

WRITTEN IN ICE

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

CALIMELLE

WRITTEN IN ICE

ORCHID CITY

BOOK THREE

CALI MELLE

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PLAYLIST

OVERDRIVE - POST MALONE

DELICATE - TAYLOR SWIFT

BAD INTENTIONS - NIYKEE HEATON, MIGOS, OG
PARKER

UNDRESSED - MERGES

EYES - BAZZI

MORE THAN FRIENDS - ISABEL LAROSA

GOING HOME - THE ACES

SAY YES TO HEAVEN - LANA DEL REY

F IT ILY - CHYMES, JACK NEWSOME

OH SHIT...ARE WE IN LOVE? - VALLEY

WHERE YOU GO - KIANA LEDE, KHALID

WORK SONG - HOZIER

*For the gurlies who go to hockey games hoping they find their
future husband—don't give up hope.*

CHAPTER ONE

CHARLOTTE

“We need something different from you, Charlie,” my editor, Diana, said with urgency through the phone. I stared out of the second-story window of my Victorian-style house. The morning fog had settled in the air, casting a blanket across the sleepy, coastal town. “The market is shifting and I think it would be good for you to shift with it.”

I slowly sipped my lukewarm coffee, tasting the bitterness on my tongue. “What are you suggesting?”

“You have a strong readership and following with the romantic thriller audience, but there has been a recent demand for contemporary.” She paused for a beat. “We have an entire proposal for you, to have you write in this different genre under a pseudonym.”

I snorted. “Diana. Do I really strike you as the type to write romance that doesn’t involve some type of suspense or thriller aspect?”

“You’re an extremely talented writer, Charlie. I don’t think there is a genre you couldn’t write.”

I fell silent as I considered her words. I appreciated her positivity and the fact that she thought I was capable of more than I had been doing. The thought of writing outside of my normal genre made me slightly uncomfortable. I was comfortable in my little romantic suspense box. Every book I wrote had romance, but it wasn’t the main plot, so it wasn’t something I was super into.

“Where did this request come from?” I questioned her as I continued to stare out the window, watching the sun as it struggled to break through the thick fog.

“It came from my boss and when I suggested you for the job, they did not hesitate.”

I chewed on the inside of my cheek and sat down on the deep windowsill. “I don’t know, Diana.”

“Tell you what—I’ll send over the proposal. Take a day or two to look it over and I’ll check back in with you in a few days to see if you’ve changed your mind. And if you do so before I reach out again, shoot me an email or give me a call.”

“Fine,” I agreed with reluctance.

I could hear the smile in Diana’s voice. “That’s not a no, so I’ll take it. It will be in your inbox in a few. Talk soon.”

She ended the call, leaving me alone with my now cold coffee and thoughts I wasn’t certain I wanted to entertain. If the publisher had requested it, there was a need. Publishing worked like any other business—there was a chain of supply and demand. The market was demanding more mainstream romance. Would it be so bad for me to branch out into something I wasn’t used to writing?

I looked out at my sleepy little town once more. Idyll Cove was where I had grown up, but it was also where I drew a lot of my inspiration from. It was the perfect setting with the perfect vibes for writing romantic thrillers.

How the hell was I supposed to draw inspiration from here to write something light and fluffy? Something without any type of mystery or suspense? It felt like such a mundane concept and the spark was not there.

My computer dinged as an email came through and I lifted myself from the windowsill as I walked over to my desk and set down my phone. Pushing out my chair, I didn’t bother to take a seat as I opened up my email and saw one from Diana. I stared at it for a moment with the pointer of my mouse hovering over the subject line. Curiosity had me tapping my forefinger down on the mouse, opening up the email.

And as my eyes began to scan the screen, my jaw fell slack. My eyes widened. My lungs momentarily failed while my heart pounded against my rib cage. I planted both of my hands on my desk as I read over the entire proposal again.

They wanted me to sign a four-book deal, one that centered on a small beach town. They had it all planned out, exactly what they were looking for, but they were still allowing me creative freedom. It wasn't even that part of the proposal that had me picking my jaw up from the ground.

It was the amount of money they were offering me. It was an advance I had never imagined seeing in my life.

