this isn't the day she decides to write a scathing exposé?

"Do you mind if I turn this off?" She gestures to the recorder.

Suspicion flickers through me. "Sure."

Tessa presses the Stop button. "Do you really think I attended Yale journalism just so I could graduate and write glowing pieces about a congressman's son's college life?" Her tone is amused rather than antagonistic.

"I mean, that's sort of what you're doing…"

"Yeah, it's called paying your dues. There's basically an entire department at the magazine for this kind of transactional bullshit."

"Transactional how?"

"Meaning I write a beautiful story about how wonderful Congressman Larsen's son is. What a fine young man he raised. And then, at a later date, he throws a piece of intel our way. Leaks that a particular vote isn't about to go as unexpected. Reveals that a particular House member is about to be arrested for tax evasion. That sort of thing." She shrugs. "Eventually, once I've written enough of this fluff, I get to work on the more hard-hitting stuff. So I assure you, this isn't an elaborate trap. These questions are simply formalities that will help me wax poetic about how you persevered after your mother died and that rather than living out the Cinderella archetype with your evil stepmother, you and Kelsey Lowen actually get along wonderfully."

"That wouldn't even be a lie," I say with a laugh. "She's great. We're having lunch next week."

"Sounds lovely. Now, shall we continue?" She reaches for the recorder.

I nod, feeling some of the pressure lift off my chest. I always have to be so careful about what I say in these situations, but I sensed nothing but sincerity from Tessa just now. And knowing I'm not walking into any traps causes me to speak more openly than I usually would.

We talk more about my stepmother. My classes. Why I wanted to attend Briar and how I chose to play hockey when I was six because all the other sports bored me.

"So you like excitement," Tessa prompts.

She doesn't know the half of it.

But my sex life, alas, is not the subject for this article.

“I guess I do,” I answer, shrugging.

“What about violence? Is that another draw for you?”

“I wouldn’t call it violence, per se. College contact rules are strict. Fighting isn’t tolerated.”

“Aggression then. The physicality of the sport. You enjoy that.”

“I mean…” I grin at her. “Nothing gets your heart pumping and your adrenaline running the way hockey does. It’s fantastic.”

Tessa’s lips curve. “I believe that is the first genuine smile you’ve given me today.”

“It’s a fun sport.”

“But no plans on going pro?”

“Honestly, I don’t think I want that life. It’s a lot to put my body through. A lot of pressure to always be at the top of my game. A lot of traveling and time away from home.”

“Hmm, and who would you want to go home to? Do you have a significant other?”

“Not at the moment. But yes, I’d hate to be away from my girl for long stretches of time. Professional hockey is a sacrifice. There are men who’ve missed the birth of their children because they’re on the road playing a five-game stretch. It’s a whole other level of dedication. There are guys on my team—Colson, Ryder, Lindley. They’ve wanted to play in the pros from the second they threw on a pair of skates. But me, I never grew up saying I wanted that.”

“What did you grow up wanting to do then?”

“I don’t know. I changed my mind all the time,” I admit. “Sometimes it was a cop, sometimes a firefighter. Sometimes I thought about being a doctor, till I realized you deal with way too many bodily fluids.”

She laughs. “What about following in your dad’s footsteps?”

I grimace. “Hard pass.”

“You wouldn’t enjoy being a politician?”

“No, I don’t need that kind of attention. Media scrutiny all the time, always having to say the right thing.” I pause. “I’m not against the behind-the-scenes stuff, though.”

“Hey, if you like excitement,” she says, waggling her eyebrows enticingly, “there’s nothing more exciting than working on a campaign. Did

you ever help out with any of your dad's?"

"Other than the obligatory photo ops, no."

"Interesting."

"But like I said, I wouldn't be against it. It does sound challenging, taking a raw candidate, polishing them up, bringing them in front of a national audience, and giving them an opportunity to sell their policies and ideals to the public."

"Yet you won't do that for your father."

I shrug. "If I ever worked on a campaign, it would have to be for someone who—"

I stop, recognizing the land mine I almost stepped in.

"Finish that sentence," Tessa urges.

"Nah, it's fine."

"Puff piece," she reminds me. "Your dad's staff made it clear not a single negative word will be on the page. They have final approval before it goes to print."

Shrugging again, I decide to finish the sentence, because she's right—Dad paid good money for this piece; there's no way he'd allow them to print what I'm about to say. Besides, I like Tessa. She seems smart. I hope she gets to write the hard-hitting stuff one day.

I meet her gaze. "I would want to campaign for someone who's more deserving."

She raises an eyebrow. "You believe your father is undeserving?"

"That's not what I said. He's good at what he does. But I feel like I'd probably connect better with someone else's policies and overall approach."

She changes the subject again. "What are your thoughts on the UCS scandal?"

Thankfully, I'm prepared for this one. Dad's PR firm sent me a stock reply I'm supposed to use.

"I keep my head focused on my own program. But if there's any truth to the allegations, then I would want to see the perpetrators punished to the fullest extent of the law."

At that, the interview comes to an end, and I honestly can't say I hated it. Tessa says she'll contact me if she has any follow-up questions, and I walk her to her car before getting into mine and driving home. I have just

enough time to catch a nap and grab some food before I need to head back to campus to meet the bus. Both games this weekend are in New Haven.

I'm pulling into the driveway when a notification lights my phone.

Charlie.

My heart instantly kicks into second gear. I don't think I've ever been more eager to open a message.

**CHARLIE:**

How about tomorrow night? Your place. No expectations, no promises. We can watch a movie or something?

I waste no time typing back a response. I know Beck won't mind. He wants this as badly as I do.

**LARS & B:**

Sounds like a plan. See you then.

# PUCKBOYS CHAT

***SHANE:***

Yo. Who the hell is this Hollis dude??

***RYDER:***

I got the lowdown from Coach after the game. Former Briar player. Won 3 Frozen Fours under Coach. He was an insurance broker but got laid off this summer and needed a job. I think Jensen is doing him a solid.

***BECK:***

Awww, I knew Jensen had a heart somewhere in that bitchy chest of his.

I like him.

***SHANE:***

Dude. He seems insane. I’m not being hyperbolic either. He literally seems like he escaped from a mental institution a few days ago and somehow wound up coaching hockey at Briar.

***RYDER:***

If Coach vouches for him, I'm sure it's fine.

***SHANE:***

It's fine until he and/or his wife suffocate you in your sleep for accidentally breathing near one of his daughters.

***BECK:***

I want to meet the daughters.

The age appropriate one.

***WILL:***

I'd advise you against that.

***SHANE:***

Dude, imagine that guy being your father-in-law? I'd way rather have Garrett Graham.

***BECK:***

Pretty sure Gigi's brother is still single. You could marry him as your way into the family.

***SHANE:***

Or I could not do that.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

## CHARLOTTE

### *Sexual support animals*

I PARK MY CAR A FEW HOUSES AWAY FROM MY DESTINATION BECAUSE I refuse to take the chance of anyone seeing it in case I spend the night.

Not that I plan on spending the night.

We're just watching a movie.

I'm not going to have sex with two hockey players.

It's.

Just.

A movie.

When I told Faith I was going over to Will Larsen's house tonight, she interrogated me like she caught me trying to smuggle cocaine over the border. Who gave you the drugs! Who introduced you to Will Larsen!

I told her he's my lab partner. We met in class, he asked me out, and I had drinks with him in Boston the other night. Which then earned me a long lecture and a guilt trip because I chose to make Dante my murder contact for that date instead of Faith.

I take a deep breath and stare at their house. The lights are on. A shadow moves behind the curtains, and I hear the faint sound of laughter spilling out into the night.

My heart will not stop pounding. My palms are damp. I wipe them on my skirt and force myself to step out of the car.

This is crazy.

I walk up the path.

What am I even doing here?

I've never done anything like this before. I thought all the kinky sex talk would stay on the app. How did it become reality? It was supposed to be

harmless teasing. Spank bank material for those long, stressful nights while I work on my capstone.

Anxiety buzzes in my veins as I ring the bell. The door swings open a moment later, and there's Beckett, grinning at me.

"Hey," he says, stepping aside to let me in.

His white shirt is unbuttoned.

Who *does* that to a woman?

I can barely wrest my gaze off the strip of flesh between the two parts of his shirt. Tanned and muscular. Those abs.

"Hi," I reply, trying to keep my voice steady.

"Come in."

In the living room, Will is lounging on the sectional's chaise, his socked feet propped up on the coffee table. He wears black track pants and a Briar U T-shirt, both items emphasizing long limbs and sculpted muscles.

He glances up when I enter, his gaze sweeping over me, taking in every detail.

I didn't dress up. I didn't dress down either, though. I selected an outfit that I'd wear on any other date. Navy corduroy skirt over black thigh-high socks and a cropped gray sweater over a white tank. My hair is tied in a low ponytail, and my only makeup is some lip gloss.

"Hey," Will greets me. "You look cute."

Ugh. That easygoing boy-next-door smile affects me every time. "Thanks."

"Have a seat."

"Want a drink?" Beckett offers. "Water? Beer?"

"Do you have green tea?"

Oh my God, what kind of question is that? They're two college boys living in a man cave. Of course they don't have green tea.

"Let me go look. Shane's mom stocked our cupboards with a bunch of teas when he lived here."

Beckett disappears into the kitchen, leaving Will to smile at me again. "You can sit down, you know."

After a few seconds of hesitation, I sit in the middle section of the U-shaped couch, close to Will.

"How was your game?" I ask, because I know they played this afternoon. That's why we're hanging out this late. It's already past nine.

“Total shit show,” he says, his tone flat, “but we squeaked out the win. No thanks to my dad. He set up this TV segment about college hockey and sicced a cameraman on us.”

“Oh, I saw that when I went to your game with Blake and Gigi Graham.”

Will breaks out in another grin. “You came to a game?”

“Don’t read too much into it. I was doing it for Blake.”

“Uh-huh.” He slants his head. “Was this before or after you found out who we were?”

“Before. But that’s when I started putting it together. Who were you playing tonight?”

“Yale. Stuck-up assholes.”

I laugh, feeling some of the tension in my chest melt away. Will always puts me at ease. “Hey, I grew up fifteen minutes from New Haven.”

“Right. You’re a Connecticut girl. Does your family still live there?”

“My parents and brother. My sister is in Manhattan.”

“You’re in luck.” Beckett reappears with a big blue mug in one hand and two beer bottles in the other. “We had green tea.”

He sets the cup on a coaster near me, steam rising from the rim. Then he passes Will a beer.

“I didn’t put any milk or sugar in it. But I’ll go grab some if you want.”

“No need. This is how I like it. Thank you.”

“I live to serve you, sugar puff.”

I glare at him. “Can we retire that nickname?”

“Nope.” Winking, he twists off his bottle cap, then plops down next to me. He rests his arm against the back of the couch, right behind my head.

He smells like citrus and sandalwood, and whatever shampoo he uses must have coconut in it because I catch a whiff of that too. His crisp, clean scent reminds me of the ocean. And his nearness creates sparks of electricity in my body, reminding me why I’m here in the first place.

“So,” Beckett says in a playful tone, “what do you want to do? We could put on a movie, play some video games, or…whatever you’re in the mood for.”

My stomach flutters at the suggestion. “A movie sounds good.”

“What do you want to watch?” Will asks, reaching for the remote.

“Um. Surprise me.”

My nerves are frayed at the edges. I know I said no expectations, but it almost feels inevitable that I'll wind up making out with them again. And maybe more. The attraction is too strong.

But while the idea of hooking up with them is thrilling, it's also terrifying. I have no idea what to expect, and the uncertainty is killing me.

Beckett must sense the tension I'm radiating because he softens his voice. "It's just a movie, Charlie."

I gulp. "Okay." I look at Will, who nods in agreement.

As the opening credits roll on the screen, I try to relax, but it's difficult with Beckett on one side of me and Will on the other. Any other girl would kill to be in my position. Sandwiched between two good-looking hockey players, being the center of their attention, the object of their affection.

I feel the tension building again, but I push it down, determined to keep things light. I'm not here to stress out. I do enough of that in my regular life. Tonight, I'm supposed to be enjoying the fun part of my double life. I'm supposed to be wild and free.

The movie kicks off with a flirty, banter-filled scene between the lead characters, and my cheeks heat up when I realize what we're in for.

I shoot a sideways glance at Will. "Didn't take you for the rom-com type."

"Hey, it's not just any rom-com. I heard this one has nudity."

Beckett snorts.

I love a good rom-com, and I'm enjoying this one until it suddenly hits a bit too close to home: the female lead, a quirky, clumsy blond named Jessie, is adopted. And that's not the only similarity.

My hand trembles as I reach for my mug. I take a sip, the hot liquid warming my throat on the way down.

"You okay?" Beckett asks. "Your face got real serious."

"I was just trying to figure out if this is a gigantic coincidence or if you guys somehow hacked into my email."

"Huh?"

Will pauses the movie. "What?"

I hesitate, because it's heavy subject matter for a movie date. "The plotline about Jessie tracking down her biological parents feels like it was plucked out of my own life."

Feeling awkward, I explain how I signed up for BioRoots and discovered I have a brother out there somewhere.

"He really never responded?" Will looks sympathetic.

"Nope." I set the mug down, unable to hide my disappointment. I've been trying not to think about that empty inbox, the green "read" checkmark next to my outgoing message.

"You could reach out again," Beckett suggests.

"No. If he wanted to talk to me, he would." I give a half shrug. "I'm not going to push it."

"Well, I guarantee he's missing out," Will says gruffly, reaching over to touch my knee. He gives it a soft squeeze, and while I know it's intended as a gesture of reassurance, it quickens my pulse.

I swallow. "It…is what it is. C'mon, let's keep watching."

He unpauses the movie, which turns out to be not only a rom-com but a love triangle. Jessie is torn between her attorney boyfriend and the brooding bartender in the small town where she winds up during her search for her roots.

Beckett nudges me with his elbow. "Who do you think she's going to choose? Hot lawyer or Mr. Broody?"

"Maybe she won't choose either. Maybe she'll run off and become a nun."

Will chuckles from the chaise. "Nah. She's got to pick someone. The tension's killing her."

That triggers a snicker from Beckett.

Heat rises in my cheeks. I laugh nervously, the movie's suggestive scenes not helping my racing thoughts. On-screen, Jessie and Hot Lawyer are having a heated conversation that quickly turns into something physical. Then the movie earns its nudity warning by showing us Jessie's breasts. Nipples and all. I gasp when Hot Lawyer drops his pants and we catch a split-second glimpse of his penis.

"You guys! This movie is getting intense. We just saw boobs *and* a boner."

"Really?" Will says, feigning innocence. "I hadn't noticed."

Beckett's eyes sparkle with mischief. "Yeah, baby girl. Get your head out of the gutter."

I can’t help but squirm a little. This is more than I’d bargained for. “I’m starting to think this was a setup.”

Will winks at me. “A setup? Nah. Total random movie choice. I swear.”

“Super random,” Beckett says.

There’s no denying the electricity in the air. “You guys are impossible.”

On the screen, Jessie is now telling Hot Lawyer she can’t go back to the city with him. Not until she finds what she’s looking for in this town. After he leaves in anger, she goes for a walk and ends up making out with Mr. Broody in the peach orchard behind their houses.

Beckett rests his hand on my thigh, the warmth of his touch seeping through my skirt. On my other side, Will’s arm is still stretched out, his palm curled over my knee.

“Are you trying to tease me?” I blurt out.

“You think this is teasing? A hand on your leg?” Beckett drawls. “That’s fucking cute.”

“So it’s not?”

“No.” His palm slides higher on my thigh, dipping just below the hem of my skirt. “This is.”

I bite my lip, the tension in the air reaching a fever pitch. I’m hyperaware of them, the heat radiating off their bodies. I try to focus on the movie, but Jessie’s love life is no longer of interest to me.

My own is far more noteworthy.

Will’s hand abandons my knee and travels north, reaching my sweater. His fingers brush the bare skin of my waist where the sweater has ridden up, and the featherlight touch sends a shiver down my spine.

It’s difficult to think straight with the way they’re both touching me.

“I think…” I swallow, trying to focus. “I want that beer after all.”

“I got you.” Chuckling, Beckett ducks into the kitchen, returning with a beer for me.

“Thanks.” I take a desperate swig, not even caring that it’s going to turn my cheeks into tomatoes. “So. Is every time a threesome with you guys? Like…you’re each other’s sexual support animals?”

Beckett nearly spits out his beer.

“Every time is not a threesome,” Will says with a crooked grin.

“Then you hook up with women one-on-one?”

“All the time.” Beckett is equally amused. “Also, unlike you, Ms. I Must Be Satisfied Thrice Daily—and contrary to popular belief—not all men are looking to bang ten times a day. Sometimes you need a day off.”

“First of all, once daily is enough.” I give him a haughty look.

“See,” he says, “that’s why this arrangement”—he gestures between him and Will—“was tailor-made for Charlotte Kingston. The days when I’m too tired to service you, I can just tag Larsen in.”

I snort out a laugh. “I appreciate your problem-solving skills. What about the days when you’re both too tired?”

“We’ll call it a solo night, and you’ll have to take care of business yourself.”

“On it. I’ve been single for eight months. Every night is a solo night.”

“How many times did you come from our chats?”

I sigh. “A lot.”

“Just so you know,” Beckett says, “I’ve spent a lot of time imagining what you sound like when you come.”

I choke mid-sip and proceed to break out in a coughing fit.

He smiles innocently.

Recovering, I swallow my beer and wipe the corner of my mouth where some spilled. “Well, I hate to disappoint you, but I live at Delta Pi. Agatha won’t allow screaming orgasms without calling you in front of the executive board. Therefore, I’m quiet as a mouse.”

“Technically, mice aren’t silent,” Beckett points out. “They squeak.”

“I don’t squeak when I orgasm,” I protest with a giggle. “Seriously, when I’m at home, I’ve perfected the art of staying quiet during a solo session.”

That intrigues him. “Bullshit.”

In an abrupt motion, Will climbs off the chaise. “Need a drink,” he says before disappearing into the kitchen.

“What was that?” I lift a brow at Beckett, who shrugs. But at Will’s return, he hoots at what his friend is holding.

“Well, fuck,” says Beckett.

I’m even more confused now. I watch as Will opens the whiskey bottle and sloshes the amber liquid into a Boston Bruins shot glass. He slugs it back and grimaces.

“What am I missing here?” I ask.

Beckett snorts. “You got Larsen so tied up in knots, he needed to take a shot.”

I turn to Will. “Is that true?”

“Maybe,” he says with a hint of a smile. “But only because I see exactly where this is going.”

My heart skips. “And where’s that?”

“Beck’s about to dare you to get yourself off without making a sound.”

All the breath leaves my body. I swing my head to Beckett, who’s grinning.

“Pretty much, yeah.”

I narrow my eyes at him. “Perv.”

“I mean, yes. But it’s not a dare so much as a challenge. I genuinely don’t believe you can do it.”

“Stop trying to trick me into touching myself.”

Beckett leans in closer, his lips grazing my ear. “Stop pretending you don’t want to.”

A rush of heat pools between my legs.

“I…” I start, but the words catch in my throat.

“You what?” Will’s voice is low. Seductive.

It’s all so much, too much, but in the best possible way. The teasing, the way they’re both looking at me like I’m the only thing in the room that matters.

It’s addictive.

“I think I’d rather *you* touched me.”

There.

It’s out in the open.

Hanging in the ever-thickening air.

With a faint smile, Will leaves the whiskey on the table and walks toward us. My pulse speeds up when he settles on my other side, resting his hand against my hip. Beckett’s fingers curl over my thigh, stroking gently.

“We can stop anytime,” Will tells me. “Just say the word.”

I don’t want to stop. Not now, not when every nerve in my body is humming with anticipation. I turn my head and press my lips to Will’s, summoning a startled grunt followed by a groan of approval. The kiss is soft at first but quickly deepens as Beckett’s hand tightens on my thigh, his lips finding the curve of my neck.

Whatever nerves I had before melt away in the heat of their touch. Will's tongue in my mouth. Beckett's mouth exploring my neck. The movie plays on in the background, but none of us are paying attention to it anymore.

"C'mere." Will lifts me up like I weigh nothing and tugs me onto the chaise, which lets us stretch out. He sits against the cushion and then pulls me toward him, nestling my back against his chest. "Let's get you more comfortable."

It's hard to breathe again. And when I do manage to inhale, I'm inhaling his spicy scent, and it fogs my mind.

Beckett moves to sit on the edge of the chaise beside me, his hand slowly tracing circles on my thigh before traveling to the hem of my skirt, bunching it between his fingers.

"Should I pull up this skirt?" His voice is raspy. "What do you think, mate?"

"I think Charlie should ask you herself." Will's breath tickles my ear. "And say please."

I squirm in anticipation. "You two are evil. Just pull up my skirt already."

"Pull up your skirt what?" Will kisses my neck, dragging his lips up to my earlobe and sucking gently.

I whimper. "Please?"

"Good girl."

Beckett lifts my skirt up to my waist, revealing my white bikini panties.

He groans. "*We're* evil? You did this on purpose," he accuses.

I toy with the tiny pink bow on my waistband, hiding a smile. "Maybe."

"You realize that only makes me more determined to test this claim that you can come without making noise?"

"I promise you, I can."

"Prove it." He covers my knuckles with his palm, so now we're both cupping my pussy.

I bite back a moan. "No fair. You're making it harder for me."

"Who said it was going to be easy?"

Will chuckles. "Man's got a point. You claim you can be quiet. It's our job to test your self-control. As a scientist, you should appreciate our diligence."

"Don't you dare bring science into this."

Beckett nudges my hand aside and slides his own inside my panties. His fingers drift lower…and lower… I suck in a sharp breath when they make contact with my clit. The sensation is immediate, a familiar jolt of heat, a tight clench.

"You just made noise," he taunts.

"Nuh-uh. Breathing is allowed. Nobody at the house can hear me breathing through the wall."

His hand stills as he mulls it over. "Fine. We'll allow it. But anything above heavy panting counts as sound."

His hand starts moving again. Then disappears entirely.

Once again, I have to forcibly tamp down a groan. This one from sheer distress. But I needn't worry. He's just bringing his fingers to his mouth, licking them.

Relief flutters through me when he resumes his single-handed task of pleasuring me. The slick pads of his index and middle fingers glide over my clit, and I squirm again, enjoying the soft, torturous sensations.

Beckett smiles at my growing restlessness. "Remember, baby girl…not a sound."

My heart races at the challenge. Will caresses my breast, squeezing with just the faintest pressure. I bite my lip, inhaling when his thumb plays with my nipple over my sweater, teasing it into a tight bud.

With each stroke of Beckett's fingers against my clit, a moan threatens to escape, but I press my lips shut to stop it. My chest rises and falls with shallow breaths. I start trembling from the effort to keep quiet.

Will's tongue circles my earlobe. "I can see how close you are. You want it so bad, don't you? You want to scream."

His breath against my skin elicits a hot shiver, and I nearly lose it right then, the pleasure building, coiling tighter and tighter. I clamp down on the sounds that hover in the back of my throat, barely holding on.

Will nuzzles my neck, pinching my nipples. "That's it, baby. Let yourself feel good."

The pressure inside me mounts. Beckett's fingertips dip in the moisture pooled at my opening, using that wetness to tease and circle my clit.

Oh my God. He's right. I want to *scream*. My mind is a haze of pleasure and restraint, every nerve ending alive and tingling. My surroundings fade, my vision blurring.

Through the fog, I hear Beckett's voice, that faint accent mocking me. "Let us hear you, baby girl."

I draw a ragged breath. My hips lift of their own volition, desperately seeking his fingers. Craving relief. I don't know how I do it, stay silent. This is beyond torture. My teeth bite painfully into my lip to stifle a sound.

Sensing how close I am, the boys ratchet up the torment, doing everything in their power to break me.

"Are you going to let us fuck you tonight?" Beckett leans forward to brush his lips over mine while he rubs tight circles around my clit.

I swallow another moan.

"We want to so bad." Will's tongue finds my neck again, licking a line up my throat.

I know he wants it. I feel his erection pressing against my ass. I see Beckett's straining in his pants.

"Tell us you want it," Will whispers in my ear. "Say yes."

It's impossible to think, let alone speak, with the way Beckett is working my pussy, those talented fingers applying more pressure on my clit. I rock into his hand, getting his palm slick with my arousal.

Will kisses his way up the side of my neck, his lips dragging along my jaw until he's nipping my bottom lip with his teeth.

His eyes lock on to mine. Gleaming. "Say yes."

Beckett slips his finger inside me.

"Yes!" I cry out.

The orgasm crashes over me. My body convulses, hips moving, inner muscles tightening as I come hard enough for black dots to obscure my vision. Every inch of my body pulses with satisfaction. I ride it out, gasping, and when the pleasure finally ebbs, I collapse back against Will's chest, breathing hard.

Both guys are peering down at me, their expressions a mix of hunger and amusement.

"You lose," Beckett says.

"Did I really?" I croak out. "'Cause from where I'm sitting, two hot guys just brought me to orgasm. I call that a win."

That draws a chuckle from Will. "She's got you there, bro."

I take another breath, slightly concerned that my heart rate doesn't seem to be slowing. "So…um…what now?"

Will pulls me up so I'm fully seated. "Anything you want, Charlie."

"We've got all night," Beckett agrees with a half smile. "No pressure. Just…options."

"Okay. Well," I say, my voice wobbling a bit, "maybe we should go upstairs and talk about these…options."

Beckett's smile widens.

"Lead the way," Will says.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

## CHARLOTTE

*Maybe twenty*

AS WE NEAR WILL'S BEDROOM, I SWEAR I CAN FEEL EVERY NERVE ENDING buzzing under my skin. I'm no stranger to adrenaline. When I'm in one of Dante's sports cars racing around the track, my blood comes alive with it. But right now, whatever's surging through my veins is far more potent. A cocktail of adrenaline and anticipation. A dizzying drug a girl could get addicted to.

I enter the room, which is lit not by the ceiling fixture but the small lamp on the nightstand, casting a soft yellow glow over the bed. Will lingers near the door, but Beckett approaches me, his eyes searching mine.

"You sure about this?" he says.

"Yes."

I tug on both halves of his shirt, pulling him in for a kiss, and he laughs against my lips, that warm, deep sound vibrating through me. He kisses me back. Slowly. Thoroughly. He doesn't rush it. He savors it, like he wants to take his time with me. Then, in one smooth motion, he lifts me into his arms.

My legs instinctively wrap around his waist as he carries me to the bed. My heart thumps harder, excitement and nerves tangling together, but the second he lays me down and hovers above me, all that doubt melts away.

Beckett's lips find mine again, but this time, the kiss is deeper. The teasing is gone, replaced with pure hunger. He's determined to devour me. His hands are everywhere, pulling at my clothes, shoving my skirt and panties off, peeling my sweater and tank off. The socks, he leaves on.

"God, this is so sexy," he mutters as he raises himself on his knees and gazes at me sprawled beneath him, wearing nothing but thigh-highs.

He peels his shirt off his shoulders, tossing it away. Removes his pants. Then he settles beside me, propped up on one elbow, skimming his hand down my naked body. He cups my breast, his thumb rubbing my nipple. Pinching it gently.

"*Fuck*," I hear Will groan.

I look over to see him standing at the foot of the bed, stroking himself through his pants. His burning eyes make me self-conscious.

"What?"

"You have no idea how gorgeous you are," he mutters. "Your body is incredible."

"It is," Beckett agrees. He's nibbling on my breast now, licking my nipple while his fingers play with the other one.

"My boobs are too small," I protest.

"Perfect handful," he mumbles, sucking my nipple deep into his mouth.

Pleasure rockets through me. "I don't have an ass."

"Sure you do." He lifts his mouth off my breast, reaching beneath me to squeeze one ass cheek.

I grumble at him. "You're just going to disagree with everything I say."

"If you plan on criticizing any inch of this body, then yes. You're a goddamn weapon, Charlie. You're dangerous."

No one's ever called me dangerous before. I think I like it.

I reach between us to grip his cock, pumping slowly. That gets me a groan. He's hot and hard in my hand. I look over to see Will easing his pants down his hips, gripping his erection in his fist. Stroking himself as he watches us fool around in his bed.

"Beck," he says. "I want to see your tongue on her clit."

Oh my God. What is happening right now?

Beckett slides between my legs, kissing my inner thighs, licking and teasing until I'm begging for him to kiss something else. Begging for the same thing Will wants—Beckett's tongue on me. We share that sentiment wholeheartedly.

Finally, I feel him kissing my sensitive nub, and I shudder with happiness. I lie back and enjoy it, my gaze shifting from Beckett's mouth to Will's face. Back and forth, because I can't decide what's more arousing: Beckett's tongue flicking my clit or Will's lust-drenched eyes as he watches him do it.

The urgency I felt downstairs has dimmed. It's not a race to the finish anymore, a desperate, painful need for release. I've already had one orgasm tonight. I'm hoping for another. But this time, I want more. I want it all.

I moan when Beckett licks his way to my opening, spearing me with his tongue. It's still not enough, though. My pussy ripples and contracts. Greedy and empty.

"I want…" I gasp, distracted by the finger he adds to the mix.

Will's gaze finds mine. "You want what, Charlie?"

"I want someone to fuck me."

He smiles. "Which one of us?"

"Both."

Will joins us on the bed. His hand strokes up my thigh, gliding along my hip, my stomach, my ribs. My breath hitches when he reaches into a drawer for condoms. He tears one off the strip, kneeling beside us as he rolls it on. Then he stretches that long, muscular body behind me, lying on his side.

When I start to turn toward him, he says, "No, stay like that."

He repositions me so I'm half on my back, half on my side. He lifts my leg, bending my knee and gripping the back of it, which pushes my core toward Beckett's seeking mouth.

"Keep licking her," he tells Beckett, who groans his approval.

A thrill shoots through me. I've never experienced anything like this before. I feel pressure between my legs as the tip of Will's cock nudges my opening. The broad head slips in half an inch. Then another. It's the most delicious friction, but too slow.

Too. Damn. Slow.

I try to buck against him to take him fully, but he grips my hip to still me.

"Let me feed it to you, baby. I'll give you what you need."

Oh my God.

It suddenly registers that Beckett's not licking me anymore. He's rubbing my clit with his thumb, his silver eyes tracking the slow glide of his friend's dick entering me.

"Jesus, that's hot," he mutters.

I peer down at him. "Really? Even with a condom?"

"I mean, it'd look hotter without it, but we don't take risks."

I don’t either—when it comes to sexual health anyway—but for some reason, the idea of Will sliding into me bare is a turn-on I didn’t expect. Another surprise kink of mine, I guess, and it causes my pussy to clamp around him so hard he bites my shoulder.

“Holy fuck,” Will croaks. “Why are you so tight?”

Beckett chuckles. “Dude, that was her response to imagining you doing her without a condom.”

“Stop revealing my secrets,” I complain, and he winks.

Will’s arm wraps around me, his hand covering my breast, squeezing. “You don’t like condoms?”

“I don’t mind them. But in this situation, I…”

“What about this situation is different?” He kisses my shoulder as he slips his full length inside me.

We both groan.

“If we weren’t using a condom right now, would you let me come inside you?” Will asks, his hips retreating, then plunging forward. Hard. Deep.

“Yes.”

“And then when Beck has his turn, you’d let him come inside you too?”

My pussy involuntarily squeezes him again, and he lets out a strangled cry.

Beckett chuckles, planting a kiss on my thigh before looking up at me with a devilish gleam in his eye. “Ah, that’s what it is. You want both of us to fill you up.”

I moan.

And that’s it. I’m gone. I start rocking back against Will at the same time as I grip Beckett’s blond hair and hold him against my pussy, practically forcing him to lick it. He doesn’t need to be asked twice. His tongue circles my clit before he sucks on it.

The orgasm sweeps through me. I cry out in pleasure, squeezing Will’s dick as I grind on Beckett’s tongue. Pain jolts through my hip from Will’s fingertips digging into it. I hear his low, growled curse as he suddenly thrusts one final time, as deep as he can go, and trembles from his own release.

It takes a few seconds to register the sound of Beckett’s laughter.

My eyelids flutter open to find him rolling his eyes at Will.

“This wasn’t supposed to be a quickie,” Beckett tells him, lips pressed together in mirth.

“Bro, you have no idea how good she feels.” Will nips my shoulder, then licks away the sting. His chest is still heaving. “You feel so good, Charlie.”

He pulls out slowly, and I ache at the loss. Will rolls onto his back and takes the condom off, but I don’t feel anywhere near done yet. Once again, the urgency is gone, but my body continues to hum with awareness. I swallow as Beckett crawls up my body and kisses me. His cock is heavy against my leg.

I reach between us and say, “Get a condom.”

Will stretches out his arm to grab another square packet. He tosses it to Beckett, who wastes no time putting it on.

Without a word, I meet his gaze and part my thighs for him. His eyes flash, nostrils flaring as he moves between my spread legs. He grips his shaft and guides it to the place where his friend was slamming into mere minutes ago. It should feel dirty. Wrong and taboo. Perverted or depraved or whatever other judgment someone like Agatha might spew in my direction if she knew what was happening right now.

But all I can focus on is the need in Beckett’s eyes and how badly he wants me. How badly I want him.

He pushes inside me, and I gasp at the sudden feeling of fullness. He’s thicker than Will, so it’s a different type of stretch. It feels like heaven.

“Oh, fuck yes,” he whispers.

His chin rests on my shoulder for a moment, lips grazing it before he rises on his knees, grips my hips, and pulls my body toward him. He fucks me in that position while Will lies beside me, playing with my nipples and kissing my neck.

“You were right,” he tells Will. His voice grows hoarse as his gaze shifts to me. “Your pussy is goddamn paradise. I want to live in it forever.”

My own pleasure is building again, his reverent words only fueling it. I lift my hips to meet his slow, teasing thrusts.

“Can you come again?” he asks.

I nod. “If you go faster.”

Beckett increases the tempo, each deep plunge hitting a spot inside me that makes me gasp for air.

“Will,” he says while his gaze stays locked with mine.

“I got you.” Will licks his fingers and then slides his hand between us to where we’re joined.

I moan the second he touches my clit.

Beckett drives into me harder. “I’m going to come soon,” he warns.

“This wasn’t supposed to be a quickie,” Will mocks.

Beckett chokes out a laugh.

I gasp when Will rubs my clit faster.

“Give it to Beck, baby,” he says roughly. “Don’t deprive him of that feeling of you squeezing his big cock when you come. Make him feel good, Charlie.”

There’s something so exhilarating about the way he’s requesting his friend’s pleasure be attended to while sucking on my nipple and fingering my clit.

Beckett’s features stretch taut. He bites into his lip. Then he groans and says, “Yep. Can’t stop it. Jesus *fuck*.”

He clasps my hips as he shudders with release, keeping my body pressed tight to his. The noises he makes and the way his chest strains with each panted breath detonate my own climax. This one is different from before. It stays localized to the spot where we’re joined, rippling around his dick.

It takes several moments for me to remember how to breathe again. Beckett collapses on top of me before shifting onto his back.

“Goddamn it,” he grunts, staring up at the ceiling.

“Fuck,” Will mutters.

Amused, I look between them. “I can’t figure out if you guys are angry.”

“Not angry,” Will assures me. He releases a breath. “I’ve just never come so fast in my life. Never seen him come that fast either.”

“Unheard of,” Beckett mumbles in agreement. “That was, what, ten strokes?”

“Maybe twenty,” Will says generously.

I laugh. “Again, can’t figure out if you’re complaining.”

“I promise we’re not.” Will rises on his elbow and peers at me ruefully. “But we were supposed to make it good for you, not be too quick on the trigger.”

“Trust me,” I say softly. “It was good for me.”

He slides closer, turning me over so I’m nestled against Beckett’s chest. Will’s dick, still semi-erect, nestles between my ass cheeks as he spoons

me. A sense of contentment washes over the bedroom. Beckett runs his fingers through my hair. Will strokes my hip.

But it's not long before the air changes. Crackles with tension again. When I feel Will's semi thickening against my ass, I twist my head to grin at him. "Seriously?"

"I can't help it. You're too sexy." He reaches over and takes my hand.

My thighs clench when he proceeds to guide my hand down to Beckett's groin, curling my fingers around his friend's shaft.

"Get him hard again," Will whispers in my ear.

Oh my God.

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I wake up at five o'clock the next morning, disoriented for a moment. But I'm not drunk or hungover, so it only takes a nanosecond for the memories to come rushing back. Even if they hadn't, I'd be able to deduce exactly what occurred based on the naked guy in bed with me. Will is sprawled on his stomach, and even in the shadows, his ass looks magnificent. Beckett was in here when I fell asleep, but he must have gone to his own room sometime during the night.

There's a soreness between my legs that doesn't usually happen after a one-night stand. Probably because I fucked two guys last night. Multiple times. Sober.

My throat tightens as anxiety begins to tickle my stomach.

I crawl out of bed, climbing over Will, who rolls onto his back.

"Charlie? You okay?" His voice is thick with sleep.

"I'm good. Just have to take off now. I go to the gym at six every morning."

"Who goes to the gym at six in the morning?" he mumbles.

Psychopaths, obviously. Which I'm not one of, seeing as how I'm not going to the gym. I'm getting the hell out of here and doing my walk of shame in peace, when the entire neighborhood is still asleep. A neighborhood comprised mostly of off-campus housing.

"Charlie," Will says, still groggy. "Hold on. Let me walk you out."

"No, it's fine. Keep sleeping. Thank you for last night. It was fun."

I need to get out of here before he fully wakes up and realizes that I'm fleeing like a thief in the night.

I gather the discarded clothing from the bedroom floor, then hurry downstairs. I realize I left my panties upstairs, and I bid them adieu because I will never be returning to this house. I roll my socks to my thighs. Grab my purse. My phone.

I conduct a scan of the shadowy living room to make sure I have everything. Then I run out the door, hopefully before either of them notices I'm gone.

I hope Will went back to sleep. I hope they don't bother me or message me—

Message me. Shit.

In the front seat of my car, I quickly pull out my phone and open the app. I stare at our chat thread, and I don't know what I'm feeling.

No, I do know what I'm feeling.

Shame.

But it's a strange feeling, because a part of me is fighting that awful sensation, insisting there was nothing wrong about last night. And then another part pipes up to recite the thousand reasons why it was.

Does it matter, though? Does this internal battle mean a damn thing when the shame clogging my throat is so thick I can barely breathe?

Without another second of thought, I delete the app.

Last night might have been the best sex of my life, but it can never happen again.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

## WILL

*Erased like it never happened*

NO MORE THAN FIVE MINUTES ELAPSE FOR THE REST OF THE WEEKEND without me thinking about Charlotte.

Her eyes smoky with desire.

Her mouth devouring mine.

Her perky ass pushing back against my dick while Beckett was tonguing her.

Hands down, it was the best sex I've ever had.

We woke up, and she was gone. Gone from the app. Profile deleted. It was a knee-jerk reaction on her part. I know that. I was with her every step of the way the night before, watching her responses to our touch. To the kissing. The sex. She was in her element. She loved every second of it, and she held all the power. She got both of us so hot that we couldn't last more than five minutes the first time. It would've been embarrassing if not for the redeeming Act 2 in which we spent the rest of the night worshipping her body.

And then…

Erased like it never happened.

I have her phone number, but the fact that she deleted the chat speaks volumes. She gave me her number to talk about homework and coordinate after-class lab visits. It'd feel like I was taking advantage if I spammed her phone.

Now, I'm fifteen minutes from seeing her, and I find myself jittery during morning skate, to the point that Shane comments on it in the locker room after practice.

"Dude, why are you all jumpy? You keep tapping your foot."

“I don’t know, maybe some of your ballroom dancing rubbed off on me,” I say sarcastically.

Although I can’t deny Shane killed it last week. He and Diana had entered an amateur dance competition that Coach made the entire team go and watch.

“Your pants were so tight,” Trager says, overhearing us. “Like, I thought your cock was gonna burst out of them.”

“You wish,” Shane says smugly before sauntering toward the exit.

Beckett appears from the steam-filled doorway, a towel wrapped around his waist. “You have lab now?” he says in a low voice. His class with her isn’t until tomorrow morning.

“Yeah.”

“Text me after. Let me know she’s okay.”

Charlotte’s been on his mind too. Charlie, I mean. Charlotte, Charlie. It’s hard to reconcile the two. But I suspect I know which one I’m going to find when I walk into the lab.

I’m right.

Her gaze is shuttered, indifferent, as I settle onto my stool. She’s wearing black leggings and a gray, belted sweater dress, her hair in a bun with two wisps framing her face.

She is so damn cute, and my groin clenches involuntarily at the sight of her.

I remember how tight she was.

I remember the way she moaned when she came.

When we were in the living room, she tried so hard not to vocalize her pleasure. I can still hear Beckett’s raspy voice in my head. Teasing her. *Let us hear you, baby girl.*

Fuck.

“Morning,” I say through the lump of pure lust clogging my throat.

“Morning.” Her tone is devoid of emotion.

“How was your weekend?”

Charlotte keeps her gaze on her textbook. “Good.”

“Mine was good too,” I say, even though she didn’t ask.

She doesn’t answer. She flips to another page.

I want to talk to her, but Professor Bianchi enters before I can. It’s rare of him to make an appearance in lab—usually Monica monitors our

experiments. But we're starting a new unit of study today, and much to my chagrin, Bianchi doesn't stop talking for the next two hours. I swear the man has a hard-on for stem cells.

I sit there trying to listen, frustration building inside me. When class finally ends, my lab partner wastes no time gathering her stuff.

"Charlie," I say.

Her jaw is tight. "Charlotte."

"Sorry. Charlotte. Can we talk?" I frown at her cold demeanor, the way she continues to avert her gaze.

"I have a meeting with my capstone advisor," she says, and I pick up my pace as I practically chase her to the door. "It's all the way across campus."

"Fine. I'll walk you."

She rejects the offer without even turning around. "No. You don't have to do that."

"I want to."

"Well, I don't want you to," she says in a strained voice.

I know when to back down, so I don't push the issue. That one anyway. But I do reach for her hand and stop her from scurrying away from me.

"Can you please just talk to me for three seconds before you go?"

She hesitates. Then dips her head in a nod.

We walk to a quieter area of the hall, where Charlotte fidgets with the strap of her oversize bag.

"I just want to make sure you're okay," I say quietly, searching her face. "You deleted the app, so Beckett and I were—"

She glances around at the mention of his name.

I stifle a sigh. "No one's listening to us, Charlotte."

Her teeth sink into her bottom lip for a moment before she lets out a hasty breath. "I'm okay. I promise." Her firm tone and resolute gaze tell me she means it.

"We didn't make you uncomfortable or…hurt you?" My stomach twists at the notion.

"Not at all." The hard edges in her expression soften, smooth out. "Shit. I'm so sorry if I made you think that."

I offer a rueful shrug. "I don't know what I was thinking. I literally haven't heard from you since you snuck out of the house yesterday at five in the morning."

“I’m sorry. But you don’t have to worry.” Her voice drops so low I can barely hear her. “I had a really good time.”

“You sure?”

“Positive. It was…” She bites her lip again. “Fun.”

Her cheeks are bright red. If this weren’t such a tense exchange, I might tease her about it, but she’s still on edge, and I don’t want to scare her off.

“But it can’t happen again, Will. It was a one-time thing. And it needs to remain a one-time thing, so that’s why I deleted the app. I needed to…” She trails off.

“Eliminate temptation,” I supply.

“Yeah, I guess.”

“Because it can’t happen again.” I raise a brow. “For some reason.”

“No,” she says. “For a thousand reasons.”

“Okay, well, give me at least one.”

“Becauseitsnotnormal” is her hissed, unintelligible reply.

“What?”

“It’s not normal.” Jaw clenched, she meets my eyes as if daring me to contradict that.

But I was right there with her this summer. I backed away from Beckett and our sexual escapades because I thought the same thing. That what I was doing was wrong. That it wasn’t “normal.”

“Charlotte, listen, I know exactly what you’re feeling, okay? You liked it too much.”

Her mouth falls open. “Don’t flatter yourself.”

“You liked it too much, and it scared you, right? Because it goes against what ‘normal’ sex is supposed to be like.”

“It *does* go against it.” She rubs the bridge of her nose. “At least in the long term. It’s fun for one night, Will. But making it a regular thing feels…I don’t know…sleazy.”

A prickly sensation travels along my skin. “Yeah? What does that make me then? I’m sleazy?”

Shocked, she meets my eyes. “No. Not at all.”

I laugh without humor. “Look. Charlotte. I used to feel the same way you did. I basically avoided Beckett all summer because I felt that way. But I realized, after a lot of introspection, that there’s nothing wrong with liking what I like.”

“Will—”

“So if you truly believe what you’re saying, then…” I shrug at her. “Then you’re right. It’s better that we don’t see you again. I can’t speak for Beck, but society is judgmental enough as it is. I don’t need the girl I’m seeing to also be judging how we pass our time. Do you want me to delete your number?”

She looks stricken, as if she didn’t expect me to say any of that. “No. You’re welcome to text me anything school related.”

“Got it.” I take a step to leave. “See you tomorrow in the lab.”

---

The Mexican restaurant in town is quieter than usual despite the lunch rush, a small mercy considering the whirlwind of thoughts in my head. When I walk in, I instantly spot my stepmother at a table in the corner. Like Tessa Diaz, she stands out like a sore thumb in small-town Massachusetts. She’s DC from head to toe in an elegant black pantsuit, her ash-blond hair twisted into a perfect updo.

But though she looks like she belongs on a congressman’s arm, she also possesses a warmth that most of those DC bloodsuckers lack.

Her face lights up at the sight of me. “Hi, honey. It’s good to see you.”

She stands to give me a hug, and I don’t have to bend far to kiss her cheek. Kelsey is nearly six feet tall, only a couple inches shorter than me.

“Hi, Kelse. You look great.”

“Thanks, kiddo. Come. Let’s sit.” She takes my hand and guides me to a chair. “I’m so glad you were able to take a break from your chaotic schedule to meet me.”

“Hey, I should be thanking you. You’re the one who drove down here from Boston.”

“I know, but I’ve made this offer a dozen times, and it’s nearly impossible to get you to take me up on it.” Her pale green eyes twinkle to let me know she’s teasing.

She’s right. I rarely accept her lunch invitations, but that’s because whenever she’s in town, my dad is usually with her. Like me and Dad, she was born and raised in Boston. She visits her parents often and asks to see

me every time, and the reminder triggers a pang of guilt as I remember all the times I've turned her down.

The truth is, I love Kelsey. She's brilliant. Gorgeous. Successful. Funnier than she looks. A woman like her is wasted on my father.

I think my father is incapable of genuine connections. Relationships are strategic for him, based on status rather than mutual affection. He rarely lets anyone see beyond his carefully constructed exterior.

"You know how it is with hockey," I say with an awkward shrug. "It's a grueling schedule."

She smiles knowingly. "And this is the first time all year that I'm in Boston without your father."

Busted.

When the waitress arrives, we both order coffee. Kelsey asks for more time with the menu and waits until the woman is gone before giving me a concerned look.

"Alessia says you haven't responded to any of your dad's emails about Christmas."

"You mean *Alessia's* emails about Christmas? Because they're sent from her email address."

My stepmother sighs. "Maybe so, but the invitation comes from him. He really wants you to come home this year and stay longer than a night." She flicks up one eyebrow. She's one of those blonds with dark brows, emphasizing her striking features. "And don't tell me your schedule won't allow it, because Alessia checked, and your team has a full week's break during the holiday."

"You don't have to guilt me," I say, rolling my eyes. "I was already planning on it. Just haven't had time to email back."

"Good. I'm glad. It'll be nice having you home."

We pick up our menus, placing our orders when the waitress returns with two cups of coffee.

"Maybe you and your dad could do something fun one of the days you're home," Kelsey suggests. "Breakfast at the waffle house? Go find a pool hall?"

I can't help but laugh. "The waffle house, I get. It's prime photo-op territory. But a pool hall? Why? Is he trying to capture a new target voter demo or something?"

“Will. Not everything is a campaign tool. Your father just wants to spend some quality time with you.”

I tip my head in challenge. “Really. Did he tell you that?”

“Well, not in so many words, but—”

Another laugh pops out. “Kelse, I love you, but you don’t need to do this anymore. Retire the father-son-bonding matchmaking efforts. It never goes anywhere.”

“It will if you let it.”

I sigh. “Please don’t take this the wrong way, but I legit have no idea what you see in him.”

Her tone becomes wry. “Your father isn’t all bad. You’re just a bit too biased to see it.”

“Give me one example,” I challenge. “Make me understand it.”

That earns me a shrug. “I can give you plenty. I’m attracted to powerful men. I enjoy our lifestyle. I enjoy the discussions and debates we have—he’s highly intelligent and can carry a stimulating conversation, unlike a lot of other men I know. He’s a problem solver. I was having an issue with a case last month, and he sat in my office for hours talking through it with me. He’s not the most patient or affectionate man, but he has his strengths.”

“And he has his weaknesses,” I counter. “Like the fact that his image matters to him more than his family.”

She doesn’t argue that point.

“Anyway, one of the reasons I wanted to meet up today is to ask for your help,” I admit. “I need you to talk to Dad and tell him to back off.”

Kelsey nods in understanding. “The media stuff?”

“Yep.” I take a sip of coffee, the bitterness matching my mood. “He’s all over me to do these interviews, and he won’t back down. I agreed to the *Capitol Magazine* piece and that ridiculous TV segment, but that’s it. And suddenly Alessia’s emailing me saying Dad wants to set up a press tour for me in May. Right during finals. What the fuck?”

“He’s up for reelection next fall,” Kelsey reminds me. “And you know the drill, honey. You’ll need to show your face on the campaign trail. We both do. It’s important to him.”

“I get that. But college is important to me,” I say flatly. “I need to pass my final exams if I want to graduate. I won’t have time to be his poster boy.

I need you to talk to him, okay? Tell him I'll make my compulsory campaign appearances but not before graduation."

She rests her chin on her hand. "You know how your father is. Once he's set his mind on something…"

"Yeah, but you've always been able to get through to him. Please, you're the only one who can talk him down. He listens to you. I need you to have my back on this."

Kelsey is quiet for a moment. She's always been difficult to read, at least when she doesn't want to be read. Probably a lawyer thing. But when she speaks again, her voice is soft with emotion.

"You know I'll always support you, Will. I've been where you are, trying to balance what you want with what someone else expects from you, so I'll do what I can to get your dad to ease up, all right? I'll talk to him."

"Thanks, Kelse." I feel a weight lift off my shoulders.

I might not call her "Mom," but I've always viewed her as that, even if we don't share the same blood. After my mother died, Kelsey stepped in and filled that void without hesitation. I trust her. In fact, I trust her more than my dad, who *does* share my blood.

She reaches across the table and gives my hand a squeeze. "You focus on school, okay? Let me handle your father."

# CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

## CHARLOTTE

*The neighborhood sex fairy*

"IT'S CUFFING SEASON," FAITH WHINES. "AND I STILL HAVEN'T FOUND my cuff."

"You don't want a boyfriend," I remind her. "Every time you have a boyfriend, all you do is complain about him."

"Yes, in the *summer*," she says in a haughty voice. "In the winter, I'm all about it. I get to wear his hoodies. There's snuggling. Pumpkin spice lattes. Couple's costumes for Halloween."

Ugh. That does sound nice. I miss having a boyfriend too. Mitch might be a total dickhead these days, but the two of us could rock a couple's costume like nobody's business.

"What was your longest relationship?" Blake asks Faith, twirling the thin straw in her sangria. Since I'm sticking to green tea, Faith had no choice but to twist my Little's arm into ordering sangrias.

At Faith's insistence, the three of us are at Malone's tonight. Tomorrow, we're all headed to our respective homes for Thanksgiving break, and Faith insisted she needed to get drunk in preparation for the family drama in store for her. I haven't met Faith's parents, but I've met four of her six siblings—that's right, *six*—and I can only imagine how chaotic holidays are at the Grierson house.

It sounds like Blake will have a busy Thanksgiving too. Her family's spending it with all her parents' friends and their kids.

Me, I was happy to hear we're keeping it low-key this year. Immediate family only. I prefer the quieter holidays. Gives me more time to spend with my parents.

“Never more than six months,” Faith says in response to Blake. She gasps. “Holy shit, I’m a seasonal dater.”

I snicker into my tea.

“How about you, Charlotte?” Blake asks curiously.

“Almost two years with my ex. And in high school, I didn’t have a regular boyfriend. I was too busy to date.”

“I’ve never had a relationship,” Blake admits.

I give her a sidelong glance. “How’s it going with Isaac?”

All I currently know about the situation is that she went on a date with him. He took her to the movies in Hastings and did not get a kiss good night. The end.

Blake Logan is the least forthcoming person I’ve ever met. I swear, it’s as if secrecy is woven into her very fabric, which makes me wonder what kind of shenanigans she gets into that nobody knows about. Maybe she leads her own double life. A…Blakey to my Charlie. Maybe she races cars in the middle of the night and sleeps with multiple hockey players too.

“Have you seen him again?” I press.

She shrugs. But I see her fighting a smile as she sips her drink.

“Oh my God. You have.”

Another shrug.

“How many times?”

After a beat, she caves to the gossip demands. “Three times total.”

“Have you slept with him?” Faith asks with a grin.

When Blake shakes her head, I try not to raise my eyebrows. I can’t envision Isaac Grant being okay with moving at this glacial a pace. The man was ready to bang me after flirting for five minutes outside the Coffee Hut. His reputation is not just a fabrication of the rumor mill. It was earned.

The memory of my interrupted evening with Isaac elicits a twinge of guilt. I’d planned on telling Blake about it after he showed up at the house making a big production of asking her out, but it slipped my mind once things with Will and Beckett ratcheted up.

Now that she revealed she’s been regularly seeing him, though, I need to be up-front with her.

“So,” I start, reaching across the table to steal Faith’s glass. Her jaw drops as she watches me gulp down some sangria. “Sorry,” I tell her. “Need the liquid courage.”

From the corner of my eye, I see Blake frowning at me. “Liquid courage for what?”

Faith now wears a knowing look. As my emergency contact and murder preventer, she’s the only one who knows my connection to Isaac Grant.

I move my chair, angling it toward Blake. “This is super awkward, but for the sake of full disclosure—and before you decide to have sex with the guy—you should know that Isaac and I fooled around once. Before you ever met him,” I hastily add.

Her eyebrows soar to her hairline. “What? *You* hooked up with Isaac?”

The guilt pulls harder at my gut. “Yes. We didn’t have sex, though. And I’m sorry I didn’t tell you before—”

She surprises me by waving her hand, unfazed. “No, I don’t care at all. You didn’t even have to tell me. I’m just…” Her eyes are wide with amazement. “Shocked. You’re the last person I’d have expected to engage in random hookups with football players.”

I don’t take offense to that. My carefully crafted Delta Pi persona is so effective, nobody would ever suspect about my lively sex life. That’s the whole point of the persona.

“I know. It’s very unlike me. But…I was bored” is the only answer I can think of.

Faith covers her snort with a cough.

Blake isn’t fooled. “Nope. Like I told you before—I *know* there’s more to you than meets the eye. This just deepens the mystery.”

As per the best friend vows we’ve taken, Faith intervenes on my behalf. “Anyway, now that we’ve cleared the air, I want to know more about these dates you went on,” she says to Blake. “You said no sex, but how about kissing?”

Once again, the freshman reverts to guarded mode. “Maybe.”

“Good kissing?” pushes Faith.

“Very good. He’s not what I expected,” Blake admits.

“So he’s not a cocky football player with a sense of entitlement?” I can’t help but tease. Because that’s exactly what I pegged Isaac for, and my time with him didn’t disprove that hypothesis.

“No, he’s definitely that. But he’s also got a sweet side. He texts me every morning and every night to say good morning and good night. He’s… kind of a sap.”

This surprises me almost as much as Isaac Grant waiting more than three dates to have sex. But my scientific brain can easily pinpoint the solution here: human nature. Biology. We are creatures wired to find a mate, and generally speaking, it's the male of a species that chases the female. The female plays hard to get because she has more options. She holds all the cards. Which makes the males work harder, puff up their feathers, and do whatever it takes to beat out the competition.

All this is to say I don't know how much of this "sweet side" is Isaac actually wanting Blake or if it's due to internal wiring that tells him he *needs* to chase her.

A wave of noise from the door grabs my attention. We're seated in the main room tonight, so we have a clear shot of everyone walking into the bar. A group of guys just entered, several of them wearing black hockey jackets. A flash of blond hair catches my eye.

Beckett.

The last time I saw him, he was fucking me hard enough to make me see stars, his fingers digging into my hips and thighs so tight he left tiny fingerprint bruises. I should have been alarmed when I saw the bruising in the mirror the next day, but I wasn't. It only made me wet, remembering the sensation of him moving inside me while Will encouraged me to be a good girl and come for Beckett.

My thighs squeeze together at the memory, and I tear my gaze off the door. No. I'm not allowed to remember the pleasure. I need to focus on the shame. That horrible, smothering feeling I got afterward when I was leaving their house, wondering what people would think if they knew I just had sex with everyone inside it like the neighborhood sex fairy.

"We should head out," Faith says, polishing off the rest of her sangria. "I have an early flight tomorrow."

I nod. "I just need to use the ladies' first."

"Go. I'll settle up. It's my turn to treat."

I walk toward the back corridor to the restrooms. I pee quickly, then wash my hands and fix my hair in front of the mirror. Make sure my side part is perfect. Not that I care what Beckett thinks of my side part. But you know…

*Yes, we want to look good for the guy you banged while his best friend watched, don't we?*

My inner critic is such a bitch.

I exit the bathroom to find Beckett waiting for me.

Usually, the restrooms are packed until closing, but it's a Wednesday and still early in the night, so the corridor is completely empty. We're alone. But I still glance toward the end of the hall to make sure no one's coming.

"Afraid to be seen with me, sugar puff?" His Aussie accent makes my heart jump.

"No, that's not it," I lie.

"Too sleazy for you, huh?"

My stomach clenches with guilt. "I told Will I don't think he's sleazy. Either of you."

"You also told him that someone who has ongoing threesomes is sleazy. So what you're saying doesn't add up, now does it?"

My insides twist harder. Damn it. I feel like an asshole. I *am* an asshole. Because he's right—the reasons I'm providing for not wanting to see them again contradict the assurances I'm giving him now.

But the confusing thing is, I'm *not* judging them. I *don't* think there's anything wrong with what they're doing.

*So why is it wrong when* you *do it?* challenges a voice in my head.

Confusion floods my brain. I…don't fucking know. All I know is that I felt ashamed of it. But *they* shouldn't feel ashamed. Because…

A groan jams inside my windpipe. Why can't I make sense of any of this?

As if sensing my inner turmoil, Beckett shrugs. "It's all good, Charlotte. If it's not for you, then it's not for you."

As he steps away, I catch a whiff of his familiar scent, so reminiscent of the ocean. It infuses my senses. I remember breathing him in when he was kissing me. When his face was buried in my neck. When his fingers were gliding down my body, turning me over so Will could put his cock in—

Enough. I can't think about it anymore, damn it.

Embarrassment creeps into my cheeks. "It was a fantasy. And I got it out of my system."

"If you say so."

He's not touching me. There's a foot of distance between us, and his hands are in the pockets of his faded blue jeans. Yet I feel the phantom

sensations of those hands on me. His tongue licking a line up my thigh, traveling toward my—

"It's okay to want it, Charlie." A knowing smile flits across his lips.

I bite the inside of my cheek, trying to hold back the sting of tears.

Then I exhale and say, "I've never felt more ashamed than when I left your house that morning."

That visibly startles him. "Charlotte—"

"No. Just drop it. I have to go. My friends are waiting for me."

I can feel him watching me walk away, but I don't look back. I find Faith and Blake at the front entrance, and I must not be doing a good job keeping my mask in place because Faith's features soften with concern.

"You okay?" she asks. "You look a bit pale."

"I'm fine. Just remembered all the stuff I have to do when I get home tonight. I guess I'm feeling overwhelmed."

"Is this the grad school admissions essays?"

I nod. "They extended the deadline, so I want to reread them and make some edits. I rushed them before because of midterms."

"If it helps, I can proofread everything before you submit it?"

I'm touched by the offer. "Aw, thanks. I'd really appreciate that."

As we exit the bar, I stick my hand inside my purse and fish around for my car keys. My fingers collide with metal at the same time as the sight of a guy standing near the entrance, partially obscured by the night shadows, snags my attention.

There's something about him—the haircut, his posture, the way he's trying to blend in but failing—that makes my skin prickle.

Faith follows my gaze. "Do you know that guy?"

"I don't think so—"

I cut myself off when he turns to leave and I catch a glimpse of his eyebrow. Suddenly, the image of that same guy lurking in the parking lot on campus comes rushing back.

"Wait, shit. I've definitely seen him before. Just…stay here a second."

Faith frowns. "Charlotte—"

Ignoring her, I make my way toward him, my heart pounding not from fear but from the adrenaline of an impending confrontation.

At my approach, the raven-haired guy stiffens, realizing he'd been spotted. He tries to walk away, but I'm faster, blocking his path.

“Hey!” I call, my voice sharp. “Why are you following me?”

His eyes widen, and he takes a step back, hands raised in surrender. “I’m not following you, I swear.”

“Bullshit,” I snap, advancing on him. “I’ve seen you around campus, and now here? Are you stalking me?”

“Charlotte. What’s going on?” Faith comes up beside me while Blake remains near the entrance of Malone’s, on the alert.

“I think this creep is stalking me,” I inform her, and Faith’s eyes immediately narrow on him.

His face turns beet red, and he looks like he wants to melt into the sidewalk. “No, it’s not like that. I—”

“Then what is it?” I demand, crossing my arms over my chest.

He fumbles with something in his pocket.

Faith and I instinctively back away, and I feel silly when I realize he’s only pulling out his phone. He holds it out so I can peer at the screen.

“Look. You sent me this.”

Shocks slams into me when I recognize the BioRoots logo and see my own words reflected back at me.

“I’m not stalking you,” he says with a heavy sigh. “I’m your brother.”

# CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

## BECKETT

*Just lie and tell the lady she looks radiant*

MY PARENTS HAVE BEEN FIGHTING FROM THE MOMENT THEY PICKED ME UP at the airport. They showed up together, then proceeded to spend the entire drive home bickering and haven't stopped since. At least they're still arguing at regular volume. Get two Australians drunk, and they can get pretty loud. Right now, though, they're only a drink or two in.

We have no family here—everyone else is back in Australia—but over the past decade, my mum has cobbled together a nice little found family, which consists of two families on our street who are also immigrants with their bigger clans abroad and a retired couple, the Walkers. Helen Walker has been flirting with me from the moment she walked in. She's had me refill her wineglass at least five times. This old lady is bombed.

Meanwhile, Mum and Dad haven't been able to keep their bickering to themselves. I'll blame Dad for this one. For some reason, he decided it would be a good idea to share the news of his job offer at Thanksgiving with all their friends. All their very opinionated friends.

Not all of them are on Mum's side either. Mrs. Aghari even tells Mum that if she had the chance to return to Delhi with a good job and a good house, she'd take it in a heartbeat. "I miss my parents and sisters," she admits.

And while Mum acknowledges she misses her own parents and extended family, she repeats the same thing she keeps telling Dad: "We've built a life here."

"Meghan," Dad sighs when the topic comes up again.

"No, James. I'm not uprooting my entire life again."

I try to focus on the mashed potatoes on my plate instead of the rising tension between my parents. Mum is fiddling with her wineglass and avoiding eye contact with Dad, who stares at the turkey like it personally offended him.

“So how are your classes?” Mr. Aghari asks me.

I glance at him in relief. Mr. Aghari with the save. “Tough but I’m managing.”

At that, the conversation finally shifts to neutral topics like the weather and Mrs. D’Agostino’s charity work.

“Beckett, dear.” Helen taps her wineglass.

I hide a grin and push my chair back, heading for the built-in bar across the room. I love this house. I get why Mum doesn’t want to leave it, this big, sprawling spread in the suburbs, with a massive yard and a garden she spent more than a decade literally building from the ground up. But…

It’s not *home*. Indianapolis doesn’t have the Gold Coast. It doesn’t have the surf breaks of Byron Bay. Doesn’t have my cousins. It doesn’t have the same air. The air *smells* different down there. If I were Mum, I’d jump on this opportunity in a heartbeat.

“She’s going hard on you, huh?” I murmur when my dad comes up beside me to grab another beer.

“Yup. I might need to tag you in later, buddy. Get you to plead our case.”

“I don’t know if that’s gonna help. She really doesn’t want this.”

“No, she doesn’t.”

I give him a sidelong glance. “What’s more important to you? Happy wife or happy you?”

“Ah, the age-old question of navigating any marriage. You’ll find out one day.”

“Maybe.” My tone remains noncommittal.

“Oh, are we still sticking to the vow?”

I snicker. “It wasn’t a vow. It was just drunk talk. You caught me on a bad day.”

Although I have to admit, there were a lot of bad days after everything that happened with Shannon. I remember the one he’s talking about. I got loaded with some teammates after the last game of a weekend exhibition. Dad caught me as I was sneaking in at four a.m. and trying to tiptoe up the stairs with all the finesse of a bull in a china shop. When he asked if I’d

been out with a girl—I think he was hoping I was—I delivered a whole drunken tirade about how I would never love again or get married because "all that love stuff" only ends in crushing heartache.

"I was eighteen," I remind him. "I was very dramatic."

"One of the few times I saw you lose your chill," he says quietly.

"I thought I would marry her." Shrugging, I refocus my attention on pouring Helen Walker's wine.

"And that didn't pan out. But we heal, Beck. We heal, and we move on, and we put the broken pieces back together."

"And we enjoy our bachelorhood," I say lightly. "In my case anyway. In *your* case, you need to start sucking up to your wife, old man."

I give him a good-natured clap on the shoulder, then return to the table and hope I didn't appear too eager to leave that conversation.

By nine o'clock, the Agharis and D'Agostinos are gone, leaving me alone with my parents and the Walkers.

I don't know how I got roped into this. A twenty-one-year-old man nursing a beer, watching football, and listening to two couples bicker. One of them is in their eighties, the other in their forties, yet they're both acting like they're in their teens.

The Walkers were only trying to help at first. Mum had started sniping at Dad again, and Albert made the mistake of bringing up a prior marital fight between him and Helen as a lesson for my parents about how to resolve conflict. Turns out the Walkers' fight is *not* resolved, because now they're arguing about it.

Fun times.

"Are we really going to rehash this?" Albert grumbles. "Now? We put this fight to rest, Helen!"

As much as I don't want to enable their behavior, curiosity gets the best of me. "What was the fight about?"

"Yes, Al. What was the fight about?" Helen's voice drips with a sweetness that makes my stomach tighten. "Why don't you tell everyone what you said to that woman?"

"That woman?" I echo. I can't look at Dad because I know we'll both bust out laughing.

"Tell them what you said," taunts Helen.

Albert growls under his breath. “How the hell am I supposed to remember what I said? It was twenty years ago!”

I nearly choke on my beer. Dad is trying to distract himself by cutting another slice of pie. I glance at Mum, whose lips are pressed together to contain her laughter.

This fight happened *twenty* years ago? The way Helen’s been going on, it sounded like this mistake that almost destroyed their marriage only occurred the other week.

“You know damn well what you said,” Helen clucks. She looks at my mother, as if requiring female solidarity for this part. “We were at our friends’ anniversary party, and he told Donna Henderson she looked ‘radiant.’”

I stare down at my pie.

My father clears his throat. “Sounds like it was a long time ago, Helen. Perhaps—”

“Oh, no, no, no,” she cuts in, waving her hand. “It’s not too late for Albert to explain himself, is it?” She turns back to her husband. “Well, Al? I’m all ears.”

Poor Albert looks like he’d rather fight off a rabid ostrich. “Helen. I was only being polite. She was the hostess.”

“You never told me I looked radiant.”

“I tell you you’re beautiful all the time!” he protests, glancing around the room for backup.

None of us dare to meet his eyes. Helen isn’t hideous, but I wouldn’t exactly call her beautiful. More like…not displeasing.

Helen’s face turns red. “You called me ‘decent’ last Christmas, Albert.”

A strangled sound escapes my lips. Oh, Jesus Christ.

You stupid bastard, Al. Decent? Just lie and tell the lady she looks radiant.

Dad’s about to keel over from the effort of restraining his laughter.

My mum, bless her, tries to step in. “Helen, would you like some more coffee?”

“Don’t change the subject, dear.” Helen’s on a mission now. “Radiant! Who even uses that word? I’ve spent two decades wondering what exactly you meant by it.”

I tremble with silent laughter.

Mum, still trying to steer the conversation back to safer waters, chuckles nervously. “I’m sure Albert didn’t mean anything by it. Right, love?”

She’s looking at *me*.

Why am I being dragged into this shit show?

“Uh, yeah. Maybe he just meant she looked good in her dress? You know, some people just have that radiant glow.”

Helen shoots me a look that could curdle milk. “I bet you’re one of those boys who tells every girl she’s special just to see how far you can get, aren’t you?”

So much for her crush.

Albert sighs, clearly defeated. “Sweetheart, if I could go back and change it, I would. But it was just a word. It didn’t mean anything.”

His wife sits back, arms crossed, looking triumphant. “Well, I’m glad we cleared that up. But let this be a lesson to you, Albert. Think before you speak.”

We all sit in awkward silence after that, and when my phone lights up and I see Will trying to FaceTime me, I practically jump out of my chair.

“One of my teammates—I gotta take this.” I hold up the phone and point to it like this is the most important call ever received. The White House is on the line. Everyone has died, and I am the designated survivor. I am the new president of the United States. Even though I can’t be because I wasn’t born here. But still.

Making my escape, I take the stairs two at a time and stumble into my old bedroom. “Jesus fuck,” I groan when the call connects. “Thank you.”

Will’s face grins back at me. “That bad, huh?”

“You have no idea what you just rescued me from, mate.”

“And here I thought the Dunne family was always sunshine and rainbows.”

“Not tonight, we ain’t.” I quickly fill him in on Dad’s new job and how Mum doesn’t want him to take it.

“If it makes you feel better,” Will says, “things aren’t any better over here.”

He turns his phone to show me the scene behind him: a very formal Thanksgiving gathering. The Larsens must eat their dinner later than we do because the long dining room table is still perfectly set. In fact, the entire

room is impeccably arranged, like something out of a magazine. Yet it feels colder than a Canadian winter.

Will passes an arched doorway that looks like it has about thirty people beyond it. Loud chatter echoes through the video for a moment. He enters a different room and closes the door, and the noise dies.

“That’s a lot of people,” I remark.

“Dad needs the photo op. We’ve got all the cousins here. And there was a journalist here this morning from some architecture magazine. This is brutal. I can’t wait to get back tomorrow.”

The hockey season doesn’t typically stop for the holidays. It just happened to work out that Thanksgiving Day got us a two-day break. But we have a game tomorrow against UConn.

“Me too,” I admit, rubbing my temples. “My folks never argue. It’s stressful watching them do it. And then we get back to Briar just in time for finals and the playoffs hunt. Christ, mate. I need to get preemptively laid to get ahead of the stress.”

“Dude. Same.”

And I know we’re both thinking about Charlie now. How good she tasted. How warm and soft she felt in my arms. My dick swells, pressing against my zipper.

“Have you spoken to her?” I ask.

His expression clouds over. “No. You?”

“Nothing since I saw her at Malone’s.”

AKA the night she made me feel like absolute dirt for making *her* feel like dirt.

My hard-on deflates at the memory.

That ravaged, mortified look in her big brown eyes.

She has nothing to be ashamed of. But I get it. There’s a life script. There are rules. There are things you do and things you don’t do. People like Will and Charlotte freak out when they go off script. It took Larsen a long time to be able to accept that sometimes it’s okay to ad-lib. Charlie’s not there yet. Our girl’s not ready to improvise. She might never be.

“You have her number, right?”

“Yes.” He gives me a warning look. “But I’m not abusing the privilege. I promised her I’d only use it for class.”

“I know. I just… Fuck, man. What she said at Malone’s that night—I can’t get it out of my head. I want to send her a message telling her she’s got nothing to be ashamed of. She can ignore it if she wants, but…one message, Larsen. Please?”

Will falls silent. Several seconds tick by, until finally I see his finger swiping at his phone.

A moment later, Charlotte’s contact info appears on my screen.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

## CHARLOTTE

*Inside and out*

MY BROTHER'S NAME IS HARRISON LEE STEVENS.

He's four years older than me. He's a freelance web designer from Nevada. He arrived in Massachusetts a month ago but hadn't worked up the courage to approach me until last night.

This is all the information we were able to exchange outside Malone's. All I was capable of digesting because I had to leave early the next morning and the shock of seeing him had fried my brain.

Now I'm home, surrounded by my family, and there's nothing more I can do about it until I'm back at school. He asked for a proper meetup, and I agreed. We exchanged numbers, and that's how we left it.

I want to tell my family, but I'm worried about their reactions. I don't want to ruin the holiday. We love Thanksgiving, maybe even more than Christmas. Mom goes all out with the decorating. Our front porch is practically drowning in pumpkins. We have a handmade gourd-shaped wreath on the door. Centerpieces full of acorns and—for some reason—antlers, even though we're not a hunting family and never have been.

My brother's wife's family usually joins us, but they're in Aruba this year, so that leaves just the five of us along with Uncle Erik and his two kids. Ava has a new boyfriend in New York who couldn't attend, and I'm a bit disappointed about that. When she told me his name is Ash, I had to laugh, because of course it is. They're both three-letter A names. Ash and Ava—sounds so perfect together. Everyone in this family is perfect.

So rather than invite an emotional and angst-ridden conversation by confessing about Harrison, I don my perfect face and go help Mom prepare the pie. We just stuffed ourselves full of turkey, and now everyone is in the

family room ready to play games over dessert. We don't watch football. We're not that family. We're a trivia crew.

"Are you okay, sweetheart?" Mom asks, watching me stand on my tiptoes to open the top cupboard.

"I'm great." I pull out the ceramic serving plate she asked for.

"Are you sure? You seem distracted today."

I turn to face her, holding out the plate. "Just stressed out, I guess. Midterms were rough, so now I'm worried about finals."

"I'm sure you killed those midterms, Char."

"I know, but…the grad school programs I'm applying for are so competitive. I just don't want my GPA to drop…"

I feel the pressure wave swelling in my throat, constricting my windpipe, and I gulp hard, forcing myself to tamp it down.

No. I can't let the wave engulf me right now. The last time I had an anxiety attack in front of my parents, they were so concerned, they tried to call the paramedics. My sister had to confiscate their phones.

"You worry too much." Mom tucks my hair behind my ears before cupping my cheeks. "My beautiful, perfect girl. You have nothing to worry about."

There's that word again.

Perfect.

"You are brilliant," she continues, her tone lined with confidence, conviction. "You can do anything you set your mind to. If your GPA drops, you'll get it back up. You don't have to stress."

Dad's voice sounds from the doorway. "Who's stressing? Not our future engineer?"

I smile at him. "It's fine. I'm just mentally preparing myself for finals."

His eyes crinkle at the corners as he returns the smile. "Oh pshaw. You can pass those in your sleep." He goes to grab a beer from the fridge. "How are your classes this semester, honey? You barely talk about them when you visit."

"They're challenging, but I'm managing. Lots of late nights in the lab."

His expression softens with pride. "You always were our little night owl. Remember that science fair you won in middle school? If we hadn't dragged you to bed, you would've stayed up all night."

Mom grins at me. “You beat out all those eighth graders to take first prize. Remember?”

“Yeah. I remember.” I had to skip my best friend’s birthday party at a waterpark that weekend to finish my project. The entire sixth grade went except for me.

I suddenly realize this is the perfect opportunity to tell them about Harrison. We’re alone. No Ava or Oliver offering their two cents on the situation.

I take a breath and open my mouth—at the same time as Ava calls us from the family room.

“Guys! This trivia ain’t gonna answer itself!”

Mom laughs. “Come on. Let’s go kick your father’s ass, sweetheart.”

“In your dreams,” Dad tells her.

My parents aren’t allowed to play on the same team during games anymore because they’re both aggressively competitive. They get too angry when one of them misses a question. To this day, we still mock Dad about one of their epic trivia blowouts. *“Anna! How could you miss that question? Everyone knows the Treaty of Phoenice ended the First Macedonian War!!!”*

Because that’s fucking common knowledge.

My parents walk in ahead of me, and I linger in the doorway watching my family for a moment, logging all the stark similarities between them. Mom’s and Ava’s eyes. Oliver’s and Dad’s hair. Dad’s and Uncle Erik’s nose. These tangible connections between them.

As a scientist, I understand the significance of DNA. Blood. The invisible threads that connect you to another human being. The reminder that individuality, while a gift, is also an illusion of sorts, because beneath its surface is a deep, biological connection that links you to something bigger than yourself. Something tracing back generations.

It’s stupid of me, I know, to care so much about all this. It doesn’t matter whether my family and I share a common genetic code.

They’re my *family*.

They’ve always been nothing but loving and supportive, and I feel like a monster for the thoughts that run through my head sometimes. For the irrational fears that poke holes in the trust I *know* I should have in them and for the insecurities that push me to question their love.

But I owe it to myself and to Harrison to get to know him. And maybe I need to do that without involving my family right now. Maybe I need to go into this new relationship with a clear head and heart.

I walk into the family room, my legs trembling, and everyone looks up as I enter, smiles lighting their faces.

“Come sit,” my mother says. “Us girls need our team captain.”

I smile back and take a seat next to my sister. I push aside all the thoughts plaguing my brain. The philosophical musings about DNA and belonging and whether my parents love me.

I don’t need to have my mother’s nose or be ambidextrous like my father for them to love me. I know they do. I *feel* it.

So I push away the insecurities and focus on enjoying the holiday with my family.

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Later that night, I curl up in my childhood bedroom and take in the familiar surroundings. I was always a little extra when it came to the posters on my walls. No masking tape on the corners for Charlotte, thank you very much. All my posters are framed. Even the one of Mollie May, which shows her at age sixteen during her first live concert. I was obsessed with her when she first hit the scene. She’s in her early twenties now, and I’m still sort of obsessed. Her last album slayed.

My phone buzzes with a text. I take one look and let out a groan of distress.

They started a group chat.

I rub my forehead and roll onto my back, wishing there were an easy answer to my Will and Beckett predicament. I haven’t stopped thinking about that night. The memory of it swarms my thoughts at least once an hour. God. The sex was mind-blowing.

But…mind-blowing sex isn’t a good enough reason to feel bad about myself again.

I’m about to delete the message, but curiosity wins out. Groaning softly, I give myself permission to read the words on the screen.

***BECKETT:***

Hey. It’s Beckett. Will gave me your number, so I’m creating this group chat. But I promise this will be the only message in here, unless you want more. I just wanted to say—it really upsets me that you feel shame because you didn’t do anything to be ashamed of. I—we—loved every second of being with you. You’re beautiful, smart, funny, exciting. I could write an entire paragraph about how incredible you are. Which says a lot, because I don’t usually do this sappy shit, as Larsen can attest. Don’t judge yourself for having a good time. Fuck what the rest of the world thinks and the people who might judge you. Your wild, fearless side is my favorite thing about you. You’re beautiful inside and out, Charlie. Never forget that.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

## CHARLOTTE

*Unfamiliar world*

ON THE TUESDAY BACK ON CAMPUS AFTER THANKSGIVING, I DO THE unthinkable.

I skip class.

Classes plural, in fact. I'm not only bailing on Climate Policy, but I'm not planning on attending my engineering lab either. Beckett's message has been haunting me for days. I don't want to see him or Will today. My emotions are too raw.

And what better balm for the affliction of raw emotions than lunch with the biological brother you never knew existed until a month ago?

Maybe I should have just gone to class.

But it's too late to back out now. Harrison is already waiting for me outside Della's Diner when I round the building from the parking lot. He's bundled up in a black down jacket and plaid scarf, his cheeks reddened by the frigid wind. When I approach, he greets me with a tentative smile.

"Hey."

"Hi."

We stand there for a moment, eyeing each other. This is…a lot more awkward than I anticipated.

"Should we go inside?" Harrison finally asks. The amused note in his voice cuts through some of the discomfort.

"I don't know. I figured we would stand outside in the cold for this," I quip. "Really heighten the intensity of the moment."

He snickers and reaches for the door handle.

We find a quiet booth in the back and shrug out of our coats, sliding in across from each other.

“Green tea, please,” I tell the waitress when she arrives to take our drink orders and deliver some menus.

“I’ll have a coffee,” Harrison says. “Thanks.”

Once she’s gone, he clasps his hands together on the tabletop. Neither of us speak. We’re back to eyeing each other, as if we’re both trying to discern the resemblance. Or at least that’s what *I’m* doing.

He doesn’t look like the male version of me, but I do note similarities. We have the same mouth. The way it turns slightly upward at the corners, like we’re sporting a perpetual smirk. His hair is the exact shade of black as mine. His eyebrows are the same shape, though mine are thinner.

Tears prick my eyelids.

I finally have someone who looks like me.

My throat closes, clogged with emotion. I don’t want to cry in front of him. He might be my brother, but he’s also a stranger. I don’t cry in front of strangers.

The silence drags on. It’s heavy, weighted down by all the things we don’t quite know how to say yet.

Finally, Harrison makes the first move.

“I’m sorry I freaked you out last week. I hopped a flight to Boston not long after you messaged me on the site,” he admits. “I wanted to scope you out before I approached you, and then once I decided you seemed like a normal person, I was trying to figure out *how* to approach you, but every time I saw you, I chickened out.” He looks sheepish. “I swear I’m not some creep. I really wanted to meet you, but I…ah…I don’t trust a lot of people. I didn’t know if you were running some sort of scam, and I just had to be sure.”

“So you’ve been lurking?” I ask, still processing.

He scratches the back of his neck, grimacing. “Yeah. Not my best plan. I’m sorry.”

“Where are you staying?”

“I was at a motel in Boston, but now I’m at the one here in Hastings.” He runs a hand through his hair. It looks soft. I wonder if it’s as silky as mine. “This is a great little town. I take it you didn’t grow up here, though? You’re only here for college?”

I nod. “I grew up in Hamden. Connecticut,” I clarify at his blank look. “And you were raised in Nevada?”

“Not quite. That’s just where I’ve been living the past few years. I moved all over the place when I was growing up.”

“Did your parents have to move for work? Military?”

“Work. My adoptive father was between jobs a lot. We moved wherever he could find work.”

His *adoptive* father. The qualifier stands out to me because I’ve never once used it to describe either of my parents. And the flat intonation behind the words is hard to miss.

“What about your mom?” I ask.

“My adoptive mom died two years after they brought me back from Seoul. Car accident.”

His voice lacks emotion, and I wonder if that’s because he doesn’t give a shit or because he’d known her such a short time before she died that he never had time to properly bond.

“She was the one who wanted kids,” Harrison continues, his expression shuttered. “She pushed Brian—my adoptive father—into going through the adoption process after they struggled for years with infertility. To be honest, I don’t think he wanted kids at all, biological or otherwise. He did it for her.”

*And then she died and left him with a kid* is the unspoken implication.

“How about you?” he counters before I can respond. “How was it? Growing up, I mean.”

I note the tension in his jaw, the way his gaze fixes on his fingers. “I had a great childhood, actually. My parents—they’re wonderful. I never wanted for anything.”

He nods, but something in his expression makes my stomach twist. “That’s good. I’m glad you had that.”

I sense the undercurrent of bitterness in his voice. “Do you remember anything about Seoul? The orphanage? Obviously, I was way too young, but you would’ve been four?”

“I remember a lot of it.” He takes a deep breath, exhaling slowly. “After you were adopted, I stayed in the orphanage for another year. Older kids don’t get picked as much. Most people want babies, especially with international adoptions. And our orphanage only worked with American adoption agencies.”

I swallow, guilt gnawing at me. “I’m sorry. I didn’t know. I don’t even remember—”

“It’s not your fault,” he cuts in. “You were just a baby. You didn’t get to choose.”

“But you got left behind.” The weight of those words settles heavily on my heart. “I don’t get it. Why did they separate us? Isn’t it customary to adopt siblings out together?”

Harrison’s eyes become distant, as if he’s seeing something far away. “I don’t know. I was angry at first when I found out you were gone. The babies lived on the bottom floor of the building, so I barely saw you after we got there. I used to beg them to let me stay with you in your crib, but they forced me to sleep upstairs in a dormitory with the older kids. And then one day I asked to come down to see you and they told me you’d been adopted. I didn’t understand why your new family took you and not me.”

My eyebrows soar. “You think my parents chose not to take you?”

“You just said so yourself—siblings are typically adopted together. They had to have known about me.”

He’s right. The orphanage administrators would’ve told them, no? They must have.

But…I truly can’t see my parents knowing I had a brother out there somewhere and never telling *me* about it. My gut says there’s more to this story, but Harrison seems convinced as he continues speaking.

“I thought maybe I wasn’t good enough. Too old for them—older kids come with more baggage, right? Babies are a shiny, clean slate.” He shrugs. “But after a while, I just accepted it. That was the way things were. It was out of my control.”

The pain in his voice is subtle, but it’s there, a sharp edge beneath his calm exterior. It makes my chest ache, knowing that while I was growing up in a warm, loving home, he had been left behind in a cold, unfamiliar world.

“I wish things had been different,” I say softly.

“Yeah. Me too.” He frowns. “They really never told you that you had a brother?”

I bite my lip. “No. But I’m not sure they knew. My parents aren’t secretive people. They’ve been nothing but transparent with me my entire

life, especially about the adoption. I don't know why they would be open about everything but leave this one thing out."

"Maybe they didn't want you looking for me."

I hear his resentment again and try to steer the conversation away from my parents. It feels like dangerous territory.

"Do you remember anything about our biological parents?" I ask, wrapping my fingers around my mug. "Do you know why they left us there?"

"I don't know if there was a 'they.' I don't think our birth father was ever in the picture. Hell, I'm surprised our DNA test revealed we share the same one," he admits. "I remember a lot of men coming in and out of our apartment before you were born."

"We had a home?"

"Maybe? I have fuzzy memories of a cramped apartment. A dirty bedroom with one mattress on the floor."

My heart squeezes. That sounds…bleak.

"Was our mother a prostitute?" I ask warily.

"I don't know. Maybe. And I don't remember having a father. No idea what his name is. I don't know hers, either."

"My adoption paperwork didn't include any parent names," I tell Harrison. "But I suppose that makes sense. I think child abandonment is illegal there, right? If the officials knew who our birth mom was, she probably would've been punished."

"I have some memories of Umma—" He uses a Korean word, which he translates at my blank look. "Our mom. I remember some things about her but not a lot. I have a vague memory of her dropping us there. Leaving us. We took the bus, I remember that. And she didn't have anything to leave you in, so she dug around in an alley full of garbage until she found, like, a plastic bucket or something."

"Laundry basket," I murmur, pain tugging at my gut. "My parents said the orphanage told them I was dropped off in a laundry basket."

"Yeah, that was it. And you were screaming bloody murder." He gives a wry smile. "I had this stuffed animal I used to drag around everywhere, so I put it in your basket. You were crying so hard, and I didn't know how to make you stop, so I gave you the only thing I had to try to calm you down."

"Was it a blue bunny?"

A small, sad smile tugs at the corners of his mouth. “How on earth do you remember that? You were a baby.”

“I still have it, Harrison.”

“You’re shitting me.”

“No. My parents brought it back with us to the States.” I stare at him, my heart squeezing. “Tiger was yours?”

“Tiger?” he echoes with a laugh. “That wasn’t his name back then.”

“What was it?”

“Tokki.” He grins. “It’s Korean for bunny.”

“Do you speak Korean?” I ask, a bit envious at the notion.

One of my biggest regrets is that I didn’t let my parents force me to take Korean classes when I was still young enough to retain the language. I scoffed whenever they brought it up. I didn’t want to speak Korean. It felt too alienating to me. Why would I speak a language that none of my friends could speak? These days, I *wish* I knew a second language, especially my birth tongue.

“Barely,” Harrison tells me. “I lost most of it when I came here, but I still remember some words.”

“Have you been back to Seoul since you were adopted?”

“No.” He snorts into his coffee. “We didn’t have money to take trips to Asia. Have you been?”

I shake my head. “No, but I’d like to someday. It’s funny—when I was a kid, I didn’t care to learn about where I came from. My parents wanted so badly for me to connect to the Korean culture. They would take us to Korean restaurants, read me books about the country, tried to make me learn how to speak the language. And I always resisted it.”

“I did too,” he confesses.

“Really?”

He nods. “Made me feel too different from my peers.”

“Me too. And I didn’t *want* to feel different. I just wanted to fit in. But the older I get, the more curious I am. That’s why I signed up for BioRoots. These past couple years, I’ve felt this need for answers. I wanted to know *why* my birth mother gave me up. Where is she now? Where is my father? Did he die?”

Harrison gives a wry chuckle. “And I’m no help at all, huh? I can’t offer you a single answer.”

“Maybe there are none,” I say with a sigh. “We might never know why we were dropped off at that orphanage. Or one day, we might get another DNA hit. Maybe find an aunt or a cousin who could provide insight into our birth mom’s decision to abandon us, into the identity of our birth father.”

“What if it’s the first one? Never knowing?”

I think it over. “Then at least we got *something* out of the search, right?” I smile shyly. “Each other.”

The waitress returns then, asking if we’re ready to order food, but we’ve been so engrossed in conversation we haven’t even looked at our menus yet. As Harrison picks one up, his sleeves slide from his wrists to his elbows, revealing his forearms. My heart stops.

Are those *cigarette* burns?

He doesn’t notice me looking at the scars, and when his gaze begins to lift, I hastily lower mine to my menu, pretending to study it.

When I put the menu down, Harrison’s sleeves are back at his wrists.

God. I can’t think of another reason why he might be walking around with what appear to be years-old cigarette burns on his arms. A reason other than abuse, that is. I want to ask him about it. I want to reach out, to comfort him, but I don’t know him well enough to do that. It feels like we’re on opposite sides of a chasm, connected by blood but separated by everything else.

“I still can’t believe you kept Tokki all these years,” he marvels after the waitress leaves.

Tears well up in my eyes, and I have to blink rapidly to keep them from spilling over. “I kept him because he made me feel safe. And because he was the only link I had to where I came from.”

“Well, I’m glad he helped. I’m sorry I couldn’t give you more than that.” He smiles suddenly. “Actually, maybe I *can* give you something else. Do you remember your Korean name?”

I suck in a breath. “I didn’t even know I had one. My parents showed me all the adoption paperwork when I was old enough to read and understand it, and my name was listed as Baby Girl followed by a number.”

“It’s Hae-Won.”

I can’t hold back the tears anymore. A dam of emotion breaks inside my chest. I have an actual *name*.

Even if this…whatever this is with Harrison…even if it explodes in my face like a supernova, it'll still be worthwhile for this one gift he's given me.

"What's yours?" I ask through the enormous lump in my throat.

"Ki-jung." His eyes fill with a mixture of discomfort and sadness. "I don't like to be called that, though."

"Why not?"

"Because it's not who I am anymore. Ki-jung is the kid whose mother didn't want him." He shrugs, reaching for his coffee again. "Harrison is the one who survived everything that followed."

Pain stabs my heart. His words are confirmation that his childhood wasn't a good one, although the cigarette burns had already told me that.

Seeing my expression, his softens. "It's okay, Charlotte. It wasn't your fault."

But it doesn't feel okay. I'd been given everything, while he'd obviously been left with so little. Yet he's the one comforting *me*.

"I wish I could change things," I say, my voice trembling.

He reaches out, his hand hovering in the air for a moment before he gently places it over mine. "Look, we can't change the past, but we *can* start fresh. Get to know each other as brother and sister. If you want."

I nod, blinking back another rush of tears. "I'd like that."

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When I get back to Delta Pi, the weight of the encounter feels like it's crushing me. I hurry upstairs and end up doing another first: napping the day away.

Around seven, I awake groggy, starving, and disoriented. I go downstairs and fix some dinner, which I eat in the dining room with Dana and a couple others. When I pass the living room afterward, I hear voices and inhale the familiar smell of popcorn that usually makes me smile. Agatha might want to keep the house sterile and cold, but she can't stop movie night.

Normally, I would change into comfy clothes and join the girls for the rom-com viewing marathon, but tonight I want to disappear into my room again and forget about everything.

Faith returns to the house around nine after a late class on campus. She pokes her head into my room to find me snuggling with my bunny. Tiger. No, Tokki. The reminder brings tears to my eyes, causing hers to flood with concern.

“Are you okay? How did it go?”

I roll onto my back, holding Tokki against my collarbone. “Brutal. It was brutal.”

“Oh no. What happened?”

She frowns and comes to sit beside me. Groaning, I curl toward her and rest my head on her lap.

I avoid her worried gaze by staring at the ceiling instead. I try to organize my thoughts, but everything feels tangled and messy.

“We talked,” I finally say. “About his life, his childhood. It was hard to hear. I mean, I always knew I lucked out, being adopted into the Kingston family, but he really got the short end of the stick. I feel like I won the lottery, and he got screwed.”

“Shit.”

“Yeah.”

Faith sits quietly, letting me spill my thoughts without interruption. It’s one of the things I love most about her—she knows when to just let me talk.

“I can’t stop thinking about it. He stayed in that orphanage for another year after I was adopted. And all that time, I was with my new family, being loved, taken care of… And then, when he finally was adopted, he only got to spend two years with his new mom before she died in an accident.”

“Shit,” she says again.

“It’s so unfair. And I feel so guilty, like it should have been both of us or neither of us.”

Faith squeezes my hand. “No. It’s not your fault. You didn’t choose to be adopted by the Kingstons.”

“Why didn’t they take him too?” I bite my lip. “Harrison thinks they must’ve known I had a sibling and that they made a conscious decision not to adopt him.”

“Maybe.” Like me, Faith sounds unconvinced. “But your parents are so…wholesome. I can’t see them keeping a whole-ass brother a secret from you.”

“Same,” I admit.

“Are you going to ask them about it?”

“Eventually. But that means telling them I’ve connected with Harrison, and I’m not ready for that right now.”

“You still think they’ll be upset?”

“Yes. But more than that, I don’t want…” I try to articulate what I’m feeling. “Outside influences, I guess, affecting this process with Harrison. Today was awkward and painful and emotional and a gazillion other things I can’t even process right now. I want to be able to focus on building a relationship with him—if that’s even possible—and not feel bogged down by other people’s emotions.” I sigh. “Does that make me an awful person?”

“Of course not. This is your life, babe. Your history, your future. You get to decide how to navigate it and when to tell your fam.”

“I can’t stop thinking about how different his life could have been if my family had taken him in too. He wouldn’t have had to go through all that pain and loneliness.”

“His story is hard to hear, no doubt, but you can’t take responsibility for his life. It’s not on you. What happened wasn’t something you or he had any control over. You were both kids, and the adults made the decisions.”

“I know, but it doesn’t stop me from feeling this way. Like I got everything, and he got nothing.”

“That’s not true. You didn’t win a lottery. You were both dealt different cards, and now you’re figuring out how to play them. Together, hopefully. If that’s what you want.”

I let her words sink in. “That feels overwhelming.”

“I know. But you’re not alone in this. And neither is Harrison, now that he’s found you.”

“I don’t know what to do next.”

“Just take it one step at a time. You already took the first step by meeting him, listening to him. The rest will come.”

Some of the weight lifts from my shoulders. “You’re right. One step at a time.” From her lap, I smile up at her. “Thank you. I’m obsessed with your friendship.”

She grins. “Anytime. With that said, I’ve got a terrible reality show queued up that’s just begging to be roasted. You down?”

“Always.”

# CHAPTER THIRTY

## CHARLOTTE

*No need to overthink*

I WAKE UP THE NEXT MORNING STILL FEELING THE LINGERING TENSION of everything that happened with Harrison. Faith is right, I can't change the past, but that doesn't stop the guilt from gnawing at me.

I arrive earlier than usual at the environmental sciences building because Agatha wants to talk about one of our pledges. She and Ciara are already waiting for me in the lobby, lattes in hand and unwrapped cashmere scarves hanging in front of their open designer coats.

I shrug out of my own coat as I approach the young women. Agatha gives my outfit a once-over, and I resist the urge to squirm self-consciously. My pink, pearl-buttoned cardigan is perfectly coordinated with my gray skirt, and my hair is twisted into a perfect bun without a hair out of place. There's nothing she can find fault in, yet the way her nose wrinkles makes me feel like I showed up in tattered rags.

"My Little is *such* a doormat," our sorority sister Ciara is complaining to Agatha. "I keep trying to encourage her to be more proactive and advocate for herself with her professors, but she's too scared to make waves. Her psych prof gave her a C on her midterm, and she refuses to appeal the grade."

I glance at Ciara. "Maybe she thinks she deserved the grade."

"Who gives a shit? A Delta Pi can't be bringing home C's." Ciara sounds annoyed.

"The more pressing matter is my Little," Agatha says, reaching for her phone. "Charlotte, have you seen this?"

I'm about to look when a gust of cool air blows through the lobby. My heart thumps when I see Beckett enter the building, making his way toward

us, all six-foot-something of him. He's the epitome of hot jock. Broad shoulders, skin that's still tanned long after summer, and a lazy, confident stride that makes everyone else seem to disappear.

"Morning, ladies," he drawls.

He flashes the smile that propelled my pulse to other dimensions the night I went to their place. Part devil, part charmer. I can feel Agatha rolling her eyes before she even does it.

She doesn't respond, just glances at her phone.

Ciara has the grace to be polite. "Good morning."

"Morning," I murmur.

I pretend I don't know what he looks like naked, because I'm that immature. So what if the memory of his body pressed against mine is branded into my brain? Doesn't mean I'm going to greet him in public like we're old friends.

But I simply don't understand how Agatha and Ciara can look at a guy like Beckett and not start drooling. All these athletes, especially the hockey guys…their bodies are insane. The football guys are a little too bulky for me, because yes, there's definitely such a thing as too much muscle. The lacrosse and swim guys are too lanky and toned. But a hockey body…it just hits different.

Rather than continue toward our lecture hall, Beckett plants his feet. "So what's the plan for the weekend? Any big parties I should know about?"

Agatha doesn't bother hiding her disdain this time. She gives him a look—a perfect mix of boredom and dismissal—and then returns her attention to her phone as if he isn't even there.

Beckett chuckles, completely unbothered by the snub. "You know, you should make an effort to smile more, Agatha," he tells her. "Your smile is absolutely effulgent—it lights up the room."

I narrow my eyes at him. Effulgent?

"Come on, girls. Let's go inside," Agatha says, pushing away from the wall. "We can discuss the Littles after class."

As my sorority sisters saunter forward, I move away from Beckett and pretend to study my phone. "I'll be right in. Just got a missed call from my mom. I need to call her back."

I raise the phone to my ear and keep it there until I see the lecture hall doors swing shut. Then I march back to Beckett, who hasn't moved from

his perch against the wall.

"Are you reading *The Virgin and the Blade*?" I demand.

"No idea what you're talking about, baby girl."

"Bullshit. Nobody uses the word *effulgent* unless they're reading *The Virgin and the Blade*!"

"Again, you're mistaking me for someone else."

"You're such a liar."

As we walk toward class, he gives me a sidelong look. "You okay? You seem off."

His assessment surprises me, because I thought I was doing a good job masking my emotions. Beckett is a lot more perceptive than he lets on.

"I'm fine." We reach the doors, but my hand hesitates on the handle. I let it drop, biting my bottom lip. "No, I'm lying. I'm not fine."

He's instantly at my side, brow creased with concern. "What's wrong?"

"Remember I told you about my biological brother and how he never responded to my message?"

Beckett nods.

"Well, he tracked me down. In person."

"Whoa. That's huge."

"I know," I say, feeling the weight settling back onto my shoulders. "We met up, and it was intense. I don't know how to deal with it. Whether I should tell my parents I've seen him. Whether I should *keep* seeing him. It's a lot to deal with."

Beckett studies me for a moment. "You asking for advice?"

"Maybe. I don't know. It's just a lot to process."

He lets out a rueful laugh. "Well, I'm the wrong guy to ask. I'm shit at giving advice. My go-to is usually to tell you to find a distraction."

"Is that what do you do? When things become too heavy?"

"Pretty much, yeah. I find something—or someone—to distract me. Hockey. Going out with mates. You."

The suggestive tone of his voice makes me blush. Luckily, I'm saved by our professor, who strides toward the lecture hall carrying her briefcase.

"Good morning," she says.

"Good morning," I echo, before glancing at Beckett. "Thanks for the advice. Sort of."

“Anytime.” I feel his gaze at my back as I follow our professor through the door.

I settle in my seat beside Nikki and get my laptop out. Beckett takes his own seat a minute later. This time, when I feel someone’s eyes boring into me, they belong to Mitch, who I catch frowning at me when I glance over my shoulder. I cannot *wait* for this semester to be over. Climate Policy has been nothing but a pain in my ass.

When the lecture begins, I try to focus on the material, but my thoughts —and my gaze—keep drifting back to Beckett. There’s something about that boy, damn it. Something that puts me both at ease and completely off-balance at the same time.

After class, Mitch waits for Nikki to exit our row before stepping forward to block my path. “Can we talk?”

I swallow a sigh. From the corner of my eye, I see Beckett taking his time gathering up his stuff, pushing items into his backpack at a snail’s pace. He is wholly aware of me and Mitch.

“What about?” I ask my ex.

“Can we go somewhere maybe? The Coffee Hut? My dorm?”

I almost snort. His dorm? Is he nuts?

“I’m sorry, but I can’t. I’m going to the lab to work on my capstone. Just tell me what’s up, Mitch.”

He glances toward Beckett, who’s now walking up the aisle.

“Mitch,” I say impatiently.

“You know what? Forget it,” he mutters, then marches toward the exit as if I’ve done something to offend him. If I did, I don’t care. We’re not together anymore. We’re not even friends.

Beckett intercepts me at the door. “You in a rush?” he murmurs.

“Not really,” I say, despite what I told Mitch. The lab will still be there in five minutes. “Why?”

“I just wanted to say, I might not be good at the advice-dispensing part, but…” He shrugs. “I’m great at distractions.”

It’s back. The temptation. The deep, relentless ache that comes whenever I’m around him. Or Will. Or both of them. I told them it would never happen again. I thought that the more time that passed, the less I’d think about them.

But I’m *always* thinking about them.

“I’m starting to get a handle on you, Charlie,” he continues, a smile curving his lips. “You’re like Will. You’re an overthinker. And right now… you look like you could use a break from all that thinking.”

I swallow through my dry mouth. I should walk away.

Instead, I ask, “What do you suggest?”

Heat flickers through his expression. “Come with me.”

Before I know it, we’re slipping into an empty supply closet down the hall. The door clicks shut behind us, engulfing us in shadows.

“What are we doing in here, Ice Boy?” My voice sounds husky to my ears.

“Depends, sugar puff.”

“On what?”

“On whether you ask me to kiss you.”

The closet becomes impossibly quiet as his unspoken question hangs between us. All I can hear is my soft breathing and quickening heartbeat.

“Kiss me,” I whisper.

Beckett doesn’t waste any time. He pulls me against him, his lips capturing mine in a slow, fiery kiss that sends a jolt of electricity through me. Someone might come in at any moment, but I don’t care. All I can think about is how good it feels to be lost in the moment.

The kiss deepens, his tongue tangling with mine, and I moan against his mouth, melting into him. His hands are everywhere. The hunger of his kiss makes my head spin. It’s just as hot, just as exciting as the first time and all the times that followed during my night with him and Will.

When we finally break apart, breathless and flushed, Beckett is smiling down at me. “See? Sometimes a little distraction isn’t so bad.”

A frown dips my mouth as a thought suddenly occurs to me. He notices, reaching out to smooth my brow with his thumb.

“What’s wrong?”

“Would Will be mad if he knew we were in here right now, making out?”

“He wouldn’t care.” Beckett leans in, brushing his lips over my earlobe as he whispers, “We like to share, remember?”

A shiver skitters along my spine. This is so far outside the lines of anything I’d ever imagined for myself. The thrill of it is undeniable, but still, the confusion is creeping back in.

“I have a question for you.” Beckett’s voice grows surprisingly tender.

I swallow. “What is it?”

“When you think about that night… when you think about both of us… kissing you, touching you…how does it make you feel?”

I don’t answer.

“How does it make you feel?” he repeats.

“Excited,” I confess. Then I let out a soft groan. “But I don’t know how to handle this. You guys keep telling me it’s not a big deal, but I feel conflicted about being attracted to both of you.”

“To us, it’s not a big deal. And you don’t have to handle it, Charlie. Just let it be what it is. No rules, no expectations.”

I stare up at him, my heart racing. It sounds so simple when he puts it that way, but I know it isn’t. Not really.

“What if someone gets hurt?”

“Then we deal with it when it happens. But for now, just enjoy it. No need to overthink.”

I nod, even as my mind continues to race. I’m out of my comfort zone, yet I can’t deny how much I want it. How much I want to be with them again. The lines are blurring, and I’m terrified of where this might lead.

My pulse quickens when Beckett steps toward the door—and locks it. Hearing my breath hitch, he glances over with a faint smile.

“We might not want anyone barging in for this part.”

I exhale in a wobbly rush. “Which part?”

He closes the distance between us, and I shiver as his lips travel over my jaw. He reaches my mouth and hovers there. “The part where I make you come.”

Before I can blink, he’s on his knees. He tips his head back, peering up at me, waiting for my signal.

I respond by spreading my legs.

He grins. “Really. Not even an illusion of protest?”

“No. I want this.”

His hands rest on my thighs, fingertips brushing the hem of my skirt. I’m not sure if it’s the way his hands are creeping upward or the lust swimming in his eyes, but every inch of me is awake, waiting. His fingers move higher, slipping beneath my skirt, grazing the soft skin of my inner thighs, and I gasp.

He smirks. He knows exactly what he's doing to me.

But I have a card or two to play myself. "I don't know if you'd be teasing me this way," I warn him, "if you knew what you were missing."

Smiling, I roll my skirt all the way up so he can see my panties.

His answering groan sets the air in this cramped space on fire. "Oh my fucking God. There's a bow."

"Nuh-uh. There's two bows."

I stroke the sides of my waistband, teasing the silky pink bows.

"You're gonna kill me," he mumbles. "I'm dead, Charlotte."

"Don't die yet. Let me come on your face first."

He gives a deep laugh. "Christ. I can't believe I've been sitting two rows ahead of you all semester without ever seeing this side of you. Why have you been hiding?"

"Social necessity."

"Well, it's a goddamn waste. I like this Charlotte."

He strokes my thighs, sending a ripple of warmth up my body. Then he pushes the crotch of my panties aside, exposing my pussy.

Beckett hums a sound of approval. "Fuck. So pretty, baby. Can I kiss it?"

I nod wordlessly.

He leans in, but he doesn't do anything just yet, his lips ghosting over my skin, so close but maddeningly far.

"Beckett…" I whisper, my voice barely audible, but he hears me.

He presses his mouth to my core, and a shiver of pleasure rolls through me. I want to close my eyes, to lose myself in the moment, but I can't stop staring at him. At the way he looks at me, like I'm the only thing that matters.

And maybe that's the thing that gets me—the way Beckett makes me feel like this. Like I can let go of everything, like it's okay to be selfish for a minute. To just be here, with him, like this. He and Will are so good at that, pushing me to feel things I didn't know I could feel and making me forget about everything else.

"You have to be quiet," he warns against my heated flesh.

And then he starts to lick.

Lick and kiss and suck and tease until I can barely stay upright. I watch him as he pleasures me. He's so focused, so devoted to making me feel

good, like this is the only place he wants to be and the only task he wants to be doing.

My knees start trembling when he captures my clit between his lips and gently flicks his tongue over it. I almost keel over, so he brings one hand to my waist, holding me steady.

“I got you. Just keep grinding my face like that. That’s it, baby girl. Just like that.”

Every part of me is tight and hot. My clit throbs painfully, pulsing when he swirls his tongue around it. One strong hand keeps me pinned against the wall. The other moves between my thighs, two fingers sliding inside me. I rock against his eager mouth and take every ounce of pleasure he has to offer, shuddering when the orgasm finally rolls through me. Beckett stays with me for it, nuzzling my thigh, lazily thrusting his fingers, until finally he gives me one last kiss and rises to his feet.

He licks his lips. “That was fucking delicious.”

When I notice the erection straining against his jeans, I smile and reach for him. “Looks painful. Need help taking care of that?”

“You don’t have to. I was trying to distract *you*, remember?”

“What’s your next class?”

“Sustainable Development. Why?”

I quirk up a brow. “How are you ever going to pay attention in Sustainable Development with this big rock in your pants?”

He opens his mouth to respond, but I’m already unzipping him, pushing his jeans and boxers down. His dick slides out, thick and hard. Desire surges through me, spurring me to sink to my knees and wrap my fingers around him. When I take him in my mouth, he groans and grips my hair.

I give one long, thorough lick before peering up at him. “I have to be at the lab soon,” I say before swallowing him up.

“That your way of saying you want me to fuck your mouth hard and fast?”

I smile around his shaft, humming an assent. He groans again and gives me exactly what I asked for. He thrusts again and again, hips flexing, hands cupping my head to guide me along his length. I don’t expect him to last long, and he doesn’t.

“Goddamn, nobody’s ever made me come as fast as you do,” he grits out, and I bask in a sense of satisfaction, giddy with feminine power, as he

spills down my throat. I swallow the familiar flavor that had my blood burning with need last weekend.

Breathing hard, I get to my feet and smooth out my skirt and hair. Noticing he's still erect, I give him a teasing stroke. He gazes down at my french-tip fingernails wrapped around him, at the drop of semen still pooled at his tip.

"Babe," he says with mischief in his eyes. "How do you feel about hand modeling?"

"What?"

"I just feel like Will should know what he missed out on."

An evil grin spreads across my face. "You're mean."

"Trust me, he'll like it."

Beckett pulls his phone out of his pocket and opens the camera. As he focuses in on my fingers, I rub the moisture lingering on his dick. After he snaps the picture and sends it, we rearrange our clothing as best as we can and exit the closet, thankfully into an empty corridor.

Within seconds, both our phones go off.

***WILL:***

> Fuuuuuck. You'll both be punished for this torture, I hope you know that.

I glance at Beckett. "He's a lot more intense than I thought he'd be."

"Oh, trust me. Not many people know the real Larsen."

I suspect he's right. I've been starting to form my own mental picture of Will. He's much more than the easygoing, all-American jock he portrays himself to be. Behind that cute smile is a man whose ravenous gaze devoured me when I was naked in his bed.

He's a hot onion too, I realize. They both are. Because I have the sneaking suspicion that Beckett is not as laid-back as *he* seems. And that he cares a lot more than he lets on.