There was no way I could turn a deal like this down. I pushed away from my desk and pulled my hair back into a ponytail. I looked back at the screen again, feeling slightly panicked while also feeling a rush of adrenaline coursing through my body. I would be a complete idiot to say no.

Grabbing my phone from my desk, I began to pace as I typed in my brother's name and hit the call button. He answered on the third ring, sounding slightly out of breath.

"Hey, Charlie," he said breathlessly. "Jas, I'll be right back. Keep working on our routine without me."

I looked at the clock on my wall and swore to myself under my breath. I didn't even bother to check the time before calling him. My brother was a professional figure skater who competed in solo performances and in pairs. He was training for the World Championships later this year.

"Shit, I'm sorry, Leo," I said with regret as I shook my head. "I didn't even realize the time. We can talk later, it's not that important. Just call me when you're done."

"Charles." He said my nickname he had given me when we were younger with a sternness that only an older brother would possess. "You're rambling. You only do that when it's something important. What's going on?"

My footsteps were light as I continued to pace around my office. I scratched the side of my head. "I just got this deal from my editor I don't think I can turn down but I don't know

what to do because it's different from what I normally write and what if I can't pull it off?"

"Okay, just take a deep breath." He paused for a second. "I have another hour left on the ice and then I'll be over with some Chinese food. We'll look over it and figure it out, okay?"

I let out a ragged breath as I finally stopped moving. "Sure. Yes, that sounds good."

"Just do me a favor and try not to have a stroke or something before I get there."

I let out a choked laugh. "I'll try not to."

My brother showed up about an hour and a half after we talked on the phone. It felt like it took him three hours to get there. He found me sitting on the floor in the middle of my office with a pros and cons list, along with a whiteboard full of sticky notes with ideas.

Leo paused in the doorway, tilting his head to the side. He studied me for a moment and shook his head with a small smile before walking into my office and sitting down on the floor across from me. When I needed to think, it was where I felt centered and grounded. This was my best thinking spot.

I pushed my board to one side and my list to the other. He started pulling a whole buffet of containers of food from the bag he brought with him and spread them out between us. He handed me a pair of chopsticks before picking up one of the containers for himself.

"So, what do we have going on here?" He shoveled a scoop of lo mein into his mouth. "Are you plotting? Does that mean you've decided to accept the deal?"

I shook my head. "No. I still don't know what to do. I was making a pros and cons list and then random ideas started floating into my brain, so I needed to write them down."

"What exactly would the cons be?"

I swallowed a mouthful of rice and grabbed my water to wash it down. "I came up with two. Number one: I've never

written contemporary romance and might not be able to. Number two: I need to temporarily go stay somewhere to research and write.”

Leo lifted a questioning eyebrow. “Okay, fuck number one. You can write anything. And number two... why can’t you stay here?”

“Inspiration, Leo. Idyll Cove is perfect for what I’ve been writing. I need something new, something fresh. I need to feel the ocean, to capture the essence of the beach to write it into a story. To be able to craft an entire beach town.”

“Go stay with Grams,” he said with a shrug, as if it were the simplest solution. “She lives right near the ocean. It would be perfect for you.”

“Grams has her own life. I doubt she wants me to come stay there.”

Leo rolled his eyes. “Please, Charles. You know she would love for you to come stay with her. She always wants us to come visit.”

I stared at him for a moment, considering the option. It wasn’t a bad one. Our grandmother lived in Orchid City, Florida. She was minutes away from the beach and it really was the perfect place to draw inspiration from. It ticked all the boxes I needed to check off. But still, there was hesitation within me. I couldn’t help but question whether I was the right author for this job.

“Where’s the proposal?” Leo asked, breaking through my thoughts. “Let me see it and I’ll give you my real opinion.”

I pointed over to my desk. “I have it pulled up already.”

Leo stood up from the floor and carried his carton of food over with him to my desk. He dropped down into my seat and I watched him from where I was sitting as I continued to slowly eat the rice and vegetables inside my own container. He was silent, his eyes glued to the screen as they scanned the words that were written out in the document.

His eyes widened before his gaze quickly flashed to mine.

“Charlie... are you fucking kidding me right now?”

I swallowed roughly and shook my head. “That’s what they sent me.”