# THE VIRGIN AND THE BLADE/LOURDES

## CHAPTER 9

## YOU CANNOT CONQUER ME

The cold stone walls of the Tower of London loomed around Elizabeth like a cage. The damp chill bit through her once-proud gown as she sat in the dimly lit chamber, her regal posture defiant despite the chains that bound her wrists. Her crown was gone, her city had fallen, and yet her spirit remained unbroken.

The door creaked open, and the air shifted as Alexander stepped into the room. He wore no armor this time—only a simple tunic and cloak—but his presence was as commanding as ever. His conquering army had stormed London, his banner now flying above the palace.

Despite his victory, there was no triumph in his eyes as he gazed at the fallen queen.

“Elizabeth,” he said with the authority of a king who had conquered empires. “It doesn’t have to be this way.”

She lifted her chin. “It is this way because you made it so,” she spat, her voice steady but filled with venom. “You may have taken my city and my throne, but you will never take my loyalty. I am the Queen of England. I will never bend the knee to you.”

Alexander knelt before her—not out of submission but something far more profound. He reached for her chains but did not touch them, his hand hovering just above her bound wrists as though the mere act of being close to her was enough to undo the iron links.

“Must you always be so proud?” he asked softly, his eyes searching hers. “Is your pride worth all this? The Tower, the chains, the broken city?”

Elizabeth's lips curled into a bitter smile. "Pride? You misunderstand me, Alexander. This isn't pride. It's duty. It's love for my country, for my people. I would rather die in chains than live in submission."

His gaze darkened, not in anger but…admiration. She was everything he had heard: unyielding, fierce, as sharp as a blade forged in battle. And yet here, in the silence of the Tower, away from the eyes of the world, he could see the woman beneath the crown, a woman whose strength had captivated him from the moment he first set eyes on her, a woman whose effulgent presence took his breath away.

"You know I could force you. I could command you to kneel right here, right now, and take your kingdom from you forever."

"You could try," she retorted. "But you'd fail. You may conquer nations, Alexander, but you cannot conquer me."

He reached out, cupping her cheek. She tensed, awaiting his next move.

"I don't want to conquer you, Elizabeth," he said, his voice raw. "I want you to rule by my side. As my equal. As my queen."

The vulnerability in his words caught her off guard. She had expected arrogance, demands, perhaps even cruelty.

But not this. Not this unexpected plea. His hand, still on her cheek, was gentle, and for a brief moment, she allowed herself to feel it. Allowed herself to imagine a different fate, one where they could stand together, two of the greatest rulers the world had ever seen.

But it was just a fleeting fantasy.

She drew in a sharp breath and pulled away, the cold chains clinking softly as she broke free of his touch. "You would have me betray everything I stand for. You would have me turn my back on my people, my crown, *my very soul*. I am not a prize to be won."

"Yes, you are much more than that. You are the most remarkable woman I've ever known. That is why I want you beside me—not as a prize but as a partner."

"Your partner?" she mocked. "What partnership could exist between the conqueror and the conquered?"

He didn’t answer immediately. Instead, he stepped closer, his face mere inches from hers. His presence was intoxicating, powerful, and yet there was a softness to him she hadn’t seen before.

“If you say the word, I will release you. I will leave this city, leave England, and never return. You will have your throne, your people, and your freedom.”

Her breath caught in her throat. Was it possible? Could it be true? Would he truly walk away?

“I will do it all—for one night in your chamber.”

Elizabeth’s eyes widened.

“One night in the warmth of your bed and the moist heat of your sheath. Give me this, and I shall return England to you.”

# CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

## BECKETT

*You're welcome. Just saved your relationship*

IT'S FRIDAY NIGHT, AND WE'RE ALL CRAMMED INTO THE VISITOR'S LOCKER room, wishing this were a home game. St. Anthony's is a D1 school, but they don't have the kind of booster backing that Briar does. Garrett Graham built us a brand-new hockey facility, for fuck's sake. St. Anthony's arena is a shanty town in comparison.

The only good thing about tonight is that our trusty camera crew has finally fucked off to parts unknown. Will's father's assistant informed Will last night that Capitol TV got all the footage and interviews they needed, which means we can go back to not having to worry about someone accidentally filming our penises when we're changing.

Coach steps to the front of the locker room in preparation to bark out the ten or so words that typically comprise his "pep talks." Shane and I have started making wagers on how many words he'll use total. Today's over-under is twelve. I'm the under, so I'm really hoping it's a short one.

"Focus tonight. We're on track to win our conference. Don't fuck it up."

Thirteen words.

Motherfucker.

Shane pokes me in the side. I'm wearing full padding, so I barely feel it. But I do feel the smugness rolling off him. Shane is such a dickhead winner.

As I walk on skate guards toward the door, Coach intercepts me. "Dunne, I want you to stay on Palecki's ass tonight. He's a nuisance."

"You got it, Coach."

I keep my promise. Anytime Nathan Palecki even breathes near the puck, I'm on him. The game ends up being a bigger ass-kicking than any of us anticipated. We figured we'd win by at least a goal or two, but we leave St. Anthony's that evening riding the high of the ass-kicking of the century.

Final score, 6–1.

It isn't until we're settling in for the bus ride back to Briar that I'm forced to think my own thoughts. Before this moment, I had a ton of distractions to keep my brain busy. Now, there's nothing stopping me from thinking about what happened this week with Charlie.

As in I shouldn't have hooked up with her.

I should've comforted her.

Because that's what she'd really been seeking that morning. Comfort. She'd wanted advice, emotional support, and instead of giving that to her, I made it about sex instead.

Sex is easier than feelings. The moment things get too heavy, I possess the uncanny power to lighten them using a bit of charm and a lot of tongue.

It's been a long time, though, since I felt the temptation to connect with someone on a deeper level. When Charlie confessed to feeling overwhelmed and afraid about how to handle the situation with her brother, I did what I always do: I resorted to distraction.

I hear Ryder chuckle under his breath. We're sitting together near the back of the bus while I pretend not to notice the dirty texts he's sending his wife. And don't get me started on how bizarre it is to say that. His wife. Who gets married in college?

"Hey," I say, nudging his arm.

"Mmm?"

"Here's a hypothetical for you."

Forehead wrinkling, he clicks his screen off. "Okay."

"You think Gigi is the love of your life, right?"

"No, I know she's the love of my life."

There's no smugness there, just quiet certainty.

"All right, well, let's suppose Gigi crushes your heart between her fingers and rips your soul from your body—"

"Wait, is she a demon?"

"No. She just hurts you. She destroys you and then leaves you."

Ryder gives a dry laugh. "This scenario is grim, bro."

“I know. But say that happened.” I poke the inside of my cheek with my tongue, shifting awkwardly in my seat. “Would you ever…you know…try again? With someone else?”

He responds with silence. Staring at me. It’s so unnerving that I have to look away, feigning deep interest in the seat ahead of me, where Will sits with Case. Shane is across the aisle next to Nick Lattimore, who’s been extra sulky tonight. Dude showed up earlier looking like someone kicked his puppy.

There’s a lot of chatter coming from the front rows, but for the most part, the bus is quiet.

Ryder’s gaze, which is usually shuttered, flickers with confusion, then concern. “Beck… is this a hypothetical, or are you asking me for advice here?”

“It’s…” I swallow, realizing I should’ve just kept my bloody mouth shut. “Just a hypothetical.”

He frowns. “Okay. Um. Yeah, I guess…no then. If Gigi left me, I don’t think I’d ever try again with someone else. She’s it for me.”

“Stop flaunting your perfect wife in everyone’s face,” grumbles Nick. The dark-haired winger twists around in his seat to scowl at Ryder. “Some people are barely holding on, man.”

I bite back a grin. Lattimore’s not the chatty type, so whatever’s eating at him tonight must be bad if he’s participating in a convo about women.

“Would you just tell us what happened already?” Shane growls. “You keep making these veiled little comments, and it’s starting to annoy the ever-living shit out of me. You clearly want to talk about it, asshole. So fucking talk about it. Asshole.”

Several snorts ring out.

Nick unleashes another scowl, this one aimed at me. “You want to know what happened? Ask Dunne. Because it’s all his fault.”

My jaw drops. “Me? What the hell did I do? Go away.”

“You’re the one who sent me that fan fiction,” he accuses.

I blink. “What?”

“Wait, what?” Will joins the conversation now, shifting around in his seat to eye me with suspicion. “What fan fiction?”

I’m armed and ready to deny, deny, deny, but Lattimore throws me under the bus again. “Beck sent Darcy a link for some dumbass story about

Queen Elizabeth and Alexander the Great, and now I'm in the doghouse for it."

"First of all—" I start.

"No," Will interrupts, rolling his eyes. "*First of all*, were you on my laptop?"

I shrug. "There's a possibility I might've been."

"And you read the story I'm editing for my old lab partner?"

Another shrug.

"And you sent it to Darcy?"

This time, I defend myself. "Hey, she requested the link. I didn't offer it." I glare at Nick. "And that was the end of my involvement in it, mate. So don't blame me for being in the doghouse."

"What does Lourdes's fanfic have to do with your girlfriend being pissed at you?" Will asks our teammate.

Nick sets his jaw. "It doesn't matter. It just does, okay?"

"What did you do?" Shane pushes, unable to contain his amusement. He's openly grinning.

"Nothing."

"C'mon, what'd you do?"

"She's trying to get you to read it, and you don't want to?" Case guesses from his seat.

"I said it doesn't matter," Nick replies through clenched teeth.

"Fine, don't tell us. I have Darcy's number," Shane says. "I'll ask her myself."

"Don't you fucking dare."

"Fine. Solve the mystery for us then."

Nick curses under his breath. "Whatever. It's not a big deal. She just, uh, you know…" He shrugs. "Caught me."

I furrow my brow. "Caught you doing what—" I give a sharp intake of breath. "Mate. No. Don't say it."

His look of sheer misery is all the confirmation I need.

I double over. "Jesus," I wheeze between waves of uncontrollable laughter. "Which chapter?"

"What am I missing here?" Shane asks.

It's hard to speak through the stitch in my side. I'm panting from the exertion. "She caught him wanking it to historical fan fiction."

There’s a beat of silence before everyone in our vicinity joins me in the land of shuddering, side-splitting laughter.

“What chapter?” Will echoes my question as the only other person on this bus who’s read Lourdes’s masterpiece.

Nick looks like he wants to crawl into a hole and die. He drops his face in his hands. “Fuck off.”

“Hey, judgment-free zone here,” I assure him, my lips twitching from the restraint of not doubling over again.

He lifts his head. His face is that of a man defeated. “Chapter twelve.”

I nod. “The deflowering. Nice.”

Shane sounds perplexed as he says, “Wait, your girl’s actually pissed about this? Are you not allowed to jerk off?”

“What? No, of course I am. She’s angry because I lost track of time and was an hour late for her birthday dinner. Now she thinks I ‘don’t value her time or the fact that she was born’—that’s an exact quote.”

This time, everyone manages not to bust out in hysterics.

“Oh,” Shane says, his tone tactful. “Well…I see her point.”

“Hey, what’s all the commotion back here?” demands our new assistant coach.

Mike Hollis strides over from the front of the bus. He stops in the middle of the aisle, clapping a hand on the top of the seat in front of Will’s. His gaze sweeps over the group.

“Is there a problem? Who’s beefing who?”

Shane shakes his head at the man. “No beef,” he assures him. “Just giving Lattimore some girl advice.”

Nick glares at Shane as if to say *why would you ever open your mouth.*

Hollis nods in understanding. “Got it. All right, lay it on me. I’m bursting with wisdom.”

I snicker under my breath.

“No, you know what? It doesn’t even matter.” Hollis leans his hip against the seat and fixes Nick with a grave look. “I have one question for you, Nicholas.”

“Please don’t call me that.”

“One question. This girl—is she wife material? You wanna marry her one day?”

I blink, not expecting that.

I don’t think Nick was either because he falters. Then he nods. “Yeah. I think so.”

“Think or know?”

“Know,” he says sheepishly.

“Then there’s only one solution to your problem. You call her up, and you say, *You’re right*. That’s it. You’re welcome. Just saved your relationship.”

Shane nods his agreement. “I mean, he’s not wrong.”

“I’m never wrong,” Coach Hollis says. “Why do you think I’ve been married for, like, a thousand years now? I know how to game the system. Oh, and I love my wife. That’s probably part of it too.”

“How’d you guys meet?” Colson calls out from his seat.

Hollis brightens. “Oh, it’s a great story. My daughters say it’s the most romantic story they’ve ever heard. Settle in, boys.”

Ryder and I exchange a look. We haven’t known this man long, but any love story told by Mike Hollis is bound to feature more than a few what-the-fuck twists.

“So, some people might say Rupi was stalking me,” he starts.

I rest my case.

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***CHARLIE:***

Can I come over tonight?

The message pops up in our group chat as Will and I are leaving the Graham Center after the team bus dropped us off. Will reads it and shakes his head at me.

“What?” I say.

“You ate her out in a closet,” he chides.

“So?”

“So I don’t want her to feel pressured into hanging out again.”

“What does me going down on her in a closet have to do with that? We both know Charlie’s not the type to be pressured into anything. But just say

no if you’re worried.”

He won’t say no. Because he’s as drawn to her as I am. Charlie is a beautiful mystery. Everything about her makes me want to dig as deep as I can. To crawl inside her. Make her smile. Hear her laugh.

I haven’t felt that urge since high school.

I push the thought aside. Fuck’s sake. I’m not looking to fall in love with Charlotte Kingston. I want to sleep with her again. Maybe get to know her some more. Nothing beyond that.

My phone buzzes in my hand. It’s the message Will just sent to Charlie.

***LARSEN:***

We’ll be home in about 30. Coming from the arena.

***CHARLIE:***

Okay. I’ll be there in an hour.

# CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

## BECKETT

*The stats don't lie*

AT HOME, I GRAB A TUPPERWARE OF LEFTOVER LASAGNA THAT WILL made last night and nuke it in the microwave. It's probably not wise to carbo-load right before a potential sex date, but I'm not taking it for granted that Charlie changed her mind about anything. And I'm famished.

"I'm gonna go take a real shower," Will says after we've devoured all the leftovers. "St. Anthony's water pressure is dogshit. I think I still have shampoo in my hair."

A shower doesn't sound like a bad idea. And it might be prudent to get some manscaping going.

Just in case.

We disappear into our respective bedrooms, reconvening downstairs a half hour later, where I grab some beers while Will puts on a movie from the Timeline franchise.

"Yo, did you see there's a new one coming out next year?" he calls toward the kitchen.

"What? No way." I return with two tall cans of IPA, handing him one.

"Literally just saw it on my feed." He holds up his phone as proof.

"Is Lykander coming back?" I demand.

Bobby Lykander is the actor who's starred in all four of the Timeline movies, but the last one ended in his tragic death. At the hand of his younger self. Fucking devastating.

Will glances at his screen, scrolling. "He's on the cast list, but we don't know if it'll be flashbacks or if this means Qualls survived."

"He totally survived. Or at the very least, he went even further back in time to make sure he didn't die. Obviously."

“Obviously.”

The doorbell rings. We exchange a look.

“I’ll let her in,” I say, then wander toward the front hall.

I open the front door to find Charlie on the stoop.

My jaw drops. “What are you wearing?”

She looks confused. “What’s wrong with what I’m wearing? It’s just leggings and a sweatshirt.”

“Exactly. It’s just leggings and a sweatshirt,” I say petulantly. “That’s not your usual outfit. Where’s the thigh highs? Where’s the pleated skirt? You’re supposed to be fulfilling my schoolgirl fantasy.”

She snorts and punches me in the chest, then bypasses me to step inside. “Sorry, but I don’t dress up for you, Ice Boy.”

“You should start, sugar puff. I dress up for you.”

“Oh really? You wore those gray sweatpants for me? And this T-shirt that’s so thin it looks like it’s going to fall apart if I pull on it?” As if to emphasize that, she tugs the fabric teasingly.

I grin at her. “I actually did wear this for you.”

“Oh really?” she repeats as she trails me into the living room.

“Statistically speaking, a woman’s sexual arousal heightens by three hundred percent at the sight of gray sweatpants.”

“The stats don’t lie,” Will calls from the sectional.

“Where are your sweatpants then?” she challenges. He’s wearing loose pants in a dark plaid and no shirt. Will runs hot.

“I didn’t want to arouse you too much,” he says with a solemn look. “It’s also common knowledge that too many sweatpants are overkill.”

“Stats don’t lie,” I concur.

“Hey,” she says as she sits in the middle section of the couch, “why can’t you trust a statistician?”

“Why?” Will asks suspiciously.

She pauses for effect. “Because they’re always plotting something.”

He sighs. “Why do I like you?”

Charlie breaks out in a smile. It’s nice to see her smiling. She seemed so down last time I saw her, at least before her distraction by orgasm.

Guilt pokes at me. I want to bring up her brother and ask how she’s doing, if she’s having an easier time processing everything.

Instead, I offer her a drink. “Green tea as usual?”

She lifts a brow. “Just because I had it once doesn’t mean it’s my usual drink order.”

“Okay, what do you want to drink then?”

“Green tea, please.”

My grin’s so big, my face actually hurts. This girl is too damn cute.

I go to the kitchen to turn on the electric kettle, then lean against the doorway between the two rooms while I wait for the water to boil. This time, I find the courage to broach a serious topic.

“You feeling any better about the whole brother situation?” I ask.

“Maybe a little.” She hesitates for a second. “Harrison told me my Korean name. The orphanage in Seoul didn’t bother including it in any of the adoption papers, but he remembers it.”

“Yeah?” I’m intrigued. “And?”

“It’s Hae-Won.” Pink splotches rise in her cheeks, and I can see the emotion in her eyes. This means a lot to her.

“Hae-Won,” Will repeats, a smile appearing. “I like it. That’s really pretty.”

“Thanks.” She smiles back, but it fades fast. “I still don’t know how to approach this, though. It’s so weird, suddenly having a sibling I never knew about. We’ve been texting all week, but it’s like trying to make friends with a stranger you met at a party one time. Trying to figure out what you have in common. What makes the other person tick. And it doesn’t help that Harrison had a really, really bad childhood.” Charlie wears a guilty look. “It’s a lot of effort, and a part of me wonders if it’s worth it. Like, I went twenty-one years without having this guy in my life and I was doing just fine.”

“I get that.” I offer a shrug. “But look, I’m an only child, and I spent a lot of time growing up wishing I had a sibling. I still think about it sometimes.”

“I do too,” Will admits quietly. “As another member of the only child club.”

I glance back at Charlie. “If it were me, I’d make the effort to get to know him. You might regret it if you don’t at least try.”

The kettle clicks, and I duck back into the kitchen to prepare Charlie’s tea, hearing them continue to talk about the situation in the other room. A minute later, I bring her a steaming mug and set it on the table next to my

beer. I settle on the other end of the couch, keeping some distance between me and Charlie.

“Let’s not talk about it anymore,” she says.

Will tips his head toward her. “You sure? ’Cause we’re happy to listen.”

“I know, and I appreciate it. But it’s just too much to think about. It’s going to overload me.”

“Does that happen a lot?” I ask her. “Getting overloaded?”

“I mean… Yes. I’m a STEM major. It’s senior year. I’ve got a capstone project to finish. Grad school essays that are due. I’m the VP of finance of my sorority, and we’re planning a huge gala. I’ve got a Little I’m supposed to mentor. A biological brother who showed up out of nowhere. I’m lusting over two boys—”

She stops, her mouth snapping shut.

Will grins.

I can’t stop a chuckle. “Lusting, are we?”

“Just shut up.”

We both laugh harder.

“Very mature of you, Charlotte,” I chide.

“I’m not Charlotte. I’m Charlie right now. Charlie tells people to shut up.”

“Yeah. What else does Charlie do?”

When she frowns, I realize how that sounded.

“That wasn’t a challenge,” I assure her. “I promise. No expectations tonight.”

“No?”

“We’re just watching a movie. Like last time.”

“Last time ended with sex.”

“Doesn’t mean that’s the precedent.”

“That’s exactly what setting a precedent is!” She sighs, glancing at the screen, which is frozen on a shot of Professor Qualls about to kiss the hot diamond thief he saved in the last movie. “Fine. What are we watching? Another one of your love-triangle rom-coms where you get to see boobs?”

Will chuckles. “No. It’s the most recent installment in the Timeline franchise. Number four.”

“You know, I’ve never actually seen these movies.”

I gape at her. “How is that possible?”

“I don’t have time to watch movies. Did you not hear that entire list of stressors I recited for you?” She pulls her knees up, making herself more comfortable as Will unpauses the movie. “Do you need to catch me up on the first three?”

“Nah, they’re all self-explanatory. That’s the professor who invented the time machine. The hot blond is his current love interest, but she’ll betray him. They always do. And the dude walking in right now is Professor Qualls’s son.” I nod at the bearded man gracing the screen.

“Wait, that’s his son? They look the same age—Ohhhh.” She nods. She gets it. “Time travel.”

Will snickers. “We’ve got a smart cookie over here, Beck.”

“The smartest.”

“Shut up. I’m just going to keep saying it all night. Shut up.”

I grab my beer off the table, my arm brushing hers when I straighten up. “Sorry,” I murmur.

“No, you’re not.”

My lips twitch. “I mean, I didn’t do it on purpose. But you’re right. I’m not sorry.”

Smirking around the rim of the can, I sip my IPA. I feel her watching me as I drink. When Will rakes his hand through his hair, I see her track that too.

She’s very aware of us. And I’m very aware of her. She repositions herself, stretching her legs to rest her feet on the table. Her socks are pink. So is the tank top she’s wearing underneath her oversize gray sweatshirt, which is falling off one shoulder. I wonder if she’s got a bra on beneath the tank. She wasn’t wearing one the night we met her for drinks in the suburbs of Boston, at the most random bar where nobody would see how naughty she was being. I remember the way her hard little nipples strained against her top.

My mouth is suddenly tingling. Fuck. I need to suck on something.

I take another sip, bringing much needed moisture into my mouth.

Charlie snorts at the cheesy joke Professor Qualls just made. The snort is somehow both sexy and adorable. Will’s laughing too. Deep and husky. For a second, my libido is like, what the fuck is happening? I have these two hot people beside me, and nobody’s naked. This feels like a travesty.

Still giggling, Charlie leans forward to pick up her tea. She blows on the liquid to cool it, but each time she raises the mug to her lips, she chickens out and doesn't sip it.

Will, who's also observing the great hot tea dilemma, finally breaks out in a grin. "Do it."

"I don't want to burn my tongue," she whines.

"Do it," he urges. "Feel the burn."

With a deep breath, her entire body tensed up, Charlie takes the tiniest, most fearful sip I've ever seen. Steam moistens her face, and her nose turns red, as do her cheeks. I want nothing more than to snatch that mug out of her hand, pull down her leggings, and screw her brains out.

Yes. I am getting aroused watching a woman drink tea.

This is a first.

"Okay, that wasn't too bad," she relents before returning her attention to the movie.

Will is still trying to explain the plotline to her, his face becoming animated. "So basically, in the last movie, the professor found out he has a son with Maritza, the Spanish assassin he had an affair with when he time traveled to eighteenth-century Spain. He was trying to stop her from assassinating the man who in ten years would invent the cure for the rare blood disease that killed the professor's first wife—"

He's midsentence when Charlie leans over and kisses him.

The move catches him off guard. Catches me off guard too. I blink, and suddenly her mouth is glued to Will's.

Before he can kiss her back, she eases away and says, "Sorry."

I snicker into my beer.

Charlie glances at me now. "I'm sorry."

"Why are you apologizing to me?"

"Because I kissed Will." She groans. "He just looked so hot while he was explaining that crazy plot."

"Yeah, I know. Sci-fi gives him a real hard-on," I tell her, and Will sighs.

At the word *hard-on*, Charlie looks at my crotch.

"Why are you looking down there?" I grin at her.

"I don't know." She lets out another groan. "I'm just so…"

"Horny," I supply.

Will chuckles.

“Conflicted,” she corrects.

“Because you’re horny.”

“Yes. *Yes*. Okay?” Her face turns bright red. “Ugh. I don’t even know why I’m here.”

“Yes, you do,” Will says softly.

Her gaze shifts to me again. “Beckett, did you mean what you wrote in that message?”

“Which part? Actually, it doesn’t matter. I meant every part. So yes, I meant what I wrote in the message.”

A smile tickles her lips. “About how my wild and fearless side is your favorite thing about me.”

“It is.” My voice is gruff, earnest.

She looks at Will.

His expression shines with sincerity. “I’ve never been drawn to anyone the way I’m drawn to you.”

He feels it too, I realize. This inexorable pull toward her. And I feel like I’m watching it in slow motion as he curls his hand around the back of her neck and brings her face to his. My cock swells when he kisses her.

It’s a measured, exploratory kiss. I see his tongue slip into her mouth. The tip of her tongue touching his. Her body arching toward him. She presses her palm to his bare chest, running her fingers over the dusting of hair there.

My dick pushes against my pants, half-mast.

“I’m sorry,” Charlie blurts out, breaking the kiss.

He blinks. “For what?”

“I judged you.” Deep remorse fills her eyes. “I made you feel like you weren’t normal. Both of you. But…I don’t actually feel that way. I wouldn’t have matched with you on the app if I thought you guys were sleazy for being into what you’re into.”

Will nods thoughtfully. “Why were you ashamed about what happened between us? Because you felt regret?”

He has this calming effect on people. Sometimes his gaze bores into you, as if he’s reading your mind, seeing into your heart. Finding all the scattered, broken pieces inside and putting them back together for you so he can show you what the final puzzle is supposed to look like.

“No,” Charlie confesses, visibly swallowing. “I didn’t feel regret. I enjoyed every second of that night.”

“Then you weren’t feeling your own shame. It was external. You felt *shamed*.”

A crease appears in her forehead. “Isn’t that the same thing?”

“No. If there’s shame or guilt because you truly felt like you did something wrong, that’s one thing. But if you’re letting yourself feel like crap based on other people’s opinions… opinions they haven’t even offered… opinions you imagine they’ll have if they find out… then that’s not shame.” He strokes her cheek. “Nobody has to find out, Charlie. Nothing we do in here ever leaves this house.”

She twists toward me for confirmation, biting her lip.

“Sacred space,” I confirm, quirking a smile.

Her teeth release her lip, and her tongue comes out as if soothing a sting. I want to be the one licking her lip. I see Will’s eyes flare, and I know he’s thinking the same thing.

“So,” he says, “should we keep watching this movie? Or…”

“Or what?” she asks.

“You tell us. What do you want?”

After a long, drawn-out moment in which both Will and I sit on pins and needles, Charlie finally releases an agonized breath.

“I want *you*,” she says, and then she kisses him again.

There should be a flicker of jealousy, a spark of resentment, that she keeps kissing him first, but all I feel is anticipation as I watch her lips meet Will’s.

He’s breathing hard by the time she releases him. Then she turns around and crawls on the couch toward me. It’s the hottest goddamn thing I’ve ever seen in my life.

“And you,” she says, her mouth covering mine. “I want *you*.”

I let her have my tongue, just for a few seconds, a few teasing licks.

“What else?” I rasp. “What else do you want?”

“I want…” Her chest rises as she inhales. She glances toward the window as if to check if the curtains are drawn. They are. She exhales in an unsteady burst. “I want your dick in my mouth.”

Jesus. I don’t even know which one of us she’s asking for, but we both obey. I ease my sweatpants down, releasing my erection. I’m so hard it

hurts. On the chaise, Will takes off his pants and tosses them aside, leaving him fully naked, all chiseled abs and tight sinew.

Charlie slides onto the floor in front of me. My heart stops when she grips me, her delicate fingers curling around my shaft to give it a slow, teasing stroke.

Her touch is too soft. It's torture. I want her nails digging into my thighs. I want the greedy suction of her lips around my cock.

I watch her with a mixture of hunger and frustration. "Suck it," I beg.

The impish gleam in her eyes tells me she's not going to make this easy for me. She's going to tease. Take her time. Draw every ounce of control out of me until I'm left with nothing but raw need.

Sure enough, she releases me and turns her cheek, pressing her mouth to my thigh. My hip. Trailing kisses over my abdomen.

I meet Will's eyes over her head, and he grins at my strained expression. "I'm kind of enjoying this," he says, gripping himself as he watches Charlie torment me with kisses. "Keep torturing him, baby."

"Fuck you, Larsen," I mumble.

Charlie's laughter heats my thigh. Her tongue dances over my obliques before finally reaching the one part of me that's throbbing for her.

She lowers her mouth to my cock. She just grazes the head before she pulls back, smiling, testing my limits.

"Charlie," I growl. "No more teasing."

Her tongue darts out to taste me, circling the tip, skimming over the sensitive underside. Will continues to watch us from the chaise, lazily stroking himself.

My fingers find her hair and thread through the silky black strands as she takes me deeper into her mouth. Then she hollows her cheeks and sucks hard enough to make me groan. Pleasure shoots through me like wildfire, spreading fast and relentless. My control slips each time her mouth engulfs me.

She sucks hard and fast, until I'm forced to grind out a warning. "I'm gonna come if you don't slow down, baby girl."

Breathless, she pumps me with her hand and offers an amused taunt. "First you want me to stop teasing, now you want me to slow down. Make up your mind, baby boy."

Will shudders with laughter.

“Fuck off, Larsen—”

I’m cut off by the feel of her mouth sucking me deep again.

Holy hell, she’s trying to kill me. At my hoarse moan, I see her smiling around the head of my dick.

Addicted. I’m addicted to this girl. It’s like she knows exactly how to break me down piece by piece. And it isn’t just the physical connection. There’s something more dangerous lurking beneath the surface, but I can’t let myself think about it. Not now. So I bury those thoughts and focus on the heat of her mouth, the way her tongue slides along my shaft, driving me higher and higher.

When she picks up her pace again, I still her with my hand in her hair. My cock is still caught between her lips as she peers up at me. So sweet and innocent.

“I mean it. Slow down unless you want my come.”

She releases me to whisper, “I want it,” and then gobbles me up again.

I really want to fuck her, but hell, the woman wants my come down her throat. Who am I to deprive her? So I fuck her mouth, and she takes every inch, moaning around me while gazing up at me with those big dark eyes.

“You want it?” I grip her hair a little tighter as the pressure builds inside me.

She moans.

I take that as a yes.

I cup the back of her head and thrust as deep as she’ll let me. My entire world narrows to just her—her mouth, her tongue, her hand, her whimpers. *Her*.

My stomach clenches tight, the release tingling in my balls before spilling over, filling Charlie’s mouth. I grunt in pleasure, groaning her name as I come, my mind blank from the intensity of it.

Will chuckles as he watches me shudder. “That good?”

“Better,” I choke out.

He stands up and strokes himself as she continues to suck on me. When my heart finally stops pounding, I pull out of her mouth and collapse backward. Christ. That was…otherworldly.

Charlie is mighty pleased with herself as she wipes her mouth with the back of her hand. She turns toward Will, rising taller on her knees, her

fingers trailing up his thighs, and she looks so naughty doing it, my cock is almost ready to go again.

To distract myself from the growing arousal, I get to my feet and come up behind Charlie, lowering my hand to her hair. Twisting it around my fist, I guide her along Will's shaft, watching as she blows him. She's still fully clothed, and he's buck naked, his hips moving to meet her eager pulls on his dick. It's so damn hot.

"Ah, look at what a good girl you are," I encourage her. "Keep sucking. You're making him feel so good."

She slips one hand between her legs, cupping herself over her leggings.

I grin down at her. "You want to take those off, don't you? You want your fingers inside yourself while you suck him?"

She nods. Her cheeks are flushed, her expression a haze of need.

"Too bad. You'll just have to sit there, wet and throbbing. You don't get yours until Larsen gets his."

Will groans.

"See? He likes the sound of that," I say with a chuckle.

His shaft is slick with her saliva, the head leaking precome that she swipes her tongue over it on every upstroke. I absentmindedly stroke myself as I watch her pleasure Will.

"You're so good at that, Charlie," he praises, his voice low and husky. "So sweet." He jerks when she swirls her tongue over his swollen cockhead. "*Fuck*."

Charlie starts moving faster, but I know Will. It's not fast enough. He likes it rougher than this. Sure enough, he replaces her mouth with his fist, pumping himself with more force. As he strokes faster, I tighten my grip in Charlie's hair, tugging her face closer to Will's cock.

"Open your mouth, baby. I want to see him come on your tongue. I want to see you swallow it."

She moans and opens her mouth.

Just like that, Will shoots, cursing as we both watch her swallow it up. Charlie barely gets to her feet before we're ripping at her clothes, breaking a record for how fast we get our girl naked.

"C'mere," I say gruffly, wrapping my arm around her waist. I press my lips to hers in a slow kiss, enjoying the way her hard nipples brush my chest

as she arches into me. I taste Will on her tongue and groan against her mouth.

Larsen needs some recovery time but apparently has no qualms making decisions for my penis. His eyes meet mine, burning with intensity.

“Get your cock hard, Beck. Our girl needs it.”

Charlie sighs happily.

Damn, I’ve never been with anybody like her before. This woman has no inhibitions when she opens herself up to a new experience. She throws herself headfirst into it, same way I do.

I really like her.

The thought lingers at the edge of my mind, no matter how much I try to push it away.

I can’t let myself go there, though. Can’t let myself admit that I might be feeling more than lust for her. Because she’s not only here with me. She’s with Will too, and whatever we have, whatever this is, it isn’t meant to be more than just…this.

# THE VIRGIN AND THE BLADE/LOURDES

## CHAPTER 12

## FORGED IN THE FIRES OF MY DESIRE

Beneath the flickering candlelight of the royal chambers, Queen Elizabeth stood, her heart pounding as she gazed at the formidable figure before her. His presence was overwhelming, a living legend, clad in the ancient armor that had conquered the world. He moved closer, his lips curling into a smirk, his eyes intense and knowing.

Elizabeth trembled with nervous anticipation. She had ruled her kingdom with grace and strength, but in Alexander's presence, she felt vulnerable, like a mere girl.

The great conqueror brushed his fingers against her cheek before sliding them down to the curve of her neck, tracing the delicate line of her collarbone.

"I have wielded many blades in my time, my queen, but none like the one I shall wield tonight."

Her cheeks flushed with a heat she'd never known before. Her heart raced as his words sank in, each syllable charged with raw, primal desire. His hands were calloused, rough from years of battle, but they were gentle as they untied the laces of her gown, revealing her bare skin to him for the first time.

"This blade," Alexander breathed, his eyes dark with hunger, "is sharp, forged in the fires of my desire. Tonight, it will claim its prize."

Elizabeth's body trembled under his touch, anticipation building as her gown fell to the floor in a soft whisper of fabric. She had never felt so exposed, so vulnerable, yet in his arms, she found herself yearning for the unknown.

"Will it hurt?" she whispered.

He smiled. “A blade must make its mark, my queen. But you will find the pain is but the first taste of pleasure.”

His words sent a surge of heat through her, and before she could respond, he was upon her, his mouth capturing hers in a searing kiss. His hands roamed her body with a possessiveness that left no doubt—tonight, she was his.

Completely and utterly.

With a swift motion, Alexander shed the last of his armor, his body towering over her in its naked glory. Elizabeth’s eyes widened as she took him in, her breath catching at the sight of his powerful form. His muscles were chiseled, his skin marred by the scars of war, but it was the fierce determination in his eyes that sent a thrill through her.

That and the impressive blade of which he spoke, jutting toward her. A threat and a promise.

“My blade,” he whispered again, pressing his hips against hers, “is eager for you, Elizabeth. It has longed to pierce your untouched depths, to make you mine.”

She gasped at the sensation of him, the heat of his body against hers, the raw power radiating from him. Her hands clutched at his shoulders as he lowered her onto the soft bed, her body trembling.

“Let me take you,” he said hoarsely. “Let me claim you, and you shall know pleasure beyond anything you’ve ever imagined.”

Elizabeth nodded, her voice lost in the storm of emotions raging within her. She had waited for this moment, dreamed of it, and now, as Alexander positioned himself above her, she knew there was no turning back.

With a groan of triumph, Alexander thrust forward, his blade finally finding its mark.

Elizabeth gasped, her body tensing at the unfamiliar sensation, but as he began to move, the pain quickly faded, replaced by a growing wave of pleasure. He filled her completely, his every movement commanding and relentless.

“My blade has tasted you now,” he growled, his voice thick with desire. “And I will not stop until you are mine in every way.”

Each thrust was a declaration, each moan from Elizabeth an acknowledgment of his power over her. She had never known such intensity, such passion. Alexander's body moved like the perfect warrior he was. Controlled, deliberate, and powerful.

"Say it," he demanded between breaths. "Say that you are mine."

Her voice was weak, breathless, but full of surrender. "I am yours, Alexander. Yours completely."

With a final, triumphant thrust, he drove his thick, hard blade deeper into her than she thought possible, sending her over the edge into a world of pleasure she had never known existed. Her cries filled the room, mingling with his as they both reached their peak, their bodies locked together in perfect unity.

# CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

## CHARLOTTE

*Out of reach*

FAITH THINKS I HAVE A BOYFRIEND. A BOYFRIEND NAMED WILL LARSEN, who plays hockey for the Briar U men's team and is my lab partner for Cell and Tissue Engineering.

And my best friend has every right to believe that, because for the past two weeks, I've spent more time at Will's town house in Hastings than I have at the Delta Pi house.

What Faith doesn't know is that when I'm at Will's house, Beckett is there too. And when we're all there, I inevitably end up naked and moaning on one of their beds while they work together to make my entire body sing.

Right now, I want nothing more than to be in that position. Lying on my back while one set of lips trails kisses along my throat and another pair travels between my legs to wrap around my clit. Today has been teetering on the edge of disaster, and my stress levels are venturing dangerously close to pressure wave territory. I barely turned in my last final paper on time. I hit a major obstacle in my capstone that had me making an emergency appointment with my lab advisor to try to troubleshoot. And now I'm stuck in an exec board meeting listening to Agatha bitch about one of our freshmen who tarnished the Delta Pi name by daring to have fun at a party.

I simply don't have the patience for this tonight. It gets old, Agatha's annoying habit of social policing to ensure everyone in the house adheres to the same high standards as hers.

"Agatha," I interrupt, startling the other members of the board. I rarely make waves during these meetings. "It was just a dare. It's not like Lucy gallivants around campus on the regular wearing a bikini. In December. Someone dared her to do it."

“And she should have said no,” Agatha responds in a tight voice. “One Delta Pi’s bad behavior reflects badly on everyone else in the house.” She makes a disparaging sound under her breath. “This is what we get for letting in the diversity pledge. I told you she wouldn’t be a good fit.”

I stare at our sorority president, struggling to keep my anger from turning my voice into a low growl. “I’m sorry. *What* did you just say?”

A perfectly manicured hand waves dismissively. “Oh, relax, Charlotte. I’m not referring to her ethnicity. I meant diversity of circumstances.”

As in *poor*? Oh my fucking God. As if that makes it any better. Lucy is a scholarship student from a small town in Texas, which, sure, is not the most progressive town nor is it an affluent one. But she seems like a nice girl, and her older sister was a Delta Pi at the University of Austin chapter.

Agatha flicks up a thin eyebrow. “All I’m saying is, you can take the girl out of the trailer, but you can’t always take the trailer out of the girl.”

Sherise and Samantha nod in agreement.

I feel the heat rising in my cheeks, but I hold back. Barely. I’ve learned to bite my tongue in this house, but that doesn’t mean I’m not fuming inside. Instead of unleashing on her, I nod tersely and somehow get through the rest of the board meeting without spilling blood.

Once Agatha dismisses us, I grab my purse, coat, and keys and shove my way through the front door, practically running to my car. I can’t stay in this house for one more second.

My phone rings as I’m sliding into the driver’s seat. It’s Harrison, who’s back in Las Vegas now. As a freelancer, he can work from anywhere as long as he has his laptop and an internet connection, but he can’t keep paying rent on his Vegas apartment while also paying to stay in the motel on the outskirts of Hastings. He’s coming back for a visit this weekend, though, and I’ve tentatively agreed to go see him in Vegas for spring break, depending on how it’s going with my capstone.

Normally I would take his call. Tonight, I hit Ignore. I’m in a crappy mood, and I know he’ll hear it in my voice. He’ll ask what’s wrong, I’ll end up telling him I’m annoyed with Agatha, and then he’ll make a derisive comment about it, because anytime I mention my sorority, he always has something snarky-adjacent to say.

He doesn’t get it. He thinks Greek life is all a big, irrelevant performance. I don’t entirely blame him—a lot of people feel that way

about sororities and frats. And maybe the Greek experience is a bit ridiculous, but that doesn't mean I don't care about it.

*You* don't *care about it*, my inner bitch cracks. *Mom does.*

Ugh. Fine. Whatever. So what if I'm here because of my mother? It makes her happy that I'm a Delta Pi. I like making her happy.

But I'm not about to tell Harrison that. It would only trigger a fresh dose of resentment in him. Whenever we talk, I do my best to steer away from the topic of my family.

And I still haven't told my family about *him*. The burden of that secret keeps getting heavier, and I know the longer I keep it from them, the worse it will be when I finally tell them.

I'm pulling out of the parking spot when the pressure wave threatens to surface. Suddenly, the world feels like it's closing in on me from all sides. I put the car in park and take a deep breath, visualizing my container.

*Put all the stress in there, Charlotte. There you go.*

But I can't fully close the box. It keeps bursting open at the seams.

I'm too full.

Or maybe the issue is I'm not full enough.

As in I need to be filled. By Will Larsen or Beckett Dunne or both.

I need to be in a place where I don't have to pretend or keep up appearances. Somewhere I can just be me. I feel like I spend so much time fighting myself. My own nature. I don't have to do that when I'm with my boys. They get me. And the more time I spend with them, the more I'm starting to get *them*.

The drive to Hastings and the walk to their front stoop is a blur. By the time I ring the doorbell, I'm buzzing with pent-up frustration. A live wire ready to detonate.

When Will opens the door, I waste no time rushing inside.

"Take your pants off," I order. "Now."

"What? Why?"

"I need it." I release a strangled sound of impatience. Desperation. "*Now*, Will."

Although he chortles loudly, he doesn't need to be asked twice. And that's how I end up in their living room, getting fucked from behind by Will, who grips my hips tight enough to hurt. I'm draped over Beckett's lap,

his long fingers twisting my hair around his fist as he guides my mouth up and down his cock.

Will reaches around and rubs my clit. He bends over me, changing the angle of penetration, and I cry out, the orgasm blasting through my body. The boys aren't far behind me.

Afterward, I collapse on top of Beckett, catching my breath for a moment before climbing off the couch and ducking into the hall bathroom to clean up.

When I return, I find two Briar hockey players staring at me in disbelief.

"What?" I say.

"What do you mean, what?" Beckett chuckles. "You just blew in here like a tornado and fucked our brains out. No explanation?"

"Do you need an explanation when the end result is you getting laid?"

"Good point."

Rather than put on my own clothes, I grab Will's discarded T-shirt and slip it over my head. The soft material falls past my knees. It smells like him, that heady, spicy scent I can't get enough of.

Beckett tugs me back onto his lap. I rest my head against his shoulder as Will grabs my legs and pulls them into his own lap. Will rubs my right foot, and I groan from the pleasurable sensation.

They're both still shirtless, but their dicks are tucked back into their sweatpants, condoms disposed of. I love how neither of them batted an eye at me showing up on a Wednesday night demanding sex like a crazed, wide-eyed lunatic.

"So I don't usually discuss exes with guys I'm seeing," I tell them, "but I just want to say thank you for taking my libido in stride."

Will looks amused. "You're welcome. But it's really not a chore to make you feel good."

"It was a chore to my ex," I say with a shrug.

"Who? Macho Mitch?" Beckett drawls. "Of course he couldn't handle someone like you. You're a majestic thoroughbred, and he's one of those sad, tired horses they make the tourists ride on beach resorts."

I snort. "I think this might be the second time you've compared me to a horse."

He nuzzles my neck. "Yeah, but, like, a really hot horse."

Will laughs, switching to my other foot and digging his fingers into the arch.

“I used to text him the way I texted you guys tonight, saying I was on my way over and practically begging him for sex. He hated it. Said he couldn’t perform on command, and I was selfish for always making it about me.” Guilt pricks my stomach.

“I guess he’s right about the performing on command part,” Will concedes. “But you also don’t strike me as the kind of person who would force the issue if you showed up and he told you he really wasn’t in the mood.”

“Of course I wouldn’t force it. I’d just go home and get the job done myself.”

“And I don’t think it’s selfish to make your needs known,” he adds. “Sounds like you just weren’t with the right person. You said it yourself—it was a mismatch. Someone with a high libido wouldn’t even blink.”

“Like you guys,” I say.

“Hockey players are horny,” Beckett agrees.

I sag into his chest, enjoying how warm and solid he feels.

“God, I’m so tired of this,” I blurt out.

Will’s hand freezes on the sole of my foot.

“No, not that.” I smile at him. “That feels divine. Don’t stop.”

Beckett plants a kiss on my neck. “Tired of what then?”

“Everything. My sorority, the stupid rules, keeping up appearances… all of it.”

“Then why do you keep doing it?”

“Because I have to,” I mumble into his shoulder. “Because everyone’s watching. Judging. And I hate it. I hate that I never get to feel free or fully alive. It’s like I’m always stuck in this box, doing what’s expected of me, playing the part everyone else wants me to play. And I never get to just… be.”

Will gives me a pensive look. “What would you do if you could? Just be, I mean? If there was nobody watching or judging, what’s one thing you’d love to do right now?”

The question catches me off guard. In a sense, I already know what I’d do. Because I already do it. I indulge in secret hookups with guys I have no business hooking up with. I race fast cars on a deserted track in the middle

of the night. I don't mind taking risks—hell, I crave them—as long I can do it away from prying eyes.

But what else?

I purse my lips. Pondering. What is something I'm dying to do that's always been out of reach? Something that's a little too risky, even for me?

"I'd go to a rave and get high," I confess.

Beckett laughs against my hair. "Okay. I wasn't expecting that. But… I'm listening."

"There's nothing deep about it. I've always wanted to go to a rave and take…I don't know, molly or something. Something that makes me feel good. I want to dance all night and lose myself in the music. Just once."

"So why don't you?" Will asks. There's no judgment in his eyes, only curiosity.

"Because it's irresponsible. Potentially dangerous. And I'm too scared. I've never done a single drug before. I'm worried I might have a freak-out and there'll be nobody to take care of me."

Will squeezes my foot. "We'll take care of you. If that's something you seriously want to do, Beck and I will go with you."

"Really?"

"Of course. We wouldn't leave your side. You could do whatever you want and know that someone's watching out for your safety."

"We should try to go over the holidays," Beckett suggests. "Maybe the weekend before the new semester starts. We don't have any games that weekend."

I'm touched by the offer. "You're serious?"

"Dead serious," he says, and Will nods his agreement. "You deserve to feel alive. To not hide who you are. You're incredible, Charlie, and you shouldn't have to keep that hidden."

Temptation tickles my belly, but it's still tethered by the fear of what could happen. "Maybe," I say, not committing but not rejecting the idea either.

Beckett runs his fingertips down my bare arm. "Well, the offer's there if you want to take us up on it."

"Thank you." I plant a tiny kiss on his chin, then meet Will's eyes and smile at him.

For the first time all day, I feel like I can breathe again.

# CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

## CHARLOTTE

*Smitten*

THE WEEKEND ARRIVES FASTER THAN I ANTICIPATE, WHICH IS BOTH A blessing and a curse. The former because it means I don't need to toil away in the lab until midnight; I have no experiments to monitor, only final write-ups to complete. The latter because that means we're one day closer to the end of the semester, and I'm not fully prepared for my midyear capstone review. I can't wait for the holiday break. I need to clear my brain of all the information I've crammed into it this semester. All the stress. All the conflicting thoughts about the two hockey players I'm banging on the nightly.

On Saturday afternoon, my Little talks me into going to a football game, and since Harrison is visiting this weekend, he's tagging along. It's the first time I've introduced him as "my brother" to anyone, and doing it brings a rush of warmth to my heart.

The stadium is packed, and the air is electric as we find our seats. This is one of the rare years that Briar has made the playoffs, so the fans are buzzing with excitement. We're all bundled up because it's bitterly cold for December, and Harrison offers to get us some hot chocolate from concessions.

As he makes his way down our row toward the aisle, I sit on my gloved hands to warm them up with my butt heat. "I can't believe you're at a game rooting for Isaac," I say, grinning at Blake.

"I decided to throw him a bone."

Ha. Yeah right. I see through the noncommittal response. It's so obvious she's into the big, cocky oaf. She can pretend to be unbothered all she wants, but I don't miss the way she's scanning the field for any sign of him.

“Can we just admit we like him already?”

“He’s okay.” I see the formation of a smile before she turns her head.

“Are you always like this?”

“Like what?” Blake asks.

“In denial.”

She glares at me.

Isaac must have arranged for these seats, because we’re right by the Briar home bench. I predict a lot of googly eyes being made between Blake and the football player she claims is just “okay” despite the fact that she’s been on a dozen dates with the guy.

Harrison returns holding a cardboard tray with three foam cups with white lids.

“You are a lifesaver,” I tell him, gratefully accepting the cup he hands me.

“Thank you,” Blake says, smiling at him.

He retakes his seat, his gaze drifting toward the field. The players haven’t come out of the tunnel yet, but the home and away benches are crawling with staff members and assistants.

“I haven’t been to a football game in years,” Harrison says, popping the lid of his cup. He got himself a coffee rather than hot chocolate, the telltale aroma wafting toward me. “Probably not since I was a teenager.”

“Do you play any sports, Harrison?” Blake asks. The tip of her nose is red as she sips her hot drink.

“Nope,” he says wryly. “I was the video game kid. My friends and I could go days without leaving our houses or seeing each other. We’d just get online and talk over our headsets for hours on end.”

Blake’s phone vibrates. She checks the screen, then rises from her seat. “Do you mind holding on to this?” she asks me, lifting her hot chocolate. “I’m just going to call my mom back before the game starts. I’ll be right back.”

I take the cup from her, then give her room to squeeze past us toward the aisle. The moment Blake is gone, I feel the waves of tension radiating off Harrison.

“So,” he says, giving me a sidelong look, “have you told them yet?”

I pretend not to know what he means. “Told who what?”

“Your adoptive parents. Have you told them about me yet?”

My parents. Not adoptive. I hate that he always adds that caveat.

A knot forms in my stomach, the guilt churning inside me. “No. Not yet.”

His expression darkens. “I don’t get it, Hae. Why not?”

That’s another thing he’s started doing in the last little while. Referring to me as Hae-Won or Hae. It was sweet the first time he did it, bringing a lump of emotion to my throat, but lately it’s been feeling more…hostile. As if he’s constantly trying to remind me that my roots didn’t originate with my family. That I’m someone different, someone they don’t know.

But whether intended or not, him using my Korean name only makes me feel *more* alienated. Not white, not Korean. Different from them, different from him.

Finding my biological relatives was supposed to help me discover a missing piece of my identity, not splinter it even further.

“Why haven’t you told them?” Harrison pushes.

“Because…” I struggle to find the words. “Because I’m not ready. I’m afraid of how they’ll react. I don’t want them to think they aren’t enough for me. That I’m trying to replace them or something.”

His jaw clenches. “So you’re just going to keep me a secret from them forever?”

“Of course not,” I protest, reaching out to touch his arm. But he pulls away.

“You sure about that?” His voice is sharp and full of hurt. “Because it’s sort of starting to feel like I’m just some stranger you’re embarrassed to tell them about.”

“No. Not at all!” My voice rises with desperation. “It’s not that, I promise. I just don’t know how to balance this. I’m still trying to figure it out.”

“I’m your brother.” He sounds sad now. “Your blood. That means something. Or at least it should.”

Tears prick at the corners of my eyes, but I blink them back, refusing to cry in front of him, in front of all these people.

“Of course it means something,” I say, my voice trembling. “But they’re my family too. They’ve been there for me my whole life, and I’m going to navigate this situation in a way that feels right for me.”

Harrison shakes his head, his expression full of disappointment.

Relief slams into me when I see Blake returning down the aisle. Thank God. This was getting way too intense for my comfort.

I get it. I know why he's upset. But he's rushing me, and I don't like to be rushed. I'm not ready to have that conversation with my parents. I'm not ready to know if they deliberately chose to adopt me and not Harrison. Fine, maybe I'm stalling. Or maybe I genuinely need the time to process this new relationship, this unfamiliar tie, before I open the door and let the rest of my family in. Either way, I feel like he's forcing me to make a choice between the only family I've ever known and the brother I just found, and it's unfair of him to do that.

"Are you okay?" Blake asks, studying my face.

"All good." I'm a pro at faking smiles, and the skill doesn't leave me today.

I must convince her, because she sits down and takes the cup I hand her without pushing the issue.

"How's your mom—"

My voice is drowned out by the sound of the stadium announcer bellowing over the loudspeakers, signaling that the game is about to start.

The Briar players burst out of the tunnel in a blur of black and silver. Our quarterback is usually the one who runs through the paper banner, but today the entire team bypasses it, leaving it intact. Instead, the players throw their arms high over their heads to get the fans going. The crowd lets out a roar, and the hum of excitement pulsing in the stadium makes it feel like it's a living, breathing entity.

As the rest of the team jogs onto the field, followed by their opponents, the announcer's voice once again reverberates in the air.

"Ladies and gents, boys and girls, we have a special announcement before the game begins," he booms. "One of our players has something he'd like to say."

I feel Blake stiffen beside me.

"Oh no," she moans, already sensing where this is headed.

Seven strapping Briar players start to line up on the field. Each one holds a big, white plaster board.

Blake turns to me, wide-eyed. "He wouldn't, would he?"

A grin nearly cracks my face in half. "Have you met him?"

"No. Noooo. Make it stop."

“Sorry, Logan. You did this to yourself.”

The first player, a behemoth linesman with a shiny, shaved head, holds up a sign that reads “**I**.”

“Oh my God,” I say. “This is the greatest thing ever.”

“No, it’s not,” Blake hisses, while Harrison chuckles on my other side.

“Is this the boyfriend?” he asks, his sour mood seeming to fade courtesy of the spectacle below.

“He’s not my boyfriend,” she replies through gritted teeth.

The next player’s sign says “**AM**.”

Blake sinks lower into her seat.

“**SMITTEN**,” reads the third sign, followed by “**WITH**” and “**YOU**,” until the players are all holding signs that spell out:

**I AM SMITTEN WITH YOU, BLAKE LOGAN**

Isaac Grant then comes bursting through the paper Briar U banner like he’s breaking the finish line tape in the Olympics. He jogs up to the deafening screams of the crowd and stands in front of the poster-holding teammates.

Then he points directly at Blake and shouts, “I’m smitten, angel!”

The fans explode into cheers and whistles, while Blake’s cheeks turn a deeper shade of crimson. She buries her face in her hands, mortified.

“This guy is insane,” she mutters.

“Yeah, but also kind of romantic,” I admit, despite myself. “Like, in a ridiculous, over-the-top, completely unnecessary way.”

Blake peeks out from between her fingers, clearly torn between being touched and wanting to crawl under a rock. “Is he gone?”

“Yup.”

She raises her head, then glares at me when she realizes Isaac is still standing there, his eyes locked on her.

With a sigh, she gives him a little wave, and his entire face lights up. The boy is smitten all right.

I don’t miss the jealous scowls from every female in our vicinity. “Uh-oh, the claws are coming out,” I tease her. “As in you’re in grave danger from the members of the Isaac Grant fan club.”

“They can have him,” she mutters. “I don’t like attention.”

“Well, get used to it.” I pat her on the back.

“Nope. It had better not become a regular thing. I don’t know if I can handle this level of public humiliation on a weekly basis.”

I laugh, despite the lingering doubt in the back of my mind about Isaac’s sincerity toward Blake. The love bombing is a red flag, for one. And yes, Isaac is good-looking, charming, and clearly willing to go to great lengths to impress her, but I can’t help but wonder if it’s all just for show. Grand gestures are nice, but they don’t always mean what we want them to mean.

Beside me, Harrison’s expression has sobered again. I don’t want him to feel like he’s my shameful secret. Ironically, the reason I haven’t told my parents about him has nothing to do with him. It’s my shit. My fear about upsetting them.

Instead, I’m only upsetting Harrison. The tension between us is back, and I don’t know how to defuse it.

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I call Ava when I get home from the game. Not just any call—a *video* call. It’s something my sister and I rarely do, so I’m not surprised when she greets me with a deep furrow of concern in her brow.

“Hey,” she says warily. “Are you okay?”

“Yes,” I answer. “But also not really.”

That gets me a wry smile. “What’s going on?”

I lie back against the headboard, knees up. Resting my phone on one knee, I reach for the stuffed bunny on my pillow and pull him toward me. Tiger. Tokki.

God, even my childhood bunny has a double life.

“Charlotte?” Ava pushes.

“I…uh…did something.”

“Oh shit. Are you pregnant?”

“No, nothing like that.”

I take a deep breath, the words sticking like glue to my throat. But I can’t keep this to myself any longer.

On an exhale, I blurt out, “I have a biological brother.”

Her gray-blue eyes widen. “What?”

“I signed up for one of those ancestry sites and sent in my DNA. The results came back telling me I have a biological brother.”

“When did you do this?”

“A couple months ago,” I admit, ignoring the pang of guilt that tugs at me. “And…I met him.”

“What? How? He’s not in Korea? Or did he travel to see you?”

“No, he was adopted by an American family too. He lives in Las Vegas.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I don’t know.” My voice breaks. “I didn’t know how to, and I didn’t want to upset anyone. I thought Mom and Dad might feel…betrayed, I guess? And I wanted to get to know him on my own time, without feeling pressured to introduce him to you guys or have any heavy conversations about it.”

She’s quiet for a moment. “I get that. It’s a lot to process, huh?”

“*So* much to process. And he had it really hard growing up. His mother died not long after he was adopted, and he was stuck with his father, who I think abused him.”

Ava gasps. “Fuck. Really?”

“He has cigarette burns on his arms, and every time I bring up his dad, he goes quiet. Gets a tortured look on his face.” I bite my lip. “I keep thinking…why didn’t they take both of us?”

“Who?”

“Mom and Dad. Why did they only adopt me and leave Harrison behind?”

Her face falls, and I can see the discomfort settling in. “Charlotte. You can’t blame them for that. They probably didn’t know.”

“I can’t imagine the orphanage not telling them I had a sibling. Seems wildly irresponsible not to.” I hesitate. “What if they did know and chose not to take him? They could have spared him the childhood he had. But they didn’t, and now he’s angry and hurt, and I don’t know how to fix it.”

Ava’s expression hardens. “It’s not your place to fix anything. And it’s not fair to blame Mom and Dad for this guy’s childhood. They aren’t responsible for the life he had. They’re responsible for you. They love *you*.”

Anger rises in my chest, perhaps misplaced, maybe a bit irrational, but I can’t hold back the hot, burning feeling.

“You don’t get it. You have no idea what it’s like to be Harrison. To feel unwanted. You’re their real daughter. You never had to wonder if you were enough for them. If you belonged with them.”

She flinches as if I’d slapped her. She looks shocked. “Is that how you really feel? That you don’t belong in our family?”

I open my mouth to respond, but the words won’t come. I hadn’t meant to say it like that, to snap at her, and the devastated look on Ava’s face causes my chest to tighten with regret.

“I don’t know,” I whisper, suddenly feeling exposed, like I’ve ripped open an old wound and can’t close it back up. I inhale slowly. “Can we talk about this later? Maybe just let it percolate for a bit and revisit it?”

“No. Let’s talk about it now.”

“Please, Ava. Let’s drop it. I called to tell you about Harrison, not to talk about my own adoption.”

Her eyes search mine. “Char, you’re my little sister. My *real* sister. That’s never been in question. Not for me, not for Mom and Dad. You’ve always been enough.”

Her assurances don’t comfort me the way I want them to. Instead, they just make the guilt heavier. I can’t meet her gaze any longer.

“Can you keep this Harrison thing to yourself for now?” I ask. “I’m not ready to tell Mom and Dad yet, and I want to be the one to do it.”

“Of course. I won’t say a word. But—”

“I have to go. Talk later.”

“Char, wait—” she protests, but I’m already pressing End Call.

I stare at my phone, the tension in my chest growing with each passing second. I feel raw. Like I’m teetering on the edge of something I can’t control.

I need to clear my head. Do something. Anything. Just anything that will make me forget about that uncomfortable exchange.

I should have never opened my mouth.

I text Dante, who says it’s cool to stop by the track, then grab my purse and jacket. I’m heading for the door just as my phone rings, and I brace myself, expecting to see Ava calling me back. Fortunately, it’s Beckett.

I greet him with a tired “Hey.”

“Hey, sugar puff. Where are you?”

“Home. Why?”

“You were supposed to come by tonight. After dinner with your brother?”

“Oh fuck, I’m sorry. I totally forgot. It’s been a night.”

“What happened?”

“I got into a thing with my sister. Got into a fight with Harrison earlier. Can I call you tomorrow? I’m on my way out.”

His voice sharpens. “It’s eleven at night. Where are you going?”

“Out,” I say, trying to keep my own voice casual. “Just need to blow off some steam.”

“Where?” he repeats, suspicious.

I sigh, because I know he won’t let it go. “Do you want to come with me?”

“Yup.”

“Fine. I’ll pick you up in twenty.”

# CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

## BECKETT

*Yeah, that's the one*

THE DRIVE IS MOSTLY QUIET, BUT IT'S A COMFORTABLE SILENCE. IT'S SO easy to be with Charlie. I don't need to impress her or fill every pause with random conversation. She's happy to sit in the driver's seat and sing along to the pop songs wafting from the car speakers, every now and then turning to flash me the smile that makes my chest clench. She's gorgeous.

I haven't pressed her any further about where we're going. I've already asked twice since she grabbed me from Hastings, to which she'd shrugged and told me to wait and see.

Only proving that Charlotte Kingston has many more layers just waiting to be unraveled.

I didn't expect to like her this much. But the more time Will and I spend with Charlie, the more I find her getting under my skin. She's so damn smart, able to hold her own in any conversation, any topic you throw her way. She makes me laugh my ass off. She gets my dick harder than anyone ever has.

And this is the first time I've ever felt…dread. Genuine anxiety about this arrangement coming to an end. Because it always does. The woman gets bored of it, the novelty of being with two men wearing off. Or she catches feelings for one of us, the way Caitlin did at the beginning of the semester. And then it ends. We all part ways.

I don't want to part ways with Charlie. I want…fuck, I'm not sure what I want from this. All I know is that the idea of breaking things off with her brings a knot of pain to my gut.

When we reach our destination, I gaze at the huge AMATO RACING sign above our heads, then at the stocky, muscular man standing near the

entrance smoking a cigarette. He looks to be a few years older than us, with dark hair and a multitude of tattoos.

I swivel my head toward Charlie. “What is this?”

“I’ve got a friend—that’s him over there. Dante. He lets me in after hours sometimes to drive.”

A slow grin spreads across my face. “You’re into cars?”

“Sort of.”

“Sort of?”

Her smile is sheepish. “Very much so,” she amends.

See? This woman never fails to surprise me.

We slide out of her car and step into the dark, silent night. It’s cold outside. I shove my ungloved hands into my coat pockets as I follow Charlie toward the tattooed guy. My breath escapes in white wisps that are carried away by the frigid air.

“Hi, princess,” he calls at our approach, his eyes flicking to me with mild curiosity. “So which one is this—Lars or Bjorn?”

I can’t help but snicker.

“This is Beckett Dunne,” Charlie introduces. “And sadly, he is not Swedish.”

“Pity.”

“He’s Australian, though. Which is even better, I think.”

He extends his hand toward me. “I’m Dante. Good to meet you. Any friend of Charlie’s is a friend of mine.”

“Nice to meet you, mate.” As I return the handshake, I give Dante the same inquisitive once-over. “How do you two know each other?”

“We met at a party a few years ago and bonded over cars,” Charlie explains, rubbing her hands together. She’s not wearing gloves either, and her cheeks are turning pink from the cold. “I hope it’s okay that I brought Beckett. I promise I won’t let him behind the wheel of a single vehicle.”

“Hey,” I protest. “That’s just cruel.”

Dante grins at me. “Sorry, bro. You’re on passenger duty. Especially now that I have to go.”

This startles Charlie. “You’re leaving?”

“Yeah, I was just about to text you. Kody’s car broke down and I need to go save him.” He pulls a set of keys from his back pocket and unlocks the front doors. “But I’m gonna let you in anyway because I’d feel like an ass

turning you away after you drove all the way out here. Just promise to keep it slow, okay?"

"Are you sure?" Charlie touches his arm. "I totally understand if you send us home. I wouldn't be mad."

"I trust you. Lock up when you're done, and leave the keys in the lockbox. I'll text you the code," Dante says before passing her the key ring. Then he reaches into his pocket for another key. "Oh, and this is the only one I'll let you drive. Be gentle with her."

Charlie glances at the symbol on the slender black fob. "Oh my God," she exclaims. "Are you serious?"

"Yep. I know how badly you've craved her." He winks, his lips curving in a soft smile. It's obvious he has great affection for Charlie. "I parked her out on the track for you."

"Oh my God," she says again.

"Leave her in the garage when you're done." Dante heads for the only other vehicle in the parking lot—a dusty pickup truck. "Don't let pretty boy behind the wheel," he calls over his shoulder.

"I won't," she calls back.

I've never been more impressed watching her navigate the facility as if she's done this a thousand times. It doesn't hurt that her outfit adds to the badass vibe she's emitting—black leggings, black boots with a chunky heel, and an oversize black sweater that's revealed when she unzips her puffy coat.

It's eerie being at a racetrack at night. The dark, empty grandstand is unnerving, and as we walk by it, I keep expecting a knife-wielding killer to jump out of the shadows and fillet us. When we reach the edge of the track, my pulse speeds up. Overhead, the winter sky is dotted with stars. The asphalt beneath our feet is dimly lit under the moon, but the red Ferrari parked on it gleams like a live wire.

Charlie shrugs out of her jacket and gestures for me to do the same. We leave our stuff on a nearby ledge, and I grin as she stalks toward the Ferrari with honest-to-God hunger in her eyes.

I can't wrap my head around the fact that she comes all the way out here in the middle of the night to drive sports cars. If you told me that my prim little sugar puff did this sort of stuff for fun, I would've laughed in your face.

“You seriously do this? Like, all the time?”

She casts a mischievous smile over her shoulder. “It’s my thing. My way to let off steam.”

“Most people hit the gym or, I don’t know, eat ice cream when they’re stressed.”

“I’m not most people.”

No, she’s really not.

I walk to the sports car, running my hand over the smooth, red metal. “This is crazy in the best way possible.”

“Wait until you’re actually in the car.”

Before I can respond, she slides into the driver’s seat like she owns the thing, and the sound of the door latching echoes in the still night. She motions for me to join her. My heart kicks into overdrive, anticipation tickling my gut as I climb in beside her. I sink into the passenger seat, surrounded by the smell of leather and gasoline.

When Charlie revs the engine, I swear I *feel* the power of it. The low, throaty growl vibrates down my spine and makes my balls tingle.

“Buckle up,” she warns, her eyes glinting under the dashboard lights. “I don’t do slow.”

“Oh yeah? Show me what you got, baby.”

Without another word, she shifts into gear and floors the gas pedal, and we shoot forward so fast I’m slammed back into my seat.

“Holy shit!” I grip the door handle for dear life.

Charlie laughs. A wild, carefree laugh that sends ripples of lust right to my dick.

“Hold on, *baby*,” she mimics. “This is just the warm-up.”

She takes the first turn at what feels like an impossible speed, but I’m relieved to see how in control she is, how easily she navigates the curves, her hands fluid on the wheel. She’s clearly done this often. And it’s…hot. Terrifying, but hot.

“This is bloody awesome!”

“I told you!” she answers over the roar of the engine. Her gaze never leaves the track as we hit another sharp bend. “It makes me feel free, you know? No pressure, no expectations. Just me, the car, and the speed.”

I’m seeing her in an entirely different light tonight. Completely in her element. Confident. Wild. Free. It brings a strange clench of emotion to my

chest, a sense of…longing.

But I force myself to ignore it. I'm not catching feelings for this girl. I just like how adventurous she is.

We speed through the next stretch, the track flying by. I can't stop grinning. Will is going to be jealous that he missed out on this. His dumb ass decided to go drinking with Colson tonight.

Suddenly, we're taking a hairpin turn at what feels like light speed. The Ferrari drifts, and for a moment, I feel like we're flying.

"Charlie, swear to God, if we crash this thing, I'm haunting you from the afterlife," I say, but my laughter bubbles up, my adrenaline feeding into hers.

She just grins and hits the gas again. The track stretches out before us, a blur of asphalt and floodlights as she pushes the Ferrari faster, the speedometer climbing higher with each passing second.

"Do I really not get to drive?" I demand.

"Nope. Dante will kill me."

"Aw, please? I didn't come all the way out here just to ride shotgun."

"You didn't even know you were coming here!"

"C'mon," I plead.

"Nope!"

"You're evil." Although maybe it's for the best. I don't want that Dante dude beating the shit out of me for scratching his Ferrari.

My gaze locks on Charlie as she slows the car, the hiss of the wind beyond the windows beginning to quiet.

"You're incredible," I tell her.

She glances over, those big eyes shining.

I reach across the center console, dragging my fingertips along the side of her throat. I smile when she shivers. "I love seeing this side of you. You should let it out more often."

"Maybe I would," she admits, "if I didn't feel like I had to keep it all bottled up."

She steers the Ferrari toward what looks like an airplane hangar. As we get closer, I realize it's a garage. She drives through the gaping entrance and pulls to a stop, the engine humming softly beneath us before going silent.

I slide my hand over hers where it rests on the gear shift. "You don't have to bottle anything up. You don't have to hide from me or from Will.

We want to see all of you. The good, the bad, the wild."

She turns to face me, biting her lip. "You really mean that?"

I stroke her cheek. Her skin is so damn soft. "I always mean what I say."

It's like something inside her cracks open at my words, her walls crumbling as she leans in to kiss me. Slow at first, tender, but the hunger quickly grows, fueled by the adrenaline still coursing through our veins.

Charlie unbuckles her seat belt so she can angle her body toward me. Her chest is rising and falling, lips slightly parted. She's turned on. So am I.

Her soft lips and the warmth of her tongue cause the rest of the world to fade away. I don't care about the past or the future, only the here and now and the way this girl makes me feel so fucking alive.

We break apart just long enough for me to grab her by the waist and pull her across the console and onto my lap. I grip her hips as my lips crash over hers in another heated kiss. She moans into my mouth, her fingers tangling in my hair.

"Fuck," I mumble. "I want you so bad right now."

She tugs at my shirt, pulling it over my head. "Then take me," she mumbles back.

Our mouths meet again, and I'm slipping my hands beneath her sweater when I remember something.

I pry my lips away. "Hey, remember our chats on the app? Your fantasy?"

"Which one? We texted so many things that I—" She stops, understanding dawning. Her cheeks turn the sweetest shade of pink.

"Yeah, that's the one," I confirm. "You still game?"

She moans in response, and I don't need any more encouragement than that. I open the car door and step out, lifting her with me. The garage boasts a chill, but someone—Dante, I suppose—must've been working here for a while with the heaters blasting, because warmth lingers in the air. The large space is barely lit, illuminated only by the bluish glow of the security lights.

Charlie presses her body against mine, her lips finding my neck as I walk her toward the front of the car.

"Right here?" I ask, low, teasing. But I already know the answer.

"Right here."

A surge of desire rips through me. I lay her down on the hood, the red Ferrari glinting beneath her as she gazes up at me, flushed and needy. When

I rest my hands on either side of her body, the cooling metal against my palms is a sharp contrast to the heat between us. I bend my head to kiss her, our tongues tangling as I pull her hips closer to the edge of the car.

“I’m so fucking glad I met you,” I rasp between kisses, my voice hoarse with need.

My erection strains painfully against my zipper. I don’t release it, because this isn’t about me yet. It’s about this goddess sprawled on the hood of a goddamn Ferrari, the girl whose eyes are burning with hunger. For me. I must’ve been a very good boy in another life for this wild, gorgeous, perfect woman to look at me this way.

Her breath hitches when I drag her sweater up to reveal the thin tank top underneath. I yank on the tank top to expose her bare, perky tits. Her nipples instantly pucker from the cool air, making my mouth water.

I kiss my way down her neck, past her collarbone, until I finally reach those delectable breasts. When I capture a hard nipple between my lips, she whimpers, and I suck on that tight bud until her entire body starts trembling. Then I lick my way to her other nipple and lavish it with the same attention. She’s breathing hard by the time I stop teasing her.

Smiling at the haze of pleasure in her eyes, I hook my fingers under the waistband of her leggings, sliding them down her long legs as I kneel in front of her.

“Beck…” she breathes, her voice quivering with anticipation.

The sight of her laid out like this, her black hair splayed out on the hood of the car, drives me fucking wild. She’s so beautiful.

I press my lips to the inside of her thigh, slowly working my way up. She starts squirming, gripping the edge of the hood as I get closer to the place where she needs me the most, her breaths escaping in short, desperate gasps.

“Oh my God,” she says when I finally reach her pussy. “*Please*.”

I chuckle against her core. “Please what?”

“Lick me.”

She doesn’t have to ask me twice. I’m addicted to the taste of her. Sweet and tangy and so damn delicious. I drag the tip of my tongue through her slit toward her opening, then spear it inside her. Her back arches off the hood, and she cries out, her hands flying to my hair, tugging me closer.

Chuckling at the violent response, I lick my way up again, groaning when my tongue finally touches her clit. Swollen and pulsing. Begging to be licked and sucked.

“I love your pussy so much,” I mumble before flicking my tongue against her.

Her hips rise again, and she pulls my hair hard enough to bring a sting of pain to my scalp. “Don’t stop.”

I couldn’t stop if I tried.

The throaty sounds she makes, the way her body responds to my tongue, my lips—it’s driving me out of my mind. I eat her as if my life depends on it, losing myself in the taste of her, in the way she gasps my name. She’s unraveling beneath my tongue, and it brings a sense of satisfaction I’ve never felt before, knowing I’m the reason this woman is shuddering and moaning with pleasure. When she comes, I nearly do as well, and I have to forcefully squeeze my dick over my jeans, the resulting pain warding off the unwanted release.

“Beckett,” she pleads, even as her body trembles from the aftershocks of orgasm. “I need you. *Please*.”

I stand, my chest heaving, and pull her up to me, kissing her hard. She grasps for my belt, desperate and shaking, and I groan into her mouth as she undoes it. I fumble in my wallet for a condom, then shove my jeans off my ass, freeing my dick. Charlie falls back on her elbows as I step between her thighs.

“You want this inside you?” I ask, gripping my erection in my fist. I give it a slow stroke.

She moans and spreads her legs wider.

Jesus. This woman is reckless abandon personified.

I push into her, and the sensation is overwhelming, the intensity of it hitting me like a wave. I lean forward to bury my face in her neck, holding her tight as I thrust into her again and again. Her legs wrap around my waist, her hands gripping my shoulders.

“Baby…” I groan, my voice rough with need. “You feel so damn good.”

Her nails dig into my back, and she pulls me closer, her lips grazing my ear. “Harder,” she begs, and I don’t hesitate. I move faster, harder.

Everything fades. This is raw. It’s primal. It’s just the two of us, connected in a way that feels deeper than anything I’d ever known. The

only thing that could make this better is if Will were here, his tongue on her nipple, fingers in her hair, as I fuck her toward another orgasm.

When she finally cries out, I cede control to her perfect little pussy, tumbling over the edge with Charlie. I come with a force so intense I see stars. I'm completely consumed by this woman, by the wet heat of her pussy, the way she's gripping my cock so tight. I collapse on top of her, our bodies tangled together, the night air cool against our flushed skin.

My heart is still pounding as I brush my lips over her temple. "That was…" I can't find the words.

She laughs. "Yeah. It was."

For a long moment, we just lie there, finding our breath. I nuzzle her neck, planting kisses on her soft skin. Her fingers trace lazy circles on my back, and I feel her heartbeat gradually slowing against my pecs.

Eventually, I help her off the car and we get dressed. She doesn't seem to be in a hurry to leave yet, though. Instead, she drifts out of the garage and walks toward the edge of the track. I follow her, our breath misting in the air. Charlie tilts her head, gazing up at the stars. When she visibly shivers, I pull her closer, keeping her warm as much for my sake as for hers.

"Better?" I murmur, rubbing warmth into her shoulders.

"Much," she murmurs back. After a while, she sighs, the sound heavy, like it's been building up inside her.

"Do you want to talk about what happened with your brother earlier? And your sister?"

She shakes her head. Then she nods. In a soft voice, she explains how Harrison guilt-tripped her at the football game and how when she called her sister afterward, it only resulted in another helping of guilt.

"It's just so hard with Harrison. When I started this whole ancestry search, I thought it would be easier. That if I found a relative, it would be like some missing piece would just snap into place. I thought that we'd be close or that he'd understand me because he's…well, family. But it's awkward. We don't even know each other, and sometimes I feel like I'm making it worse, like I'm doing something wrong."

"From what you've told me, he hasn't exactly been easy to talk to."

She nods, a frown pulling at her mouth. "Yeah, he's a lot. He has all this bitterness about our different upbringings, and it's like I can never say the

right thing around him. I constantly feel like I'm supposed to apologize for having a good life."

When she stops talking, pressing her lips together, I think she's done, but then she makes an irritated sound and keeps going.

"And it's not just Harrison either. I felt like that with my ex too, like if I messed up, I'd lose him. I kept trying to be the perfect girlfriend for Mitch, but eventually I couldn't do it anymore. It was so exhausting, trying to preserve his fragile ego and make him happy every second of the day."

"That guy is such a dick," I grumble.

"Yup. And even when I was perfect, he'd still find something wrong," she says, bitterness creeping into her voice. "It got to the point where even just being myself felt like a risk. Like if I let my guard down, everything would fall apart."

A sharp stab of anger pokes at my gut. Not at her but at anyone who'd make her feel that way. "You know that's all on him, right? None of that is on you. Those were Macho Mitch's bullshit issues, not yours."

She looks up at me, her eyes a little shiny. "Sometimes it doesn't feel that way."

"Well, it should," I say. "Because if he couldn't handle you—really handle you, the real you—that's his problem. He missed out."

"You really think that?"

"I *know* that. You shouldn't have to change to keep anyone around. That's not love. That's…control."

She goes quiet, thinking. Above us, the sky stretches out like an endless black sea, dotted with stars too distant to reach but close enough to fill the air between us.

Charlie rests her head against my shoulder and turns the tables on me. "What about you? What was your ex like?"

I keep my answer vague. "She was…I don't know. We were just kids, you know? Figuring out what we wanted, who we were." I search for the right words, but everything feels off, like I'm trying to explain a dream. How do you even explain someone who, at one point, felt like your whole life? "It was good until it wasn't."

"Did she end it or did you?"

"She's the one who left."

Charlie nods. "Did she cheat?"

I nod back.

“Do you two ever talk?”

“No.” I shake my head, swallowing back the instinct to shut this down, but my next words slip out before I can stop them. “But I, uh, used to write to her. Letters. Maybe for about a year afterward.” I chuckle under my breath, feeling like an idiot for admitting this. “I never sent them, though.”

“So why write them?”

I shrug, giving a small, self-deprecating smile. “I guess it was my way of putting things to rest, even if she never read them. I told her things I couldn’t say before, things I never figured out until later.”

Charlie hesitates again. “Do you think she’s happier without you?”

The question hits me square in the chest.

I don’t answer right away. I take a deep breath, and for a second, the cold feels sharper.

“Yes,” I finally say. “Yeah, I think she is.”

“And are you happier without her?”

A lump fills my throat. “That’s a tough one to answer. I’m not the same person I was back then. My idea of happiness is different now.”

She looks at me, really looks at me, her eyes containing a warmth that makes the frigid night bearable. “I’m glad you’re here right now,” she says quietly. “With me.”

I hold her gaze, brushing a loose strand of hair from her face. “Me too.”

We fall silent, the weight of the past hanging between us like smoke that refuses to clear. Yet I feel lighter somehow, after letting her see a piece of me I don’t usually show. The realization causes emotion to constrict my chest and throat, making it hard to breathe again.

Yeah.

I’m definitely catching feelings for her.

This isn’t good.

At all.

# CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

## CHARLOTTE

### *Nonnegotiable*

OUR KITCHEN SMELLS LIKE CINNAMON AND SUGAR. IT'S MY FAVORITE combination in the whole entire world, and the familiar scent of cookies baking in the oven wraps around me like a warm blanket. Mom and I have been at it for hours, our hands dusted with flour, the counter cluttered with cookie cutters and bowls of frosting. It's one of those moments that feels like it's out of time, like nothing else in the world matters but the dough beneath my hands and the steady rhythm of Mom's humming beside me.

This has always been our tradition, a moment of peace amid the usual holiday chaos, but the irony of it is that neither of us are very good bakers. In fact, we sort of suck. Ava's Christmas cookies taste a hell of a lot better. Even Dad produces superior gingerbread people.

Somehow, Mom and I always end up covered in flour, no matter how careful we are, and we're officially banned from using the candy cane molds after the Great Penis Cookie Debacle five years ago.

When I was little, Mom tried incorporating Korean cookies into our holiday baking, but she made the mistake of explaining they used rice wine and were deep fried. Like a total brat, I threw a tantrum, because cookies "weren't supposed to have rice in them."

And then there was the Christmas they invited Daisy, my elementary school classmate, and her family for dinner thinking it would create a cultural connection, only to discover that Daisy's family was even more American than ours. Her parents were second-generation Korean Americans who felt zero kinship to their parents' homeland and didn't care if Daisy did either. At least mine tried to keep me connected to the culture.

And I resisted it every step of the way.

“These snowflakes look a little sad, don’t they?” Mom teases, nudging me with her elbow as she reaches for another piece of dough.

I glance down at the cookies I’ve been cutting, realizing she’s right. The shapes are uneven, the edges ragged where my hands were shaking a little too much.

I force a smile, trying to keep things light. “Nah. They’re abstract. Very modern.”

She laughs.

“Hey, what were those Korean cookies you used to make when I was a kid?” I ask her.

“Hmm. I can’t remember what they were called, but your dad and brother loved them. Why do you ask?”

“I don’t know. Just thinking it might be nice to learn how to make them.”

Taking a breath, I gauge her reaction, but although she looks startled, she also seems pleased.

“Oh, that would be wonderful, honey. What a great idea. I’ll dig through my old recipe books later. Maybe we can grab some ingredients tomorrow.”

She smiles at me, and for a moment, it feels like everything’s okay. Like I’m just here with my mom, baking cookies for Christmas, and there’s nothing weighing down my chest.

But then the back door opens, and the illusion shatters. Cold air rushes into the kitchen, and with it comes Ava. The tension creeps in behind her like an unwelcome guest.

“Honey! You’re just in time,” Mom says, greeting her with a smile. Her brow furrows when she notices Ava is alone. “Where’s Ash? We thought he was coming with you.”

Ava shrugs out of her coat, hanging it by the door. “He had to work over the holidays, so he stayed in New York.”

Mom’s smile falters. “Oh, that’s too bad. We were really looking forward to meeting him.”

I focus on the cookies, trying to stay out of this conversation. Trying to keep the peace that’s been so fragile since I told Ava about Harrison. Like clockwork, she’s been texting me every few days about it, asking if I’d told our parents yet. So of course, this afternoon is no different. Mom steps out

of the kitchen for a moment to check on the laundry, and as soon as she's gone, Ava pounces.

"You're going to tell them during the break, right?"

I don't look up. I keep myself busy with the dough, pressing the cutter into it with more force than necessary. "I'll tell them when I'm ready. Stop pressuring me."

"Charlotte, come on. You're being ridiculous. You can't keep avoiding this. They deserve to know," she scolds, crossing her arms like she's the one who's been wronged here.

"I know that," I bite back, finally meeting her gaze. There's a warning in my voice, but she's not backing down. "It's my decision, okay? I'll tell them when I'm good and ready."

"You can't keep this a secret forever."

"Oh my God, *I know that*," I repeat, my irritation spilling over. "Ava. Seriously. Just back off, okay?"

"Whatever. I'm going to get my bag from the car." She huffs, turning toward the door just as Mom reenters the kitchen, blissfully unaware of the storm brewing between her daughters.

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***HARRISON:***

> Nah, it's better this way. Dad is always meaner than usual during the holidays. Last few years I've avoided him altogether at Xmas.

Sitting at the kitchen table, I stare at the text I just received from Harrison and wonder how the hell to respond to it. It's the message he sent in response to me saying it's a bummer he's spending Christmas in California with friends instead of with his father and grandparents in Nevada. I only recently found out he's somewhat close with those grandparents. From what he's described, they seem nice. His father, not so much.

The guilt settles over me, suffocating the joy of being here with my own family. Despite the tension between me and Ava, the house is buzzing with warmth. Christmas music playing softly in the background, the smell of pine from the tree, my mom and Oliver laughing about something as they tidy up the family room after our rowdy game of charades. My dad went for a walk with my sister-in-law, and soon we're going to put on a cheesy holiday rom-com and watch it in our pj's.

It's everything Harrison doesn't have, and I hate that for him. But I also won't apologize for my circumstances, the way he seems to want me to.

Ava enters the kitchen, her eyes catching mine before she heads to the fridge to grab a drink. I quickly turn my phone face down on the counter, but not before she notices.

"Is that him? The brother?"

I nod. "Just saying happy holidays." When I see her frown, I give one of my own. "Stop it. Please. I don't need the constant looks of disapproval."

The last few days have been a struggle. Every time we've been in the same room, her disappointment has been palpable, radiating off her in waves.

"They deserve to know, Char," she says now, sounding like a broken record at this point.

"It's Christmas. I'm not going to drop a bomb on them right now." I feel defensive, like I have to justify the knot in my stomach that I haven't been able to untangle since I got here.

She sighs, visibly frustrated, but doesn't push it further. For now anyway. I have no doubt she'll push me again later. Ava grabs a wine cooler from the middle shelf, then closes the fridge and walks out of the kitchen.

I know she's right, but I can't handle this. Not now. Not with the self-reproach clawing at me every time I glance at my phone and think of Harrison spending the holidays with random friends while I'm here, surrounded by people who love me.

I'm debating taking a walk to clear my head when my phone buzzes again. I tense, expecting another message from Harrison, but it's Beckett.

I swipe to find a screenshot in our group chat, advertising an all-night rave. The date says it's tomorrow, and the location is a mere hour's drive from my family's house.

My pulse speeds up. I can't believe they remembered. When I told the guys about my desire to go to a rave, take some molly, and dance all night long, I was only half-serious. It sounds like a ton of fun on paper, but the reality is a bit scary. I'm not a drug girl. Hell, I don't even like to smoke weed. It gives me headaches.

Another message pops up.

***BECKETT:***

I'm back from Indy tomorrow morning. Should we go?

But…I think I need this. I need to escape the pressure and the guilt and the weight of all the secrets I'm carrying. There's still another week left in the holiday break. Ava isn't flying back to New York for another two days. I *need* this.

Just one night to regroup. I could meet up with the boys, let loose for twenty-four hours, and then come back here to spend New Year's with my family.

I hesitate for only a moment before typing back.

***ME:***

I'm in.

---

And that's how I end up at an EDM party near Hartford the following night. I drive out there myself, parking my car in a huge gravel lot behind the sprawling warehouse where the rave is taking place. The cold December air bites at my skin as I step out of the car, adjusting the hem of my dress under my coat. My heart is already racing, and I haven't even gone inside yet.

I texted the guys when I was five minutes away. Now I watch them striding across the lot toward me, my heart skipping a beat at the sight of

them. I haven’t seen them in a week, and I’m startled to realize I missed them.

A lot.

It doesn’t hurt that they both look smoking hot tonight. Will is dressed in a black button-down that clings to his broad chest, paired with dark jeans and boots. His hair is styled away from his forehead, emphasizing his chiseled cheekbones and clean-shaven face. Beckett is rocking his usual laid-back style—fitted jacket over a white T-shirt, jeans slung low on his hips, and that casual, cocky smirk that always melts me.

“Damn,” Beckett murmurs. “That is some dangerous lipstick, sugar puff.”

I opted for a bloodred lip for the night’s festivities, pairing it with a smoky eye, and the appreciation on both their faces is confirmation I achieved the desired result.

Will grins at me. “You’re not gonna make it easy on us tonight, are you?”

“Why would I? I like it when you’re hard.”

That summons a low groan from Beckett. “You’re such a cocktease.”

“You love it.” I laugh before my expression sobers. “How is your friend doing?”

They’d both gone to Vermont last weekend for a funeral—one of their teammates lost his father to cancer last week, which is devastating enough as it is. But for it to happen right before the holidays? Brutal.

“Not great,” Beckett admits. “Shane’s spending the holidays helping his mom sell their house. It’s fucking sad.”

“Sorry, I shouldn’t have brought it up,” I say with a sigh.

“It’s fine,” Will says. “But yeah, probably not the best topic of conversation right before a rave.”

Nodding, I unzip my coat and slip it off my shoulders. “I think I’ll leave this in the car. Don’t want to lose it inside.”

The moment my coat is off, the heat of their stares sizzles into me. The mint-green dress I chose hugs my limited curves, with a plunging neckline that reveals just enough upper boob to make their jaws slack. It’s tight in all the right places, the hem stopping midthigh, showing off my legs.

Beckett eyes me up and down. “Jesus, Charlie. You look fucking unreal.”

Before I can respond, he tugs me toward him, capturing my lips in a deep kiss. His hands slide around my waist, gripping me tight, and static electricity sparks between us, prickling across my flesh. When he finally pulls back, Will is already there, his hand slipping around my neck as he leans in to kiss me too—rougher, hungrier, making me moan into his mouth.

For a moment, I forget where we are. All I feel is the heat of their bodies pressing against mine, the way their hands move like they know every inch of me, claiming me in a way that weakens my knees. Will's fingers trail down to my hip, and Beckett's breath is hot against my ear.

"We should probably—" he begins, then clears the lust from his throat. "Stop," he finishes hoarsely.

"Yeah," Will agrees. "We need to talk business."

I blink up at them, still breathless from their kisses. "Did you guys already pay the cover?"

Will nods. "Yeah, that's all taken care of. Also booked a hotel room nearby, as promised. We got you, babe."

"And…" Beckett reaches into his pocket. His hand emerges with a tiny clear baggie, which he grasps between his fingers. "We took care of this part too."

I stare at the teeny ecstasy pill, and suddenly the night feels even more charged.

They actually did it. I'm not even going to ask how they procured the drug. Plausible deniability, obviously. But my heart races at the sight of it. It's part nerves, part anticipation, but mostly excitement for what's about to happen.

I glance between them. "I can't believe you made this happen."

When I reach for the baggie, Beckett closes his fist around it. "No, baby girl."

I frown.

"Not until we talk about the rules," he clarifies, his voice firm.

I raise an eyebrow. "I thought the whole point of tonight was throwing away the rule book."

Will's tone is equally uncompromising. "Not yet. Before you take this, we need to get a few things straight."

He’s trying to be the stern, protective guy—and he’s pulling it off. I love it when Will gets like this. Leaning into his commanding alpha side. I can’t help but smirk a little, knowing how much he cares but also knowing I’m going to push back, just a bit.

“Fine. Let’s discuss.”

Beckett crosses his arms, backing Will up. “Oh, this isn’t a discussion. The rules are nonnegotiable.”

Will’s gaze locks on to mine. “Rule number one: You stay with us the entire time. No wandering off, no going anywhere alone. Got it?”

I nod, trying to ignore the warm flutter in my chest at how seriously they’re taking this. On one hand, I feel like a little kid being told not to run with scissors. On the other hand, this overprotective dominant thing they’re doing is turning me on.

“Got it,” I say.

“Rule number two,” Beckett says. “If you start feeling weird—like, at all—you tell us immediately. Doesn’t matter if you think it’s nothing, you say something.”

I roll my eyes but can’t stop the smile that surfaces.

“Say it,” he insists, leaving no room for teasing.

I bite my lip to suppress a laugh. “If I start feeling weird, I’ll tell you guys immediately. I promise.”

He gives a satisfied nod.

“Rule number three,” Will says. “Hydration. You drink plenty of water, and I mean it. No getting dehydrated on us. Steady sips, no chugging.”

“Plenty of water, steady sips. Got it,” I answer, fighting to keep a straight face. It feels like we’re prepping for a big exam instead of a night of dancing and letting loose.

“Rule number four: No sex.”

My mouth falls open at that one. “What?”

“No sex,” he repeats, and Beckett nods in agreement.

I blink at them, caught off guard. “But…I heard ecstasy is supposed to make you really…”

“Horny,” Beckett finishes, chuckling. “Yeah, it does. And that’s exactly why neither of us is laying a finger on you tonight. I don’t care how much you say you want it or how much you beg. Right, Larsen?”

“Damn right.”

I pout, but along with my disappointment, I also feel a strange kind of respect.

Will steps closer, gripping my chin as he tilts my face up to meet his eyes. His thumb skims my lower lip, sending a jolt of desire through me.

“Baby.” His voice drops low, almost a growl. “We’re not fucking you while you’re on drugs. Understood? That kind of consent line is way too blurry for me. For us.” He glances at Beckett, who offers another firm nod.

“We promised we’d take care of you,” Beckett says gruffly. “That means not taking advantage of you in that state.”

“No sex.” Will’s eyes search mine to make sure I understand. “That’s final.”

I let out a small breath, realizing how much these guys mean to me. They’re not just here for the fun of it—they’re looking out for me. And that makes my heart swell with emotion.

“Last rule,” Will says. “You listen to us. If we say it’s time to go, we go. No arguing, no ‘just one more song.’ Got it?”

I lick my lips, noticing how they both track the movement of my tongue. “You two are so fucking hot right now.”

Beckett narrows his eyes at me, clearly trying to keep a straight face too. “We’re serious. We’re not playing around.”

“I know,” I say, reaching out to squeeze his hand. “And I love that you guys care so much.”

Beckett opens his fist and holds the baggie out to me. “You still want to do this?”

I nod, warmth flooding my chest as I accept the bag from him and fish out the tiny pill. Before I pop it into my mouth, I glance at the boys, my throat tightening.

“Thank you,” I say softly. “For looking out for me.”

“Always.” Will’s voice is a low rumble.

“Now take it before we change our minds,” Beckett says with a grin.

I grin back, then place the pill on my tongue and swallow it with a gulp of water from the bottle Will passes me.

No matter what happens tonight, I know they’ll take care of me.

# CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

## BECKETT

*She's with us*

A KALEIDOSCOPE OF COLOR WASHES OVER THE PACKED CROWD, LIGHTS pulsing in time with the frenetic beat, and the air is thick with sweat and the electric energy of a thousand bodies moving as one. I've been to raves before, but this one is different. This time, Charlie is with me. And she's fucking glowing. The way she moves, the way she smiles… It's like watching someone come alive for the first time. She's let go completely, lost in the music, her body swaying and spinning in a rhythm that's all her own.

Will and I stick close, making sure she's safe, but we can't help but be mesmerized by the way she dances. As she moves under the flashing lights, her dress slides and skims over her pale, firm thighs, her black hair cascading down her shoulders, I can't tear my gaze away.

The last time I was this spellbound by a girl was in high school. With Shannon. I still remember the first time I laid eyes on Shannon. Ninth grade. First day. I walked into homeroom and spotted her sitting in the front row, her golden hair gleaming under the fluorescent lights, her full lips pinched in a line of distress as she tried to make sense of the math equation she was trying to solve. Yep, she was doing homework before it had even been assigned.

Turns out I have a hard-on for the overachieving type.

I'd always been a back-of-the-room sort of guy, but the moment I saw that willowy blond with the sweet frown and delicate fingers choking the life out of her pencil, I was a goner. I walked to the front row, sat beside her, and introduced myself. I was confident, even at fourteen.

I think she was surprised I was talking to her. It was only the first day, but I was already destined to be the popular dude at Lincoln High. Already

one of the stars of the hockey team, as proven during our summer training camp. Already wearing a hockey shirt in our school's colors.

On our first date, Shannon confessed she never thought a jock would be interested in someone like her. She claimed she'd been a huge dork in junior high, invisible to all the boys. I had no idea how someone like Shannon could ever be invisible to anyone. Her aura drew me in from the second I saw her. I never believed in love at first sight until that morning in homeroom.

It wasn't love at first sight with Charlotte. I thought she was hot when I met her in Climate Policy, but nothing more. Hell, even now, I don't know what it is that I'm feeling for her. Not love, obviously. I don't do that shit anymore.

But it's…something.

I told her about the letters I wrote to Shannon, for chrissake. That indicates something more than lust.

But it's definitely not love.

Charlie catches our eyes and beams at us. Her cheeks are flushed red from excitement. Well, that and from the MDMA coursing through her veins. She's high, but it's a giddy, euphoric high. Her laughter rings out above the music as she dances her way over to us.

"You guys are just standing there!" She grabs Will and pulls him into the throng of dancers. "Dance with me!"

He chuckles, letting himself be dragged into the crowd, and I follow, unable to resist her infectious energy. I hate dancing, but this doesn't require a lot of skill. It's too crowded to move much. All I have to do is stand there and grind against my girl's hot, tight body, sandwiching her between me and Will. The three of us dance together, moving in sync, laughing like the rest of the world doesn't exist.

I bend my head toward Charlie's ear, checking in with her as I've done all night. "You okay, sugar puff?"

She gazes up at me. "I'm more than okay," she says before resting her head against my chest. "I feel alive."

The music pounds in time with my heartbeat as we dance, lost in the crowd, bodies moving together under the strobe lights. Charlie's smile is wide, her eyes bright as she sways between us, completely free in a way I've never seen before.

It’s beautiful.

We dance for hours, the frenzied atmosphere and loud, thumping bass line casting a spell over the entire club. I’m surprised by how chill everyone is, yet no sooner does the thought enter my head than I notice him—a guy, a little older, trying to cut in, his glassy eyes fixed on Charlie. He’s moving closer, way too close, and she’s too caught up in the moment to realize it.

“Hey, sexy,” the guy shouts, his lips practically touching her ear. “You look like you need some company.”

She blinks up at him, still smiling but confused, not fully processing what’s happening. The ecstasy has programmed her to feel good and to want everyone else around her to feel good too.

I battle a surge of anger, hot and immediate. Before I can react, Will steps in between them, his hand firmly on the guy’s chest, pushing him back.

“She’s not interested,” he growls. “Back off.”

The guy stumbles slightly, surprise flashing across his face. “What the hell, man? She can speak for herself.”

“Yeah, she can,” Will shoots back. His eyes stay locked on the creep’s, daring him to make another move. “And she’s with us. So take the hint.”

I come up beside Will, backing my boy.

The man squares his shoulders, trying to puff himself up like a peacock. “You think you can just—”

“Yeah, I do,” Will snaps at him. “So why don’t you make it easy on yourself and walk away.”

For a moment, it looks like the guy might push back, but then he glances between me and Will. He knows he’s outnumbered and outmatched.

“Whatever, assholes,” he mutters, backing off into the crowd. “This bitch ain’t worth it.”

As soon as he’s gone, I turn back to Charlie. I expect her to be shaken, maybe even upset, but to my amusement, she’s visibly turned on.

“That was so hot.” Her voice is tinged with something that makes my dick twitch. Something sultry and captivating.

“You like it when we turn into cavemen, do you?” Will teases, wrapping an arm around her waist.

“So much.”

Charlie leans in and kisses him, a quick, fierce press of her lips that rips a groan from his throat.

I chuckle. “All right, let’s get back to dancing before you two start something that’ll get us kicked out.”

She giggles and gives herself over to the rhythm of the music again. There’s a different energy between us now, but I can’t succumb to it. We promised her we wouldn’t touch her tonight, and I’m not about to abuse that trust.

---

We stay until the rave ends, until the lights dim and the music fades into the early morning silence. Charlie is now leaning heavily against us, her energy finally spent. We guide her out of the warehouse. Her feet are dragging, but she’s smiling, a dreamy, satisfied smile that tells me she’s still feeling the effects of the drug.

Will booked us a room nearby, and the city is quiet as we walk the four blocks to the hotel, bundled up against the late December chill. The adrenaline from the night slowly ebbs, leaving a peaceful calm in its wake. Our breath escapes in wispy, white puffs, carried away by the night breeze. It still hasn’t snowed this winter, not in New England anyway. Charlie had complained in our group chat about the lack of a white Christmas, but to be honest, I enjoyed it. I hate the snow.

When we get to our room, Charlie collapses on the king-size bed, her limbs sprawled out on the white bedspread like she’s making a snow angel. The city lights filter through the curtains, casting soft shadows across the bed. Her eyes are half-lidded, a lazy smile playing on her lips as she looks up at Will and me, her fingers absentmindedly tracing patterns on the bedsheets.

“Best night ever,” she mumbles, her voice heavy with exhaustion but still tinged with that excited high. “I don’t want it to end. Take your clothes off. Both of you.”

I exchange a glance with Will, and he shakes his head in amusement. We were anticipating this.

“How are we dating the horniest girl in the world?” he says.

“Right?” Chuckling, I sit beside her and brush strands of hair away from her flushed face. “Tonight was fun, but you’re done for now. You’re benched.”

She props herself up on her elbows. “But I’m not tired!” she protests. “And I want you. I want Will. You guys are being so unfair.”

As tempting as it is—so goddamn tempting—we made her a promise. She isn’t in the right state of mind.

“Charlotte.” I use her full name to show her I mean business. “As hot as you look tonight, we’re not going to take advantage of you. We said no sex, and we meant it. That’s a line we’re not willing to cross.”

Her pout is fucking adorable, but neither of us is backing down.

Grumbling in disappointment, she flops backward. She looks so good in that dress, I have to wrestle my gaze off her.

I need a cold shower, stat.

---

Sunlight filters through the open curtains of the hotel room, shining over the mess of tangled sheets and discarded clothes. Charlie is still asleep, her face peaceful and relaxed as she lies between Will and me. I watch her for a moment, my mind replaying the events of last night. Charlie dancing with reckless abandon. Her eyes lighting up every time she looked at us. Falling asleep with her sandwiched between us.

Our girl stirs, her eyelids fluttering open as she looks up at me with a drowsy smile. “Morning.” Her voice is still thick with sleep.

“Morning,” I answer, leaning down to kiss her forehead.

She glances at Will, who’s on his side with his back to us. She reaches out to stroke the sleek sinew between his shoulder blades. He grunts in response, and her smile widens.

“I need to shower,” she says. “And then we should probably head out after that. My parents will freak if I’m not there in time for New Year’s Eve lunch. It’s a tradition.”

“No problem,” Will says, finally waking up fully. He stretches, then plants a peck on Charlie’s shoulder. “How do you feel? The high should be gone, right?”

“All gone.” She sighs. “It was good while it lasted.”

“Does that mean you’ll be doing molly every weekend?” he teases.

“God, no. This was a one-time thing. I liked it too much to do it again.”

I snort.

“I’m serious,” she insists. “Anything that good should never become a habit.”

I can’t help but relate that warning to our own situation, because I’m addicted to our sex life. Every single time is better than the last. Whether it’s Charlie and me alone or the three of us together, I can’t get enough.

I check my phone while Charlie’s in the shower, rolling my eyes at my father’s latest series of text messages. I get that he’s super bummed about turning down that job offer last week, but he’s being very melodramatic about the whole thing. He keeps sending me memes of sad puppies.

I’m just texting him back to tell him to chill the fuck out already when Charlie emerges from the bathroom with a tiny towel wrapped around her damp body. Her *lower* body. The towel is so small it doesn’t even cover her tits.

Jaw dropping, my phone slips out of my hand and onto the bed. “I’m pretty sure that’s the towel you’re supposed to use for your hair,” I manage to say through the lust coating my throat.

“Oh, is it?” Her eyes are innocent.

Will licks his lips, equally affected by her very blatant teasing. “I thought you had to leave ASAP.”

She glances between us, one eyebrow arched. “My family will survive if I’m an hour late.”

“Get on the bed,” I growl.

She breaks out in a smile.

A moment later, her body is stretched out on the mattress like a delicious offering. I can’t take my eyes off her. She’s so beautiful like this, wild and completely at our mercy.

To Will, I say, “Get on your knees in front of her.”

He smiles too, sinking down at the foot of the bed. “You’re in luck, babe,” he says to Charlie as he pulls her naked body closer to the edge. “Bossy Beck is making a rare appearance this morning.”

He’s right. After enduring Charlie’s body grinding against mine all damn night, I desperately need to get off, and I’m calling the shots until I fucking do.

Her eyes find mine, flickering with intrigue. Before she can say anything, Will's mouth is on her, traveling down her stomach, and I know exactly where he's headed.

I sit beside her, running my hand over her soft skin. She's still flushed from the shower.

"Slow down, mate," I warn. My fingers dance over Charlie's taut nipple, making her gasp. "Take your time. I want to hear her beg for it."

Will glances up at me, smirking, but he listens, taking it slow as his mouth inches lower, kissing right above where she needs him most. Charlie squirms, her back arching as she lets out a soft whine of impatience.

"Beckett, please…" she breathes, her voice shaky.

I grin. "You want him to taste you? Want his mouth on you?"

She nods frantically, clutching at the sheets. "Yes. God, yes."

I chuckle, loving how worked up she is. "Hear that, Larsen? She wants you."

Will doesn't say a word. He just looks at me, waiting for my cue. He knows this is my game to play this morning. I brush a hand over Charlie's stomach, feeling the tremble in her muscles, and I lean back a little, giving him space.

"Go ahead," I say, my voice rough with arousal. "Make her scream."

He doesn't hesitate this time. His mouth moves between her legs, and the second his tongue touches her, Charlie lets out a loud moan, her entire body jolting at the sensation.

"That's it," I tell him. "Nice and slow. Don't rush it. Make her feel every second of it."

Will's mouth works her slowly, deliberately, while her breath escapes in short gasps. I can tell she's close already. She's always so damn responsive, so in tune with us.

"You love that, don't you?" I ask, reaching up to cup her tit. I squeeze gently. "Having both of us focused on you. You want to come for him, don't you?"

She nods, her voice too broken to form words, but the way she grips my arm tells me everything I need to know.

"Tell him. Tell Will how much you need it."

She shudders. "Will, please. I need it so bad."

He looks up at me briefly, a wicked smile on his lips before he doubles down, his tongue flicking over her clit. Charlie jerks, a strangled moan escaping her.

“Tell her what you’re gonna do to her, Larsen,” I say, knowing it’ll drive her even crazier. “Tell her how you’re gonna ruin her.”

He groans against her pussy, and I don’t need to look over to know he’s hard as a rock. Growling, he digs his fingers into her thighs, parting her legs even wider for him.

“I’m gonna make you come so hard you won’t be able to think straight,” he promises her, his voice dripping with lust. Then he takes her clit between his lips and sucks.

I can see how much those words affect her. She’s already soaked, her need for us clear as day.

“You hear that, baby?” I whisper in her ear, my thumb teasing her nipple. “He’s gonna wreck you with that mouth. And I’m gonna watch while you fall apart for us.”

Will presses his tongue flat against her, teasing her with a long, lazy stroke, and she starts trembling uncontrollably.

He chuckles, gripping her hips to keep her still. “Yeah, you like that, don’t you? I can feel how wet you are, how fucking ready you are for this.”

He licks her again, torturing her with every flick of his tongue.

“She’s close,” I tell him, my hand tangling in her hair, pulling just enough to make her gasp. “Make her come. Don’t stop until she’s screaming for it.”

Will does exactly what I say, his tongue working her over with skilled precision. Her body starts to tense, legs quivering. She’s right there on the edge.

I lean down, my mouth hovering over hers. “Let go, baby girl.”

And then, without warning, he flicks his tongue just right, and she loses it, her entire body shaking as he holds her down, drawing out every second of her release. I watch her face, her lips parted, her eyes squeezed shut, and it’s the hottest thing I’ve ever seen.

“Good girl,” I whisper. “That’s it. Just like that.”

As Will slows down, I feel her body relax beside me. When she finally opens her eyes, they’re glazed over, and I can’t help but grin as I kiss her, my lips lingering against hers.

“I could watch you come all day,” I tell her.

Will lifts his head, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand as he straightens his broad shoulders, looking as satisfied as I feel.

Charlie tries to catch her breath. She looks so damn gorgeous, laid out before us, completely undone. But I’m not finished with her. Not even close.

I pull her up gently, turning her over so she’s on all fours, her perfect ass in the air. She lets out a soft moan as I put on a condom and position myself behind her. I’m so hard I can barely think straight, but I want to take my time, relish every second of this.

Will is beside her now, leaning close, stroking her back as he says, “You ready for more?”

Charlie’s breath hitches as she looks over her shoulder at me, her eyes glazed with lust. “Yes.”

That’s all the encouragement I need.

I grip her hips, sliding into her, and the second I’m inside, a deep groan rumbles out of me. She’s so tight, so wet from everything Will’s done to her, and it feels incredible. I thrust slowly at first, savoring the way her body reacts to me, the way she clenches around me as I push deeper.

Will trails his fingers down her spine, his eyes gleaming as he watches her shudder beneath his touch.

“Look at you, baby. Your body’s fucking perfect. I love the way you take a dick, the way you’re so desperate for us. You know you drive us insane, right? With that tight little body, begging to be touched… *Fuck*,” he groans.

He cups her ass, giving it a firm squeeze, while I’m still deep inside her, feeling her pulse around me.

“Can’t wait to be inside you next,” he says, his voice thick with need. “Look at how well you’re taking him.”

I can’t help but groan at the sight of her, completely at our mercy. I thrust deep again.

“Yes,” Charlie whimpers, bucking back against me as I start to move faster.

“You look so good like this. Bent over, begging for it. You’re such a good girl for us.” Will’s eyes flash with lust.

She’s moaning louder, and I know she’s getting close again. The way she’s moving against me, the way her pussy is tightening. It’s almost too

much to take.

“You’re gonna come again, aren’t you?” Will teases. “Gonna come with Beckett buried deep inside you, stretching you out.”

I pull out and then thrust back in, lost in the feeling of her wrapped around me, and I can barely hold back myself.

“Give it to me, Charlie,” I say, my voice ragged. “I want to feel you.”

Will chuckles, watching both of us fall apart. “You hear that, baby? He wants to feel you come all over his cock. Are you gonna give him what he wants?”

She’s breathless, clutching the sheets as she lets out another desperate moan. “Yes…please…I’m so close…”

I smack one firm ass cheek and drive my cock deeper. “That’s my girl. Come for us. Show us how good that tight little body can take it.”

Charlie crashes over the edge, shaking with the force of her orgasm, and it’s enough to send me over too. I thrust into her one last time, pleasure flooding my body.

We both collapse onto the mattress, completely spent, while Will watches us with a satisfied grin.

“Damn,” he says. “You two look good together.” He leans closer to Charlie, his fingers brushing over her flushed skin. “You did so good, baby.”