He blinked. “And you’re seriously sitting here making a pros and cons list?” He shook his head with an incredulous look on his face. “You can’t turn this down. This is too good of a deal. Hell, if you won’t do it, I will.”

Laughter spilled from my lips as my brother abandoned my desk and came back to sit across from me. “I’m not sure they would even want your grocery list.”

Leo laughed and gave me the middle finger while he shook his head. His laughter trailed off and the expression on his face turned serious as he stared back at me. “This is life-changing, Charlie. I hope you realize that.”

“I know,” I said quietly as I nodded. “I’m just afraid I won’t write it the way they want.”

“Do not even entertain those thoughts. I believe in you. I know you are going to write the shit out of these little romance novels.”

A soft laugh escaped me. “You’re annoying.”

He gave me a crooked grin. “That’s what brothers are for.”

CHAPTER TWO

CHARLOTTE

I glanced out the window at the billboard-sized sign welcoming us to Florida. It still felt and seemed completely surreal. I had accepted their proposal and deal and now I was turning my life upside down for the sake of writing a decent story. Thankfully, my house in Idyll Cove was paid off and I didn't have any pets. My best friend, Aurora, agreed to check in on things for me while I was gone.

I knew I'd be returning home at some point—I just had no idea when that would be.

Leo and I called our grandmother three nights ago and now I was completely packed and heading to her place. Leo stayed true to his word and was driving me and my car down to Florida. He also told Grams that he would stay for the weekend, since he was able to get away for a few days, as long as he found a rink to practice at while he was in Orchid City.

Thankfully there was one that wasn't far away, so it was a done deal. He would be lucky if Grams let him leave in a timely fashion. As much as she knew that he had his own life to live and dreams to chase, we were her only grandchildren. She was desperate to have us around. A part of me felt bad for not visiting her more often, especially since our parents weren't able to come see her as much as they wanted to.

Our family owned a boat repair shop at Idyllic Marina and it wasn't often that they were able to get away from it for long. They were able to come visit her a few times a year, but

Grams usually ended up coming to Idyll Cove at least once every year.

My brother and I continued to ride in silence as we got closer to Grams's house. It was only about a six-hour drive from where we lived, so it wasn't a terrible drive.

"Thanks again for driving down here with me," I told Leo as he turned onto the road that led to the gated community that Grams lived in. "I really do appreciate you doing this."

Leo turned to look at me and smiled brightly. "Of course. That's what I'm here for, Charlie."

Even though we were adults, he still continued to look out for me.

Leo was two years older than me, so we had always been close. When we were growing up, we had a lot of the same friends. And all my friends were always chasing after him. He played the field, never really settling down. Even now, at twenty-seven, he still had no desire to be in a committed relationship with anyone. I couldn't blame him, though.

I mean, who was I to talk?

I made a career out of writing about romance, but still hadn't fully experienced it myself. Sure, I had dated a few guys, but it never amounted to anything serious. I never felt that pull to someone like what I wrote about in my books. It was simply just a brief connection, sex, and then we always went our separate ways.

Leo pulled up to the gate and explained the situation to the man sitting inside the small building. We waited as he phoned our grandmother and she confirmed with him. The man handed Leo a pass to put inside the car so we wouldn't have to be troubled with this again since we would be coming and going from the community.

And then we were on our way.

It took less than a minute of driving down two streets that were lined with palm trees until we were pulling into her driveway. Most of the houses looked the same, varying

between modest-sized ones and two-story homes. Grams lived in a one-story house, but it was much larger than she needed.

She and our grandfather had both retired here, but he had unfortunately passed away seven years ago. He was ten years older than her, leaving her at only seventy-two now. Our grandfather had suffered from heart disease and it progressed quicker than anyone had expected. Grams took his death hard, but it was to be expected. They had been together for over forty years.

Leo pulled his car directly in front of her house and Grams popped out through the front door with the biggest smile on her face. Her energy was infectious and I couldn't help but smile back at her as I climbed out of the car. Leo wasn't far behind and Grams pulled both of us in for hugs as she stepped up to us.