She twists her head to kiss him, already reaching for the erection jutting out toward her.

Yeah.

She’s definitely going to be late for her family’s lunch.

---

After checking out at the front desk downstairs, we go to the parking lot behind the hotel and walk Charlie to her car.

She kisses each of us in turn. “Thanks for last night. And this morning. I don’t think I’ve ever had so much fun.”

“Anytime,” Will answers, his voice soft. I note the way he looks at her, the way his gaze lingers as she gets into the driver’s seat and buckles her seat belt.

“See you on campus?” she asks, looking up at us.

“Of course,” I answer before closing the door for her.

Once she’s safely driving out of the lot, we climb into Will’s SUV and follow suit. The silence is different now, though. Heavier. Loaded with questions neither of us know how to voice.

“I think about her all the time,” I finally confess, and I hate how exposed that makes me feel. “Charlie. She’s always there, in the back of my mind.”

“Same,” Will admits. “She’s different. Special.”

I hesitate again before asking, “What is this, mate? With the three of us. Like, how the hell is it supposed to work?”

He considers the question. “I don’t know. But maybe we don’t need to know right now. Let’s just…let it play out.”

Biting my lip, I give a slow nod. “Yeah. I guess you’re right. No need to overthink anything.”

Will grabs his phone and pulls up a different playlist, the strains of chill, folksy rock filling the front seat. The tension dissipates, as does my confusion.

Whatever this is, with Charlie, with all three of us…

We’ll figure it out as we go.

# CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

## CHARLOTTE

*Some seriously good exclusive sex*

NEW SEMESTERS ARE SO PROMISING. A NICE, CLEAN BLANK SLATE, WHERE everything feels manageable again, the stress of the previous semester momentarily lifted. I love meeting my new professors. Getting my hands on the syllabus for a new class. It's like this one magical, optimistic moment where the future is mine for the taking and anything seems possible.

This snowy January day, I'm in a great mood, no pressure waves in sight. My morning Rehabilitation Engineering lab was utterly fascinating, gearing up to be my favorite this semester. We're learning about assistive devices, and today we spoke in depth about prosthetics and their impact on patient mobility and quality of life. I almost regret not choosing to design a rehabilitation device for my capstone, but it's far too late to change direction now.

Will meets me outside the lab, looking gorgeous as always with his brown hair swept away from his forehead and his jaw clean-shaven. Boyfriend #1 is the epitome of the boy next door, and yes, I am now referring to him as my boyfriend. It's a lot easier than continuing to call him "the guy I'm seeing" or "the hockey player I'm banging."

Boyfriend #2 is looking more rugged these days thanks to the beard he's growing out for hockey purposes. Briar is killing it this season, and I've discovered that hockey players are superstitious as hell. Beckett forgot to shave on the day the team dominated what was supposed to be a brutal matchup, so obviously, his facial hair is the reason they won. Not skill or anything. I told him he looks like an Australian mountain man now. I'm into it.

I'm into *them*. But to the world, Will is my main man. My only man.

Beckett doesn't seem to mind that he's not the public face of our arrangement, but it still activates a jolt of guilt inside me each time I've held hands with Will at Malone's while Beckett is standing five feet away. Sure, he fingered me in the car on the way home the other night while Will drove, but I still feel bad. I don't want him to think I'm ashamed of him, although I get the feeling he likes having that distance between us. Beckett doesn't do love. He's made that clear.

Not that I'm in love. You can't be in love with two men. That's just crazy.

I'm certainly in lust.

Totally in like.

But I'm not taking this any more seriously than I need to. We're having fun, that's all.

"Do you want to grab lunch at Carver Hall or drive into Hastings?" Will asks as I wrap a red wool scarf around my neck.

"Let's just do the dining hall. I have that stupid Delta Pi meeting this evening, so I want to stay on campus. But I'll come over later after the meeting."

We're almost to the exit when his phone rings. He glances at the screen, and his jaw tightens. "Sorry, I have to take this."

"It's fine. Go ahead."

We step through the doors, and Will sighs before answering, "Hey, Dad."

I keep walking beside him, my winter boots crunching against the snow-packed path. We finally got some snow last week, and the entire campus is now a blanket of white. Will stays quiet for several long beats, and I can tell from his stiff posture that something is up. He rarely receives calls from his father that don't stress him out.

"Another one?" he says, his voice tense. "What, the *Capitol* piece wasn't enough to boost your image?"

I catch the frustration in his expression. I hear his dad's voice, loud and authoritative, wafting out of the phone, but I'm not close enough to make out the words.

Will clenches his jaw again, rubbing the back of his neck as he listens. "Yeah, I get it… I said I get it. I just—Fine. I'll do it. Tell Alessia to email me the details."

He ends the call, his shoulders slumped.

“What did he want?” I ask.

He stuffs the phone into his pocket, then slips his gloved hand through mine. “He scheduled another interview. Another puff piece about his son being a star athlete and a good role model.” The sarcasm is unmistakable. “He’s obsessed with making me look perfect in the media. It’s like he thinks I’m some kind of product he can market.”

I frown, stopping in front of him. “You don’t have to let him do this all the time. You can say no.”

Will shakes his head, offering a rueful smile. “You don’t know my father. He bulldozes you until you give in. It’s impossible to say no to him.”

The defeated cloud in his eyes breaks my heart. Will is so strong in so many ways, but his father has this power over him that makes him feel small. I hate that for him.

“You’re stronger than you think,” I say, looping my arms around his neck. My breath comes out in a white cloud. “You’re a strong, sexy, assertive man. You don’t have to let him control you.”

Will gazes down at me, his expression softening, and I can sense the internal battle he’s fighting. Like he wants to believe me, but years of his dad’s influence makes it impossible.

“Maybe,” he says gruffly, his hands resting on my waist. “But it’s not easy.”

“I know it’s not, but I have faith in you. I think you’re fully capable of extricating yourself from his control. You just need to hold your ground,” I reply before leaning up to kiss him.

The kiss is slow, meant to comfort him more than anything, but it quickly becomes something deeper, the way it always does with Will and Beckett. He relaxes against me, his arms tightening around my waist.

Just as our tongues meet, we’re interrupted by a snide voice.

“Well, isn’t this cozy.”

I spin around to see my ex-boyfriend standing on the path, watching us. Great. Of *all* people.

Mitch’s arms are crossed over his chest, his eyes flicking between me and Will.

“Hey, Mitch,” I say, trying to keep my voice light.

“Hey, Charlotte,” he says, mimicking my tone. He smirks, taking a step toward us. “Are you going to introduce us?”

“Oh. Uh. Sure. Mitch, this is Will.” I don’t elaborate.

My ex notes Will’s jacket and flattens his lips. “Hockey guy, huh?”

Will stiffens, his protective instincts kicking in. “You’ve got a problem with that?”

Mitch sizes him up, then shrugs. “No problem. Just wondering how long it’ll take before Charlotte gets bored of your dick and moves on. Like she always does.”

Irritation courses through me, but before I can say anything, Will steps in front of me, blocking Mitch’s view. “Watch your mouth,” he cautions.

My ex sneers. “What are you gonna do? Hit me?”

“Maybe,” Will replies, his voice calm but with an edge that makes it clear he isn’t joking.

Mitch’s bravado falters for a second. Then he masks it with another derisive look. “Whatever, man. She’s all yours. Good luck with that.”

Mitch turns and walks away. I let out a breath as I watch him go.

“I’m sorry about that,” I say, touching Will’s arm.

He shakes his head, turning back to me. “You don’t have to apologize for him. He’s the one who should be sorry. That was fucking rude.”

“Yeah. He’s still not over our breakup. I don’t know if he’ll ever be.” I offer a small smile, trying to lighten the mood. “By the way? You’re pretty intimidating when you want to be. That’s how you need to handle your dad.”

“Yeah, maybe.” Will chuckles, taking my hand as we fall into step with each other again.

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I’m still thinking about the run-in with Mitch when I get home later, and as my mind replays the tense encounter, a gnawing unease settles in my stomach. I try to shake it off as I grab my laptop for our weekly meeting.

I enter the dining room and take my seat next to Sherise, then twist in my chair to say hi and smile at Blake, who’s leaning against the wall. She smiles back, looking tanned and happy. She went to St. Barts over the break with her family and their friends. I guess someone they know has a beach

house there. Faith was away too, as one of her million siblings got married over the holidays. Destination wedding to Greece. Lucky bitch.

Everyone is chattering away as they wait for Agatha to start the meeting. The hairs on the back of my neck stand on end when I notice a few girls sneaking glances at me, their whispers suddenly becoming more pronounced. But I hide my frown and brush it off, focusing on Agatha. She sits at the head of the table, posture set with her usual air of superiority.

"Let's get started," she announces once everyone has filed in.

Much to my relief, the next hour passes quickly. And whatever had caused my sorority sisters to whisper seems to have passed—at least until Agatha stops me from leaving the room after she dismisses everyone.

"Charlotte," she says sharply. "Don't go yet. We need to have a little chat."

My heart sinks, but I nod. As the others stream out of the dining room, some of them throw sympathetic looks my way. Others just seem curious.

I brace myself as Agatha approaches with her perfect hair, designer dress, and an expression that's a mix of concern and condescension.

"What is it, Agatha?" I ask, stifling my irritation.

She folds her arms. "It's been brought to my attention that you were seen making out with a guy on campus today."

My jaw drops. "I'm sorry—what?"

"You heard me."

"I don't see how that's any of your business," I say in amusement. I was expecting something a lot more dire. Like maybe someone accused me of embezzling from the house account. Or someone figured out I'm regularly having sex with two guys.

But this is about me kissing Will on campus?

Big fucking deal.

"It's my business when it reflects poorly on this house. As Delta Pi sisters, we're expected to uphold a certain image. An image of class and dignity. Slutty behavior is unbecoming of a Delta."

My hands clench into fists at my sides, her condescending tone igniting a spark of anger.

"Slutty behavior?" I echo, my voice rising slightly. "It was a kiss, Agatha. Chill the fuck out. It's not like I was blowing him on the quad."

“That’s not the point,” she snaps back. “The point is that your actions are being noticed and not in a good way. We have a reputation to maintain, and you’re putting that at risk.”

I stare at her, incredulous. “Who told you about this anyway? Who’s so concerned about my personal life that they felt the need to report it?” But I know the answer before she can even open her mouth. “Mitch. It was him, right?”

Of course he would stoop this low. And I know for a fact he has Agatha’s phone number. As the VP of Delta Tau, he was part of our executive board group chat when we cohosted a dinner party last year with his frat.

“It doesn’t matter who told me. What matters is that you need to start thinking about how your actions affect all of us.”

My patience snaps. “You know what? I’m done with this. I’m done with you thinking you can control every aspect of my life because it might reflect poorly on this precious sorority. So why don’t you just mind your own business and stop acting like you’re the fucking morality police?”

Her eyes widen. She clearly wasn’t expecting me to talk back. “I’m just trying to—”

“To what? Shame me into submission? Well, I’m not going to apologize for living my life the way I want to. If that doesn’t fit into your picture of what a Delta sister should be, then maybe I don’t belong here.”

Silence falls as Agatha gawks at me, speechless for once. I turn on my heel and storm out of the room. My pulse is racing, my hands trembling with the adrenaline.

I go upstairs, taking the steps two at a time. Fuck. Had I really meant what I said about not belonging here?

I don’t know, but right now, I don’t care. I just need to get away from all of it. Away from the rules, the expectations, the suffocating pressure to be perfect.

When I hear footsteps hurrying after me, I don’t need to turn around to know it’s Faith.

She follows me into my bedroom, a mischievous grin on her face. “You realize the entire house heard that, right?”

“I don’t care.”

“That was epic,” she informs me.

“Yeah, well, I don’t think she’s going to forgive me for that one,” I mutter, running a hand through my hair.

“Who cares? She needed to hear it. I swear, if she pulled that ‘unbecoming of a Delta’ crap on me one more time, I was going to lose it too.”

“She’s so fucking full of herself. Acting like she’s some kind of queen who can control everyone’s lives.” I’m still fuming. “I can’t believe she tried to shame me over a kiss.”

“Oh, I believe it. Bitch has her nose so far up in the air, it’s a miracle she doesn’t drown when it rains.”

That makes me snicker. “Like, how is this any of her business? I’m not hurting anyone.” Now I sigh. “Ugh. I bet she’s already planning some way to get back at me.”

“Let her try. We’ll just remind her that not everyone’s interested in playing her little game of ‘Who’s the Most Perfect Delta?’”

My heart squeezes at the conviction I hear in Faith’s voice. When I joined this sorority and saw the other girls in my pledge class, I was terrified I’d never fit in with any of them. Never find an ally. A true friend. But it turned out not all of them were uptight and judgmental. Faith emerged like a glorious unicorn out of a crowd of snooty thoroughbreds and showed me, for the first time in my life, what *ride or die* means.

Stomping toward her, I throw my arms around her shoulders, snuggling close. “I love you, Faith Grierson.”

She snorts in my hair. “Are you coming on to me?”

“No. I just want you to know I love you. I don’t know what I’d do in this house without you.”

“Probably be stuck in the living room, listening to Agatha drone on about reputations and decorum.” She lifts a brow. “Now, can we please talk about this hot make-out session everyone in the house is whispering about? According to Jia, you had a hand down your hockey player’s pants and were jerking him off in the middle of the quad.”

“Oh my God. Yeah right. It was just a kiss.”

“In public, though?” Faith grins at me. “That’s a big deal for Charlotte Kingston. Making out on the quad is the equivalent of going Instagram official. So do we have an official boyfriend now?”

We have two.

But I keep that tidbit to myself.

“I wouldn’t say it’s *official* official. But yeah, Will and I are together.”

“Exclusively?”

I falter. Well, shit.

“What?” Faith says, frowning.

“It suddenly occurred to me that I never actually asked if we were exclusive. I simply assumed we were.”

She snickers. “You should probably get on that.”

“Yeah. I probably should.”

---

As I head for the boys’ house in Hastings, I’m both obsessing over the exclusivity issue while riding the high from standing up to Agatha. The entire drive, I replay the confrontation with her. Then I replay the night at the rave, the mind-blowing sex, every moment I’ve spent with the guys.

I feel unstoppable. Confident.

I let myself into their house and kick off my shoes. Will is on the couch, working on his laptop, but he raises an eyebrow when I flounce into the living room.

“Someone looks pleased with herself,” he teases, taking in my expression. He closes the laptop and sets it aside. “What’s got you in such a good mood?”

I grin, tossing my bag onto the armchair. “I just told Agatha where she could shove her Delta rules.”

He lets out a low chuckle. “Our sweet little Charlotte did that? Seriously? What happened?”

“She called me out after the meeting and lectured me about being ‘unbecoming’ because Mitch saw us kissing earlier,” I explain, my blood still burning with the satisfaction of the moment. “So I told her to mind her own business.”

I join him on the chaise, and he immediately pulls me onto his lap, wrapping his arms around my waist.

“That’s my girl,” he says, and the praise brings a beat of hesitation on my part, a reaction he doesn’t miss. “What’s wrong?”

“I was talking to Faith before I came here.” I bite my lip. “And I realized we’ve never actually had the talk.”

“The talk?” Amusement dances in his eyes. “Like the sex talk? The penis goes into the vagina, et cetera et cetera.”

“Yes,” I say solemnly. “We haven’t discussed the mechanics of intercourse.” I punch him jokingly in the arm. “I mean the talk about whether we’re seeing other people.”

His shoulders stiffen. “Are *you* seeing other people?”

“Oh my God, no. I’m not,” I assure him. “This was more of a you and Beckett question for me. You guys never really told me whether we’re exclusive—”

“We are.”

My lips quirk in a smile. “Are we?”

“Of course. I don’t want to see other people. I know Beck doesn’t either.”

“Where is he anyway?”

“He went to a party with some of the guys.”

“Pity,” I say.

“Why’s that?”

“Because he’s about to miss out on some seriously good exclusive sex.”

Will’s grip on my waist tightens as I plant kisses along his jawline. His breath hitches when I reach his lips and capture the bottom one between my teeth. I bite, and he groans out a curse.

I let my hands wander down his chest, tracing the defined ridges and lines of his muscles through his shirt. I love the way his body tenses as I tease him. I love feeling his dick harden at each heated touch, until finally, it’s a hot spike poking against my inner thigh.

His palms slide to my lower back, pulling me even closer until there’s no space between us. “You’re going to be the death of me,” he grumbles, but the hunger in his eyes says he doesn’t mind it one bit.

“Good.”

I bring my mouth to his and kiss him. He kisses me back, his hands roaming my body, greedy and skillful. I push him back onto the couch, straddling him. Will groans again. His fingers slip under my shirt and scrape along my skin, unleashing a flurry of shivers along my spine.

As I lie on top of him, my tongue in his mouth and my hands all over his ripped body, my elbow suddenly bumps his laptop. I manage to catch it before it falls off the couch.

"Sorry," I say, hastily moving it to the coffee table.

"You'd better be. Lourdes will kill me if you destroy my laptop before I finish editing her chapter."

I was about to kiss him again, but now I freeze, my lips hovering over his. "There's a new chapter?"

"Uh-huh." He's already forgotten about it, though, his mouth latching on to my neck.

I smack his chest, forcing his gaze to mine. "And?" I demand. "Does Elizabeth agree to join forces with Alexander against the invading Chinese army?"

"Charlie," Will reprimands. "Do you really want to talk about *The Virgin and the Blade* right now, or do you want me to fuck your brains out?"

When I ponder it, he barks out a laugh.

"You hesitated," he accuses.

"Because I want to know what happens!"

Chuckling, he yanks me back down, kissing me before I can argue some more. The moment his tongue meets mine, I forget all about Elizabeth and Alexander and remember how badly I want to get this man naked.

So I do, tearing off his clothes while he tears off mine, and then we're naked on the couch, skin to skin, mouths fused together. Will is just slipping his hand between my thighs when we hear the front door creak open.

I tense instantly, reaching for my discarded shirt, because for all I know, Beckett is coming home with ten hockey players in tow. But when Boyfriend #2 appears in the doorway, he's blessedly alone.

Beckett's gray eyes immediately lock on to the scene in front of him. He seems to be fighting a grin as he takes in the sight of me on top of Will. His gaze dips to Will's hand, buried between my legs, and the smile breaks free.

"Don't mind me," he drawls, leaning against the doorframe.

We both look at him, but neither of us make a move to climb off each other. If anything, Will grows even harder against my thigh. And he strokes his palm over my aching pussy, as if to show Beckett exactly what he's missing.

My Aussie mountain man doesn't move toward us, but he doesn't leave either. Instead, he walks over to the armchair and sinks down, his eyes never leaving us. I'm still straddling Will, my palms on his bare chest. I can feel his heartbeat thrumming beneath my palms.

"You're not going to join us?" I ask, turning to look at Beckett.

He shakes his head, offering a small smirk. "Not tonight. But don't let me stop you. I'm enjoying the show."

Grinning, Will cups my pussy again, grinding the heel of his palm over my clit. I shudder with pleasure, and it only intensifies when he slips a finger inside, then a second one. I moan at the sudden feeling of fullness, my hips taking on a life of their own as they begin rocking against his hand.

Will's eyes flare with needy, dirty lust. "Jesus, baby. You look so goddamn hot fucking yourself on my fingers like that. You want another one?"

I'm too turned on to answer, but my inner muscles clamp tight, bringing a wicked smile to his lips.

"I felt that, Charlie. Someone needs to be filled tonight, huh?"

"*Yes*." A desperate moan escapes my throat.

He adds a third finger and curls them all inside me, hitting a spot that blurs my vision and triggers a rush of moisture. I grind harder against his hand, my breathing growing shallow.

"Oh, you like that," he says with a dark laugh. "You feel so full, don't you, baby? Just wait until it's my cock inside you. All the fucking way inside you. Then you'll really be full."

He pushes his fingers in and out, the sounds of wet suction filling the air between us. I can scarcely breathe now. My clit is pulsing, begging to be touched. I reach down to rub it and hear Beckett curse softly. There's something about the way he's watching us, the molten fire in his gaze, that makes the whole situation even hotter. My breath quickens as Will fingers me faster, his hand soaked from my arousal.

"Come for him," Beckett tells me, his voice low and commanding. "Show me how much you want him."

Will finds that sweet spot again, his fingertips pressing into it, and I lose control, the orgasm rushing through me in hot, pulsing waves. I collapse onto his chest, trembling, gasping for air. I feel his erection against my stomach, leaving a streak of precome against my skin, and the knowledge

that he’s this turned on from getting me off triggers another shuddering burst of pleasure.

Will groans, his lips seeking mine, and his hips start to move. I hear Beckett groan too, and the thrill of knowing he’s enjoying this only heightens the sensations. I feel every muscle in Will’s body coiled tight, his desire so palpable it’s almost overwhelming.

“Baby,” he whispers. “Sit on my dick before I explode.”

“Condom,” I remind him, but Beckett’s got us covered. A square package sails in our direction, which Will catches easily.

A moment later, I impale myself on him, eliciting gasps from both of us. As I seat myself completely, I stroke his torso, enjoying the heat of his skin.

“Ride me hard,” he mutters.

I give the man what he wants, riding him hard and fast, Beckett’s presence adding a whole other layer of heat to an already scorching encounter. Will trembles beneath me, eyes growing heavy-lidded, his control slipping as I push him closer to the edge.

“Don’t stop,” Beckett orders. “Make him come.”

And with that, Will lets go, coming with a low groan, arms locked tightly around me as he thrusts upward, filling me deep. We lie there tangled up for a while, requiring a long time to recover. So long that Beckett actually goes to the kitchen to make me some tea, and when he returns, I’m *still* draped over Will.

Eventually, I climb off the couch and search for my clothes, and the three of us settle in for the night. The guys put on a video game. I curl up next to Beckett, watching but not really paying attention to the zombie RPG on the screen. I’m so damn comfortable with these boys. Both of them. And it’s a damn good thing they don’t want me to choose between them, because I truly don’t think I can.

I spend the night in Will’s room, the way I always do. Beckett prefers to sleep alone, I’ve discovered. I suspect it’s simply another way to keep us at arm’s length, to never commit more than his body to this endeavor. Even getting him to share two sentences about his ex-girlfriend had been like pulling teeth. I’m still shocked he even admitted to writing letters to her after the breakup. He’s allergic to intimacy, and it’s starting to bother me a little, but I don’t want to push him because I know how much it sucks being pushed.

The next morning, I wake up to an SOS on my phone from my Little.

***BLAKE:***

> Can we meet up ASAP? I just got kicked out of my dorm.

# CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

## CHARLOTTE

*The Method failed me*

I MEET BLAKE AT DELLA'S DINER A COUPLE OF HOURS LATER. SHE'S with Gigi and a platinum blond named Diana. Blake warned me ahead of time that Diana was recently assaulted by an ex—which sounds downright terrifying—so I'm able to mask my shock when I see the purple-and-black bruising on Diana's face. Sounds like Diana and her boyfriend, Shane, had a tough winter. His father died. She was attacked. I can't even imagine going through either of those events without having a breakdown.

"What happened?" I ask Blake as I slide into the booth beside her. "How did you get kicked out of Burton House? Is it a permanent thing?"

"According to them, yes," she says flatly. "I'm not allowed to step foot in there except to pack up my stuff. Supervised. But my parents are going to speak to the dean."

"Seriously, what the hell happened?"

She grits her teeth. "Isaac happened."

Oh dear.

"We were hanging out in the common room last night, and he invited some of his football buddies to come by and watch the game with us. I wasn't thrilled about the idea, but he promised me they'd behave." Her blue eyes flash. "They did *not* behave. They totally trashed the place. I'm talking broken furniture, spilled drinks, stained carpets. One of the linesmen even kicked a hole in the wall. By accident, but still."

Blake is usually cool and collected, but this morning, I hear the note of panic in her voice.

"That's awful," I exclaim. "What are you going to do?"

“My dad promised he’d take care of it, but the dean is out of town until Tuesday, so I’m homeless for the next few days.”

“You’re not homeless,” Diana assures her. “I told you, you can crash at my place until you figure it out. I’ll stay with Shane next door.”

At my blank look, Diana explains that she and her boyfriend are next-door neighbors at an apartment complex not far from here. Beckett told me the other day that Shane was back at Briar. He’d moved home for a short time after his father passed away to help his mom and sister, but he returned to Hastings after Diana’s attack. I have a feeling he won’t be leaving her side anytime soon. I’m discovering that hockey players are beyond protective.

“And if that doesn’t work out,” I tell Blake, “I’m sure Will and Beckett would be happy to let you stay in their spare room.”

“Speaking of Will…” Gigi eyes me over the rim of her coffee cup as she takes a long sip.

“What?” I say.

“A little birdie told us you’re dating Will.”

“The birdie’s name is Will,” Diana says, snorting.

Discomfort has me shifting in my seat. “Yeah? What else did he say?”

“That was it.” Diana rolls her eyes. “Which is why we’re fishing for details.”

“Leave my Big alone,” Blake chides.

Gigi grimaces. “God, this sorority lingo is so weird.”

“I know,” I sigh.

“But no, Blakey, we will not leave your Big alone,” Diana says, flipping her ponytail over her shoulder. “So, Big…tell me…what are your intentions with our William?”

Luckily, I’m saved by the loud vibration of my phone.

“Hold that thought,” I tell them while inwardly praying they’re human goldfish and will forget what we’re talking about in five seconds.

I lift my purse onto my lap and dig around for my phone, finally finding it hiding under my wallet. As I pull it out of my bag, a piece of paper comes out with it, fluttering onto the tabletop in front of Diana.

She plucks it up and gives it back to me. “Here you go.”

“Thanks,” I say, a crease puckering my forehead. I don’t recognize the paper and have no idea why it’s in my bag, but rather than check it later, I

make the stupid decision of unfolding it in front of everyone.

My heart stops when I recognize the handwriting.

It's Beckett's.

Not Will's.

"Oh my God, is that a love note?" With a grin, Diana steals the paper back, her green eyes twinkling with mischief.

I try to snatch it out of her hand, but she's already reading it out loud.

"*Have a good day, baby girl. Miss you already.*" Her jaw falls open. "Whoa. Will's leaving secret notes in your purse? The boy has it *bad*."

Relief floods my chest at her assumption that the note is from Will. Thank God she doesn't know what their handwriting looks like.

And thank God that Beckett chose to write the most innocuous note on the planet. This could've gone in a whole other direction if he'd said *Will and I can't wait to fuck you later, baby girl.*

Gigi's voice drips with amusement as she says, "Okay, that is beyond cute."

I give a nervous laugh, hoping the flush in my cheeks doesn't give me away. "Yeah. Will's sweet like that sometimes."

"Would it kill you to admit you like him?" Blake says with a smirk, and I realize she's mimicking my exact words when I was harassing her about Isaac in the fall.

"I like him a lot," I admit.

I stuff the note into my purse as casually as possible, pretending it wasn't from the wrong guy. No, not the *wrong* guy. Just a *different* guy. My mind races, guilt gnawing at me. I have no idea how to handle this situation anymore. I don't want to lie about who's writing me sweet notes. But I also don't want to tell the truth.

"What's a lot?" Gigi asks, smiling.

What am I supposed to say? That I'm falling for him? For Beckett too? The notion feels too big. Too terrifying. When we started this thing, I hadn't planned on catching feelings—especially for both of them.

For the first time in my life, the Method failed me. Because "falling in love with two guys" was *not* on my list of potential outcomes.

"I don't know," I finally say. "I mean…I *might* be falling for him." I laugh awkwardly, trying to brush it off as no big deal.

Blake’s eyebrows soar. “You’re falling for him? Charlotte, that’s serious.”

“Yeah.” I sigh, hating how conflicted I feel. How scared I am.

Because…falling for one guy? Fine.

But two?

That’s a mess I’m not ready for.

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A few nights later, I’m back at the town house, sitting cross-legged on the couch, laptop open in front of me and a mess of textbooks and scribbled notes spread out on the coffee table as I sketch out the latest iteration of my heart monitor design.

I prefer working at their place. In fact, it’s become a habit now, packing an overnight bag and driving to Hastings, where there’s no Agatha monitoring the halls making sure everyone is wearing Delta Pi–approved pj’s or isn’t typing too loudly on their keyboards. Here, I can be as quiet or as loud as I choose. I can stay up all night if I want without worrying about anyone derisively commenting about the dark circles under my eyes the next day. Because dark eye circles are a common occurrence in STEM. Engineering comes with a lot of late nights, caffeine, and occasional breakdowns over complex algorithms.

I wouldn’t trade it for anything in the world, though. STEM might be challenging, but it’s also stimulating. Rewarding. *Fun*. Maybe not everyone’s idea of fun, but definitely mine.

Will sits on the other end of the couch, his gaze glued to the Bruins game on the TV. Every few minutes, he either curses angrily or exclaims, “Fuck yeah!”

Beckett went out tonight with one of their teammates, someone called the Kansas Kid, who I only recently realized was a human man. For the longest time, I thought they were talking about a western movie.

I groan when my phone buzzes on the table, fighting the urge to march into the hall bathroom and flush the damn thing down the toilet. Harrison’s been blowing up my phone this past week, and although I feel like shit admitting it, I enjoyed it when he was in California. He ended up staying out there after Christmas for another six weeks, crashing at his friend’s

place and building a website for the friend's tech start-up. He'd been too busy to text or call me more than a handful of times, and I can't deny it felt nice to have some breathing room.

Whenever I talk to Harrison, it feels so damn *heavy*. He triggers this relentless need to atone for the great childhood, the full life, I was fortunate to be given. My sister is adding to that guilt too. She stopped badgering me to tell our parents about Harrison, which is somehow even worse than being nagged about it. A part of me needed her to keep pushing. Without that pressure, I'm even less inclined to share the truth with Mom and Dad.

"Holy shit. You should've come out tonight, Larsen. Nazzy almost started a bar fight with an active-duty Navy SEAL."

I glance up as Beckett strolls into the living room, a bearded, golden vision in faded jeans and a white hoodie that brings out his tan. His eyes are bright but not glazed, which tells me he's tipsy rather than wasted.

"Dude, that kid's mouth is gonna get him killed one day," Will says without taking his gaze off the hockey game.

Beckett settles next to me, leaning in to smack a kiss on my cheek. "How's the blood project going?"

"It's my capstone project," I correct with a grin. "And it's a blood *pressure* device."

"Right. Explain this to me again?" He peeks over my shoulder at the laptop screen. "I'm trying to get my nerd fix for the night."

Will snorts.

But because I happen to *be* a nerd, I can't pass up the opportunity to nerd out when given the chance.

"Okay. *So*," I tell Beckett, excited to talk about my capstone. "Imagine a device that can measure your heart rate and blood pressure without the need for those annoying cuffs. It's totally noninvasive. You know, no squeezing or anything."

"But squeezing is fun." He winks at me.

"Yeah, for you, perv." I snicker. "But normal people don't like those cuffs squeezing their arms, especially if they need to check their blood pressure multiple times a day."

"True," he agrees. He glances back at the laptop. "So you're saying that gadget there can take someone's blood pressure? How?"

“Dude,” Will warns from the chaise. “You have no idea the can of nerd worms you just opened.”

I beam at Beckett. “How, you ask? Let me tell you!”

“Larsen,” he groans. “Save me.”

“Nah.”

“So basically,” I explain, “it involves a combination of photoplethysmography and oscillometry. PPG is a technique that uses light to measure changes in blood volume, and oscillometry is used to estimate blood pressure based on arterial pulsations.”

He sighs. “I don’t think that was English.”

“Sure it was.”

“Can we just say you’re creating a device that makes those old-fashioned cuffs look like dinosaur tech? I don’t need to see behind the curtain.”

“Fine, but only if you promise to help me test the prototype. Both of you. You guys are going to be my human guinea pigs.”

Will looks over with a lewd smile. “You can do anything you want to my body.”

“Any day of the week,” Beckett agrees. “Actually, no. I’ll be your lab rat as long as it doesn’t involve any scary-ass wires and electric shock.”

“Don’t worry, it’ll be painless. Unless you count the pain of having to listen to me explain the minutiae of heart rate variability and signal processing.”

“You know what’s really sexy about this?” Beckett says.

I can’t help but laugh. “I wouldn’t associate my capstone with the word *sexy*, but okay, I’ll bite. What’s sexy about this?”

“How hot you look when you talk about your work. I like it.” His voice is gruff.

Damn it. Every time he says stuff like that, I melt into a puddle at his feet.

I keep working while the guys watch the rest of the game, and after it ends, Beckett puts on that role-playing zombie game he likes while Will passes out on the sectional. Eventually, my eyelids start drooping, so I close the laptop and snuggle up against Beckett. He turns off his game and stretches out beside me, pulling me closer so I’m resting my head on his chest.

He doesn’t make a move to initiate anything physical. It’s late, past two in the morning, and we’re both content to cuddle on the couch, clothes on and genitals safely tucked away.

I reach under his hoodie and stroke his warm, hard flesh. Not in a sexual way. I just like touching him.

“Feels nice,” he mumbles.

Lying there with him, I think back to how annoying I found him last semester, how I believed he had such little substance, and guilt pricks at me.

“Beck?” I say softly.

“Mmm?”

“I misjudged you.”

“What?”

“Last semester. I thought you were a fuckboy.”

“I mean…” He shrugs, and I feel him smiling against my hair.

“And that you lacked substance,” I admit, then release an expletive when I realize how harsh that sounded. “I’m sorry. I just heard that out loud, and it sounds so shitty.”

He rolls onto his side so we’re facing each other, his eyes taking on a knowing gleam.

“Don’t apologize. You’re not the first to think that. Probably won’t be the last.” A wry smile tugs on the corners of his mouth. “People don’t take me seriously because I look like a blond surfer boy and sound like a dumb Australian. But that’s fine by me, actually. It gives me the upper hand. Catches them off guard when they realize I see a lot more than they think.”

“See what?”

“Them. I see people for who they are.”

“Yeah?” I stroke the beard growth on his face, and he sags into my touch for a moment. “Tell me what you see then.”

“Okay. Well…” He nods toward a sleeping Will, gravel thickening his voice. “Larsen, for example. He plays a role outside this house. The nice, unassuming good guy. The perfect gentleman.”

“And he’s not a gentleman?”

“No, he is. He can be. But he’s also got a filthy mouth. He’s an animal in bed. And he’s ruthless. Not like his dad—he wouldn’t crush someone to get ahead. But Will isn’t a pushover either. Push comes to shove, he’ll take what he wants. He’ll pick himself if it comes down to it.”

A groove digs into my forehead. “Would he pick himself over you? Over me?”

“No. But over some people, definitely. Friends even. But not the ones he loves. He’d give the shirt off his back for us.”

I smile against his chest. “He loves us?”

“Are you kidding me? He’s head over heels for you, Charlie. And I think he cares about me, yeah. I think he’d always have my back.”

I sit up, my gaze drifting in Will’s direction. He’s fast asleep.

“So Will is ruthless but selfless. He’s a gentleman and an animal. What else?”

“He’s intense.”

“That I know.”

“He smiles to hide the intensity, but it’s inside him. He’s ambitious, but he doesn’t want to be because he thinks it makes him like his dad. So he pretends he doesn’t have this innate drive to succeed in anything.”

God. Beckett *is* perceptive.

I curl up beside him again, reaching for his hand and lacing our fingers. “Okay. How about me? Tell me about myself, all-knowing one.”

He brushes his lips over my forehead. “You’re the strongest, most fragile person I know.”

I laugh. “Impossible. There’s this thing called the law of contradiction.”

“Huh?”

“Fundamental principle of logic. Basically, it’s a law that states a proposition can’t be true and false at the same time and in the same sense.”

“So…an oxymoron?”

“Sure, if you want to use the commoner’s term for it,” I say in a haughty voice.

He chuckles. “Another truth about you—you’re not a snob, even though you sometimes pretend to be.”

“What else, smart-ass?”

“You’re a perfectionist.”

“Duh.”

“Because you’re scared of not being good enough for your family.”

I falter. “Wh-what?”

“That’s why you push yourself so hard. You’re always trying to be perfect, because you think if you slip up even once, your family won’t love

you as much.”

My heart clenches, his words hitting me in a way I wasn’t prepared for.

“What else?” I ask, my voice shaking.

“When you’re in Charlotte mode, you never let yourself relax, and you’re always on guard. You’ve spent your whole life trying to prove you’re worth loving.”

Every single word is like a tiny, precise blade cutting into truths I’ve always buried deep, under all the achievements and smiles. My eyes feel hot, stinging. I try to swallow, but the lump in my throat won’t budge.

“I…” I blink back the tears, but it’s too late.

They spill over, streaming down my cheeks as a sob chokes my throat.

Beckett curses when he realizes what’s happening. He sits up in alarm, pulling me onto his lap. “Charlie. I’m sorry, baby. I didn’t mean to make you cry.”

The tears keep falling, and I *hate* it. I hate how vulnerable I feel. I hate how he just drew all these fears out into the open and forced me to look at them.

“I’m sorry.” Misery rings in his voice. “I’m a fucking idiot. I’m not good at this shit. Not anymore. I shouldn’t have said any of that.”

Another sob racks my body.

“Please stop crying, baby.” He’s begging me now.

The commotion jolts Will awake. “What’s going on? Are you okay?”

The deep concern swimming in his eyes shatters something inside me. I cry even harder, my chest heaving as the sobs I’ve been holding back for so long break free. It’s too much. Too much truth. Too much vulnerability.

Beckett holds me tighter. “It’s my fault,” he tells Will. “I said some dumb shit.”

“No,” I mumble through a sheen of tears. “You were right. Everything you said…it’s all true.”

Will sinks down beside us, wrapping his arms around my waist from behind. It’s odd, the way he grounds me, makes me feel safe. Beckett does too, but in a different way. I trust Beckett wholeheartedly, but he doesn’t necessarily ground me. If anything, he makes me soar.

“I love my parents,” I whisper as the tears finally begin to subside. “So much. And I know they love me. But being adopted messes with your head sometimes, especially when you’re a kid. I know it’s irrational. They’ve

never given me a single reason to doubt their love. But I remember lying awake some nights, especially if I did something bad, like stole a cookie and then lied about it or some other trivial bullshit—I'd lie there terrified that they'd come into my room and tell me it was time to go back."

Will rests his chin on my shoulder, pressing a kiss to it. "I'm sorry. That sounds brutal."

I gulp through the lump in my throat. The memories trigger a fresh rush of tears.

Me at age six, my clothes all dirty, clinging to my mom after I ran through the muddy playground when she ordered me not to.

Clutching her hand, desperate for reassurance. Asking her if she was going to give me back now because I was bad.

And then the relief that washed over me when she held me close and whispered that I was her forever daughter.

I hadn't realized I was still carrying so many of those childhood fears, and I bury my face in Beckett's neck, battling the tears while he strokes my hair and Will holds me steady.

"Breathe," Beckett whispers in my ear.

I close my eyes and take a deep breath, then exhale slowly, trying to let go of the anxiety, the insecurity, the constant need to prove myself.

But there's nothing for me to prove. Not here, with these two guys. When I'm here, I don't feel the need to be perfect. I just get to be…me.

# DAD CHAT

***Will Larsen has been added to Dad Chat***

***Luke Ryder has been added to Dad Chat***

***Shane Lindley has been added to Dad Chat***

***Beckett Dunne has been added to Dad Chat***

***JOHN LOGAN:***

Yo. You've been recruited.

***LUKE RYDER:***

Recruited for what?

***JOHN LOGAN:***

To watch out for my daughter. This Isaac kid is a menace.

***BECKETT DUNNE:***

I don't want to be in this chat. Unsubscribe.

***WILL LARSEN:***

I will stay only because three of you played in the NHL and won multiple Stanley Cups.

***JOHN LOGAN:***

You are all staying in this chat until you are removed from the chat.

***HUNTER DAVENPORT:***

What do you mean, three? You realize I exist, right? I won a fucking cup with Tampa.

***WILL LARSEN:***

Oh shit. Davenport's in this chat too??

***SHANE LINDLEY:***

Coach Hollis is gonna shit a brick when he finds out we're in here and he still can't score an invite.

***GARRETT GRAHAM:***

Hey, Shane. Sorry to hear about your father. Gigi said you two were close.

***SHANE LINDLEY:***

Thanks, Mr. Graham. Yeah…it's been rough. We miss him a lot.

***GARRETT GRAHAM:***

Garrett. And I hear ya. I can't imagine what you're going through.

***COLIN FITZGERALD:***

This could probably go unsaid, but nobody tells Hollis you got an invite. Understood?

***BECKETT DUNNE:***

Any reason why he's shunned from a super cool group called Dad Chat?

***JAKE CONNELLY:***

His wife is a narc. She reads his messages and reports back to our wives.

***SHANE LINDLEY:***

Yo, that's fucked. She breaks into his phone?

***COLIN FITZGERALD:***

No, he gives her access to it. Hollis says secrets are the nails used to build a

house of divorce.

***SHANE LINDLEY:***

That dude is weird.

***JOHN LOGAN:***

How did you assholes turn this conversation about yourselves? My daughter's life is at risk here.

***JOHN TUCKER:***

Your daughter's life isn't at risk.

***DEAN DI LAURENTIS:***

At risk of getting knocked up by a football player, maybe. Risk of death? Unlikely.

***JOHN LOGAN:***

She's not getting knocked up, because they're not having sex.

***BECKETT DUNNE:***

LOL

***GARRETT GRAHAM:***

LOL

***CONOR EDWARDS:***

LOL

***SHANE LINDLEY:***

BAHAHAHAHAHAHA

***DEAN DI LAURENTIS:***

What’s the weather like in Denial Town?

***JOHN LOGAN:***

Fuck all of you.

Here’s the deal, young Briars. Blake is too trusting for her own good. She doesn’t possess the proper skills yet to see through this dickhead’s bullshit. But I do. Isaac Grant is a MTMD.

***SHANE LINDLEY:***

??

***GARRETT GRAHAM:***

I got this—I speak Logan. A…menace to my daughter.

***JOHN LOGAN:***

Exactly. Who names their kid Isaac Grant anyway? Fucking assholes, that's who. He almost got Blake kicked out of her dorm. And since I'm not there to keep an eye on this fuckhead, I'm officially declaring you my proxies. Especially you, Ryder. You're practically related to her now.

***LUKE RYDER:***

Um…I'm not interfering in a freshman girl's love life.

***SHANE LINDLEY:***

Hard pass.

***BECKETT DUNNE:***

I'll do it. She's cute.

***Beckett Dunne has been removed from Dad Chat***

***JOHN LOGAN:***

The rest of you—you'll watch out for Blake, you hear me?

***DEAN DI LAURENTIS:***

Or face death.

***WILL LARSEN:***

We'll do our best to look out for her.

***JOHN LOGAN:***

Finally, someone reasonable.

***GARRETT GRAHAM:***

Yes. Finally.

***JOHN LOGAN:***

Are you calling me unreasonable?

***HUNTER DAVENPORT:***

Oh shit! The nominees for this year's Hockey Hall of Fame were just announced.

***JAKE CONNELLY:***

Link?

***GARRETT GRAHAM:***

Let me read and then we'll discuss.

***SHANE LINDLEY:***

omg we’re about to discuss hockey with hockey legends.

***JOHN LOGAN:***

No, we’re done here. Watch out for Blake.

***DEAN DI LAURENTIS:***

Or die.

***JOHN LOGAN:***

Fuck off, Dean. If this were one of your daughters, you’d do the same thing.

***SHANE LINDLEY:***

Can we please talk about the Hall of Fame nominations?

***Shane Lindley has been removed from Dad Chat***

***Luke Ryder has been removed from Dad Chat***

***Will Larsen has been removed from Dad Chat***

# CHAPTER FORTY

## CHARLOTTE

*He’s the worst, right?*

AFTER MONTHS OF RIGOROUS PLANNING AND ENDLESS MEETINGS—WITH a few stellar PowerPoint presentations thrown in there—the night of the Delta Pi Presidents’ Gala finally arrives. And I have to admit, my sorority sisters killed it with the decorations. Yara’s centerpieces are downright glorious.

The ballroom at the hotel in Boston is shimmering, lit by chandeliers. I smooth the front of my pale pink dress and adjust the spaghetti straps, looking around for Will, my date for tonight.

My heart flutters when I spot him by the bar, looking impossibly handsome in a sleek black tuxedo. He catches my eye and flashes that easy smile that always makes me weak in the knees. He cleans up nicely, but I’m not surprised. Of course Mr. All-American can pull off a tux.

I can’t help but admire how he stands out among the sea of older, wealthier alumni. He looks confident, poised, like he belongs here, and I suppose he does. He’s a congressman’s son. He fits right in at these sorts of events, with these types of people.

I make my way over to him, weaving through clusters of people who are too busy schmoozing to notice me slip past. When I reach him, he kisses my cheek, his hand gently resting on my lower back.

“Sorry, this drink line is taking forever,” he tells me.

“It’s okay. We’re not in any rush. The guests of honor aren’t even here yet.”

I keep scanning the arched doorway for my mother, who texted a few minutes ago to say she was almost at the hotel. Dad couldn’t come with her tonight because of a work emergency, so she’s flying solo.

On my next scan, my gaze lands on a familiar face.

Ugh. Mitch is here.

Every muscle goes on high alert. I don't know why I'm surprised to see him. A third of my sorority sisters are dating Delta Tau guys. Their frat is our male counterpart, and we frequently cohost events with them, so there are a bunch of Delta Tau alums in attendance tonight.

When Mitch's eyes meet mine, he gives me a little smirk. I shift my gaze off his smug face, wondering what I ever saw in the guy. He was so sweet when we first started dating. Attentive. Kind. But his energy could never quite match mine, whether in the bedroom, academics, or general life aspirations. I can't believe I wasted almost two years on him.

Will follows my gaze. "Is that Mitch?"

"Yup. Just ignore him."

"Gladly."

The bartender finally brings Will two glasses of red wine. He hands me one, and I link my arm through his as we wander away from the bar. We find a quiet spot across the room with Faith, Yara, and Blake, and rather than acknowledge the constant looks Mitch tosses my way, I try to focus on the sound of Will's deep voice as he chats with my friends. The ballroom buzzes with laughter and conversation, the clinking of glasses echoing off the walls.

The next time I check the entrance, I spot my mother walking through the archway.

I touch Will's arm. "My mom's here."

He's unfazed. "Do you want to go over there alone first, or should I come with you?"

I stare at him.

"What?" he says.

"You're about to meet my mother, and you're acting like it's no big deal."

Will shrugs. "It's *not* a big deal. You told her we're dating, right?"

Yes, but I'd neglected to mention that I'm also dating his best friend. Mom has been texting all week about how she can't wait to meet Will, and each time I read an excited message from her, unhappiness washes over me at the reminder that Beckett isn't here with us. He insisted he didn't mind, that he wanted me to enjoy the night without worrying about him, but still, it doesn't quite feel right.

It feels like I’m betraying Beckett by not introducing him to my mother. By acting like he’s not as big a part of my life as Will is.

“C’mon,” Will says, lacing his fingers through mine. “Let’s go say hi.”

I notice Faith giving a nod of approval at his confidence about meeting my mom. She told me the other night that she likes Will a lot. She thinks he’s good for me.

I catch my mother’s eye, and we weave our way toward her. Her face lights up at the sight of us, her smile broadening.

“Charlotte, honey! You look beautiful.” She gives me a hug and a kiss on the forehead, then turns to Will, appraising him. “And I finally get to meet Will! You are a lot more handsome than Charlotte described,” she tells him, and he chuckles.

“Thanks,” he says, looking bashful as he bites his lip through a smile. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Mrs. Kingston.”

“Please. Call me Anna.” She shakes his hand, then squeezes it with both of hers. “The pleasure is all mine. Char hasn’t told us much about you, so I’m looking forward to getting to know you better. You play hockey, I’ve heard?”

He nods. “I’m a forward for the Briar men’s team. Do you watch hockey?”

Mom laughs. “Nope! But I’m happy to hear all about it. Do you enjoy it?”

There’s genuine affection in her eyes as she chats with Will, asking him about his studies, his interests. He answers her questions with the perfect blend of charm and respect, and I can’t help but feel proud. He really is sweet, and Mom is clearly impressed by him.

As they talk, another rush of guilt floods my body.

Beckett should be here too.

I shouldn’t have to choose between them like this, decide on who gets to be my “public” boyfriend. The job fell into Will’s lap because I’d told Faith I had a movie date with him the first time I went over to their place. And it just sort of stuck.

The evening goes on, the award ceremony for my mother and the other presidential honoree coming and going, and Will stays by my side, his presence comforting and steady. But I can’t shake the feeling that something is missing. Every time I look at him, I think of Beckett and how

unfair this all is. I need to talk to Beckett. Just to hear his voice, to make sure he's okay.

"Hey," I whisper to Will as a jazz band starts up, signaling the beginning of the dancing portion of the night. "I'm going to step outside for a minute, okay? I want to call Beck and see how he's doing. I'll be right back."

"Sure," he says. "Take your time."

I slip out of the ballroom and into a quiet hallway, pulling my phone from my clutch. I dig my heels into the soft carpet and tap my french-tipped fingernails against the cream-colored wall as I wait for Beckett to pick up. He takes his sweet-ass time.

"Hey, baby," he finally drawls. Just hearing him makes my heart ache with longing.

"Hey. I wanted to check in on you. How are you doing?"

"All good here," he assures me, and I can hear the smile in his voice. "I told you, don't worry about me. Are you having a good time?"

"I am," I admit. "But I wish you were here. We both do."

"Nah, don't feel bad, Charlie. I mean it. Enjoy the night."

"I can't help it—I do feel bad. But I promise I'll make it up to you later."

"Oh? And how do you plan on doing that?" His voice drops to a low, teasing tone.

"Well… I'm thinking it'll involve your dick and my mouth and a lot of moaning."

His laughter tickles my ear. "I like the sound of that. Although I think your pussy might need to make an appearance too."

The pussy in question clenches with desire. "That could be arranged."

"Are you wet right now?"

"As of two seconds ago, soaked. I called to cheer you up, and instead you just turned me on. Thanks a lot, Beckett."

"I won't apologize for turning you on. Making you horny is my favorite hobby."

I catch my lip between my teeth to tamp down a groan. "I can't wait to fuck you later."

Before he can respond, I hear a scoff behind me.

"Seriously, Charlotte? *Wow*."

Spinning around, I find Mitch standing at the entry of the hallway, disgust twisting his features.

I freeze, my heart dropping to my stomach. “I have to go,” I whisper into the phone. “Call you when we’re leaving.”

“Charlie—” Beckett starts.

I end the call and take a breath. I’m sick to my stomach as I walk toward my ex-boyfriend.

“You’re still the same slut you’ve always been, huh?” Mitch mocks.

I hope he can’t see how badly my knees are wobbling. “I have no idea what you’re talking about,” I say coolly.

That gets me a loud bark of laughter. “You just told some other guy you can’t wait to fuck him later.”

“You must have misheard me.”

“I didn’t mishear shit,” he snarls. “You called him Beckett. Isn’t that the dumb jock from class last semester?”

I clench my teeth.

“You’re unreal. Sneaking off to talk to another guy while you’re here with someone else?” His voice rises. “I knew you were a cock-addicted, come-guzzling whore, but this is a new low, even for you.”

My blood runs cold. I glance toward the lobby area, praying no one else overheard. But then I see movement out of the corner of my eye. My mother steps into the hallway, her expression a mixture of confusion and concern.

“Charlotte. There you are!” she calls. “I was looking for you.” Her eyes narrow when she recognizes who I’m speaking to. “Mitch. I didn’t realize you were here tonight.”

“Anna,” he says politely.

“Mrs. Kingston,” she corrects. *Mic drop, Mom*. Her gaze shifts between us. “What’s going on here?”

“Nothing,” I say quickly. “We were just catching up.”

“Catching up?” Mitch scoffs. “Is that what you call it now?”

My mother frowns. “Honey, what’s going on?”

“It’s nothing, I swear,” I lie.

She doesn’t look convinced, but there’s no way I’m repeating a single word Mitch just uttered. I shoot him a glare, silently begging him to drop it, and thankfully, he doesn’t say anything else.

“Let’s go back inside and find Will,” I tell her.

She gives a slow nod. “All right.”

We leave my ex in our wake and cross the lobby toward the ballroom doors, but as we're about to pass the archway, she stops and touches my arm.

"Char," she says. The worry has faded from her expression, and her lips now twitch with wry amusement. "I'm only saying this because I'm secure in the belief that you and Mitch will never be getting back together, but… your father and I hated that boy."

A laugh pops out of my mouth. "He's the worst, right?"

"The absolute worst."

"I wish you'd told me this when we were dating."

"You wouldn't have listened."

"You're probably right."

I'm still giggling as we rejoin the festivities, but the humor dies when I remember what Mom had interrupted.

Mitch heard me talking to a guy who isn't Will, my public boyfriend.

He *heard* me, damn it.

# CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

## CHARLOTTE

*Breathe with me*

SOMEHOW, I MAINTAIN MY COMPOSURE FOR THE REST OF THE EVENING. Most of the older guests start to head out before midnight, but as a member of the exec board, I'm expected to stay until the very end, even if this thing goes on until four in the morning. Although I'm fairly certain we only have the ballroom until two, thank God. I really don't want to be here all night.

The Delta Tau guys don't seem to be in a hurry to leave. I keep hearing laughter from their table, and every time I glance over there, they're huddled together like a pack of wolves.

As Faith and Will chat beside me, I catch Mitch's eye for a second before he leans in closer to his frat brothers, saying something that makes them roar with laughter.

"What the hell are those idiots giggling about?" Faith says, looking annoyed.

"Joey probably told another one of his stellar fart jokes," I reply, but the knot in my stomach hints at something more ominous.

My instincts are screaming that Mitch told the Delta Tau guys what he heard earlier, and I want desperately for those instincts to be wrong.

But then I hear it—Mitch's voice, clear and cutting, slicing in our direction. "Yeah, Charlotte's fucking two guys. Total slut."

Will goes rigid beside me. His jaw clenches.

I feel the blood rushing to my face, turning my cheeks into tomatoes, but rather than flee for the door the way my mortification wants me to do, my legs have a mind of their own. Before I can stop myself, I stomp toward the Delta Tau table.

"What did you just say?" I growl at Mitch.

Heads turn toward us, curious stares lingering, but I don’t give a shit.

He leans back in his chair, a cocky grin spreading across his face. “Oh, didn’t hear me the first time? I was just telling the guys about how you like to keep things interesting with more than one dick. Must be exhausting keeping up the prim-and-proper act all the time.”

Will comes up beside me, his fists tightening, but I place a hand on his chest to stop him. I’m not about to let my ex-boyfriend get to me, not like this.

“You don’t know anything about me,” I snap at him. “Keep my name out of your mouth, Mitch.”

Before he can say anything else, Agatha marches over in her white designer dress, perfectly styled hair bouncing with each step.

“What is going on here?” she demands.

Mitch grins up at her from his chair. “Hey, Agatha, did you know Charlotte’s been bed-hopping between two hockey players? Gotta satisfy her sex addiction somehow, right?”

Now it’s Faith lunging forward. “Hey, asshole, give it a fucking rest.”

He rolls his eyes at my best friend. “You should be giving that advice to Char, Faith. She needs to rest between all the dicks she’s sucking.”

Once again, I have to restrain Will from attacking my ex. I squeeze his hand, a silent message to stay calm.

“Is any of this true, Charlotte?” Agatha’s jaw is agape.

“Of course it’s not true,” Faith snaps back. “Jesus, Agatha. Charlotte isn’t a sex addict. He’s just bitter that she dumped him. Pathetic asshole.”

“It’s not true,” I assure Agatha, anger churning in my gut. “He’s trying to stir up trouble, as usual.”

She looks between Mitch and me, clearly unsure who to believe. “This isn’t the time for drama,” she finally says. “We have standards here, and I don’t want rumors like this affecting our sorority’s reputation.”

I want to scream. “It’s not a rumor. He’s lying.”

“Am I?” Mitch chimes in, his smirk growing wider. His friends laugh again, egging him on.

I can’t even look at Will, afraid of what I’ll see in his expression. Murder, most likely. Mitch and his frat bros are chortling as Agatha huffs away, and it takes all my willpower to hold it together.

“Let’s get out of here,” I tell Will, gripping his hand so tight I fear I might break it.

Faith falls in step with us, forcing me to a stop when we’re a good distance away. “Are you all right?”

“I’m fine. I just want to leave.” I lean in to give her a quick hug. “Thanks for having my back.”

“Always.”

“I know I’m supposed to stay and help with cleanup, but—”

“Go,” she orders. “I’ll deal with Agatha and the execs.”

“Thank you.” I don’t know what I did to deserve a friend like Faith.

As Will and I walk out of the ballroom, I feel the stares of Mitch and his Delta Tau crew burning into my back. My chest is tight with embarrassment. Will’s hand is steady around mine, but even his touch can’t calm the storm inside me.

We give our tickets to the coat check girl, collect our jackets, and then head toward the lobby, where Will says, “Do you mind if I hit the head before we go?”

“No problem. I’ll meet you out front.”

I exit the hotel through the glass sliding doors in the lobby and step onto the wide sidewalk, the winter air hitting my face like a slap. It feels good, though. The chill. It opens up my lungs, and I finally feel like I can breathe again.

I lean against the brick exterior, staring out onto the well-lit street, trying to collect myself.

But the quiet doesn’t last long.

“Thought you could just walk away from that, huh?”

I stiffen at the sound of Mitch’s voice. I turn to see him stepping outside, a nasty grin plastered across his face. My stomach twists. I don’t want to do this again. Not now. Not ever.

“Go away,” I mutter.

He comes closer. “What’s wrong? Can’t handle people knowing the truth about you?”

“I said leave me alone.”

“Or what?” His voice drops to a venomous note. “You’re really something, you know that? Acting all high and mighty, pretending to be so

perfect. But you're just a slut, Charlotte. You think banging two guys makes you special? It just makes you pathetic."

I clench my fists. "You don't know anything about me."

"I know enough. You were never good enough for me, and you're not good enough for these hockey players either. They'll figure it out soon enough."

The words cut deep, even though I know they shouldn't. I open my mouth to retort, but before I can say anything, Will appears behind us, his eyes blazing with fury.

"What the *fuck* did you just say to her?"

Mitch's smirk wavers for a moment, but he recovers quickly. "Oh, look, the knight in shining armor. What, you here to defend your little toy? Doesn't it bother you she's screwing your buddy behind your back?"

Will doesn't hesitate. He's on Mitch in an instant, grabbing him by the collar and slamming him against the wall. "Shut the fuck up already."

Mitch laughs. "You gonna hit me, tough guy? Go ahead. See how that looks."

"If you insist."

Will's fist shoots forward, colliding into Mitch's jaw with a sickening crack. My ex staggers, clutching his face.

"Get the hell out of here," Will snarls.

Mitch doesn't need to be told twice. He scrambles back inside, muttering curses under his breath.

As soon as he's gone, the reality of what just happened crashes down on me. Mitch isn't going to keep his mouth shut about this. Any of it. He's going to go in there and rant about how Charlotte's hockey player goon punched him in the face. How Charlotte is a slut who's banging the entire hockey team. I can already hear the questions from my sorority sisters. The interrogation from Agatha.

"You okay?" Will asks.

I shake my head, barely able to speak past the lump in my throat. "I can't believe this happened."

"It's not your fault. He deserved it."

I know he's right, but that doesn't make the embarrassment any less overwhelming. "Agatha and the others are going to have a lot to say about this."

“Let them say it. Who cares what they think?”

I care. I care too much. I can already hear the whispers, the judgment, the way they’ll look at me tomorrow like I’m a walking scandal. My secret life is catching up to me, encroaching on my real life.

A life that feels more and more like it’s spiraling out of control.

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I go home with Will instead of to the sorority house. I’m in avoidance mode. Faith texts to make sure I’m okay, and I assure her I am, but I’m lying.

At the boys’ house, I undress in Will’s bedroom, leaving my jewelry on his night table and my dress on his floor. Then I slip into the T-shirt he hands me. Briar Hockey. It hangs past my knees and smells like him.

I collapse on his mattress, the tension in my muscles refusing to alleviate.

I hear the water running in the hall bathroom. Beckett was in the shower when we got back, and now it sounds like he’s brushing his teeth. As Will gets ready for bed, he glances over every few seconds as if to check I’m not going to burst into tears. He’s right to worry.

Before I can ward it off, the wave hits me. Suddenly my chest feels too tight, like there’s a vise squeezing my lungs, and my heart beats so fast it blurs my vision.

It’s been a long time since I’ve experienced a pressure wave this suffocating.

Everything is closing in on me. School, my capstone project, my family, my new brother. Keeping this secret life hidden. Pretending everything is okay when it clearly isn’t.

It’s all too much.

I’m dating two guys. Two amazing, complicated, intense guys. And if anyone finds out, my entire world will implode.

I can’t bear the thought of losing them, but it feels like I’m on the edge of a cliff, dangerously close to falling. The guilt and fear and overwhelming sense of helplessness—it all comes crashing down on me like a tidal wave, and before I know it, I’m sliding off the bed and onto the floor of Will’s bedroom, gasping for air.

“Charlie?”

I can’t breathe. I feel the hot tears streaming down my cheeks. I hadn’t even realized I was crying.

“*Charlotte*.”

Will’s voice is soft, but there’s an urgency in it that cuts through the fog in my mind. He kneels in front of me, his hands cupping my face as he tries to force me to look at him.

“Breathe, baby. Just breathe.”

“I…I can’t,” I wheeze.

“Yes, you can,” he insists, his thumbs brushing away my tears. “I’m right here, okay? Focus on me. Breathe with me.”

He takes a slow, deep breath, exaggerating it so I can follow along. I try to mimic him, inhaling shakily and exhaling just as unsteadily. My heart is still racing, my mind still spinning, but Will doesn’t let go. He keeps his eyes locked on mine.

“Good girl,” he murmurs, his voice soothing. “Keep going, just like that. You’re safe. I’ve got you.”

I manage a weak nod, clutching his wrists like they’re a lifeline. It feels like an eternity before my breathing finally begins to even out, the panic dissipating.

But the fear remains, lurking beneath the surface, threatening to rise up again at any second.

“What if people find out?” The words spill out before I can stop them. “What if they find out about the three of us?”

“They won’t.”

“Mitch heard me talking to Beckett tonight.” I draw another breath. “I don’t think anybody is going to believe him. They’ll assume it’s a rumor. But what happens if it gets out for real?”

“Then we’ll figure it out.”

My bottom lip starts trembling. “I’m so scared of losing everything.”

“You won’t,” he promises, leaning in to press a gentle kiss to my forehead.

I slump into him, desperate for the comfort he offers, and he wraps his arms around me, holding me close.

Beckett’s footsteps sound in the hall. He’s done with his shower. As if sensing the waves of tension rolling out of Will’s room, he appears in the

open doorway, a towel secured around his trim waist.

He takes in the scene with a quick glance, his chiseled features softening when he notices me clinging to Will. “You okay?”

I nod, unable to speak. Will keeps his arms around me, but he looks up at Beckett, and something unspoken passes between them. Beckett walks over to us and crouches beside me.

“She’s okay,” Will says, then fills him in on what happened at the gala. Just hearing the recap makes my stomach roil.

“I’m sorry,” I say when I realize they’re both kneeling at my side like I’m in danger of swooning or something. “I’m okay now. It was just a panic attack.”

Beckett places his hand on my back, reassuring me. “You’ve got nothing to be sorry about.”

I peer up at him, my face still wet with tears. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to __”

“Stop apologizing,” he interrupts, shaking his head.

A lump fills my throat. I gulp it down. “I hate that everyone’s talking about me now. Judging me.”

“Let them judge,” Will says. “They don’t know anything about our relationship. It’s nobody’s business but ours.”

My gaze shifts between them, a familiar knot of doubt twisting inside me. “But what if they’re right? What if this is too complicated? Too messy? I feel like I’m constantly hiding, like we’re doing something wrong.”

“You’re not doing anything wrong. We’re not doing anything wrong.” Will tucks my hair behind my ears. “I know part of you still thinks this isn’t normal, but who cares about normal? I’ve had to work through my own doubts about all this too. There were moments I didn’t think I could handle it. But…I love you, Charlie. And I know that what we have—it’s right. For all of us.”

My breath hitches.

Did he just tell me he loves me?

“And nothing’s going to change that,” he continues, as if he hadn’t dropped an actual L-bomb. “Not some party, not some dickhead like Mitch, and definitely not what other people think.”

“Other people’s opinions matter to me, though. I wish they didn’t. But I don’t think—”

“You don’t have to think about anything right now.” Will’s thumb traces soothing circles on my arm. “Forget about everything, and just be with us.”

Beckett nods, leaning in to kiss my temple. “Let us take care of you tonight.”

The air shifts, thickening as their words sink in. I shiver from the heat of their bodies, noting the way their gazes deepen into something more… primal. My pulse careens, not from fear this time but anticipation.

“Okay,” I breathe, surrendering to the moment.

Will’s lips find mine first, coaxing me into a slow, languid kiss. I melt into him, the pressure of his mouth against mine grounding me, reminding me that I’m safe. Beckett’s fingers slide up my spine, his touch firm and possessive, as if to remind me that he’s there too, that he’s part of this.

Will’s kiss grows more urgent. Beckett’s hand moves to the nape of my neck, tilting my head slightly to the side so he can lick the sensitive skin right below my ear. I shiver at the sensation, a soft moan escaping.

I blink, and suddenly I’m being lifted onto the bed. They’re both on me now, their hands and lips everywhere, worshipping me, making me forget the world outside this bedroom. It’s overwhelming in the best possible way, the heat and the desire pooling low in my belly, soaking my panties, drowning out every thought except how badly I want these men.

They move together in perfect synchronicity, their focus entirely on me, on making me feel like I’m the only thing that matters in the world. And for those few precious moments, I believe it. I let go of everything else, all the fear and uncertainty, and let myself get lost in them.

On my left, Will traces lazy patterns with his fingers along my skin, almost reverent, like he’s memorizing every inch of me. Beckett is on my right, his lips traveling the length of my jawline.

They take their time with me. There’s no rush, no urgency. Just us, tangled together in Will’s bed, in the comfort of each other.

I sigh, my body melting into Will’s touch as his palm skims up my side, tracing the curve of my waist. He knows me so well now. Knows how to make me feel safe, how to bring me back to myself when everything else feels like it’s spinning out of control.

The air in the room changes. Charged with something deeper than mere desire.

Maybe I’m not falling for these guys.

Maybe I’ve already fallen.

Because this…

It feels like love. This complicated, beautiful thing we’ve built together. It’s the way Beckett holds me like I’m the only thing tethering him to the world and the way Will’s steady touch makes me feel like everything will be okay.

I turn my head toward Will, and our lips collide in a kiss. Soft, patient, like he’s savoring the moment. Then I turn toward Beckett, and he strokes my cheek before kissing me too, his tongue slipping through my parted lips.

It suddenly occurs to me that he’s in nothing but a towel. The terry cloth hangs off his hip, one tug away from revealing every tantalizing inch below. So I give it that tug, and his cock springs into my hand, hot and ready for me.

Beckett fucks me first. His long, muscular body hovers over me as he thrusts his cock inside me, again and again, while Will squeezes my breasts and whispers how beautiful I am. I wrap my legs around Beckett’s hips, changing the angle, and that’s when we both realize why this feels so good.

“No condom,” he mumbles against my neck.

I’m on the pill, which I know doesn’t mean much when it comes to STIs. But both guys produced test results during the holidays after I made a random remark about how condoms don’t prevent everything. Even if they hadn’t gotten tested, I know my boys, and I trust them. They’re not sleeping with anyone but me, and I’m only sleeping with them.

“It’s okay,” I tell him. “Keep going.”

The permission summons a husky groan from him. He fucks me harder, filling me so deep I cry out. I cling to him, losing myself in the moment, and when he comes, I feel his cock swell and pulse inside me, and it’s the hottest thing I’ve ever experienced.

Will is the one to coax an orgasm out of me, getting me off with his tongue on my clit before flipping me over, yanking my ass up, and driving his hard cock into me from behind. I know he feels the evidence of Beckett’s release, because he moans and thrusts even deeper. He doesn’t last long, his hips slamming into me, his grunt heating my shoulder as he leans forward and finds his own release, pressed deep inside me.

Afterward, when they’ve left me spent and breathless, I lie between them, more at peace than I’ve felt in days. I turn my head to look at Beckett,

hoping he'll stay with us for once.

But he's already getting up, slipping out of bed and reaching for his towel.

"Where are you going?" I ask, hearing the note of longing in my voice. I hope he's just going to use the bathroom.

He pauses, his back to us, and I see the tension lining his shoulders. "Heading to bed," he says gruffly, not turning around.

I sit up. "Stay with us," I plead.

He hesitates for a long moment, then shakes his head, as if he's fighting something inside himself.

"I prefer to sleep alone." His voice is rough. "G'night."

I know there's more to it than that, something he isn't saying, but I don't push. I simply watch him leave, the door closing behind him, and the ache in my chest returns.

Will pulls me back down beside him, wrapping his arms around me. "Beck's complicated," he says against my hair. "But he cares about you. We both do."

I smile against his shoulder. "You told me you loved me. Before. I heard you say it."

He pauses, then gives a sheepish laugh. "Yeah. I guess I did."

"Did you mean it?"

"Yes." This time, there's no pause. No hesitation.

My mouth feels dry all of a sudden. I swallow, trying to find my voice. "I love you too."

He holds me tighter, his heartbeat steady beneath my ear.

"I just wish…" I trail off, trying to ignore the hollow feeling in my heart.

My gaze shifts toward the bedroom door, and I know Will is reading my mind because he plants a kiss on the top of my head.

"Go," he says softly.

"You sure?"

"Mm-hmm." He sounds sleepy, already falling asleep. "Go."

# CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

## BECKETT

*She was my entire world, and then she wasn't*

I CRAWL INTO MY OWN BED AND STARE UP AT THE CEILING, TRYING TO push away the thoughts spinning like a carousel in my mind. The room is dark, and the stillness that usually brings me comfort now feels oppressive, heavy. I hate leaving them, but staying feels too…dangerous.

The truth is, as much as I care about Charlie, as much as I want to be with her, I can't let myself get too close. Not like that. Not when I know it will only hurt more in the end.

I'm starting to drift off when I hear her footsteps, see her shadowy frame walk into my bedroom. A moment later, the bed shifts beneath me. My heart skips a beat, and before I can react, Charlie is sliding under the covers, her warm body pressing against mine. She wraps her arms around me as the big spoon, her face nuzzling the crook of my neck.

"Baby," I whisper, my voice thick with emotion. "What are you doing?"

"I don't want you to sleep alone." Her breath tickles my skin.

I swallow hard. "You should be with Will. You know that."

She tightens her grip on me, refusing to let go. "No. I want to be with you. Right now, I need you, Beck."

I sigh, closing my eyes. I feel my resolve crumbling. There's something about this woman that makes it impossible to push her away, no matter how much I know I should.

"I don't like sleeping with people," I finally say.

"Why?" Her voice is soft but insistent. "Why don't you like it?"

I hesitate, my mind flashing back to memories I've tried so hard to bury. "It's too intimate," I mumble after an interminable pause.

She pauses too, processing my words. "Is that because of your high school girlfriend? The one who cheated on you?"

I stiffen, the mention of Shannon stirring up a mix of bitterness and pain. "Yeah. Because of her."

Charlie pulls me backward so that I'm lying prone and she's peering down at me, searching my eyes in the darkness.

"What happened? I know she hurt you, but you never talk about it."

She's right. I don't. And I don't plan on starting now.

"It doesn't matter what happened." I shrug. "She was my entire world, and then she wasn't."

Charlie stays quiet, her gaze locked on mine, urging me to continue.

"What do you want me to say here, sugar puff?" I take a deep breath, my chest constricting at the memories. "We had plans. We were supposed to go to college together. We talked about moving in, starting this whole new life. I thought she was my future."

"You must've been devastated when she ended it."

I shrug again, my shoulders bumping the pillow.

"And I imagine there's a lot of trust issues now. You're scared to let anyone else in, right? You're worried if you do, you'll get cheated on again."

"Actually, I'm not." I give a wry chuckle. "I don't ascribe someone else's bad behavior on every new person I meet. I don't see cheaters now everywhere I look."

"But you're afraid of getting hurt."

"I guess. I don't know. It's like…there's this wall around me now, and I can't let anyone in. Not completely."

"Not even me?"

"Especially not you," I say roughly. "Because you deserve someone who can be there for you completely. Someone like Will. Larsen's boyfriend material from head to toe."

"Will's amazing," she agrees. "But so are you. You're more than you think you are. You're sweet and caring and protective. You're boyfriend material too, whether you believe it or not."

“I’m not. I’m not cut out for the deeper shit. And I don’t want to drag you down with me.”

“You’re not dragging me down. You’re lifting me up. Both of you are. Look at what you did for me tonight. I don’t think I’ve ever had a panic attack like that before, and you guys sat there with me, helped me breathe, and then made me forget.”

My heart squeezes when I remember how vulnerable she’d looked earlier. Scared. The tears streaking her cheeks. But she’s wrong. Will was the one who talked her down. Will was the one who told her he loved her.

And me? I just stood there. Mute.

I chew on the inside of my cheek, hesitating. “Will said he loved you.”

“I know. And…I said it back. Before I came in your room.”

I nod in the darkness. I want to say something, but the words stick in my throat.

“Beckett,” she whispers, her hand finding mine under the covers. “I love you too.”

The room seems to shrink. I can’t draw any oxygen into my lungs. She loves me. I knew it, deep down, but hearing her say it… It cracks something open inside me, my chest swelling with emotion.

For a moment, I can’t speak. I want to believe her, want to let myself fall into what Charlie and I have, what the three of us have, but the fear is still there, gnawing at the edges of my resolve.

I swallow. “I…I can’t say it back.”

“Why not?”

I shake my head, feeling like the worst person alive. “It’s not that I don’t feel something. I just—” I stop talking, my muscles tensing. I can’t fucking do this. “I can’t say it.”

Her fingers tighten around mine. “But do you feel it?”

Do I feel it? Yeah, of course I do. I’ve been falling for her for months. But saying it out loud feels like stepping onto a tightrope with no safety net.

She waits, and when I don’t answer, she asks again. “Do you feel it, Beckett?”

“I don’t know.”

That’s a lie. I know. But admitting it means letting her in. Fully. Letting her see all the parts of myself that I’m not ready to expose.

Silence stretches between us. I can hear my heartbeat in my ears, louder than it should be.

“What if you leave?” I blurt out, surprising even myself.

She sits up, confused. “What?”

I force myself to meet her eyes. “What if I let myself feel this, and you leave?”

Her features soften. She reaches out to touch my cheek, stroking my beard. “I’m not your ex. I would never hurt you.”

“You say that now. But you can’t see the future. People change their minds. People leave. You don’t know what will happen.”

“I know that I love you, more than I ever thought I would. I know I would never intentionally hurt you.”

I want to believe her. Fuck, I want to. But the fear has wrapped itself around my chest like a boa constrictor.

She leans over me, resting her forehead against mine. “Trust me, Ice Boy. I love you. I’m not going to hurt you.”

I close my eyes. She’s asking me to let her in, and I don’t know if I can.

“Please,” she murmurs. “Trust me.”

I exhale. Maybe I don’t have to say it. Maybe it’s enough, for now, to just hold on to her.

“I’ll try,” I say quietly, pulling her against my chest.

“That’s all I’m asking for.”

We stay like that for a while, her breathing evening out as she nestles closer. Eventually, I feel her body relax completely as she drifts off to sleep, but my mind continues to race.

# CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

## WILL

*Tick-fucking-tock*

I WAKE UP TO THE SOUND OF MUFFLED VOICES AND THE DISTINCT CREAK of the front door opening and then closing. It takes a moment to fully shake off the remnants of sleep. I blink, realizing the voices aren't in my head. There are people downstairs.

I roll over, expecting to find Charlotte still asleep beside me, but the bed is empty, and I remember she slept with Beckett last night.

I wait for it. The stab of jealousy. The heat of possessiveness. *Mine. She's mine.*

But it doesn't come.

Because she's ours.

I toss the covers aside and slip out of bed, pulling on a pair of sweatpants and sliding my phone in my pocket in case I need to call the cops. Because the voices downstairs are only growing louder, and I don't hear Charlie's feminine pitch. It sounds like a bunch of dudes arguing with each other.

What the fuck?

I make my way downstairs, but it isn't until I round the corner into the living room that I find the source of the commotion. Beckett stands near the window, shirtless, his arms crossed, while an older blond man paces the hardwood with a frustrated expression on his face.

Judging by the strong resemblance, I deduce this is Beck's dad.

And the man is clearly agitated, making wild gestures as he says, "Can you believe it? Over a job offer!"

Beckett sighs and drops his arms to his sides. "Dad. Seriously. Chill, bro. Did she actually kick you out?"

I lean against the doorway, trying not to eavesdrop too obviously, but curiosity gets the better of me. Beck's dad has the same broad shoulders and strong jawline as his son, but his hair is graying at the temples, and he's sporting a bit of a paunch at his midsection. Australians do like to drink.

"Yes!" Mr. Dunne exclaims, throwing his hands up in exasperation. "Kicked me out of my own house because I accepted a job offer! A great opportunity, mind you, but noooo, she says it's too much of a sacrifice."

Beckett gawks at his father. "I'm sorry—what? You *accepted* the Sydney job? Even after Mum said she didn't want to move?"

His dad falters. In the face of Beckett's disbelief, I witness Mr. Dunne realizing in real time what a stupid thing he'd done.

It's weird to see them interact. Conversing like a normal father and son. I can't remember the last time I had a conversation with my own father that wasn't transactional. No way would Congressman Larsen be showing up here if he got into a fight with Kelsey.

"What, you just assumed she'd go along with it?"

"Well…yeah!" Mr. Dunne stops pacing long enough to shoot his son a pointed look. "I'm the one with the career. She should be supportive. But instead, she's always complaining about the little things. Like moving to another continent is some huge inconvenience. Marriage is about making sacrifices, right? Isn't that what she's supposed to do?"

I can't help but snort at that, and both their heads turn toward the doorway.

When Mr. Dunne raises a brow, I shrug, unable to suppress my grin. "You consider moving to another continent a 'little thing'?" I use air quotes. "That's, like, a *colossal* sacrifice."

The older man glares at me. "And who the hell are you, mate?"

His glare is all bluster and no substance. My grin springs free.

"This is Will Larsen," Beckett introduces. "Roommate, teammate, et cetera."

"Nice to meet you, Will. I'm James," Mr. Dunne says before glaring at me again. "Now mind your own business."

I can't help it—I start to laugh. Beck snickers too.

"Dude," he tells his dad, "Larsen isn't wrong. Mum told you she didn't want to move to Sydney. So you accepted a job in Sydney. Do you see the logical inconsistency here?"

His father huffs. “You sound just like her. Both of you. You’re supposed to be on my side.”

Beckett laughs. “I’m not taking sides. I’m saying that maybe, just *maybe*, you fucked up. Women don’t appreciate being bulldozed.”

James grumbles something under his breath, clearly not thrilled with the idea of being wrong.

I decide to make myself useful and walk to the kitchen, firing up the coffee maker. “Coffee?” I call out.

“God, yes,” Beckett’s dad calls back, stomping after me into the kitchen. “I could use a strong cup right about now.”

Beck joins us, propping his hip against the counter as I start brewing the coffee. “I can’t believe you accepted that job. I had no idea you were suicidal.”

I snort.

“How did she do it when she kicked you out? Throw your clothes out the window? Change the locks?”

“Even worse. She tricked me, mate!”

I grin at the older man. “How does one get tricked into getting kicked out of the house?”

“So yesterday, I told her about accepting the offer, and she said we should go out for dinner later to discuss it, and I’m thinking, okay, she’s taking this really bloody well! Excellent. So I throw on some nice clothes —” He gestures to the polo shirt and khakis he has on, which appear a bit wrinkled, as if he’d slept in them. “We hop in the car, and the next thing I know, she’s dropping me off at the airport hotel and handing me a ticket for a flight that leaves this morning.”

My jaw drops. “Whoa.”

“Nice.” Beckett looks impressed. “Mum’s a stone-cold bitch.”

“Don’t call your mother a bitch,” James grumbles. “Anyway, she looks me right in the eye and says, *Go see your son. Maybe he’ll talk some sense into that dumbass head of yours*. And then she drove off and left me there!”

“One-way ticket?” I ask as I pour three cups of coffee.

“Yes!” he answers in outrage. “Can you believe this?”

“What is going *on* in here?” Charlie’s sleepy voice wafts from the doorway, and we all glance toward her.

My heart beats a little bit faster at the sight of her, my T-shirt hanging over her leggings, feet bare, long black hair rumpled from sleep. She falters when she notices Beckett's father, her wary gaze darting between me and Beck, who gives her a rueful smile.

"This is my dad," he says. "James Dunne, Charlotte Kingston."

He doesn't elaborate, and neither do me or Charlie. Instead, she walks over to shake James's hand, then prepares herself a cup of green tea. As she's dropping a tea bag into her mug, Beckett comes up behind her to plant a kiss on her neck.

"Sorry we woke you," he says, then gives her ass a playful squeeze before grabbing a seat at the breakfast counter with his coffee.

"I didn't know your dad was visiting," she says to him.

"Neither did I," he snorts, which prompts James to retell the entire sordid tale to Charlie, unfazed that she's a total stranger.

Today I'm learning that Australians overshare.

I take a sip of coffee just as my phone buzzes in my pocket. I pull it out, grimacing at the name flashing on the screen.

Tessa Diaz.

I haven't heard from Tessa since she published that profile at my dad's insistence. She emailed me a link to the article when it released back in December. The piece had painted me as the all-American son of a well-respected congressman, teeming with promise and potential, a guy with a bright and shiny future ahead of him.

In other words, total bullshit.

I duck out of the kitchen, bringing the phone to my ear. "Tessa, hey."

"Will!" she chirps, far too enthusiastic for this early in the morning. "I'm sorry to call before nine on a Saturday, but I'm in Boston right now, and I'll only be here until noon. I was hoping to drive out to Hastings for a quick chat. Do you have some time in the next couple hours?"

Curiosity creases my forehead. "Yes, I do. As long as it's soon. We have a game later, so I need to be at the rink this afternoon."

"It'll be quick," she assures me. "If I head out now, I can be at your place in about an hour?"

"My place? You don't want to meet at the diner or something?"

"I'd prefer not to. Wouldn't mind some privacy for this discussion."

Well, color me intrigued.

After we hang up, I return to the kitchen, where Beckett's dad is now asking Charlotte if she would divorce him for taking a job without her permission.

"Who was on the phone?" Beck catches my eye as he sips his coffee.

"Tessa Diaz, that journalist from *Capitol Magazine*. She wrote the profile on me in the fall."

"Right. Your dad's mouthpiece."

"She's coming by in an hour. Says she has something to discuss with me."

Slugging back the rest of my coffee, I walk to the sink and drop my cup in it, then head for the hall.

"Gonna grab a shower before she gets here," I say over my shoulder.

In the shower, as hot water courses down my face and chest, I wonder what the hell my dad's cooked up this time. Because there's no other reason Tessa would be calling me out of the blue, wanting to chat.

We already did a puff piece, though. So this follow-up, or whatever it is, must have some sort of an angle, some new way to cram me further into the mold he's crafted for me.

An hour later, Tessa rings my doorbell, all smiles and bright eyes as I let her in. She's dressed in dark jeans and a thick blue parka with a fur hood, and I greet her with a handshake, trying to match her enthusiasm even as every instinct tells me to be wary.

Rather than remove her winter gear, she nods at the front door. "How about we go for a walk and chat? I promise I won't take up too much of your time."

"Sure."

Grabbing my own coat, I shove my feet in my boots and pull a pair of gloves on. The morning air has a bite to it as we head down the sidewalk. It's fucking cold out, but Tessa doesn't seem to mind it.

"So what's on your mind?" I ask, stuffing my gloved hands into my pockets and wishing I brought a hat.

She gives me a sidelong look. "I'm going to be blunt, Will. I have a proposition for you."

"Okay?"

"I'm leaving the magazine."

My eyebrows soar. "Really? What happened to paying your dues?"

“It’s not necessarily a permanent leave. We’re calling it a leave of absence for now, but it depends on how the campaign pans out.” She grins at my puzzled look and continues. “I’ve been offered a position on Harper Wozniak’s staff as a campaign speechwriter.”

“Oh. Cool. Congratulations.”

“Thank you. I’m excited about it.” She smiles at me, a teasing gleam in her dark eyes. “I want you to come with me.”

I stop dead in my tracks, turning to face her. “What?”

“There’s an open position on the staff. Assistant to Pamela Kerry, Wozniak’s campaign manager. I floated your name out for it, and Pam said the job is yours if you want it. No interview necessary.”

“You’re serious?”

“As a heart attack.”

This is the *last* thing I expected to hear this morning, and now my mind is racing, trying to remember what I know of Harper Wozniak. Her name sounds familiar, but I can’t figure out why.

“Is she my father’s opponent in the primary?” I ask, frowning.

Next fall will be the first time in more than a decade that someone is primarying my dad, which is another reason he’s been so up my ass about maintaining the perfect “image.” Over the holidays, he was ranting and raving like a lunatic about it. How *dare* someone in his own party try to push him out! The *nerve*! I thought he was going to have an aneurysm.

“No,” Tessa replies. “That’s Sandra Donaldson. Harper’s running in another district. With that said, she’s not a fan of your father’s. She’s been quoted in the press criticizing your father’s policies before.”

“And you want me to, what, switch sides? Work for a lady who’s against my father?”

“I think you’d really like Harper. I sat down with her for three hours the other day talking through her positions and everything she’d like to get done. And it lined up with everything you and I talked about during our interview. In fact, she reminded me so much of you that I flew to Boston just so I could do this in person.” Tessa smiles ruefully. “I had a feeling you’d need a lot of convincing and that my sunny disposition might win you over.”

I manage a grin, but I can’t stop staring at her, my mind reeling. I don’t know a thing about Harper Wozniak, but even if everything she’s hoping to

achieve lines up with my own beliefs, there's no way I can work for my father's rival. It's a massive betrayal.

"I don't think so," I finally say, the words thick in my throat. "That's big."

"Huge," she agrees. "And I don't expect you to decide right away. All I'm asking is that you think about it."

I chew on the inside of my cheek. "Tell me more about this position then."

Tessa offers more details, including about her own job. She'll be one of Wozniak's speechwriters for the campaign, and if Wozniak wins, Tessa will be part of her staff full-time. Apparently, there could be a full-time position for me too, if not with Wozniak's office, then with Pamela Kerry on another campaign.

"I spoke to both of them about you in length," Tessa says. "They're intrigued."

"Yeah, because they're thinking of how they can spin it. Look, voters! Representative Larsen's own son doesn't support him."

"You can still support your father in his primary. Harper isn't trying to unseat him. They're not even in the same district. The two things aren't mutually exclusive."

"When would I start?"

"In May, after graduation."

We walk in silence for a few more minutes. The offer continues to run through my mind, and by the time we circle back to the townhouse, I'm a jumbled mess of conflicting emotions.

I can't deny this sounds interesting. I had no idea what job I'd line up after graduation. To be honest, I haven't even started looking. And now this offer just lands in my lap.

I can't *not* consider it, right?

"Do you mind if I use your bathroom before I make the drive back to Boston?" Tessa asks.

"Sure. I still can't believe you drove all the way here for a twenty-minute chat."

"I really want you to take this job, Will." We pause on the stoop, and she reaches for my hand. It's not a romantic gesture but one of encouragement.

“You’re one of the only people I think actually belongs in politics. You have integrity. I think you could make a real difference in this sphere.”

“I’ll think about it” is my noncommittal response. “When do I need to let them know by?”

“Ideally within the month.”

I nod, opening the front door. We step into the hall just as Charlie approaches it, slipping on her coat. A shirtless Beckett trails after her with a travel cup of what I’m assuming is green tea. He bends down to give her a kiss on the lips.

“For the drive, sugar puff,” he says, handing her the cup.

She looks touched, beaming at him. “Thanks.”

When they notice Tessa’s small frame tucked behind me, they startle.

I quickly make the introductions. “Guys, Tessa Diaz. Tessa, this is my roommate and teammate, Beckett. And, uh, Charlotte.” I stutter over this one. “His girlfriend.”

Beckett doesn’t even blink, and Tessa simply nods, uninterested in any personal details. But the introduction is now seared into my brain because I’d felt it in my chest. The lie. The omission. Whatever it was.

It felt too awkward to introduce Charlie as anything other than Beckett’s girl—we just saw him, without a shirt, kissing her. But it evokes a rush of guilt, because Charlie isn’t only his. She’s mine too.

I should be proud of that. I should want to advertise it to the entire world. This is my girl.

But deep down…I know what stopped me just now. A part of me was embarrassed. Of how Tessa might see us. How she might see *me*.

And as that bleak truth settles over me, I suddenly hear it. Tick-tock. Tick-fucking-tock. It drums a beat in my head. The clock. The countdown.

The realization that sooner or later, this complicated arrangement is going to come crashing down around us.

# CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

## BECKETT

### *Safe*

I WANT TO BE AT THE GRAHAM CENTER EARLY TODAY SO I CAN SHOW my dad around the facility, but Will has his head buried in his laptop and isn't ready to go, so he tosses me the keys to his SUV and says he'll catch a ride to the rink with Shane.

Despite the circumstances that landed Dad on my doorstep, I'm happy to see the big oaf. It's always a good time with him. He's going to tail the team bus this afternoon in Will's car and come to our game against Quinnipiac.

As I reverse out of the driveway, the sun glints off the windshield and reflects the snowdrifts on either side of the street. We got lucky with the snow situation this winter. So far at least. The temperature has been freezing, but the snowfall has been almost nonexistent. According to my Marine Ecology and Conservation professor this term, climate change is the devil, and soon all the oceans will dry up and we'll all die of heatstroke. Actual rant she went on last week when someone asked if a mild New England winter is a bad sign.

In the passenger seat, Dad stares out the window, watching the residential streets of Hastings whiz by. He hasn't said much since we left the house. It's strange seeing him like this, unsettled, like a man who's lost his anchor.

"So what's the plan?" I ask him. "Are you going to book a flight home for tomorrow? Monday?"

He lets out a heavy sigh, still focusing on the passing scenery. "I don't know, kid. Your mum's still pissed. Never seen her this mad before."

"Well, you did accept a job offer that requires moving across the world without consulting her. Can't say I blame her."

“I thought I was doing the right thing. That once it became a reality, she’d get it, you know? She’d feel like she was going home. But Meg doesn’t see it that way. She thinks I’m being selfish.”

Because he is.

I have to swallow a laugh, given that he’s genuinely upset here, but come on, Dad. You don’t make big life decisions like that when your wife isn’t on board. He should know better.

He scrubs a hand over his face. “I got caught up in the excitement, I s’pose. Thought I was doing what was best for us, for the family. Now I’m not so sure. Maybe she’s right, and I was trying to do what’s best for me.”

I hear the weariness in his voice, and it hits me that he’s not just frustrated. He’s scared. Scared of what this boneheaded decision might mean for their marriage, for their life together.

“So what are you going to do?”

“Gotta let the job go. Stay in Indy, work things out with your mum. But the thought of passing up this opportunity… It feels like I’m giving up something important.”

“It’s not worth losing her over. You know that.”

“I know. But it’s hard, kid. It’s hard to let go of something you’ve worked so hard for. You know that feeling.”

He pauses, and it lasts long enough that I glance over at him. His forehead has a disconcerted groove in it.

“What?” I say.

“Ah…so…that Charlie girl. I like her. She seems smart. Funny.”

I knew this was coming. From the second Dad met Charlie earlier, I’ve been waiting for him to bring it up. Grill me about her.

“You didn’t tell me you had a girlfriend.”

“It’s new.”

He nods, but the lines in his brow don’t smooth out.

“What?” I say again.

“Probably shouldn’t tell you this while you’re driving, but, ah, your girlfriend was making out with your roommate after he got out of the shower.”

The resulting silence is so acute, I can hear my own lungs fluttering as I drag oxygen into them.

When I don’t respond, Dad continues in an awkward tone.

“Saw them when I went upstairs to grab a hoodie from your room.” He gestures to the Briar U hoodie he now wears instead of his polo, as if to prove he’d really been upstairs.

I stay silent, trying to figure out how to answer.

“Beckett,” he presses.

Finally, I loosen my grip on the steering wheel and give him a sideways glance. “Charlie’s not just my girlfriend. She’s Will’s too.”

His eyebrows shoot up. “Excuse me?”

I shift my gaze back to the road. “Yeah. We’re… We share. It’s complicated.”

“Complicated?” He lets out a short laugh, but there’s no humor in it. “That’s one way to put it. Son, what the hell are you doing? How do you think that’s ever going to work out?”

“It’s working fine so far,” I admit. “We all care about each other. We make it work.”

He’s quiet for a moment, his eyes burning a hole in the side of my head.

“And what about the future?” he finally asks. “What if you want to get married? How does that fit into this arrangement?”

I swallow hard. I haven’t thought that far ahead, not really. We’re just taking it day by day, enjoying what we have.

But now I feel the doubts creeping in.

“I don’t know. We haven’t talked about it.”

He sighs, shaking his head. “You’re playing with fire, kid. I saw the way you looked at her. This isn’t some casual fling. You’re involving your heart in something that could blow up in your bloody face. And for what? Because you’re too scared to let someone in for real?”

I frown at him. “What?”

“You’re saying that’s not what this is?”

“That’s not it at all,” I snap, my knuckles tightening on the wheel.

“You think I don’t know what you’re doing? You picked this girl because it’s safe. Because deep down, you know this isn’t going to go anywhere. It’s an excuse to keep your heart locked up.”

The accusation stings more than I expected. I’ve been trying not to overthink it, but Dad’s right. It’s not just about now. The future is a big, looming question mark.

“I’m not doing this because it’s safe.” I hear the defensive note in my voice and wince. “I care about her. I care about both of them.”

“Do you? Or are you just hiding behind them because it’s easier than facing the possibility of getting hurt again?”

I open my mouth to respond, but the words won’t come. I don’t know how to answer that. Because maybe he’s right. Maybe I *have* been using this situation as a way to protect myself, to keep from fully opening up, from risking everything.

“Beckett,” Dad says, his tone gentle now, “I get it. I do. After what happened with Shannon, I understand why you’d be scared to let someone in. But this isn’t the answer. You can’t…*share* a girlfriend. You’re only hurting yourself more in the long run.”

I stare straight ahead. I don’t want to admit that he might be right. I don’t want to face the possibility that I’m sabotaging something out of fear.

“I don’t know,” I mumble. “I don’t know what I’m doing.”

“It’s okay not to know. But don’t settle for something just because it feels safe.”

We drive the rest of the way in silence.

# CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

## CHARLOTTE

*The supreme slut of the galaxy*

BY MIDWEEK, I'VE BASICALLY MOVED INTO THE ENGINEERING LAB AND am considering purchasing a sleeping bag and hot plate. The prototype for my blood pressure device is fucking beautiful, though. Works like a dream. Even my advisor was impressed when she stopped by earlier to check in on me.

With spring break quickly approaching, I want to make some real progress on my capstone so I can actually—gasp—relax. Harrison texted last night, offering to fly out for a visit during break because I couldn't make a trip out west happen, and I'd like to see him. It's his birthday that weekend too, so it would be nice to spend it with him, especially now that he seems to have lost some of the chip on his shoulder. Our last few text exchanges have been great. Not a single jab or veiled remark about my family, and he hasn't asked whether I've told them about him.

Which I still haven't done. I think even Ava has given up on it. And to be honest, I'm both shocked and grateful that she's managed to keep it to herself. I assumed she would've blabbed to our parents ages ago, but she's respecting my wishes of wanting to tell them myself.

Which I'll do.

Eventually.

It's past ten o'clock when I leave the lab. There are a few messages in our group chat and one of Beckett's signature notes in my purse, which I discover when I'm pulling out my phone.

No more all-nighters at the lab.

Please, baby. I miss your pussy so bad.

I bite my lip and smile. Boyfriend #2 has a way with words. I'm sort of obsessed with his notes. I have no clue how he manages to slip them in my bag without me noticing, but every few days, usually after I've spent the night at the boys' house, I'll find a new note, scrawled in his familiar handwriting.

In the group chat, the messages come from Will.

***WILL:***

How's the project going?

Come over after if it's not too late.

I check the time and decide it is indeed too late. I have an early class tomorrow, so I type a quick response telling them I'll see them tomorrow night, then drive home to Greek Row.

Agatha is entering the foyer from the corridor at the same time as I walk through the front door. Her expression grows pinched at the sight of me, and she greets me with a tight nod. She's been extra cool to me since the Presidents' Gala. She claims she doesn't believe my ex's allegations that I'm the supreme slut of the galaxy, but I can tell she's suspicious of me.

Faith pokes her head out of her room when I reach the second-floor hallway. "Hey, babe. You're back so late."

"I live at the lab now," I say glumly.

"Make any progress at least?"

"Thankfully, yes."

She follows me into my room, flopping on the mattress and watching me deposit my laptop bag and purse on the desk.

"You look stressed," she remarks in amusement.

"I am stressed. Ugh. I sort of regret not going to the guys' house tonight for some stress-busting sex, but I have to wake up *so* early tomorrow—" I stop when I notice her expression.

Bewilderment and deep, deep suspicion.

“What?” I ask warily.

“You just said the *guys’* house? Like, plural guys.”

A queasy sensation tickles my stomach. “I mean Will’s house. He has a roommate, so I guess the plural just made sense in my head.”

Faith’s gaze pierces into me. “You’re lying.”

“I’m not lying,” I insist.

“Yes, you are.”

“No, I’m not.”

She hops to her feet, crossing her arms over the front of the oversize Patriots tee she likes to sleep in. “What are you up to?”

“Nothing.”

“We’ve been sharing a house for almost four years now, Charlotte Kingston. Do you think I’m a fool? A foolish fool who can’t tell when my best friend is being a filthy liar?”

A strangled laugh flies out. It’s my turn to flop onto the bed, burying my face in my hands.

“Fine. You win. I’ve found myself in a bit of a situation,” I confess into my palms.

“Okay?”

I peek out from between my fingers. “I did something stupid.”

“Define stupid.”

“I have two boyfriends, and I’m in love with them both.”

Silence crashes over the room.

Then Faith doubles over in laughter.

My head pops out from my hands. “Why are you laughing at me? This is serious!”

At that, my best friend’s mouth falls open. “Wait. That wasn’t a joke?”

“No! This is *literally* what is happening in my life right now.”

“Holy shit. All that stuff Mitch was saying at the gala? That was *true*?”

“Yes and no.” My jaw hardens at the memory of Mitch’s cruel words. “I’m not going around sucking dicks left and right. I’m dating Will. As in genuinely dating him—it’s not only a physical thing.” I bite my lip. “But I’m also dating Beckett Dunne. Will’s teammate.”

She blinks in surprise. “At the same time?”

I nod.

“Oh my God.”

“I didn’t plan for this to happen,” I moan. “It just…did. And they know about each other, by the way. It’s, um, kind of their thing. But no one else knows. Not even their friends.”

“So you’re in a secret relationship with both of them, and nobody knows?”

“Well, you know now. But yes.”

Looking amazed, Faith collapses in my desk chair. “Wow. This is wild.” She wrinkles her forehead. “Are you happy with them?”

“It’s complicated, but…yes. They make me feel like, I don’t know, like I don’t have to choose between being one version of myself or the other. They just get me. Even if it’s messy.”

“Messy might be an understatement.” She laughs again, then dons a thoughtful expression, scrutinizing me.

I know exactly what she’s thinking.

“Just ask,” I sigh.

“Do you fuck them at the same time?” she demands.

“Yes and no.”

Humor dances in her eyes. “What the hell does that mean?”

“It means sometimes I’m alone with Will, and sometimes I’m alone with Beckett, and sometimes…” I let out a breath. “Sometimes it’s all three of us.”

“One in each hole?”

“Faith!” I chide at her crudeness.

“What? It’s an honest question!”

“No,” I confess. “We haven’t done that.”

“Yet?”

“I don’t know. Maybe.” I can’t deny the idea of taking them both at the same time is…appealing.

She goes quiet again, back to processing. Then she jumps out of the chair, her curls bouncing on her shoulders as she starts pacing back and forth in front of me.

I follow her quick movements, smiling wryly. “What?”

Without warning, she’s bombarding me with questions.

“How will this even work? Like, logistically?” Her hands and hair fly around as she paces and talks. “Is there a schedule? What happens when you want to go out in public? Do you guys all hang out together, or do you

act like just friends in front of people? And what about holidays? What are you going to do if one of them gets jealous? Have you thought about marriage? Or kids? Who's going to be the father? Or are they both going to be the father?"

She's rapid-firing so many bullets I feel like my head might explode. I open my mouth, but nothing comes out right away. How am I supposed to answer all that when I barely have answers for myself?

"Slow down," I plead. "I don't know, okay? I don't have all the answers."

She quits pacing. "You don't know? You're telling me you're in love with *two guys*, and you don't know how any of this is going to work?"

I rub my temples, feeling a headache coming on. "I don't know how to navigate this. It's not like there's a handbook for being in a relationship with two people."

Faith plops down next to me, staring at me like she's trying to solve a puzzle. "Okay, but what happens when it gets serious? You can't just keep dating both of them forever, right? Eventually, someone's going to want something more. What if one of them wants to get married?"

A knot forms in my stomach. I've thought about it, of course, but not too deeply. It's been this distant, abstract thing. But now that she's quizzing me about it, I can't keep my head in the sand anymore.

She's right. What happens if or when it gets serious?

"I don't know. I really don't. I don't want to choose, and neither of them has asked me to. But yeah, I have no idea what happens down the line."

"Okay, fine. Let's say you don't have to choose. You're all fine with that. What happens if people start noticing? You can't exactly keep this a secret forever."

I stare at my hands, twisting my fingers together. "I don't know," I reiterate, all the unknowns pressing down on my chest. "I haven't figured that part out yet. All I know is that I love them."

"Love isn't always enough, Charlotte. You need to think about the practical stuff too. You can't just float along forever."

I slump against her and rest my head on her shoulder. "I know. Trust me, I know. I'm trying to take things one step at a time, but then I get overwhelmed by all the stuff I don't have answers for. What if one of them

wants more and the other doesn't? What if I want more, and I'm the one who messes everything up?"

"You're not going to mess it up. But you do have to start thinking about this stuff. If you're going to make this work—*really* make it work—you have to figure out what the future looks like for all three of you."

I nod, but inside, I'm still spinning.

Because the truth is, I have absolutely no idea how to make this work.

# CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

## WILL

*Fathers and sons*

ON WEDNESDAY AFTERNOON, I STAND IN THE MIDDLE OF THE KITCHEN, staring at my phone, debating whether to make this call. I can practically hear my father's voice in my head, barking orders, dismissing my thoughts and feelings like they're nothing. But this job offer Tessa brought me is too big to ignore. I've spent the past four days researching every last detail about Harper Wozniak, the would-be congresswoman.

And Tessa was right.

I love her politics.

Finally, with a deep breath, I tap my dad's contact name. The phone rings once, twice, and then his voice comes on the line, clipped and businesslike as always. A part of me is surprised he didn't send me to voicemail the way he usually does.

"William," he says. No hello, no small talk. Just straight to the point. "What is it?"

I mimic his approach, not bothering with pleasantries either.

"I got a job offer. From Pamela Kerry, the campaign manager for Harper Wozniak. She wants me to join the campaign."

There's a pause on the other end of the line.

I can practically feel the temperature drop.

When my father finally speaks, his voice is like ice. "Wozniak is a piece of shit, William. You can't be serious."

"I am serious. I'm considering accepting."

"Absolutely not." He laughs in amazement. "Absolutely fucking *not*. Do you hear me?"

“Loud and clear.” Resentment climbs up my throat. “But you don’t have a say in this, Dad. This is my decision to make.”

“There is no decision. I said no.”

“And I’m tired of doing everything your way. Being your puppet. It’s time for me to make my own choices.”

“Your own choices?” he snaps. “Your choices reflect on this family, William. On me. Do you have any idea what this would do to *my* campaign? You would be viewed as a traitor. A son turning on his goddamn father.”

A surge of anger rises in my chest, hot and fierce. “This isn’t about you. This is about me. For once in my life, I want to do something that isn’t about furthering your career.”

My father scoffs, his disdain dripping through the phone. “Don’t be ridiculous. You’re not going anywhere near Wozniak’s campaign. I forbid it.”

“Forbid it? You can’t control me anymore. I’m about to graduate from college. I’m not a kid. I’m an adult.”

“You’re acting like a child,” he spits back. “And if you go through with this, you can forget about any support from me or Kelsey or anyone else in this family. You’ll be on your own.”

His words hit me like a punch to the gut, but I refuse to back down.

“Yeah? Well, maybe that’s exactly what I need. To be on my own, away from you and all your goddamn expectations.”

After a long, tense silence, my father speaks, his voice cold and final. “Do what you want, William. But don’t come crying to me when it all falls apart.”

With that, he disconnects the call, leaving me staring at the phone.

I want to curse, break something, but instead, I slam the phone on the kitchen counter and storm out the back door, needing some air.

To my surprise, I find Beckett’s dad standing out there, nursing a cup of coffee as he stares out at the small, frost-covered yard. He’s heading back to Indy tonight, and I have to admit I’m going to miss the man. He’s like a goofier, funnier, more dramatic version of Beckett. I’ve enjoyed having him around.

He glances up as I approach, taking in my stormy expression. “You okay, mate?”

I shake my head, unable to find the words to describe the mess of emotions churning inside me.

“Just had a fight with my dad,” I finally manage to say.

James nods. “Want to talk about it?”

I hesitate, and something in his eyes brings an ache to my chest. It’s the kind of look I’ve never seen from my own father. Warm, understanding. Like he actually cares about how I feel.

“I know it’s none of my business,” he says when I don’t answer, “but I’ve got a pretty good handle on this stuff. Fathers and sons…it’s a tricky relationship.”

I let out a bitter laugh, rubbing my face. “You have no idea.”

“But you’re a good kid, Will. I’ve seen how you treat Beck, how you’ve been there for him when he needed someone. You’ve got a good heart.”

I blink at the unexpected praise. “Thanks, but my dad doesn’t see it that way. He wants me to fall in line, do what I’m told.”

James sighs. “Yeah, some blokes think their way is the only way. They don’t realize that their kids need to find their own path, make their own mistakes.”

“I just want to be my own person, but every time I try, he shuts me down. He doesn’t care what I want.”

“I’m sorry. It’s tough when the people who’re supposed to care the most don’t give you the support you need. I went through that with my own dad. Beck’s gramps. Took him a long time to see me as a real, fully formed human and not an extension of himself.”

A lump forms in my throat, all the years of trying to live up to my father’s expectations suddenly overwhelming me. “That’s exactly it. I’m an extension. And I wish he could see me for who I am, not who he wants me to be.”

James touches my shoulder, and for a moment, I think I might actually break down and cry.

“You’re a good kid,” he repeats, firmer this time. “And don’t let anyone, not even your father, make you feel like you’re not enough.”

Before I know what’s happening, he pulls me in for a hug, a simple gesture of comfort and support that is wholly alien to me. I stand there, frozen for a moment, before finally allowing myself to relax into the embrace, a wave of emotion washing over me.

He releases me with a lighthearted clap on the back, and my throat tightens to the point of asphyxiation. A strange mix of gratitude and sadness is lodged in my windpipe, the ache of something I've never really had. A dad who cares more about me than about appearances.

"Thanks," I mumble, clearing my throat as I try to regain my composure. "I needed to hear that."

"Anytime, mate. And remember, you're not alone. You've got people who care about you, who have your back. With that said…" He pauses for a beat, his expression growing somber. "We need to talk about Charlotte."

I frown. "What about her?"

"Beckett told me about your…arrangement. How you're both with her. Or you're all with each other. I still don't really get how it works. But you know what I mean."

I blink in surprise. I wasn't expecting that. I eye him, trying to play it cool, but he's waiting for me to say something, and I can't exactly deny it.

So I just shrug.

"Honestly, I'm not here to judge. You're all adults, and you can make your own choices. But I'm worried about Beckett."

"Worried? Why?"

James scrubs a hand over his face like this conversation is weighing on him. "Beck's been through a lot, more than he lets on, and I'm worried he's chosen a relationship—this relationship—because he knows it won't ever lead to anything long-term. It's safer for him, you know? If it doesn't last, he doesn't have to get hurt again."

I suck in a startled breath. I knew Beckett was guarded, but hearing it like this, spoken so bluntly by his dad, makes it feel more serious than I thought.

"I mean, yeah," I say. "I know he's been through stuff. He told me about his ex. How she cheated on him, and it really messed him up."

James knits his brow. "Cheated? What ex are you talking about?"

"Shannon," I say, now confused myself. "His high school girlfriend. He said she cheated on him, broke his heart, and that's why he doesn't let people get too close. It took him a long time to get over it."

Something shifts in James's expression. "Will…Shannon didn't cheat on him." He stops, like he's trying to find the right words. "Shannon didn't break his heart. She died."

# CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

## BECKETT

### *Shannon*

I RETURN FROM MY AFTERNOON RENEWABLE ENERGY CLASS IN TIME TO say goodbye to my dad before he leaves for the airport. While the taxi waits at the curb, we exchange a hug and he playfully ruffles my hair, and then he gets into the back seat, and I watch the car disappear down the street.

Once it's out of sight, I scroll through my phone contacts until I hit "Mum." She answers after a couple of rings.

"Hi, sweetheart."

I walk back to the porch. "Hey. Dad just got in the cab. He should be at the airport in an hour or so."

"Oh good. Thank you for letting him stay with you, Beck." She sighs. "I might have been…harsh."

"When you kicked him out, you mean?" Snorting, I shut the front door behind me and go to the living room. "No, not harsh at all."

Another sigh.

"Mum…" I trail off, choosing my words carefully. "Try not to be so hard on him, okay? He made a dumb decision with that job offer, yeah, but it wasn't to hurt you. He just misses it, you know? Home."

"I know he misses it." There's fatigue in her voice, like this isn't the first time she's had this conversation. "But that doesn't mean he can just uproot everything without a conversation. A marriage is a partnership."

"I get that," I promise, not wanting her to feel like I'm taking sides. "I'm not saying he was right. I just understand why he did it. He's homesick. He had this opportunity to go back, and he took it. I miss it too sometimes."

"You miss Sydney?" she says in surprise.

I nod, even though she can’t see me. “Yeah, I do. More than I thought I would. I think about it a lot, the life we had there. Sometimes it feels like it’s calling me back.”

“You’ve never told me that before. Would you really want to move back? Permanently?”