It had been a few months since either of us last saw her, but she was still the same spry woman as she'd always been. She smelled like lavender and honey and her graying light brown hair brushed against my face as she wrapped her slender arms around me. There wasn't a single thing about this woman that was fragile, but she did not look her age at all. She had aged like the finest wine in all of the world and I was grateful to have her genes.

"My sweet little love muffins," she crooned as she released both of us and then pulled us each in for separate hugs. She broke apart from me last and stared into my eyes with her deep brown irises. "I am so glad that you decided to come down and stay with me. Perhaps I can convince you to live here permanently."

I choked out a laugh and smiled back at her. "You can try, Grams, but I'll probably always end up back in Idyll Cove."

"One can hope," she said softly as she wrapped her arm around my shoulders and began to guide me into the house. "Leo, be a dear and grab your sister's things."

"Of course, Grams," he said from where he was standing. His voice was nothing but sweet, but I could pick up on the tone he had. If there was a favorite between the two of us, it

was me, but it was simply because I was the first girl in the family.

Grams had three boys. Our father was the only one who went on to have any children. Leo was the first grandchild, so he still had a special place in her heart, but she had always hoped for a girl in the family. When I was born, she got her wish.

We were also simply closer than she was with Leo. He had to do a lot of traveling with being a professional figure skater. There were many things he had missed out on over the years, but it wasn't his fault. It just came with the territory and the life he chose to live. We all lived it when I was a kid and our parents were driving him to different competitions and practices.

Grams and I walked into the house, Leo following behind with my bags. Her house was just as I remembered, vast and open with as much natural light as possible. She had various plants around her house and they all looked as if they received the love and attention they needed to thrive.

Her living room, kitchen and dining room were all within the center of the house. To the left was where her suite was, fully equipped with a massive bedroom and bathroom. To the right was a small hallway that led to the laundry room, garage, two guest rooms and a bathroom. She walked to the largest out of the two rooms and motioned for me to step inside.

“All of the sheets are cleaned. Unpack your stuff and then come meet me out by the lanai.” She turned to Leo. “Go put your bag in the other room and come sit with me. I want to catch up on my favorite boy’s life.”

Leo snorted. “I’m not a boy anymore, Grams.”

She reached over and pinched his cheek as he scowled. “You’ll always be my boy.”

Leo swatted at her hand before sprinting out of the room. Grams glanced at me and smiled before disappearing from the bedroom. I only unpacked a few things—the essentials—before abandoning the bedroom. I would have plenty of time

to unpack and organize. It was a beautiful day and the sun was shining brightly in the sky.

I didn't want to waste any time by being cooped up indoors. I needed to draw as much inspiration from the world around me as I could. My editor was expecting the first five chapters within the next two weeks. I had nothing written, just random ideas that were floating around in my head and the ones I had written out. Nothing felt like it was sticking and it made me feel a little anxious.

It didn't help that I was trying to do this entire career without being medicated for my ADHD. I decided to go off my meds last year and it really threw me for a loop. I hated the way they physically made me feel. I had to learn how to organize and manage my entire life with my brain being scattered and pulling me in different directions. Thankfully, I had a lot of my material written or I had already plotted things out. My biggest struggle then was making sure I stayed focused.

This was the first book I was writing from the very beginning while trying to manage my life medication-free. It was proving to be a challenge. As long as I stayed focused, I could make this work. Meditation and yoga had been my saving grace and really helped me. As long as I stuck to a schedule that integrated both of those, I could do this.

I wasn't sure if I was lying to myself or just forcing myself to believe that as the truth anymore.

My brother and grandmother were both sitting in plush outdoor chairs in the one sitting area just through the sliding glass doors in her living room. I stepped outside and they both smiled at me as I took a seat.

“Did you get unpacked?” Grams asked me.

I shook my head. “I unpacked a few things, but I will get to the rest later.”

She simply smiled and nodded. Grams was one of the most laid-back, go-with-the-flow people I had ever met. She was very much a go-getter and loved to stay busy, but when it

came to everyone else, she just wanted everyone to be happy. As long as they were living their best life, that was all she cared about.

“So, I was thinking that while you’re still getting settled in and since your brother is in town until Sunday evening, perhaps we could do something fun.”