I rub the back of my neck, trying to put words to the feeling that’s been sitting in my chest for a while now. “I don’t know. Maybe. There’s just something about being there that feels right. The beaches, the ocean, the way the air smells. Everything. It’s like part of me never really left.”

“And what about hockey? Your friends? Your life here? You’ve built something here, Beck. You’ve worked so hard for it.”

“I know. But I’m graduating soon, and I need to figure out what the hell I’m going to do next. I don’t want to play professional hockey. I have no clue what career path to take. And I don’t know how to explain it, but there’s this pull, like I need to go back at some point. I think Dad feels the same way.”

“You miss it that much?” There’s underlying fear in her tone now, as if she’s worried she might lose me to a place she thought we left behind.

“I do. Maybe it’s just nostalgia, or maybe it’s something deeper. But I get why Dad’s struggling. He’s been away so long.”

“I always thought you were so settled here,” she says. “You’ve got your life, your future ahead of you. I didn’t realize you still felt like you belonged there.”

“I think it’s more than just belonging. It’s about…I don’t know. Purpose, maybe? Identity? It’s like Australia is woven into who I am. I can’t explain it.”

“Well. I’ll admit that I didn’t expect this conversation to take this turn. But, sweetheart, I hope you know that whatever you decide, your father and I will support you. You have to follow your heart, wherever that leads you.”

“I know. And I’m not saying I’m going to up and leave tomorrow. I’ve got a lot to think about until graduation, and there’s a lot tying me here. I just wanted you to understand how Dad’s feeling.”

“I do understand. But I suppose I didn’t realize how much he’s been holding on to this. And I didn’t realize you felt it too.” Another soft sigh fills the line. “Thank you for telling me. I’ll talk to him when he gets back.”

“Thanks, Mum.”

I hang up, leaning my head against the couch cushions, the exhaustion settling deep in my bones. I can feel it in every muscle, but it's not only stress causing the tension. My dad was here for four days.

I haven't gotten laid in four days.

I'm horny.

And the moment the thought registers, my body makes it demands known. Buzzing. Aching. My balls tighten, and I resist the urge to pull my dick out and jerk off right here in the living room. But I don't want to waste this first night with my dad gone. Charlie's coming over soon. Why would I come in my own hand when I can bury myself inside her and bust in that perfect pussy?

The wait is excruciating, though. I have no idea what Will is up to tonight—he didn't answer my text asking where the hell he is. I try to distract myself from my persistent hard-on by watching TV, but I can't concentrate.

By the time Charlie arrives, I'm barely holding on to control.

She steps inside, unaware of the lust storm brewing. She smiles at me, and I know I should say something casual, something normal. But all I can think about is her body pressed up against mine, the feel of her skin, the sound of her gasping my name.

"Can I fuck you?" My voice is rough. Almost desperate.

She laughs in surprise. "Right now?"

"Right now. I need you."

When she sees the look in my eyes, her breath catches. "You want me that bad?"

"You have no idea," I growl.

Her lips curve in another smile. Then she says, "C'mere."

I'm on her in an instant, yanking her against me so she can feel how hard I am for her.

"Upstairs?" she says.

I shake my head as I lower my face to her neck, kissing her smooth, soft skin. "I can't wait," I mumble.

Her nails dig into my shoulders. "Okay."

That's all the permission I need.

I grab her by the waist, backing her into the wall. She gasps when my lips crash over hers in a sloppy, hungry kiss. I'm goddamn feral tonight.

“I’ve been thinking about this for days,” I mutter before running my tongue along the seam of her lips. “Thinking about how good you feel. How wet you’ll be for me.”

She lets out a soft moan, arching into me.

I claim her mouth like I’ve been starved for her, and she responds just as fiercely, tugging at my shirt. I break the kiss long enough to pull it over my head, throwing it on the floor, and then I’m on her again. My hands slip under her sweater, splaying over her skin.

“Fuck, you’re perfect,” I rasp.

I peel her clothes away, piece by piece. Her shirt, her bra, leggings, panties. They fall to the floor like an afterthought, and when I finally have her naked against the wall, my dick is harder than it’s ever been.

She watches me from under heavy-lidded eyes, her palms roaming over my bare chest, my stomach, lower. As she undoes my jeans, I bring one hand between her thighs, finding her slick and ready for me. She moans when I touch her clit, her body jerking at the contact, and I smirk, loving how responsive she is, how much she wants this too.

“You’re soaked,” I say, teasing her just enough to make her squirm. “You’ve been thinking about this too, haven’t you?”

“Always,” she breathes, gasping when two fingers slide inside her.

I kiss her again, rougher this time. My fingers move faster, but I can’t hold back any longer. I need more. I need all of her.

I pull my hand away, making quick work of my pants and boxers, kicking them off before I pin her to the wall with my body. Her legs wrap around me instinctively, and I position myself at her opening, teasing my cockhead through her slit for just a second before thrusting inside.

I groan at the sensation, the heat, the tightness of her pussy squeezing my cock. It’s overwhelming, almost too much, but I can’t slow down. I don’t want to.

“You feel so good,” I grit out, moving inside her with hard, deep thrusts. “I can’t get enough of you, Charlie. Never goddamn enough.”

Every thrust is a release of the pent-up tension, the need I’ve been holding back for days. She matches me, her body rocking into mine as her breathing becomes more ragged.

“Beckett,” she gasps, her voice strained with pleasure. “I’m so close. Don’t stop.”

“I’ve got you,” I groan, slamming into her with everything I have. “I’m not stopping until you come all over me.”

Her eyelids flutter shut, her body trembling as I bring her closer to the edge, my name falling breathlessly from her lips. Her pussy clamps around me, and I know she’s right there, teetering on the brink.

“Come for me, baby girl,” I whisper against her neck. “I want to feel it.”

That’s all it takes. With a sharp cry, she shatters, her body convulsing around me as her orgasm crashes through her. The sensation sends me soaring, and I follow her over the edge, my balls drawing up tight as I come inside her.

We stay like that for a long moment, our bodies pressed together, our breathing unsteady as the world slowly comes back into focus. I lean my forehead against hers. My hand still grips her hip, her legs still wrapped around me.

“Fuck,” I curse. “I needed that.”

She smiles, her fingers tracing tiny patterns on my chest. “Me too.”

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Later, after we’ve made dinner and settled in the living room to eat it, Charlie opens her laptop and works on a write-up for some dorky experiment she’s doing at the lab this week. I play a video game, pausing every now and then to sip my water. It’s low-key and I’m content, until the front door creaks open and Will comes home.

He’s unusually quiet as he hangs up his winter gear. Then he appears in the doorway, watching us for a moment.

“Your dad make it to the airport okay?” he asks me.

“Yeah. He landed in Indy an hour ago.”

I know Larsen like the back of my hand, and something is up. He enters the room and goes to give Charlie a peck on the lips, but the smile he gives her is strained. And when he glances at me, he’s not smiling at all.

I frown at him. “What’s wrong?”

He shrugs. “Nothing. Want a beer?”

“Nah. It’s late. Morning skate tomorrow.”

It’s unlike him to drink on a random weeknight when we’re gearing up for the playoffs. He returns, twisting off the cap, his gaze on mine.

“What’s going on, mate?” I push.

There’s a long silence. Charlie must sense the tension, because she lifts her head from her laptop.

“Will?” she says, frowning.

He doesn’t break the eye contact, focused only on me. “Your dad told me about Shannon.”

My breath jams in my throat, and for a moment, I feel like I’ve had the wind knocked out of me. Fucking hell, Dad. He knows I don’t like advertising that shit.

Charlie’s apprehension is aimed at me now. “What? Who’s Shannon?”

“Your ex,” Will prompts, not quite mocking me, but there’s an edge to his words. “That’s what you’ve always referred to her as, right? Your ex?”

I clench my jaw.

“Beckett,” Charlie says. “What’s going on?”

Will glances at our girl. “Shannon wasn’t an ex who cheated on Beck,” he says flatly. “She was his girlfriend who died.”

Charlie stares at me. Speechless.

Will tips his chin at me. “Isn’t that right?”

“Yeah,” I mutter. “That’s right.”

“What the fuck, Beck? Why didn’t you tell me? Why did you let us think Shannon cheated on you?”

I shrug, trying to play it off like it doesn’t matter. Like I hadn’t lied to my best friend about something so significant.

Charlie blinks, still looking stunned. “She didn’t cheat on you? She *died*? How?”

When I don’t answer, Will fills in the blanks. “Leukemia,” he says.

“Why would you lie about that?” Charlie exclaims.

I don’t look at either of them. I can’t.

“Beckett,” she pushes.

“Charlotte. I didn’t want to talk about it then,” I say irritably, “and I sure as hell don’t want to talk about it now.”

Now they’re both staring at me in disbelief.

“You can’t just pretend it didn’t happen,” she says. “You can’t brush it off like it’s nothing.”

Anger rises inside me, not at them but at the whole damn situation. “I’m not brushing it off. I just don’t want to be that guy. The one everyone pities

and looks at like he's broken. After Shannon died, everyone treated me like I was some kind of charity case, walking on eggshells around me. I fucking hated it."

"So you made up a story?" Will is incredulous. "You'd rather people think she cheated on you than know the truth?"

"Yeah, I would. At least that way, people stopped feeling sorry for me."

"But you're still hurting." Charlie reaches out and touches my arm, but I shrug it off.

"I'm fine. It was a long time ago. I'm over it."

"Are you?" Will challenges. "Because you don't seem fine."

"What do you want me to say? That I'm still torn up about it? That I think about her every damn day? What's the point? She's gone, and I had to move on. So I did."

I slide off the couch, needing to remove myself from this situation.

Charlie gets up too, stepping in front of me. Her eyes fill with that soft, stubborn empathy that grates on me.

I clench my teeth. Shannon's death gutted me, and the truth is, I haven't entirely moved on. I'd simply shoved it so far down that I didn't have to feel it every day. But now, with them standing here, it feels like someone is tearing open the wound and scraping a dull razor blade over it, twisting and mutilating scar tissue that never fully healed.

I can't stand the way they're looking at me. The sympathy, the concern. It's too much.

So I shove past them, ignoring Charlie calling my name, ignoring Will's half-formed words.

The front door slams behind me, and I'm outside, shirtless in the biting February cold, snow crunching under the boots I barely had the presence of mind to throw on. My breath fogs in the air, each exhale sharp against the frozen night.

I don't know where I'm going, but I need to get out of here. Away from their questions.

My sweatpants hang low on my hips, offering no warmth, but I don't care. My body feels numb. Numb like it did that day.

"Beckett!" Her voice cuts through the quiet night. She's coming after me. I hear her steps running through the snow.

I keep walking. I don't want to stop. If I stop, I'll have to face it.

“Beckett, please.” She’s closer now, and suddenly, her hand latches on to my bicep, tugging me to a stop. “Please, talk to me.”

I turn, chest heaving, but not from the cold. Charlie’s eyes are wide, full of concern, her breath coming out in shallow clouds. The moonlight makes her look fragile, but she’s out here, chasing me into the freezing cold because she loves me.

“You really want to know?” I snap, harsher than I mean to.

She doesn’t flinch, though. She nods, desperate for me to let her in.

“She fucking died.” The words feel like broken glass in my throat. I try to swallow, but it doesn’t help. “The leukemia ate her alive, piece by piece. And it came out of fucking nowhere. Diagnosed late. So aggressive that treatment was completely ineffective.”

Charlie’s mouth opens like she wants to say something, but she doesn’t. She just listens.

“I was there. I was there when she died. I was lying next to her in that hospital bed. I spent every night with her, holding her until she fell asleep. I woke up that morning, and she was gone. She was dead in my arms, and I didn’t even know. I was goddamn *asleep* when she died.”

I choke on the last word, my voice failing, and I turn away from Charlie, staring into the empty street. The cold is cutting through me now, deep and painful, but I don’t move.

“When I started at Eastwood College, I lied to anyone who asked me about my past relationship, because I couldn’t take the pity anymore, not after dealing with it in high school. So I made up the story, and it was easier that way. But I’m not fine, Charlie. I’m not okay, and I never will be.”

I finally look back at her. Her eyelashes glisten with tears that haven’t fallen yet. And suddenly, the words I’ve been fighting are there, rushing up before I can push them down again.

“I’m scared of losing you too,” I blurt out. “I’m scared because I love you. I love you, and I don’t know what the hell to do with that.”

Her face crumples, and then she’s stepping forward, throwing her arms around me. I feel her warmth against my chilled skin, the contrast so sharp it makes me dizzy. I bury my face in her hair, inhaling her scent, grounding myself in the reality that she’s here. Alive.

She’s whispering something, but I can’t hear it over the sound of my own heart pounding in my ears. She holds me tighter, her small frame

somehow anchoring me, bringing me back from the edge. I'm trembling, and I don't know if it's from the cold or the emotions pouring out of me.

"Let's go inside," she says, pulling back to look at me. "You're freezing."

I nod, letting her lead me back to the house, back to warmth, back to them. But as we step inside and the heat of the house wraps around me, the only thing I feel is her. Her hand in mine, steady and sure.

"Beck," she says, as if reading my mind.

"Yeah?" We both hear the crack in my voice.

"I'm not going anywhere."

My throat closes up.

"I mean it. You're not going to lose me."

I manage a nod. Maybe she's right. Maybe this time, I won't lose everything. It's not going to be easy, though. I know it won't. I know there are still parts of myself I'm not ready to share, wounds that haven't fully healed. But I also know that I don't want to lose Charlie. Or Will.

# CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

## CHARLOTTE

*I belong here*

HARRISON'S BIRTHDAY FALLS ON AN UNUSUALLY WARM SATURDAY IN mid-March. Somehow, the temperature rises ten degrees and all the snow melts three days before he arrives, as if the weather knows I desperately need a nice, sunny weekend with my brother.

But there's no sunshine in Harrison's eyes when he steps out of the airport toward the pickup area. I drove all the way to Logan Airport to collect him, and he barely gives me a smile.

His shoulders are hunched against the cold, hands shoved deep into the pockets of his worn-out jacket. He doesn't look like someone who's here to celebrate a birthday.

"Hi," I say, trying to keep my voice light as I greet him with a hug. He stiffens slightly before giving in, wrapping his arms around me in a way that feels both familiar and distant. "Happy birthday."

"Thanks."

"How was the flight?"

"Shitty."

Awesome. This is off to a super fun start.

"So what's the plan?" he asks once we're in the front seat of my car.

I move the gearshift into drive. "I thought we would spend a couple hours outdoors. You could stretch your legs after that long flight, and I can breathe some real air. I've been locked up in the engineering lab all week," I say ruefully.

"Sure. Sounds good."

"Okay, great. There's this trail I thought you'd like. It follows the river and has the prettiest lookouts."

He nods, but the excitement I hoped to see isn't there. We drive mostly in silence. I keep sneaking glances at him, searching for any sign that today might be different. That we might actually connect. But all I see is the same guarded expression he's had since we first met.

This trail system is one of my favorites, located outside the city. I park in the free lot at the head of the trail.

"Ready?" I chirp at my dour-faced companion.

Harrison sighs, but he gets out of the car, shoving his hands into his pockets again as we start down the path.

The trees are bare, their branches reaching out like skeletons against the clear sky. It's peaceful here, the kind of place where you can hear yourself think. I hope it'll help us talk.

I hike my backpack higher on my shoulders and turn to smile at my brother. He doesn't smile back.

The air on the trail smells like pine and earth, the pale sun warming our backs. I've been in the lab too much lately, and the clear, open sky feels like a gift today. The river current looks vicious, though, and I'm careful with my footing when we near a slope that's still covered in some winter frost. I don't want either of us slipping and tumbling into the water below.

I sneak a glance at Harrison. He's quiet, staring ahead, barely reacting to the beauty around us. I try to fill the silence, chatting about whatever comes to mind.

"So how's work going? You said you had a big project launching this week, right?"

"It's fine," he mutters, kicking a pebble along the trail.

Okay, then. I dig for more, hoping to get him talking. "Do you like your clients? Are they the picky kind or just let you do your thing?"

He shrugs. "It's whatever."

This is like pulling teeth. I let the silence stretch out, hoping he'll open up if I give him space. But it drags on, thick and awkward, as we round a bend in the trail. Finally, I stop, turning to face him.

"Are you all right? You seem off."

For a moment, I think he's going to shrug me off again, but then his shoulders drop. "I've had a shitty week," he admits.

"What happened?"

“My adoptive dad,” he starts, then strains his features as if the words are hard to get out. “He got arrested for drunk driving this week.”

I blink, taken aback. “Oh my God. Was anyone hurt?”

“No. Thankfully. Totaled his truck, but he hit a tree, not another car. There was this whole thing at my grandparents’ house. They confronted him about it, and it turned into a big fight. He stormed out, drunk again, of course. It’s been a mess.”

I don’t know what to say at first. The wind stirs around us, the heaviness of his emotions settling in the air.

“I’m so sorry. That sounds awful.”

“It is. I don’t even know how to deal with it. I hate him, Hae. Like, I *loathe* that man.”

“That’s a lot to handle. Have you talked to anyone about it? A therapist? Friend?”

He shakes his head, kicking at the ground again. “Not really. What’s the point? Nothing’s gonna change.”

I take a breath, trying to think of something comforting to say. “I know it feels hopeless, but you don’t have to carry this by yourself. I’m here, okay? You can talk to me. Anytime.”

“Thanks.” He sounds noncommittal.

We start walking again, the path winding through a patch of trees, and I wish there were more I could do to help him. I wanted today to be about celebrating him, but he’s clearly not in a celebratory mood.

I think about the gift tucked in my backpack and wonder if maybe it’ll help. It’s not much, but it’s something.

I nudge him gently with my elbow. “Hey, I know it’s been a rough week, but it *is* your birthday, and I got you a present.”

He glances at me, the corners of his mouth twitching, but it’s not quite a smile. “You didn’t have to do that.”

“I wanted to.”

I spot a bench in the distance, tucked on the edge of the path overlooking the river, and guide him toward it. As he sits, I pull my backpack into my lap to unzip it, then reach inside. My hand emerges with the small tissue-paper-wrapped bundle, which I give to Harrison.

“I didn’t get you a card,” I say sheepishly. “I’m bad at writing in cards.”

That earns me a genuine smile. “Me too. I never know what to write.”

After a beat of hesitation, he peels off the piece of tape keeping the tissue paper together. His brow furrows when he sees what's inside.

"Is this…" He lifts his gaze to mine, his throat dipping as he swallows. "Tokki."

I'm caught in a weird state of nostalgia and nerves as I watch him stroke the stuffed animal's soft, floppy ears, the sun catching its faded gray fur. Tiger AKA Tokki is worn after years in my possession.

"I've had him for twenty-one years," I say, offering a tentative smile. "I thought maybe you'd like to have him back for a while. Take over babysitting duties."

Harrison's expression softens, and for the first time today, I feel like we're connecting. Like maybe we can build something from this, from a shared memory and the fact that we found each other after all these years.

But then the darkness creeps back in. His face hardens, and he shoves Tokki back at me. "What am I supposed to do with this?"

"I just thought—"

"You thought what? That this would fix everything?" He glares at me. "You think a stupid stuffed animal is gonna make up for the fact that you got adopted by a family that actually gave a shit, while I got stuck with that monster?"

"Harrison, no, that's not what I—"

"He beat me, Hae. He burned me with cigarettes. Did you know that? And while he was doing that, you were living the good life with your perfect fucking family. I didn't get to grow up in some cozy little home. I got stuck with an abusive drunk who treated me like garbage. And now you want to give me this stupid bunny like it's supposed to make everything better? Like it erases the fact that I got left behind?"

His words slam into me like a punch to the throat. I stumble to my feet, stunned, my chest tightening with guilt.

"I didn't mean it like that. I hoped it might mean something to you. To have something from before we—"

"From before we were separated? From before you got to live happily ever after and I got locked in closets for hours when I was being disobedient?"

My heart aches. "I know it wasn't fair. I know you went through things I can't even imagine. But I didn't choose this. I didn't ask to be adopted

without you.”

“No, you just got lucky. You got everything. And I got nothing. And every time I look at you, it reminds me of how fucked-up my life has been compared to yours. So don’t stand there and act like you understand, because you don’t.”

Tears prick my eyes. “You’re right. I don’t understand. But I’m trying. I want to understand.”

He shakes his head. “It’s too late for that, Charlotte.”

His words crush all the hope I had that this gift might help bridge the gap between us. Instead, it’s only widened the divide.

“I’m so sorry,” I say, my heart breaking for him. “I wish I could change it, but—”

“But you can’t,” he snaps. “And don’t give me that bullshit about how you think your parents didn’t know I existed. You *know* you don’t believe that. Otherwise, you would’ve told them about me already. But you’re stalling because you’re scared to hear the truth.”

I flinch as if he’d struck me. “That’s not true,” I protest.

“Stop lying to yourself. They didn’t want me. They only wanted you.”

I feel tears prickling at the corners of my eyes, attempting to leak out. “You’re wrong. They would have—”

“Fuck this,” he interrupts. Cold and final. “I should’ve never answered your message. I don’t want you in my life, and I sure as hell don’t want these dumb memories.”

Before I can react, he snatches Tiger off the bench and marches toward the wooden railing separating us from the river below. He winds his arm back, then hurls the bunny into the water. I watch in horror as it floats away.

The one tangible connection to my past slipping out of reach.

“No!” I cry out, running to the edge, but it’s too late. Tiger is gone, carried away by the current. I spin back to Harrison, my heart shattering to pieces. “Why did you do that? That was all we had left!”

“Because it doesn’t mean anything. None of this means anything.” His face is devoid of emotion. “I’ll wait for you at the car.”

He turns and walks away, and my tears finally burst free, spilling down my cheeks as I watch him disappear around the bend.

I want to hurry after him, to tell him he’s wrong, that we can fix this, that we can still have something. But I can’t move. I can’t breathe. The pain

is too much.

And as I stand there, alone by the river, I realize that I've lost him all over again.

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Two hours.

I drive two hours to see them.

I could've gone back to Delta Pi after I dropped Harrison off at his hotel. Gone home and talked to Faith. Or to Hastings, where the boys would be happy to comfort me.

But I don't want their comfort.

I want my mom and dad.

It's hard to drive with a sheen of tears in my eyes, but somehow, I make it to Hamden in one piece. I pull into the driveway and don't even bother turning off the engine; I just jump out, my feet pounding against the stone path as I hurry to the front door. My hands tremble as I twist the knob. It's locked. And my stupid keys are in my stupid car, so I start knocking, each frenzied rap echoing my frantic heartbeat.

The door swings open to reveal my mother, her expression shifting from confusion to alarm as she takes in my tear-streaked face.

"Oh, sweetheart!" she gasps, pulling me into her arms without hesitation.

I bury my face in her shoulder, the familiar scent of her lilac perfume bringing a flood of comfort amid the chaos in my heart.

"What happened? What's wrong?"

"He threw him in the river!" I sob, my voice muffled against her soft white sweater. "He threw Tiger into the river!"

"What? Who?" she frets, her worry deepening as she wraps one arm around me and ushers me into the house.

Inside, she leads me into the living room, where I collapse onto the couch, still trembling from the intensity of my emotions.

"I found my brother."

The confession flies out before I can stop it.

Mom doesn't understand, though. "Oliver?"

“No. My biological brother. I found him, and I thought…I thought it would be okay. But he threw Tiger away. It was all I had left from before. From Korea. The only piece of my old life!”

“Honey. You need to slow down. And maybe start from the beginning. You found your brother?” she prompts, urging me to focus.

I take a shaky breath. “Yes. I found him on a DNA site. I was scared to tell you guys because I thought you would be angry or feel betrayed.”

Fresh tears spill down my cheeks.

“Anna? What’s going on?” My father’s voice sounds from the doorway.

I glance up at him, and when he sees me sitting there, concern floods his eyes.

“Peanut, what are you doing home?”

“Ed, come sit down,” Mom says. “Charlotte just told me she signed up for an ancestry site to track down her biological relatives. She discovered she has a brother.”

His expression goes serious. “Oh. I see.”

“Are you mad?” I ask, my voice cracking.

“What? I could never be angry at you for wanting to learn about your heritage,” he says, taking a seat next to me. “I wish you’d told us about this earlier. We would’ve supported you every step of the way.”

“Really?”

“Of course. We always encouraged you to learn everything you could about where you came from,” he reminds me.

“When you turned eighteen, your dad and I discussed suggesting you sign up for a site like that,” Mom admits, “but you’ve always been so resistant when it comes to anything related to Korea. I’m glad to hear you’re open to it now.”

I look between them, my heart clenching. “Why didn’t you adopt him too?”

That startles both my parents.

“Charlotte,” Mom says firmly. “We had *no idea* you had a sibling. I’m still trying to wrap my head around it now. The orphanage didn’t tell us. We thought you were the only child.”

“Why wouldn’t they tell you?” I choke out. “They could have saved him from everything he went through.”

“I don’t know.” Her voice softens. “Even your own adoption paperwork was a bit of a mess. The agency we worked with constantly complained how disorganized the Seoul agency was. But to neglect to mention a *sibling*…” She shakes her head. “I’m stunned.”

On my other side, Dad squeezes my hand. “I wish we had known, peanut. We would’ve been a family of six rather than five. But nobody can change the past. What matters now is the present. And in the present, in this moment, you are our daughter, and our daughter is hurting.”

Before I can stop them, a slew of disjointed questions leaves my mouth. “But what if I’m not enough? What if he needs more from you than I do? What if you regret adopting me?”

Mom shakes her head again. Vehemently. “You are *always* enough for us. Why would you ever think otherwise?”

“Because I’m not perfect. I want to be perfect for you,” I blurt out, my insecurities bubbling to the surface. “I thought if I just tried hard enough, if I showed you how smart and accomplished and capable I am, maybe I would be worth it.”

Shocked, Dad pulls me into a hug, his arms strong and reassuring. “You don’t have to be perfect, peanut. We love you for who you are, not who you think you should be.”

“I messed everything up,” I moan. “I got in a fight with Harrison, and now he hates me. He threw Tiger in the river—the stuffed bunny he gave me when I was a baby. It was the only thing I had from before you adopted me.”

Dad looks upset on my behalf. “Oh, kiddo. I’m sorry. That must have been painful for you.”

I can barely see through the tears obscuring my vision. “It was. And now I’m scared I’ll lose him and that I’ll lose you too. I kept this from you for months. I’ve been *lying* for months. Lying by omission, but still.”

“Sweetheart,” Mom says, “there’s nothing you could ever do that would change how much we love you. Same goes for Oliver and Ava.”

“But I’m not like Ava,” I sob. “I’m not your real daughter.”

“Charlotte!” She raises her voice, but not in anger. With deep, unwavering conviction. “You are our real daughter. You always have been. We chose you, and we will always choose you.”

I bite my lip. Hard. “But sometimes I feel different. Like I don’t really fit in. Ava and Oliver, you have a bond with them that I’ll never have. You look like them. They belong.”

“You belong too,” she insists. “You’re just as much a part of this family as your brother and sister are. Blood doesn’t make a family—love does. And we love you more than anything in this world. We’re so proud of you, and nothing, absolutely nothing, could ever make us stop loving you.”

I cling to them, my heart breaking and mending all at once. A law of contradiction.

My tears flow even harder, but they’re different now. They aren’t tears of fear but relief. I bury my face in my father’s chest again, Mom’s arms still around me, and I allow myself to feel the security of their presence.

I feel safe here.

I belong here.

Straightening up, I inhale a deep breath, willing the tears to subside. “I wish I never gave Tiger to him. It felt like losing my childhood all over again.”

Dad brushes hair off my forehead. “You haven’t lost anything. That stuffed animal, no matter where it is, will always be a part of your story.”

“Come on. Why don’t we go and make some tea?” Mom suggests, wiping the tears off my cheeks with her thumbs. “You can tell us everything you found out about this brother, talk us through it. We’ll get through this together. Okay?”

I sag into her touch, smiling. “Okay.”

Charlotte,

I’m not sure where to begin, except to say I’m sorry. I know saying that doesn’t come close to fixing what I did, but I need you to know how much I regret losing my temper and throwing away something so important to you.

It almost feels a bit silly to be apologizing over a stuffed animal, but it wasn’t just a stuffed bunny. It meant something. To both of us. And the fact that I took it from you in a moment of anger…it’s hard to even face that.

You have every right to never want to speak to me again. I understand if that’s how you feel. I wouldn’t blame you at all.

My childhood was total shit. I’m not saying this to excuse what I did, but I carry a lot of rage and bitterness about things I don’t even fully understand sometimes. When I found out you were adopted without me, it stirred up feelings I didn’t know how to deal with, and I took it out on you. That was wrong. I know that now.

My views on family and adoption are messed up. I've had to live with feeling like I was the one left behind, and it's poisoned the way I look at everything. But I'm realizing that's not fair to you. You didn't choose any of this, and you've got your own journey, your own struggles. I never should have taken my pain out on you.

I know I've probably damaged whatever chance we had at building something. But if you're willing to give me another chance, I'd really like to try. I want to be better. I want to understand you, and maybe you can understand me too. But if you can't, if this was the last straw, I'll understand that as well. I don't want to cause you any more pain.

Please take care of yourself, no matter what you decide.

Harrison

# CHAPTER FORTY-NINE

## WILL

*I’ll sass your fucking face*

CASE AND HIS ROOMMATE, TRAGER, ARE THROWING A PARTY TONIGHT. It’s the last day of spring break and we don’t have practice tomorrow, so it’s prime time to get loaded without repercussions. The moment we step into the house, the music hits us like a tidal wave, thumping so loud I can feel it in my chest. The living room is packed. Random people are sprawled on the couches, sipping from red cups, while some of our teammates play a drinking game in the dining room, everyone shouting to be heard. The air’s thick with that unmistakable mix of cheap beer and perfume, and the buzz of conversation fills every corner.

Beside me, Charlie looks a little tense. She glances around, clutching my hand tightly. I give her a reassuring smile, leaning close so only she can hear me.

“You look amazing, you know that? Like, jaw-droppingly hot.”

She blushes, eyes flicking up at me, then Beckett, who’s on her other side. He grins at her, nodding in agreement. “Larsen’s right. I’d be eye-fucking you if I didn’t already know you were with us.”

“Stop, you guys,” she whispers, a shy grin tugging at her lips.

I can tell she’s nervous, but the compliments are working. She holds her head a little higher.

Beckett and I exchange a quick look, and I know we’re on the same page. Tonight isn’t just a random party at Colson’s house—it’s our first time stepping out together, the three of us, letting people know what we have with Charlie.

I know she’s afraid of how people will react. Not gonna lie—I’m nervous too. The back of my neck itches and I resist the urge to scratch it.

Just then, someone calls my name, and I turn to see Case striding toward us. Trager hears him and ambles over too, greeting me with a clap on the arm.

"Yo," Trager says. "I got a beef with your stupid dad."

I snort. "Join the club."

"What the hell was that hockey segment? They didn't use my interview! They used *Pope's* dumbass frozen-on-the-spot interview and not mine? What the fuck."

"I had zero involvement in it." I shrug at him. "Take it up with Coach. Maybe he knows."

Trager is about to respond when he notices Charlie sandwiched between us. He openly checks her out, and I don't blame him. She looks damn cute tonight. Short skirt, tall boots, and a black top under her signature cropped cashmere sweater.

"Is this your girl?" Trager asks me.

"Yes," I say, at the same time Beckett drawls, "Yup."

Case doesn't bother hiding his grin. He knows about this arrangement already. I told him weeks ago. But this is the first time the rest of the team is hearing about it.

Trager looks between me and Beckett, visibly confused. "Wait. Who —?"

"This is Charlie," I say, keeping my tone casual. "She's with both of us."

Our teammate's jaw drops. Then he grins and says, "Nice."

"Wait, I don't get it," Patrick Armstrong says, and I realize he and Nazem have been eavesdropping on us. He steps closer, frowning at me. "How is she with both of you?"

"She just is," Beckett says, his arm looping around Charlie's waist protectively.

Patrick's eyes narrow, bouncing between me, Beckett, and Charlie like he's just stumbled into some alternate universe. He sips his beer, then purses his lips, scrutinizing Charlie. "Uh…and that, like…works for you?"

She hesitates, cheeks flushing. "I mean…yes," she replies. "It works for us."

Poor Kansas Kid looks like he's trying to do mental gymnastics, and I can't help but laugh.

“Hold on,” Patrick says, raising his hand like he’s still trying to process this. “So, if she’s your girlfriend…or yours…then, like…who buys her flowers and stuff?”

I put on a super solemn expression. “Both of us.”

The two underclassmen glance between us again, skeptical. “You’re messing with us,” Patrick finally says. “You don’t have the same girlfriend.”

“No, they do.” Charlie surprises us both, lifting her chin confidently as she looks at our teammates. “And they’re both great boyfriends.”

“I’m sorry, you’re telling me you’re dating *both* these losers?” a new voice says, and I roll my eyes as Shane strides over with Diana at his side.

Charlie’s face fills with relief at the sight of Diana. “Oh my God. Estrogen. Thank you. I need you.”

Diana throws her head back and laughs, then pulls Charlie in for a hug. “Are these dumbasses bothering you?”

“Not really.”

Meanwhile, Patrick is still staring at her like he’s processing the world’s hardest math equation. “Okay, so if she’s your girlfriend, Beck, or, wait… no, Larsen’s girlfriend too. How does that…” He stops and regroups. “Who decides when you do boyfriend stuff?”

Beck and I both shrug like it’s no big deal.

“For example,” Patrick says, “back to the flower dilemma—”

“Why are you so focused on flowers?” Nazzy demands.

His friend ignores him. “Do you *both* get her flowers? Like on the same day?”

I sigh.

“No, this is a great question,” Shane says, grinning behind Patrick’s head. He’s clearly toying with the kid. “Is there a staggered flower schedule?” he asks Charlie with a grave look. “Beckett one week, Larsen the other? That way you always have fresh flowers in your room? Or do they double up on the flowers so your room is always overflowing with them?”

“I don’t really care about flowers” is Charlie’s response, and I swear Patrick’s brain implodes.

“And what about Valentine’s Day?” Shane pushes. “That’s gotta be a war zone for you guys.”

“Yeah,” Case says with a grin. “Do you have a Google Calendar or something for this whole setup?”

“Don’t get her started about her calendar,” Beckett groans.

“Dude, I’m out,” Trager says, gulping the rest of his beer. “This is giving me an anxiety attack. I feel pressured when a chick even asks me what my favorite color is. You two assholes are over here on *next level* relationship mode.”

“Go away, all of you,” Diana orders. “You’re putting Charlotte on the spot.”

Thankfully, Diana succeeds in shooing everyone away, until only her and Shane remain.

“See?” Beckett says to Charlie. “That was easy.”

“What are you talking about!” she huffs. “I’m exhausted from that grilling.”

“Nah, that went better than I thought it would,” I admit.

The five of us drift into the other room, where Charlie and Diana huddle together talking, while the boys and I talk hockey. Eventually, Diana drags Shane to dance, although I don’t know if there’s much coercion involved. Dude can deny it all he wants, but he totally likes dancing now.

Charlie returns to tuck herself between us, and Beckett leans down to brush his lips over hers. Then he nudges her toward me, and I draw her back against my chest, kissing her cheek.

A few girls nearby glance our way. I notice they’re giving Charlie looks, and not the good kind. Raised eyebrows, thinly veiled annoyance. Whispering to each other behind their drinks.

Charlie notices too, and she shifts a little closer to me, uncomfortable.

Beckett gives her hand a gentle squeeze. “Ignore them,” he says.

She nods, but I can tell she’s still uneasy.

Fortunately, Diana struts back toward us at that moment, platinum ponytail swinging, confidence on full display. She frowns when she clocks Charlie’s expression. Then she notices the girls glaring in our direction and bursts out laughing.

“Oh my God,” Diana tells Charlie, tossing her ponytail over her shoulder. “You’ve got half the women in here fuming. You snagged the two biggest catches on the team.”

I wink at her. “Aw, thanks, Di. I didn’t realize you think I’m a catch.”

She grins at me before linking her arm through Charlie's. "Seriously, though, ignore those looks. They're just jealous."

As if on cue, one of the glaring girls, a tall blond in a too-tight dress, walks by us. She's with a couple of her friends, who all exchange a glance, and as she passes, she sneers loud enough for us to hear.

"Guess some girls just can't stand being alone, huh?"

Charlie's face flushes red. Before any of us can say anything, Diana steps forward, arms crossed and voice ice-cold.

"Excuse me? You got something to say?" Her tone is as sharp as glass, and I see the blond girl falter, her eyes widening as Diana stares her down. Or rather, up. Diana is all of five feet, yet she's still cutting this much taller chick down to size. "Or are you just salty because you couldn't handle one of these guys, let alone two?"

The blond looks between Diana, Charlie, and us, her confidence wavering. "Whatever," she mutters, rolling her eyes as she tries to play it off. "I just think it's…desperate."

Diana scoffs, rolling her eyes right back at her. "Desperate? Honey, it's called knowing what you want and actually being happy. Try it sometime, maybe it'll make you less of a Bitter Betty."

The girl's mouth falls open, and her friends grab her arm, tugging her away before she can respond.

Charlie looks at Diana, wide-eyed, before breaking into a smile. "Thanks for that. I wasn't sure what to say."

"Hey, if you're gonna be with these two, you better be ready to ignore a *lot* of jealous jerks. It just comes with the territory."

I search Charlie's expression, looking for any sign that she's more shaken by that exchange than she's letting on, but she seems fine.

I am too, shockingly enough. The last time I was in a position to reveal this unusual relationship, I chickened out and introduced Charlie as Beckett's girlfriend to Tessa Diaz. I wasn't sure how I'd feel tonight, having so many people privy to my personal business.

But this…wasn't bad at all.

# CHAPTER FIFTY

## BECKETT

*That's our girl*

SPRING HAS A WAY OF MAKING EVERYTHING FEEL LIGHTER. THE SUN'S out more. The air smells fresh. And even Charlie is smiling more despite the most intense workload I've ever seen anyone undertake. She's finally settled into the rhythm of *us*, this fucked-up, unorthodox relationship we have, and Will seems happy too. We're all in a good place. For now.

But there's this ticking clock. Graduation is right around the corner, and the pressure is building, the need to make decisions. Life is about to change, and I don't know how to stop it from pulling us apart.

Tonight, Charlie is stretched out on the couch, flipping through one of her textbooks, while Will is sprawled on the floor, reviewing notes for one of his last exams. I have my laptop open on the other end of the couch from Charlie, aimlessly scrolling through job ads.

I'm not really looking for anything specific, just killing time. But my mind keeps drifting back to what's coming after all this. The looming uncertainty that comes with graduation.

"Are you ever going to decide about that job offer?" Charlie is saying to Will, almost as if she's been reading my mind.

"I don't know. My original plan for after graduation was to travel around Europe for a year, but I'm not sure anymore. God knows my dad would be happy if I scrapped the traveling plan. He thinks it's a waste of time and money."

"Yo, Larsen, tell Charlie how you earned money last summer to save for the trip," I say with a grin.

He rolls his eyes.

"How?" she pushes.

With a shrug, he says, “Worked as a pool boy.”

Her jaw drops. “How many?”

“How many what?”

“How many MILFs did you service?”

I howl with laughter. That’s our girl.

“Zero, you brat.” He sits up and pokes her in the ribs, then proceeds to tickle them until she’s squirming and giggling.

“You should skip Europe and go to Australia,” I tell him. “That way, I could tag along on some of your stops. Go to New Zealand maybe. There are some sick climbing spots there. And Bali’s, like, a puddle-jumper ride away.”

“That doesn’t sound entirely unappealing. I wasn’t locked on a particular location. All I wanted was to get away from here for a while. Breathe different air. Eat different food. See different people.”

“Would you come?” I ask, nudging Charlie with my foot.

She purses her lips. “My sister has a couple weeks’ vacation time she wanted to use this summer, and we were thinking of traveling somewhere together. Seoul maybe, but I don’t know if that’s a trip I want to take with Ava. But…New Zealand was one of the other places she threw out as a suggestion…”

My face lights up. “Do it.”

“But then I’ll have to explain to my sister why I’m kissing two different guys hello.” She bites her lip.

“Just kiss Larsen hello,” I say. I know they think it bothers me that he’s the “public face” of the relationship, as Charlie likes to call it. But it honestly doesn’t. The things I get to do to her in private make up for it. “Then when we’re alone, you can prove your love by kissing more than my mouth.”

Charlie grins. But it fades fast. “How would this work if we kept seeing each other after graduation?”

Her question brings an ache to my chest, because the way she phrased it reveals something I was afraid of.

She assumed it would end after graduation.

I suppose that’s a fair assumption, yet the idea of never seeing her again is physically painful. I’m obsessed with her. Ever since the truth about Shannon came out, it’s like something inside me has shifted. I’ve felt

lighter. More willing to share things with Charlie and Will that I always kept buried.

I told them about how smart and kind Shannon was. That I don't think about her as often as I used to but that when the memories do come, they're agonizing. Bittersweet. But sometimes, they just make me smile.

I told them about all the plans Shannon and I made. How we wanted a big family someday. How I still want that big family.

But Charlie's right. How the fuck *is* it going to work? I don't even know where I'll be. Neither does Charlie; she doesn't know what grad school she'll attend. And Will hasn't decided if he's traveling or accepting the job on that campaign.

"We'll figure it out," Will says in response to her question. That's always his response. He seems to think stalling is a viable solution to this problem.

I glance back at my laptop just as Charlie says, "What about your plans, Beck?"

"I don't really have any."

"No? Because if you keep looking at jobs in Australia, we might start thinking you've got a secret plan to ditch us."

I give her a half smile. "Nah. No plan to ditch you. But…I don't know. Something about going back there feels right."

"Wait, are you talking about more than just the summer?" Will's tone sharpens. "Like a permanent move?"

I shrug, trying to keep it casual. "Maybe. I guess I'm thinking about it."

"Are you serious?"

"I don't know yet."

I rake a hand over my beard, wishing I could shave the damn thing off already. But the team not only sailed through the playoffs, we're playing in the Frozen Four tournament in Michigan next weekend. The guys will murder me if I shave the magic beard.

"I haven't decided anything," I assure them. "I'm honestly just looking."

Charlie bites her lip. "What if you go to Australia and Will takes this job in DC? And then I end up in, I don't know, Copenhagen for grad school."

"Copenhagen?" he echoes in surprise. "Did you get into the program there?"

“No, I still haven’t received any acceptances other than MIT and Cornell.” She offers a dry laugh. “The two places I’d rather not attend. I’m just using it as an example. What if the three of us are spread all over the world, over three continents? Where does that leave us?”

The question hangs in the air, harboring an implication that none of us want to face.

Because we all know where that leaves us.

Alone. Single.

Will changes the subject then, and I’m grateful for it.

The next few days pass without incident. No more heaviness. No deep talks. Just lots of great sex and hockey practices. I end up applying to a bunch of jobs, not expecting much to come from it, but to feel like I’m doing something productive.

With the environmental science degree I’ll soon have, I qualify for a bunch of interesting entry-level positions at various environmental nonprofits. Climate and conservation organizations. I follow Charlie’s lead with her grad school applications by casting a wide net when it comes to jobs, looking beyond the continental United States.

Then I put it out of my mind as our practices become more grueling and we gear up for the most important series of games of the whole season.

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The locker room is buzzing. Excitement and dread. Adrenaline and nerves. It’s the second-to-last game of the season, and everyone knows what’s at stake. We win tonight, we’re going to the final tournament tomorrow. But even if we win, it’s all winding down soon. For the seniors, like me, Ryder, Shane…it’s the end of an era.

Things won’t be the same after this.

I sit on the bench, slowly taping my stick, trying not to think too much. Beside me, Ryder is shaking out his shoulders like he’s already preparing for the game. He’ll be headed down to Dallas with the wife this summer. Going pro. Winning a Stanley Cup or two.

“What?” he says when he catches me staring at him.

I smirk. “Just thinking how I’m gonna miss your grumpy ass after you move.”

His eyes soften a little. “It’s weird, isn’t it? Possibly the last game with the team. Last few weeks at Briar.”

“Yeah,” I say. I’m trying to shrug it off, but it’s hitting me harder than I thought it would. I’m feeling the weight of it. The inevitable goodbyes. Soon, this team, my teammates…it’ll be just a memory.

Before the melancholy can take root, Shane strolls over, tapping his stick against the floor in a lazy rhythm. He’s also NHL-bound, heading to Chicago. Far as I know, Diana’s going with him.

“Look at you two, getting all sappy,” he drawls. “It’s adorable. Do you want me to film you guys braiding each other’s hair for an online tutorial?”

“I hope Chicago is ready for your smart-ass remarks,” I say.

Ryder snorts. “Either that, or his new teammates sign a petition to get him traded.”

I glance at Will, who’s taping his stick, focused, in the zone.

He still hasn’t decided what he’s doing after graduation. Neither have I. The uncertainty feels like a dark cloud hanging over me. It’s like everyone’s moving on, and I don’t know where I fit anymore.

My attention is diverted when Coach Jensen stalks in, tailed by his assistant coaches. He stands at the head of the room, arms folded over his bulky chest, shaking his head like he’s dealing with a bunch of toddlers when nobody has even said a word.

“Colson,” he snaps. “If I see you miss any checks tonight like you did last weekend, I’ll check you myself. Kansas Kid, don’t sass the refs again, or I’ll sass your fucking face.”

“What does that mean?” Patrick asks in confusion.

But Coach has already moved on. “Dunne, I need you on their winger—that goddamn nuisance, number fifty-five—all goddamn night. Focus on keeping the puck away from his grubby hands, not on your pretty-boy looks.”

“I’m offended by that,” I call from my perch on the bench. “I don’t even own a mirror.”

He ignores me. “Ryder, watch out for Palicki. He’ll be breathing down your neck all night.”

With that, Jensen turns to speak to his assistants.

“Was that our championship tournament pep talk?” Shane says with a sigh.

“I feel like Coach needs to take classes on how to be a nice human,” remarks one of our freshmen.

“I’m still in the room, Abrams,” Jensen growls from the door.

“Hey, Coach Hollis,” Shane calls out. “Why don’t you give the pep talk?”

Our assistant coach turns toward our side of the room with a dark scowl. “Oh, now I’m worthy of you?”

I swallow a laugh. Here we go. I’d *kill* to spend five minutes in that man’s brain.

“I heard about you joining Dad Chat,” Hollis says, glaring daggers at us. “And I don’t take betrayal lightly.”

“If it helps, we were removed from the chat,” I tell him.

“No, sir. It does not.” Hollis proceeds to shatter everyone’s eardrums by blowing his whistle. In the fucking locker room. “I will offer no pep until I receive an apology letter in my mailbox.”

“Mailbox? What century does he live in?” Shane murmurs to me, and I choke on my laughter.

We finish getting dressed, the anticipation once again building in the room. By the time we’re in uniform, every single one of us is wired and ready to murder our opponents.

Just as I’m about to head to the tunnel, my phone vibrates in my locker. I almost ignore the alert, but something makes me check it.

Figuring it won’t matter if I’m one minute late for warm-ups, I slide my gloves off and grab my phone, then freeze when I read the email on the screen.

It’s a job offer.

From an ocean conservation organization. In Sydney.

I skim the email, my pulse racing when I see the words *salaried position*. This is an actual position. Not an internship, not some part-time thing. A full-time, real job. The kind of job I’ve always been dreaming about. Actual fieldwork.

“Dunne,” a sharp voice says from the door. It’s Coach. “Get your ass out there and join your team.”

“Sorry, Coach. Coming.”

“*Now*.”

I shove the phone back in my locker and scramble for the tunnel.

# CHAPTER FIFTY-ONE

## CHARLOTTE

*How often does it rain in Sydney?*

THE PILE OF ACCEPTANCE LETTERS SITS ON MY DESK, STARING AT ME IN accusation. Daring me to make this massive decision I'm nowhere near ready to make. All the programs are phenomenal, but I can't decide which path to follow. The pressure to make the right choice is so intense, a part of me wants to just run away from it all.

As I pick up one of the rejections in the stack, my phone buzzes with a text from Beckett.

***BECKETT:***

Hey. Can you come over?

I frown at the screen. His team lost the semi-finals last night, so he's probably still feeling down. Maybe he needs to talk or distract himself from the crushing disappointment.

***ME:***

Yeah. I'm on my way.

Fine, I might be looking to distract myself too, using his SOS to once again delay picking a grad school program. Still, as I grab my jacket and keys, I also tuck the stack of letters into my bag. Maybe I can get his and Will's opinions on the grad school dilemma while I'm there.

When I let myself into their house twenty minutes later, Beckett immediately comes down to greet me. I expect to see some postgame sadness, but he's not moping around. In fact, there's a weird kind of energy in his eyes. And he finally shaved that beard, allowing me to see his perfect, chiseled features again. He's truly one of the best-looking men I've ever laid eyes on. I'm a lucky woman.

"Hey," I say, hanging my jacket. "How are you holding up?"

"Fine." He shrugs. "Thanks for coming over. There's something I wanted to talk to you about."

I follow him into the living room, realizing this isn't about the game at all. "What's going on?"

Beckett runs a hand through his blond hair, pursing his lips as if trying to find the right words. "I, uh, got a job offer."

"Really? That's awesome. Where?"

"Sydney."

My jaw drops, and then, before I can stop it, I burst out laughing.

He stares at me in confusion. "What's so funny?"

"I got an acceptance letter from the grad school in Sydney."

"Seriously?"

"Dead serious." I pull the envelopes from my bag, flipping through them until I find the one. I wave it in the air. "University of Sydney."

He grins, that sexy rogue grin that makes my stomach flip. "That's fate, right? It's gotta be."

I shake my head, still laughing. "I don't believe in fate."

"Well, I do. Look, I've been thinking about it since I got the offer. And now hearing you got accepted too? It just makes sense." He searches my gaze. "Would you come with me? To Australia?"

My heart skips a beat. "What about Will?"

Beckett doesn't hesitate. "I'll ask him too. I want both of you with me. This thing we have, whatever it is…it's something real. I don't want to leave it behind."

I'm stunned, my mind racing as I try to process what he's saying. Move to Australia? With Beckett and possibly Will? Part of me can't believe he's even asking, but the other part—the part that's always dreamed of adventure, of freedom—feels a rush of excitement.

"You're serious," I say, more to myself than to him.

“Dead serious,” he mimics, stepping closer. “You don’t have to decide right now. But I do want you to think about it. Picture what it would be like. You, me, Larsen. Together in Syd-naye.”

I grin at the way he exaggerates his accent. Then I bite my lip, torn between the practical side of me and the part that wants to say yes right this second.

“Okay. I’ll think about it.”

Even as the words leave my mouth, I already know how tempted I am. How incredible it would be to not say goodbye to Beckett.

Yet at the same time, I can’t factor Beckett or Will into this. First, I need to determine what this decision would mean for *me*. For my family. For everything I’ve worked toward.

Leaving the States would be a huge deal. My parents expect me to stay close. Maybe not in the same town but at least in the same country. They’ve supported me through all this, through college, through the mess of finding my biological brother, and now I’m about to tell them I might be moving halfway around the world? And not only that but that I’ll be giving up an elite program in the States for the University of Sydney? It’s a downgrade in schools, or at least my parents will view it that way.

“I’ll need to talk to my family about it.” Nerves tickle my stomach. “They have no idea I even applied overseas.” Another thought occurs to me. “What if I go to Sydney, and it’s not what I thought it would be? What if I hate it?”

Beckett chuckles at my panicky expression. “Then you can leave. Fun fact, sugar puff—there’s no law stating that once you step foot on Australian soil, you’re forbidden from leaving the continent.” He shrugs. “I’m not asking for forever, Charlie. Just think about it, though.”

I nod slowly. “Okay.”

As I leave the town house a couple hours later, my mind is still a mess of thoughts and emotions. Moving to Australia sounds…crazy. But it also sounds amazing. And I can’t stop thinking about how perfect it might be. I don’t want to be at MIT or Cornell. From the moment I started applying to grad schools, I was drawn to the new, exciting, unfamiliar places. Sydney. Oxford. Copenhagen. Unfortunately, I didn’t get into the latter program—it was too damn competitive—or the Melbourne one, but I was accepted into the rest.

Oxford sounds pretty incredible too.

*It rains all the time in England…*

How often does it rain in Sydney? I should look that up.

At home, I go right back to obsessing over my options, spreading the envelopes across my comforter. On the left side of the bed is the *no* pile. It features every New England school. Sorry, Ivies, but it's been swell. Four years was enough.

On the right side, I have Sydney and Oxford.

On my desk sit the two rejections.

It's ridiculous how much weight these one-page letters carry. How a single sentence can make or break my future.

There's a knock on my door, and I know it's Faith even before I hear her say, "Char? You in there?"

"Come in," I tell her, and she pokes her head inside.

"You want to watch a movie or something?"

"No, babe. I'm too distracted."

She stares at the sea of paper. "Grad school?"

I nod.

"Any closer to picking one?"

I nod again. "I think so. I'm going to run a pros-and-cons list now and see if it points me in one direction."

She rolls her eyes. "You are the biggest nerd in the world, and I love you dearly."

"Love you too."

Once she's gone, I grab my laptop and settle on the bed, leaning against the headboard.

I open a new document and begin my favorite process in the whole world. The Method.

**ACTION: Move to Sydney.**

# CHAPTER FIFTY-TWO

## WILL

*Ours, baby*

THE JOB OFFER FROM TESSA DIAZ SITS IN MY INBOX LIKE AN ARMED bomb, waiting for me to either defuse it or let it blow my life up. A campaign job in DC, working for one of my father's biggest critics.

It's so tempting.

And so fucking risky.

I just had lunch with Case, and we spoke about it in length. He thinks I should take it. But Case doesn't know my dad. He can't grasp the sheer force of my father's wrath.

Now, I'm driving home from the diner, still torn, and after several more minutes of vacillating, I call the one person who might actually give me valid advice.

"Hi, kiddo." My stepmother answers on the second ring, her voice wafting out of the car speakers.

"Do you have a minute?" I ask Kelsey. "I need to talk."

"Of course. What's going on?"

I turn at the end of Main Street, driving in the direction of Hastings's residential neighborhood. "I got a job offer. A big one. Campaign work."

"I know. Your father told me."

I frown. "Oh. Okay."

"And I knew it would only be a matter of time before you called to talk about it."

I hesitate, feeling the words catch in my throat. "Harper Wozniak has been really critical of Dad in the press."

"Yes, she has."

"Dad flipped out when I told him."

“Yes, he did.”

“So what do I do?”

The silence on the other end of the line is loud.

“I know,” I grumble. “It’s a shitty move.”

“Very much so,” she says wryly.

Frustration seizes my throat. “I get that. But it’s exactly the kind of work I want to do. I can’t just wait around for the next opportunity. This is right in front of me.”

“Will, you can’t take that job. It would be terrible for your father’s image. Do you realize what it would look like? His own son working for the opposition? It would tear him apart.”

I gnaw on the inside of my cheek. I knew she’d say something like that. But hearing it still makes my chest tighten.

“Fuck his image, Kels. I’m tired of living my life worrying about what it looks like for him. This is my career. My life.”

“I know, honey,” she says. “But you’ve worked so hard to get to where you are, and I just worry that taking this job will make everything more difficult. Not only for him but for *you*. The media machine will spin this, and it won’t be kind. It’ll become a mess you don’t need.”

“I can handle the media. And I don’t care what they write about me.”

“Listen to me, Will. Sometimes, the right job isn’t the one that comes first. It’s the one that fits with who you are. And I don’t think this is it.”

“Yeah, maybe.”

“Whatever you decide, though, I’ll support you.”

Will she? Because it sounds like this is one of those rare times when she’s firmly siding with my father.

But maybe that’s telling. Maybe it’s a sign that this job is not the way to go.

After we hang up, I’m no closer to figuring out what the hell to do. Her advice lingers in the back of my mind, but I hate that a part of me feels obligated to consider my dad’s image in all this.

When I get home, I hear Beckett’s voice before I even open the door.

“Yo, Larsen!” he calls out as soon as I walk in. “Got news.”

I toss my jacket on the hook in the front hall. “What kind of news?”

He grins from his perch on the couch, looking way too excited for someone whose team got knocked out in the semi-finals last night.

I’m still pissed about that. The game had been tied nearly the entire time. We could’ve taken that shit to overtime. Instead, Nazzy took the stupidest penalty known to man, giving Michigan State a power play thirty seconds before the last buzzer. They scored, and we lost. The end.

Certainly not the greatest way to end an otherwise flawless season, but I also can’t complain, considering we won the championship last year. You can’t win ’em all, right?

“I got a job offer,” Beckett reveals.

“Seriously? That’s great, man. Where?”

“Sydney.”

“No shit?”

“Yeah. Ocean conservation work.” He leans forward on his forearms, looking like a kid who just found out he’s going to Disney World. “But that’s not the best part. I talked to Charlie. She came by to chill for a bit when you were out with Colson.”

“Okay?” I’m not quite following.

“Our girl got accepted to the grad program at the University of Sydney. Come on. Tell me that isn’t fate or something.”

“You’re kidding.”

“Nope. I asked her if she’d move there with me, and she’s thinking about it.”

Wait. What? He asked her to move with him?

My heart does a weird little flip at the thought of Charlie moving halfway across the world.

Beckett notes my expression and snorts. “Mate. I’m telling you because I want you to come too.”

“You want me to just pick up and move to Australia with you and Charlie?”

“Why not?” He shrugs like it’s the simplest thing in the world. “You’ve been wanting to travel, to do something different, right? This is it.”

I shake my head, laughing at how absurd it all sounds. “I don’t know, man. I’ve got this job offer too… I still haven’t decided what I want to do about that.” I pause for a moment. “You really think this could work?”

“Yeah, I do. But it’s up to you. All I know is I’m going. And I want both you and Charlie with me.”

Charlie comes back later to spend the night, and the moment she walks through the door, Beckett's eyes light up. Jesus. He's got it bad.

I feel my eyes lighting up too.

Because I also have it bad.

She looks between us as if sensing it. A small, knowing smile plays on her lips, like she can read us both better than we can read ourselves. Like she understands exactly what's going on inside our heads without us having to say a word.

"Hey," she says, bending over to take off her little suede ankle boots. Now that the weather is warming up, she's gone back to wearing her good-girl pleated skirts and cropped sweaters, and my gaze drinks up the sight of her.

Beckett crosses the room first, pulling her into his arms. The way they fit together makes my chest tighten, but in a good way. It's not jealousy; it's knowing that what they have, what we all have, is real. It's ours.

I move closer, my hands brushing her waist as Beck kisses her. She melts into him, and I can't help but smile as I watch them, feeling the same heat stir inside me. This has always been something we've done together, this shared intimacy that somehow feels even more intense because we both love her in the same way.

When he pulls away, I'm right there. I tilt her chin up to me, and our lips meet. The kiss is slower, lingering, and I feel her melt into me just as much.

We're all in sync tonight, going upstairs without a word. Beckett is the one who leads us toward the bed, tugging off his shirt as I follow. I take Charlie's hand, guiding her down onto the mattress between us. Beckett sucks gently on her neck, and I run my hands over her body, loving the softness of her skin under my fingers.

The three of us have done this before, but tonight feels different. There's this unspoken understanding. Raw emotion. The connection between us is more than physical. It's something I can't even fully explain.

She moans softly as he kisses his way down her body, and I watch, mesmerized by the way she responds to both of us. When I kiss her again, it's slow, sensual, and full of everything I can't quite say.

"Goddamn," Beckett chokes out.

He’s staring at Charlie’s underwear. Pink, lacy, with a little white bow. A grin springs to my lips.

“Baby,” he says, his voice hoarse. “As much as I love this bow, I’m gonna need to take these off. I want to see your pussy.”

My dick grows impossibly harder, and my jeans suddenly feel too small. I shove them off my hips, kicking them away. The moment my cock juts out, Charlie wraps her fingers around it.

“You taste so good,” Beckett whispers.

I glance down in time to see his tongue lick a slow, teasing stripe from her clit to her perfect tiny asshole. *Jesus*. I thrust into our girl’s hand, my balls tightening with pleasure.

Charlie’s breathing grows ragged as Beckett starts licking her in fervor. Sucking her clit in his mouth before flicking his tongue over it, again and again, until she’s writhing on the bed. She spreads her legs even wider, splayed out for him like a goddamn feast.

“You’re so beautiful like this,” I murmur, my lips grazing the side of her breast. I lick my way to her nipple and circle it with my tongue.

Beckett’s face is buried between her thighs. He groans, and I see him reach down to stroke himself, fucking his own hand as he fucks her with his mouth.

“Look at what you do to him,” I tell Charlie, squeezing her tits. “He can’t get enough of you. Neither of us can.”

Her breathing gets choppier.

“You’re ours,” I say in her ear. “Fucking ours, baby. And we’re yours.”

My words seem to have an effect on both of them. I can’t fight my amusement as they both come without warning. Beckett shoots into his hand, grunting against her pussy, while she grinds his face as her orgasm shudders through her. She’s barely recovered from it before she’s pulling me on top of her, desperately grasping my cock, trying to put it inside her.

“I got you,” I say, curling my fingers over hers.

I thrust deep, and it’s overwhelming in the best way possible. Being inside her. It’s like every part of me is wrapped up in her, in this moment. She gasps, and her inner muscles grip me tight, her nails digging into my back as she tries to get me even closer, deeper. I give her every single inch. Everything I have. I’m tethered to her in a way that goes beyond anything

I've ever felt. I glance up, catching Beckett's eye as he watches us. He feels it too. I can tell.

As I fuck her, I feel every pulse of her body, every heartbeat, and when I finally find my release inside her, it knocks the breath right out of me. Groaning, I collapse on top of her for a moment before rolling us over so I don't crush her with my body weight. Beckett lies beside us, his arm draped over both of us, his breathing slowing as sleep begins to pull him under.

I'm exhausted too, but my mind is still racing.

I can't stop thinking about how much I love this, and the thought of anything coming between us makes my chest clench. As much as I've been trying to figure out my next move, I realize now that I already know what I need to do.

I slide out of bed, careful not to wake them. They're both sound asleep now, Beckett holding Charlie close, the two of them looking peaceful and content. I grab my phone from the nightstand, staring at the message sitting in my inbox, awaiting my response.

I open the email and start typing.

> **Tessa, I appreciate the offer more than you know, but after careful consideration, I've decided not to accept the position. Please let Pamela know, and thanks again.**

I hesitate, only for a second, then hit Send, a strange sense of relief washing over me. This isn't about rejecting the job—it's about choosing them.

Choosing this life, right here, right now.

# CHAPTER FIFTY-THREE

## CHARLOTTE

*It's basically mainstream now*

MY DAD'S BIRTHDAY IS THE WEEK BEFORE GRADUATION, SO I TAKE A DAY off from the lab to drive out to Hamden for lunch. I'm always happy to see my family, but I can't fight the nervous flutter in my chest. I have so much to tell them today. Like, a lot of shit to tell them.

And maybe Dad's birthday isn't the time to do it, but I've learned my lesson after the Harrison fiasco. I'm not keeping secrets from my family anymore.

"Hi, peanut!" Dad greets me at the door with his usual bear hug. "Glad you made it."

"Wouldn't miss it." I smile, hugging him back before stepping inside.

Mom is already in hostess mode, humming as she sets the dining room table. Ava is home from New York this weekend, and she's prepping a salad in the kitchen when I walk in, while Dad goes to rejoin Oliver out on the back patio. Oliver's wife is absent—he mentioned in our family group chat that Kat had to work this weekend.

Ava and I set the table. We're eating in the dining room because it's still too cold to sit on the patio. Oliver and Dad are grilling the steaks in the backyard, bundled up in hoodies and hats.

After lunch, Mom passes us plates of birthday cake, and the Kingston tradition of sharing our met goals and accomplishments promptly commences.

"Char, why don't you kick us off?" Mom says. "Any news about grad school?"

There it is. The opening.

I set down my fork and say, “I was accepted into every grad school I applied to except for two.”

“Which two?” Dad asks immediately, and I know he’s praying inside that it wasn’t MIT.

“Copenhagen and Melbourne.”

Oliver grins. “Whoa, you weren’t kidding when you told me you applied to some ‘randoms.’” He air quotes me.

“Yeah, well…” I shrug. “I got into a few of the randoms too. And I’ve been strongly considering, um, Sydney.”

“Australia?” Dad raises his eyebrows. “That’s a long way from here.”

“I know. And I get it—the University of Sydney isn’t as elite as an Ivy, but the biomed program is strong, and…I think I might go.”

The table falls quiet.

Mom is frowning at me. “That’s wonderful that you got in, honey, but we didn’t even know you were applying overseas. Why did you keep that from us?”

“I wanted to wait for the acceptance letters before I decided anything.” I fiddle with my dessert fork, avoiding their eyes. “And, um, since we’re talking about things I’ve kept from you—”

Ava groans. “No. Don’t you dare tell us you have another biological sibling.”

“No, nothing like that.” I swallow, the pressure mounting. This is it. “It’s about my boyfriend. Will. And…uh…Beckett.”

“Beckett?” My mom tilts her head, confused. “Will’s roommate?”

I exhale in a rush. “I’m seeing Beckett too. I’m in love with both of them.”

The confession hangs over us like a mushroom cloud. For a split second, I regret everything. And I’m not even done yet.

“We’re all moving to Sydney together.”

More silence.

My parents are staring at me like I told them I just saw a unicorn in the backyard. Ava’s jaw is scraping the floor. And my brother…well, he has a strange look in his eye, which I can’t decipher, and before I can even try, Oliver blurts out the mother of all bombs.

“I’m getting a divorce.”

We all spin toward him. My mom’s fork clatters onto her dessert plate.

I blink. “Wait, what?”

He slumps back in his chair. “I wasn’t gonna say anything, but apparently today is *let’s spill all our secrets* day, so…yeah. Katherine and I are getting a divorce.”

“A divorce?” Mom echoes.

“Yes,” he says, rubbing the back of his neck. “It’s been a long time coming—we’ve been having problems for a while. But we didn’t want to say anything during the holidays, and then the longer I kept it from you, the harder it’s been to say it. And, well…here we are.”

I gawk at him. “You’re seriously dropping this news now? At Dad’s birthday lunch?”

“Me? Really?” Oliver shoots back. “You *literally* just dropped an ‘I’ve got two boyfriends’ bomb. At Dad’s birthday lunch. So it just seemed like the time to—”

“I’m a lesbian,” Ava blurts out.

What is *happening* right now!

My gaze is bouncing around the table like a Ping-Pong ball. My parents look the same way they do when I’m trying to show them how to use a new app on their phones. Mystified and outraged. I don’t think they’re mad at the news we’re sharing but that it’s all coming out now. In Ava’s case, literally coming out.

“You’re a lesbian?” I exclaim. “Since when?” She’s only ever dated guys. Publicly anyway.

Now that all eyes are on her, Ava blushes, squirming in her seat. “I’m a late bloomer, it seems. To be honest, I thought I was asexual for a long time. I’ve never been attracted to any of the men I dated, but I also wasn’t drawn to women either. But, um, the boyfriend I’ve been telling you guys about? Ash? That’s my girlfriend. Her name’s Ashley.”

For a beat, nobody moves. Dad sits with his fork halfway to his mouth, frozen.

Then, all at once, the tension breaks.

I laugh, the absurdity of the situation hitting me. I glance at my parents. “Swear to God, if you two tell us you’re swingers or something…”

Dad finally puts his fork down, shaking his head with a grin. “Absolutely not.”

Mom, meanwhile, wears an uncertain expression as she looks around the table. “Just so I’m clear—were you all keeping these significant life changes from us because you thought we would disapprove?”

Oliver is first to answer. “No. I was just embarrassed,” he admits. “Never saw myself as being a divorcé.”

A sheepish Ava goes next. “I didn’t think that either. I was still coming to terms with it myself. I guess I needed the time to work through it.” She glances at me. “That’s why I never said a word about the Harrison thing, Char. It was frustrating seeing you keep it from everyone, but I was doing the same thing, so I stopped pushing the issue.”

I nod. It makes sense now. I was always so surprised she didn’t tell my parents about Harrison.

“Charlotte?” Mom prompts.

I lick my suddenly dry lips. “I thought you might disapprove,” I confess. “Dating two guys isn’t exactly normal.”

“Nah, poly’s all the rage,” my sister argues. “It’s basically mainstream now.”

I shrug. “I have two boyfriends. That’s fucking weird, okay?”

Oliver snorts.

Mom speaks up again, her tone brooking no arguments. “Guys, here’s the thing: we love you. All of you. For who you are. It doesn’t matter if you have two boyfriends or no boyfriends or you’re getting divorced or dating a girl. We love you, and nothing will ever change that.”

Dad nods, his usual laid-back demeanor settling back into place. “Yeah. As long as you’re happy, we’re happy.”

I can’t believe what I’m hearing. I expected awkwardness, maybe even disappointment, but instead, they’re just…accepting. Like it isn’t a big deal.

Mom notices my expression and offers a gentle smile. “If you love this second boy, sweetheart, then we want to meet him too. Invite him and Will over. It’ll take some getting used to, sure, but if they make you happy, that’s what matters.”

I blink back tears, overwhelmed by how simple she makes it sound. I’d spent so long worrying about how they’d react, about keeping everything a secret, and here they are, telling me it’s okay. That I’m okay.

For the first time in a long time, I feel truly secure—both in my choices and in my family’s unwavering love.

“And if you really want to attend grad school in Sydney, we’ll support it,” she adds. “We don’t care about whether you attend an elite school, Char. We care about you following your heart. But gosh, we’ll miss you so fucking much.”

I grin in amazement. “You just cursed.” Mom never curses.

“That’s how much I’ll fucking miss you,” she says, and everyone bursts out laughing.

Later, I’m clearing the table with Ava, listening to her tell me about Ashley—who sounds both really cool and really strange—when the message I’ve been waiting for lights up my phone.

***HARRISON:***

Be there in 5.

I bite my lip as I study the screen. Nerves gather in my stomach.

Ava nudges me with her shoulder. “Is that him?”

I nod. “He’ll be here soon.”

This is the part of the day I’ve been stressing about the most. Harrison is in town again this weekend. Because I invited him. I saw him last night, and we sat in Will and Beck’s kitchen, talking for hours.

It took me a while to respond to the long letter he sent me on the app. I wasn’t sure if I wanted to continue a relationship with him. If it was worth it. The heartache, the pain, the guilt. But I was wrong when I told my parents that with Tiger gone, so were all links to my past.

I still have a link. Harrison. And if he’s willing to start fresh and try to build something that’s free of guilt and resentment, then so am I.

When I open the front door, I find a terrified Harrison on the porch. He’s dressed in perfectly pressed khakis, a white button-down shirt, and loafers rather than his trademark sneakers. In his hand, he holds a bouquet of pink peonies. My mom’s favorite flower.

“Hi,” he says nervously.

Tears sting my eyes. “You brought my mom flowers?”

He nods. “Is that bad?”

“No. She’ll love it.”

“Do I look okay?” he asks, shifting his feet.

A smile tickles my lips. “You look…like you’re applying for a job.”

“Shit.”

“No, it’s fine. By the way, you showed up on the weirdest day ever. Everyone just unloaded their deepest, darkest secrets over chocolate birthday cake with blue sprinkles.”

“I’m intrigued. Is one of them a serial killer with a torture dungeon?” he cracks, and I love this lighter, sarcastic side of him. It’s like he’s truly lowered his walls since we agreed to that clean slate.

“No. But I did find out my sister’s new girlfriend is a mortician.” I pull him inside. “C’mon. Let me introduce you to my family.”

# DAD CHAT

***GARRETT GRAHAM:***

I want a third dog and Wellsy won't let me get one.

***JOHN LOGAN:***

Ohhhhh look at the fancy man with his two dogs. Grace is allergic so we can't even have one. Go fuck yourself.

***JOHN TUCKER:***

That escalated quickly.

***DEAN DI LAURENTIS:***

Just bring home a puppy without asking. It's not like she's going to cast it out on the street. She'll take one look into those big puppy eyes and fall in love.

***COLIN FITZGERALD:***

That's what Hollis and his twins tried to do to Rupi and she kicked him out for a month. That was the worst month of my life.

***DEAN DI LAURENTIS:***

Ours too.

***JOHN LOGAN:***

Why do you make everything about yourself?

***DEAN DI LAURENTIS:***

Summer came to stay with us for that month! Hollis's wife basically started a chain reaction of unwanted houseguests.

***HUNTER DAVENPORT:***

We don't use Rupi as a barometer for normal woman behavior, bro.

***JOHN TUCKER:***

I wouldn't risk it, G.

***GARRETT GRAHAM:***

I will take all your opinions into consideration.

Next order of business. I want to throw a graduation party for Stan and Luke in Tahoe this summer.

***DEAN DI LAURENTIS:***

Speaking of Tahoe…

***JOHN LOGAN:***

No.

***JOHN TUCKER:***

Speaking of Tahoe…

***JOHN LOGAN:***

No.

# CHAPTER FIFTY-FOUR

## CHARLOTTE

### *Crying Day*

I'M SITTING ON THE FLOOR OF MY BEDROOM, SURROUNDED BY BOXES, and it hits me all at once.

This is really happening.

I'm leaving.

Faith is next to me, passing me another stack of clothes to fold, but we both know this isn't just about packing. This is about saying goodbye.

"This is so weird," I murmur, trying to focus on the task at hand. My voice is tight, my throat already closing up. "I've lived in this room for how long now? Four years? And now…Australia."

Faith laughs, but it's that kind of laugh that's masking something else. "Yeah, Miss Adventurer. I still can't believe you're actually doing it. I'm proud of you, though. You're gonna kill it over there."

I stop folding and just sit there, staring at the mess of half-packed boxes around me. A lot of this stuff is being shipped to my parents' house, but Beckett's aunt Suzanne in Sydney agreed to let me ship a few boxes of books to store at her house until we find a place.

Beck, Will, and I are flying out to LA in a few days, then flying to Sydney for a three-week stay. Hopefully by the end of it, we'll have found an apartment and signed a lease. Then I'm coming back to spend the rest of the summer with my parents before officially going Down Under in mid-August.

It doesn't feel real yet, even though it's right in front of me. I'm leaving this room, this house, this life behind.

Faith stops packing too, suddenly heading for the door. "Hey," she says. "Before you pack away everything, I have something for you. Please stand

by.”

She’s gone before I can answer and back before I can even guess why she left. Confusion flickers through me as she hands me a small present wrapped in gift paper covered with frogs.

“What’s this?”

She smiles, but there’s something bittersweet in her eyes. “Just open it.”

I do, unwrapping it carefully. The second I see the stuffed bunny, I lose it. Tears blur my vision as I clutch the stuffed animal, a wave of emotion swelling in my chest. It’s not gray like Tiger was but white, like my favorite cashmere sweater.

“Oh my God, Faith…” I can’t even finish the sentence before I start sobbing.

She scoots closer, wrapping her arms around me as I cry into her shoulder. “I know it’s not the same as your old one. But I thought maybe it could be a new start. Something to take with you on your new adventure.”

I squeeze the bunny tighter. “I’m going to miss you so much,” I manage to choke out, my voice cracking with every word.

“I’m going to miss you too. Like a stupid amount.”

We stay like that for a long time, just holding each other. If I can only take one thing out of my Delta Pi experience, as aggravating and suffocating as it was at times, it’s that I met my soulmate in this house.

Eventually, I release her, wiping my cheeks with the back of my hand. I’m so grateful. Grateful for this moment, for this friendship that has carried me through everything.

After we’ve packed most of my things, I go downstairs to check in on Blake, who showed up early for our last meeting of the semester. The one where Agatha delivers a long, boring speech recapping our sorority’s achievements for the year and then passes the mantle to the new president, one Ms. Yara Merrimack. I’m glad it’s Yara. I hope she makes next year fun for our sisters. Then sends Agatha the dictionary definition for *fun*.

I find Blake in the living room, scrolling on her phone. She smiles when she spots me in the doorway.

“How’s the packing going?”

“Slow,” I admit with a tired smile. “I think it’s going to take me another week at this rate.”

She laughs. “I can imagine. Moving to another continent is no small thing.”

“No, it’s not,” I agree, leaning against the doorframe. “But enough about me. How are things with you? Still happily in love?”

Her cheeks flush as she grins. “I wouldn’t go that far. The L-word has not been spoken yet.”

I snort. “Didn’t Isaac say it on your fifth date?”

“Yes, but Isaac is a crazy person. I am a rational one.” She shrugs. “I like him a lot, though. I’m bringing him on vacation with my family to Lake Tahoe this summer.”

“Really? That’s a big step.”

She nods a little sheepishly. “I know. I have no idea how my dad’s going to act. I mean, Dad’s great, but he’s overprotective when it comes to my love life.”

“He’s not going to kill him, don’t worry. If anything, he’ll probably just grill him for a few hours and then secretly approve.”

She goes quiet for a moment before leveling me with a very un-Blake-like look—one loaded with emotion rather than indifference. “I haven’t said this nearly enough but…thank you. For everything. You’ve been there for me all year, and I don’t think I would’ve survived without you.”

That familiar lump rises in my throat again. Oh my God. I officially dub today a Crying Day.

I blink back the tears and walk over to give her a hug. “You’re welcome. I loved getting to know you this year, and I’ll be beyond pissed if you don’t text me when I’m in Sydney.”

“I will,” she promises.

She hugs me back, and I realize, despite having a love-hate relationship with Delta Pi, I’m really going to miss this place.

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Graduation is an emotional roller coaster. My parents cry their eyes out. Harrison flies out and sits next to my mom, who clutches his hand during the entire ceremony. Will and Beckett sit with Oliver, and all three of them holler and whoop when I take the stage in my cap and gown. George and Lourdes are both STEM majors too and receive their diplomas alongside

me, and I'm shocked to discover they broke up, no longer united in love and learning.

The boys' ceremonies are later in the day, and I kiss them both afterward —in public. Not a single person around us bats an eye, which bodes well for our Australian adventure. I still don't know how this relationship arrangement is going to work or how it will look in the future, but right now, I'm happy. Blissful. Grateful.

We're leaving tonight for LA. The taxi is picking us up at the boys' house in Hastings, so after I hug my family goodbye, I get a ride out there with Faith. She'll be living in Boston now, and I sold her my car since I can't exactly take it with me to Australia.

Now, I stand in the doorway of their town house, looking out at the darkening sky. A bittersweet heaviness is suspended in the air. The house is empty, cleared out for the next tenants, but my heart feels like it's still tangled up in this place, like it's refusing to move on.

"You good?" Beckett says, coming up behind me.

I turn and give him a small smile. "I'm good. Just thinking."

"It feels weird, doesn't it? Leaving."

The lump in my throat grows. "Yes. It does."

His hand finds mine, and we stand there for a minute, absorbing the moment. It's hard to believe it's over, this chapter in my life. College. Four years over in the blink of an eye.

"Is the cab here?" Will's voice breaks through my thoughts.

I see him standing by the stairs, his backpack slung over one shoulder. He's in a sky-blue hoodie and faded jeans, and although he's smiling, it doesn't quite reach his eyes. I guess he's sad too, to leave this place behind.

Nodding, I sling my purse over my shoulder. "Yep. Just got here. He's pulling into the driveway."

Beckett and I step onto the porch. It takes me a second to realize Will isn't following.

"Babe?" I prompt, glancing over my shoulder.

I feel the shift in the air before he even opens his mouth.

"I'm not coming."

He speaks so softly I can barely hear him. But when his words register, it feels like the ground drops out from under me.

I freeze, still clutching the strap of my bag. "What?"

Beckett echoes the sentiment, only more colorfully. “What the fuck, mate?”

Will doesn’t look at me. At either of us. He stares at his feet, his jaw tight. “I’m not coming to Australia.”

# CHAPTER FIFTY-FIVE

## WILL

### *Gutted*

*I'M NOT COMING TO AUSTRALIA.*

Those five words hang in the air like a noose, and I can already feel the tension winding around us, choking whatever future we were about to step into together.

Beckett is frozen in place.

Charlotte is staring at me like a mom cat who lost all her kittens in a barn fire.

I swallow hard, not able to meet their stunned gazes. "Not right now," I clarify.

"What the hell are you talking about?" Beckett demands.

I desperately try to find the words, but none of them feel right. "I thought I could do it. I thought I could just get on the plane and go with you guys, but I can't. Something's telling me I need to stay."

Charlie's face crumples, and I feel like the worst person in the world. "Stay for what? Will, we're leaving in a few hours. You were all packed—"

"I know." My voice cracks, and I hate how small it sounds. "But…"

I trail off. The truth is, I don't know how to be in a relationship like this. With her and Beckett. There's too much I still need to figure out.

Even though everyone who knows about us has been accepting of it, I still can't stop thinking about the day Tessa Diaz was here, how I'd introduced Charlie as Beckett's girlfriend. *His*. Not mine, not *ours*. I'd lied to protect myself, because I didn't know how to explain us. I didn't know how to tell someone, a stranger, that I was sharing the woman I love. The woman we both love. It felt like a tangled mess I couldn't unravel, and instead of confronting it, I buried it. I told myself that as long as our friends

and family support us, who cares what the rest of the world thinks. But the truth is? I think I might care.

But that's not the only reason I can't go. I could navigate this thing with them, learn how to walk this path, so long as we do it slow and steady. And I still intend to do that.

Just…not yet.

"I want to take the job," I confess. "On the Wozniak campaign."

Beckett's expression darkens. "What do you mean? You turned that down ages ago. And now, right when we're leaving for the fucking airport, you're backing out?"

I take a deep breath, the guilt eating me alive. "I turned it down because…well, I guess I've been trying to tamp down my ambition because I didn't want to feel like I was my father, but I want this job. I want to learn how to manage a campaign. I want it really fucking bad."

Charlie's lip trembles, and it kills me to see the hurt in her eyes.

"Baby," I tell her, moving closer so I can cup her cheeks. "I love you. But I can't do this right now. I'll come. I promise you, I will. I'll join you guys in November, after the election."

But even as I say it, I'm not entirely confident. I don't know if I'll follow through. Because…what happens if Wozniak wins and they want to hire me on to her staff? That would be tempting. The pull of my career, the ambition I've been fighting, *that's* tempting. And it's stronger than I wanted to admit.

Beckett moves between me and Charlie, his fists clenched. "You're full of shit, mate. You're not coming in November."

"I—" I try to speak, but I can't argue because I don't know the truth. Beckett sees it. He's always been able to read me better than I could read myself.

Before I can react, his fist connects with my face. Hard.

Charlie gasps. "Beckett!"

I stumble backward, the sharp pain radiating through my jaw, but I don't fight back. I deserve it.

"I get it," I say, tasting blood on my lip. "I hurt her. I deserve that."

But he shakes his head, his gray eyes filled with anger and something else. Betrayal. "No, Larsen. I didn't hit you because you hurt her. Charlie can fight her own battles. I hit you because you hurt *me*."

His words strike me harder than his fist. I feel like I've just been gutted.

I look over at Charlie. Moisture clings to her eyelashes, her shoulders shaking as she tries to hold it together. My heart cracks open at the sight of her tears. I want to fix it, to make it right, but I know I can't.

"I'm so sorry," I say, stepping closer to her. "I didn't mean to hurt you."

"Why didn't you tell us this sooner? Why are you waiting until now to drop this on us?"

My shoulders slump. "I didn't want to disappoint you. I thought I could push through it, but I can't. I'm sorry, baby. I'm really sorry."

After a beat, she throws her arms around me, hugging me tight.

I press a kiss to her forehead. "I'll join you in November. I promise," I say, and I pray to God it's not a hollow promise.

Beckett watches, his expression tight, and I know he doesn't believe me. Maybe he shouldn't.

I dip my head to kiss Charlie, pouring everything I can't say into that kiss. My heart is aching. I love this woman. More than she'll ever know.

After I release her, Beckett steps toward me. I tense, wondering if he's about to punch me again, but instead, he tugs me in for a quick side hug, even as his disappointed gaze flickers over me.

"Take care of her," I say gruffly.

"Always," he answers.

I step back, watching the two of them walk toward the taxi, Beckett hauling their carry-ons rather than rolling them.

As they climb inside, Charlie turns to look at me one more time, her eyes filled with sadness and…hope. Hope that I'll change my mind.

But I don't.

The door closes, and the taxi pulls away. I stand there, my heart screaming at me as the car disappears.

I don't know if I'll ever see them again.

# CHAPTER FIFTY-SIX

## CHARLOTTE

*A million times over*

## SIX MONTHS LATER

I CLOSE MY LAPTOP AND SHOVE IT INTO MY BAG, MY MIND ALREADY drifting toward home. It's late afternoon, the golden sun reflecting off the waves as it inches toward the horizon. The view from the lab window reminds me of everything good about being here. Australia has been everything I didn't know I needed. I never realized how incredible the ocean smelled. Beckett and I are thriving in ways I never imagined.

And yet there's always that lingering ache.

A space in my heart where Will should be.

As I sling my purse over my shoulder, something falls out and flutters onto the table. I pick it up and smile. It's a note from Beckett, folded up small. I unfold it, wondering what my man has to say today.

> Hey sugar puff, can't wait to see you tonight. You're my favorite part of every day. Love you more than you'll ever know.

My heart swells, warmth scorching my cheeks. I glance over at my tablemate, who's watching me with a raised eyebrow.

"Does he leave you these notes every day?" she teases with a grin.

I laugh, tucking the paper into my purse. "Not every day. He likes to keep me on my toes."

"Damn, girl. Don't ever let that man go. He must really love you."

"Yeah, he does. I'm lucky."

“Lucky? Girl, you hit the jackpot.”

I smile, but the thought makes my chest tighten a bit. Yes, I’ve certainly hit the jackpot with Beckett. He’s everything I could ask for.

I head out, excited to get home. Our place isn’t far from campus, and as I walk through the streets of my beautiful new city, the salty ocean breeze wafting over me, it reminds me of how far we’ve come. The apartment Beckett and I share has a view that feels almost unreal, like something out of a dream. We’ve built an incredible life together, and I know I should feel complete.

But that hole—Will’s absence—it’s always there.

When I walk through the door, Beckett is already waiting, leaning against the kitchen counter, grinning as soon as he sees me. His happiness is infectious. He’s got this wild energy about him today, and before I can even say hello, he strides over and tugs me into his arms.

“You,” he murmurs against my neck, “look incredible.”

I laugh, but the way he’s looking at me, I know what’s coming next. “I just got home. Can I at least get a proper greeting before you—”

His lips crash against mine, cutting me off. The kiss is deep and hungry, and any thought I had of taking things slow dissolves instantly. But the truth is? I don’t want slow. I *love* that this man can’t get enough of me. I love that he’s so desperate for me that he can’t even think straight. Can’t wait. Can’t bother with a hello.

It’s the way I’ve always wanted to be wanted.

“I missed you today,” he says, his hands already working on the button of my jeans.

“Beck,” I gasp as his fingers slip inside my underwear.

He backs me up against the kitchen counter and then drops to his knees, kissing his way down my stomach until I can’t focus on anything except the heat building between my thighs.

“I’ve been thinking about you all day.” His voice thickens with lust. “Couldn’t concentrate on anything.”

“Yeah?” I breathe. “What were you thinking about?”

“About getting you out of these clothes.” He tugs at my jeans, pulling them down in one swift motion. “About tasting you. Fucking you until you’re screaming my name.”

His lips tickle my inner thigh as he peers up at me, his eyes gleaming with hunger.

“Spread your legs for me. Let me see how wet you are.”

I lean back on the counter, my breath hissing out faster as I obey, opening myself to him. And then he’s there, his mouth hot against my pussy, his tongue teasing until I can’t contain the moan that escapes my throat.

My fingers tangle in his hair. “Don’t stop.”

His tongue circles my clit, teasing me until my legs are shaking. I can barely think, barely breathe, and all I can hear is the slick sound of his mouth on me and his husky, dirty praise.

“You’re so perfect, Charlie,” he mumbles, looking up at me, his lips glistening. “So wet for me. Tell me how much you want it.”

“I want you. I need you inside me.”

His smile is wicked as he stands, rough hands lifting me onto the counter. I don’t have a chance to catch my breath before he’s filling me completely, and the shock of it makes me cry out. He grips my thighs, pulling me closer, his thrusts deep and urgent.

“You feel so good,” he groans. “So tight. You were made for me, weren’t you? Made for me to fuck like this.”

“Yes,” I gasp.

He grunts low in his throat as he slams into me, over and over, until I’m on the brink of losing control. “I want you to come for me. Come on my cock, baby girl. Let me feel it.”

His command sends me over the edge, and the orgasm crashes through me. Beckett follows right after, groaning my name as he shudders against me. For a long moment, we’re both shaking, the world falls away, and it’s just us.

His sculpted chest rises and falls with heavy breaths. “Sorry. I couldn’t wait,” he says, grinning like a mischievous kid.

I choke out a laugh. “Yeah, I noticed.”

We stay there for a few moments, just holding each other, the sound of the ocean outside the window. I look up at him, my heart full, but that ache is still there, buried deep.

“I was thinking a lot about Will today,” I admit, running my fingers over his chest.

Beckett nods, his smile faltering. He slides out of me and hikes his sweatpants back up to his hips. “Yeah. Me too. The election’s tomorrow.”

I nod back. Will’s been working nonstop on the campaign. He’s been texting us, keeping us updated on everything, and while I’m excited for him, I also wish he were here with us. That he could be part of this life we’re building.

“Do you think his candidate will win?” I ask as I scrounge on the floor for my clothes.

“I hope so. He’s worked his ass off for this. He deserves it.”

We’re both quiet for a moment, lost in our thoughts.

Finally, Beckett looks at me, his features soft. “You miss him a lot.”

I swallow the lump in my throat. “Yeah. I do.”

He comes over and brushes a strand of hair behind my ear, his touch gentle. “Me too. But…we have this, sugar puff. And it’s good. It’s really good.”

No, what we have is better than good. But there’ll always be that part of me that misses Will.

“But if he changes his mind again and doesn’t want to come…will it still be good?” Beckett asks roughly. “With us?”

“Why wouldn’t it be?”

“If he doesn’t come, am I enough for you?”

My jaw drops. “Oh my God. Of course you are.”

He searches my face, uncharacteristic vulnerability flickering in his eyes. “You sure?”

“One hundred percent.” We both hear my conviction. Because I fucking mean it. “I love Will, but my love for him has nothing to do with my love for you. You are more than enough, Beck. You protect me, you care for me, you make me feel safe, you fuck me on command—”

He snickers.

“How could I ever not be satisfied with that? With you?” I cup his face, stroking the day-old stubble on his jaw. “I love you. A million times over.”

A smile lifts his lips. “Love you too. And I have a feeling…we’ll see him again. Maybe sooner than we think.”

I nod, resting my head against his shoulder, and for a moment, I let myself believe it.

# CHAPTER FIFTY-SEVEN

## WILL

### *A tempting offer*

THE ROOM IS ELECTRIC, BUZZING WITH ENERGY AS THE RESULTS KEEP rolling in. I can practically taste the tension in the air, but it's the good kind. The kind that happens when something huge is about to go down. I glance up at the screens mounted on the walls. Harper is actually ahead.

Then I glance over at Tessa, who's been with me on this roller coaster since day one. She's tapping away on her phone, probably already drafting tomorrow's headline. I flash her a quick smile, and she returns it, her eyes shining with disbelief and excitement.

Excitement that I should be feeling too. Our candidate is about to win. I should be buzzing, just like everybody else. But I'm not.

If anything, I'm indifferent.

"Looks like we're pulling this off," I say, the words half a question, because even though the numbers are clear, it doesn't feel real yet.

This was a rough, dirty, brutal six months, with an October surprise thrown in there that nearly had Harper dead in the water: three male employees coming forward to accuse her of sexual harassment. It took no time at all to discredit the dudes—turns out they'd been paid off by our competitor. But those few days of bad press killed her in the polls. I honestly wasn't sure if she would be able to bounce back.

"Looks like," Tessa confirms, her smile broad. "I think she's actually going to win."

The whole room is watching the TV screen now, even though the numbers are locked in. There's that electric feeling again. Everyone else is holding a collective breath, waiting for someone to declare it official. And then it happens. The news anchor calls it. The room erupts in cheers, people

jumping up from their seats, hugging each other, some of the staff even crying. Our candidate just got elected.

I clap along with the rest of the team, but that sense of apathy doesn't fade. It only morphs into a twinge of disgust as the memories of what it took to get to this point come flooding back to me. The fake promises I heard Harper make. The way Pamela Kerry talks out of both sides of her mouth.

I knew politics was dirty, but I thought the good guys were at least cleaner than most.

They're not.

Tessa punches me lightly in the arm, grinning like she's just won the lottery.

"Nice speech," I tell her, nodding at the TV.

Harper Wozniak is now standing behind a podium, thanking her supporters. The words Tessa gave her are polished but real, everything you'd want a newly elected official to say. It's just a damn shame she doesn't mean a lick of what she's saying.

"You really think so?" Tessa asks me.

I nod. "You're a damn good writer, Tess."

Her grin falters a little, and for a moment, there's a shift in the air between us. Something unspoken. She eases closer, the space between us shrinking.

"You're really something, you know that?" she says. "I mean, I had a feeling you'd be good at this, but watching you in action these last few months…it's been impressive. The way you threw yourself at that sexual harassment story, digging to the bottom of it. It was brilliant, Will."

There's a pause, and I feel it—that flicker of sexual tension. It's been there before, simmering under the surface when we'd work late nights at the campaign headquarters or share drinks after a long day. Tessa's beautiful, smart, driven. If I gave her the signal, I know she'd be up for it. It'd be easy.

But…

Charlie's and Beckett's faces flash in my mind. I haven't seen them in six months. I miss them. I miss them both so much, and the idea of being with anyone else feels wrong. Like I'd be betraying what we have, even

though we haven’t exactly put labels on anything. They’re my people. My home.

Tessa’s looking at me like she’s waiting for a response. I clear my throat and step back, breaking that tension before it goes any further.

“You did good too, Tess,” I say, keeping my voice steady, friendly, but not more than that.

She seems to catch the drift, giving me a nod. Her smile slips back into something more professional. “Thanks, Will.”

The campaign manager and my boss, Pamela Kerry, makes her way over to us, squeezing my arm. “Will. Tessa. Hell of a job, guys. I knew we had a shot, but I didn’t think we’d pull this off so decisively.”

I paste on a polite smile and respond with the platitudes she expects. “Thanks, Pam. It was a team effort for sure.”

She nods, her expression turning serious. “Listen, I was going to talk to you about this tomorrow morning. Win or lose, actually. But if you’re interested, I’d love to bring you on full-time. Hit the ground running on my next campaign. What do you say? Come in tomorrow morning so we can discuss it?”

“Sounds good,” I tell Pam, but my tone is noncommittal. “We can chat about it.”

She moves on to speak to another member of the staff, leaving me with my thoughts. I glance at Tessa again. She’s already back on her phone, probably working on another speech for tomorrow.

The celebration swirls around me, people still cheering, drinking champagne, basking in the win. But I’m stuck in my head, replaying every moment of the last six months and trying to reconcile my feelings about everything.

As I’m stepping outside for some air, my phone buzzes in my pocket. I pull it out and see my father’s name on the screen. Great. Just what I need right now.

I answer it, bracing myself for the inevitable. “Hey, Dad.”

I don’t even get a *hello*.

“Do you know what the hell you’ve done?” He’s seething, like a pot about to boil over. “Do you have any idea what this means? You just helped one of my biggest critics get elected, William. Do you realize how that looks?”

“I don’t care how it looks,” I answer with a tired breath. “Not everything revolves around you and your precious image.”

“That’s where you’re wrong, son. Everything revolves around me! I’ve spent my entire life building this legacy, and you just tossed it aside for what? A flash-in-the-pan candidate who doesn’t have a prayer of lasting in this world in the long run?”

I grip the phone tighter. “You don’t get it, do you? This is my life, not yours. I make my own choices, and if that means supporting someone you don’t like, then so be it.”

“You think you can just walk away from the family name? From the expectations?” His tone shifts, taking on that condescending edge that has driven me crazy my entire life. “You’re making a huge mistake.”

“Then it’s my mistake to make. And maybe it’s time for you to realize that I’m not just an extension of you, Dad. I’m my own man, and I’ll live my life however the fuck I want.”

Silence hangs on the line for a heartbeat before he explodes again. “You’re ruining everything I’ve worked for—”

“Goodbye, Dad.”

I hang up before he can say another word. I take a deep breath, forcing myself to calm down. I didn’t want to lash out, but I’ve had enough of his controlling bullshit. I’m sick of being caught in the shadow of his expectations, of his ambitions.

But along with the usual anger comes a pang of…

Damn it, I think it might be compassion.

I thought working for a “good politician” wouldn’t just provide some sort of meaning, but it would prove that you can survive in this realm without having to be a narcissistic prick. That my father is an asshole and there are public servants who truly want to make the world a better place.

There aren’t. Or rather, there might be, but they can’t do a damn thing about it. The system is too corrupt, and it’ll be next to impossible to dismantle it, even from within.

And the system *corrupts*. I just spent six months watching a woman bend and compromise and make deals that chipped away at her policy dreams and her morals. And yes, it got her elected, but Harper is now indebted and beholden to so many different agendas that I can’t imagine how she’ll ever enact her own.

Maybe my father was corrupted by that same system. Maybe when Kelsey met him all those years ago, he still had some humanity left. Maybe this job steals every shred of it from you, until you become someone like my dad.

And now here I am, standing in a campaign office with people I barely know, facing a future that doesn't include the woman I love and my best friend who loves her just as fiercely. They've been living this new life together in Sydney, and I've been here fighting to prove something. To myself, to my father, I don't even know anymore.

All I can think about now is the promise I made to Charlie and Beckett, and I know I have to figure out what I really want.

Before it's too late.

# CHAPTER FIFTY-EIGHT

## CHARLOTTE

*Is this real?*

"WAIT. SO BY SAVING THE DOG, HE'S NOW IN A COMPLETELY DIFFERENT timeline, but the characters in the new timeline still know who he is?"

"Exactly."

"Does nobody in this franchise understand basic causality? Butterfly effect? You change one thing, and *everything* changes. That's Time Travel 101."

Beckett chuckles, giving me a sideways glance. "Baby, stop talking about causality. I can't concentrate if my dick is hard."

I hoot with laughter. It's Sunday night, and we're lounging on the couch, halfway through this gloriously terrible time travel movie. On-screen, the main character just accidentally traveled back to 1985 *again*, somehow changing the course of history by saving a dog.

Beckett reaches over and grabs a handful of popcorn from the bowl on the table, still grinning. "I gotta say, this might be the worst time travel movie I've ever watched. And that's saying something, because I've seen a lot."

"What about the one we watched last week where the guy could only travel back two minutes and somehow still managed to stop a nuclear war?"

"Oh, true. That one was special."

I unpause the movie, and we make it about three whole minutes before I pause it again.

"Beck!" I whine.

The main character randomly reappeared in the same diner, in the exact same chair, for the third time.

"What?" he says, munching on another mouthful of popcorn.

“Am I just supposed to sit here and pretend that time dilation doesn’t exist? Because if time travel is possible—”

“I’m sorry, did you say *if*?”

“—then you’d be dealing with time dilation and relativistic effects. If you’re moving through time, you’re also moving through *space*, right? So the earth is rotating, it’s orbiting the sun, the sun’s orbiting the galaxy. You’re not going to land in the same spot every time you go back. You could end up in the middle of space.”

“You’re right. It’s a travesty that this low-budget movie didn’t address all this.”

“And where’s the paradox resolution?” I say as if he hadn’t spoken. “There should at least be some catastrophic time loop or, I don’t know, an explosion of the universe.”

“Sugar puff. I say this with all kindness, but…I can’t believe I live with such a massive nerd.”

“Thank you.”

“Wasn’t a compliment.”

“You said it was with kindness!”

“I fucking lied.”

There’s a sudden knock on the door.

We both freeze for a moment, glancing at each other.

“Were you expecting anyone?” I ask.

He shakes his head. “Nope. And nobody buzzed in downstairs.”

“Maybe it’s a murderer.”

“Why was there hope in your voice when you said that?” Chuckling, Beckett stands up and cracks his knuckles. “I’ll go check it out alone. You know, just in case it *is* a murderer. That way, at least you’ll have a chance to escape. I’ll heroically sacrifice myself.”

“That’s so noble of you.”

“I live to serve.” He winks at me as he heads for the hallway.

I listen to his footsteps. I hear the door open. And then…there’s nothing.

I assume he already sent whoever it was away and is now trying to scare me, but the silence drags on long enough for concern to spark in my gut.

“Beck? Who is it?” I call from the couch.

He doesn’t answer. But then I hear footsteps again.

My breath sucks in sharply when Will walks into the living room.

I jump up from the couch so fast, I almost trip over the blanket. He's *here*. Like, *actually here*.

Without thinking, I rush across the room and throw my arms around him, burying my face in his shirt. That familiar spicy scent fills my nostrils, and I desperately inhale it into my lungs. I missed his smell so much.

"Oh my God," I say. "Is this real? Are you really here? Are you here to stay?"

His arms wrap around me, and I feel his heartbeat hammering against my cheek. "Yes. I'm here, and I'm staying."

Behind me, I hear Beckett chuckle. "About bloody time, mate."

Will's voice thickens with remorse. "I know. I'm sorry it took me so long. I had to figure some things out."

I don't want to let go, but I release him so I can search his eyes. "What things?"

Interjecting, Beckett claps him on the shoulder. "I'll get you a beer. You look like you could use one."

But I know Beck well enough to understand—he's giving us a minute alone. He disappears into the kitchen, leaving Will and me standing in the middle of the living room.

"I missed you so much," I tell him. I reach for his hand, a swirl of emotions running rampant inside me.

"I missed you too." His words are lined with gravel. He clears his throat before continuing. "I love you. And I can't live without you. Every day away from you—away from both of you—felt wrong."

"What about the campaign? The job? You didn't enjoy it?"

"I hated it," he admits. "DC is the most cynical, corrupt place I've ever been. I don't regret taking the job, though. I needed to experience it, to understand why I'm not suited for it. But even if I loved it, I wasn't about to stay. I can't be away from you. I need you, Charlie. I need you like air."

Tears well up in my eyes, and I don't even try to blink them away. "I missed you every single day you were gone." I hate how vulnerable I sound, but it's the truth. "I thought maybe you were done with me. With us."

"Never." He shakes his head, his thumb brushing away the tear that's fallen down my cheek. "I just needed to figure out how to be with you. How to be okay with what we have."

Before I can respond, Beckett returns, holding a beer. But there's no tension, no awkwardness. Just…us.

Will turns to him, a serious look on his face. "I'm sorry it took me so long to get here. I missed you guys."

Beckett's gray eyes soften. Then he smirks, handing Will the bottle. "Well, lucky for you, we've missed the hell out of you too. C'mon. Have a seat."

Will glances toward the TV, a slow grin spreading across his boy-next-door face. "So. What are we watching?"

# EPILOGUE

## CHARLOTTE

*I just want to give my blowjobs in peace*

THE SUN IS SETTING LOW OVER THE BEACH, CASTING A WARM, GOLDEN glow as Beckett and I stand side by side, watching Helix, our ridiculously energetic Labrador puppy, charge through the sand. His gangly legs can barely keep up with the stick he's trying to chase, but he's a determined little thing. He's also smart as hell, already picking up commands like he's been doing this for years. Of course, the boys love to think it's because they're natural dog trainers. But it's obviously because of me.

Beckett gives a sharp whistle, and Helix bounds toward us, his oversize paws kicking up sand.

Behind us, Will laughs. He's stretched out on a towel, still clad in his suit pants from his virtual meeting. The nonprofit he works for is so dedicated to enacting change on a global scale that they hold meetings well into the evening, nearly every single night, even on weekends. We practically had to drag him out of the house to take a walk.

We have a house now, a three-bedroom near the ocean, because three people sharing one office in the apartment had been pure hell and utter torture. Now the boys share one, and I have my own. Although I'll need to convert mine into a guest room next month because my sister and her girlfriend are visiting.

I'm excited for it—I haven't seen Ava or the rest of my family since the boys and I went home for Christmas. Three Christmases, in fact, as we had to spend a few days at each of our homes, including Will's Connecticut estate where his father informed us that he'd held two focus groups to gauge his constituents' response to his son's unconventional relationship,

and the consensus was mixed. We all pretended to care, and then I went for a walk with Will's stepmother, whom I adore.

We're going to miss Christmas this year, though, because the boys and I are going to Seoul for two weeks. I'm excited. I spent so much of my childhood resisting learning about Korean culture because I thought it made me too different, but now I realize that different doesn't have to be a bad word. Different is good. I can't wait to learn more about the country where I was born and for my guys to see where I came from.

From his towel, Will watches Helix with an amused look, shaking his head. "How did we end up with the most uncoordinated dog on the planet?"

"He's in his lanky teenager phase, Larsen," Beckett argues. "He'll get better at this."

"At least he's persistent, I'll give him that. But holy shit, does he suck at running."

"Quit insulting my son or I'll train him to piss on your leg every time Charlie is giving you a blowjob."

"Hey!" I object. "Don't drag me into this. I just want to give my blowjobs in peace."

No sooner do I say that than an elderly couple appears around the bend to hear me utter the word *blowjobs*.

The husband narrows his eyes, but the wife looks intrigued, winking at me as they pass. And I don't miss the way she checks my boyfriends out. Of course she does. I'm dating the two hottest guys in Australia, and that says a lot, because this entire place is crawling with man-vee Thor men.

Life is weird, in the best possible way. Here we are, in Sydney, more than a year and a half since Will came back to us. Finally living the life we'd danced around but couldn't fully grasp before. The waves crash softly in the distance, the breeze feels cool on my skin, and the constant warmth of Beckett and Will fills the spaces that used to feel empty.

I join Will on the towel and settle back against his chest, feeling Beckett's gaze linger on us for a moment. He walks over and sits beside us in the sand. Helix finally gives up on the stick and trots toward us, flopping dramatically next to Beckett, who scratches behind his ears. The puppy immediately rolls over for belly rubs. Beckett indulges him for a minute before leaning back on his elbows.

He gazes at the sky as the first stars begin to appear. “I don’t think I’ve ever been happier,” he admits, glancing over at us. “This, right here, this is home.”

“Yeah,” I say, smiling as I look between the two of them. “It really is.”

Beckett leans in, brushing a kiss against my temple. Will pulls me closer, his arm wrapped tight around my shoulders. For the first time in my life, it all fits. *I* fit.

The three of us are exactly where we’re supposed to be.

Together.

# PUBLISHING ANNOUNCEMENT

## Major Deal Announcement for Bestselling Fan Fiction Author's Debut Novel

We are thrilled to announce that Lourdes Lo Curto, a beloved writer from the online fan fiction community, has signed a major multibook deal with Phoenix House Publishing for her previously self-published novel, *The Virgin and the Blade.* The deal, brokered by Melanie McGerrity at McGerrity & Vale Literary, follows Lo Curto's meteoric rise in popularity, captivating millions of readers worldwide with her emotionally charged storytelling and unforgettable characters.

*The Virgin and the Blade* is a transformative reimagining of the life of Queen Elizabeth I and her passionate, tumultuous affair with famed conqueror Alexander the Great. The story delves into themes of love, duty, power, femininity, masculinity, and war, blending romance and adventure in a way that has already garnered enthusiastic buzz from fans and industry insiders alike.

"Lo Curto has an undeniable gift for storytelling, and we couldn't be more excited to bring her incredible world to a broader audience," said Vivian Holstead-Contreras at Phoenix House. "*The Virgin and the Blade* is poised to be a game changer in the historical romance genre."

The novel is set for release early next year, with plans for an extensive marketing campaign and global distribution.

Film rights: Heather Delano, IAA.

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

No matter how many books I write, each story brings its own delightful, hair-pulling challenges. (Who knew characters could be so stubborn? Oh, wait. Me. I knew.) While I loved writing Charlie, Will, and Beckett's love story, I also knew it would be difficult fleshing out three points of view of three very different personalities. But I also had a ton of fun delving into their heads and bringing you their unconventional romance. I know some readers had expectations for what Will and Beckett's journey should be, but my stories come from my gut, and the moment I introduced them in *The Graham Effect*, I knew exactly what these two needed. I hope after reading *The Charlie Method*, you agree that what they needed was Charlotte!

As always, this book would not be in your hands without a team of incredibly patient, talented people who deserve all the praise and maybe a vacation.

My editor Christa Desir, who is my #family and biggest cheerleader. Texting about this book was ridiculous and hilarious and so much fun. Oh, and thank you for reading the two totally different endings I wrote and helping me decide which one served the characters the best.

Everyone at Bloom Books for championing this series so hard, with a special shoutout to Madison, my marketing guru, tour partner, sounding board, book recommender, and general life manager. The number of times a week you text me "I got you" is pretty cool. Not sure if you noticed, but it's Will's catchphrase in this book. You are my Will (in a non-creepy, non-sexual way).

My agent Celeste Fine and the rest of the Park and Fine team for coming on board and being so enthusiastic about my books. Special shoutout to John, who read Charlie at the last second to answer my SOS without even batting an eye. You're awesome.

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Team Elle Kennedy: Natasha, Nicole, Lori, Ann-Marie, Erica, and Lindsey and Shaye from Good Girl PR. I’d literally die without you. Not literally, but sort of literally.

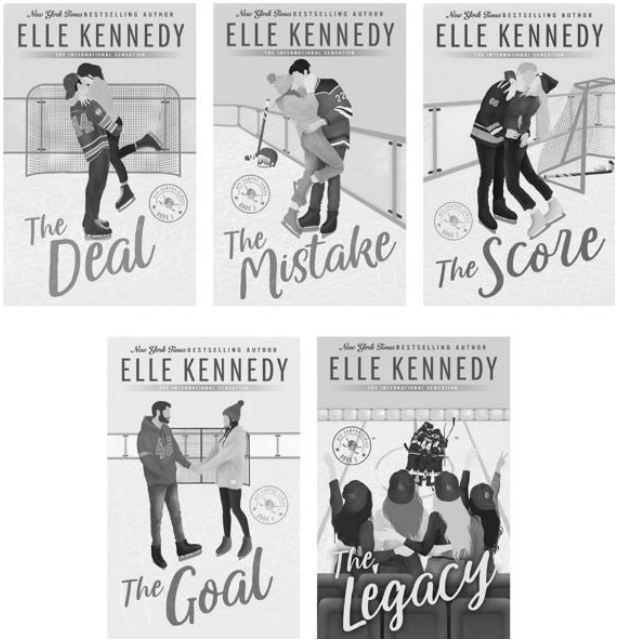
A very special thanks to the sensitivity readers who provided their expertise on adoption and their experiences as Korean American women. Your feedback was invaluable in helping me tell these aspects of the story with the nuance and respect they deserve.

And of course, all my readers: You are the true MVPs. Every late-night read, every enthusiastic post, every moment of love for these characters makes it all worth it.

Love,
Elle

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