I put on my best poker face and swallowed back the anxiety that welled inside. I needed to get started on this project immediately, but I couldn’t tell Grams that, not with the hopeful look on her face. She had both of her grandchildren here at the same time. I could wait two days to start. I would just have to work my ass off come Monday.

“Absolutely!” I said with a look of excitement. Leo raised an eyebrow, noticing the off-tone I had, but he didn’t question me. “What were you thinking?”

Grams clapped. “Okay, you both know my best friend, Phyllis. Well, her grandson plays for the local professional hockey team and she gave me tickets for the game tonight. And I know that you like ice stuff,” she said directly to Leo and I stifled a laugh. “So I thought it would be fun for the three of us to go!”

Leo narrowed his eyes. “I don’t like hockey.”

“Yeah, but you ice skate. It’s pretty much the same thing, right?”

His jaw ticked. “No, Grams. I’ve explained to you before that hockey and figure skating are actually nothing alike. The only similarity is that you’re skating on ice.”

Laughter bubbled in my throat and I couldn’t swallow it back down. “I’m so sorry,” I laughed, shaking my head. “I just can’t believe—um—you didn’t know he hates hockey.”

Poor Leo. When he was a little kid and wanted to learn how to ice skate, everyone thought he would go on to play hockey. But he was completely captivated by figure skating and never once looked back. He dealt with a lot of bullying growing up, especially from some of the hockey players he

went to high school with. They looked down on him for choosing one sport over the other.

Grams looked horrified. “I knew you didn’t like hockey players because of how mean some of them were to you. I didn’t know you didn’t like the actual sport.”

“It’s fine,” he said with a shrug of indifference, again concealing his feelings regarding the matter. I felt bad. I knew how bad things got for him. I knew how badly it bothered him. And if we were being honest, it made me hate a majority of the players I met. “I’ve never been to a professional game. I’m sure it will be a good time.”

“It will be fine,” Grams assured him with a smile. “Plus, they have tons of alcohol there and according to Phyllis, the seats that we have are part of some package where we have access to free food and drinks.”

“Perfect,” Leo said with a smile. “I’ll be fine, Grams. It’s not that big of a deal.”

“I’ll go tell Phyllis that we will meet her later this evening,” she said as she rose from her seat and disappeared into the house.

“Damn her,” Leo grumbled as he kicked his foot at the bottom of my seat. “Did she really forget that I hate the damn sport?”

I shrugged. “Who knows with her. She means well, you know that.”

“Yeah, I know.” He paused for a second. “What was that look earlier? You don’t want to go either?”

“I need to start this fucking book as soon as possible. It’s fine. It will all be fine,” I added quickly as I waved my hand dismissively.

Leo laughed, shaking his head. “The story of my life.”

“Mine too.”

CHAPTER THREE

WES

My footsteps were light as I walked behind Nico and entered the building. He was a few steps ahead of me with his head down, not paying much attention. I was just as in the zone as he was, walking with my music playing through my AirPods. The season had just started a few weeks ago and we each had our own game day routines. I yawned, wiping the sleep that had lingered in my eyes.

I overslept by a few minutes, sleeping past my alarm. A game day nap was always a necessity after we had our morning practice. A lot of people didn't realize the strain that hockey put on the body. We were skating at full force with as much power as possible on blades that were roughly three millimeters wide. It took a toll on the body.

We walked in through the players' entrance and found our way to the locker room. There were a few of the guys there already, changing into their warm-up outfits. I walked over to my spot, next to Mac and shrugged off my suit jacket.

"Cole," Mac greeted from where he was sitting, tying the laces of his sneakers. "Are you ever going to iron that damn shirt?"

I shook my head. "Not unless you want us to go on a losing streak."

"Don't you dare say any shit like that," Nico growled from his seat. His eyes cut to mine. "We do not need any bad luck right now."

I gave him a knowing look and glanced at Mac. “Hence why I will never be ironing the shirt.”

Mac and I were definitely opposites. He was extremely organized and meticulous. It was borderline psychotic. He couldn't have a single thing out of place, which was one of his little quirks. Everything had a specific spot it was supposed to go in and he had to have things the way he felt were the right way. I was the opposite.

I thrived off chaos and disorder. Every night before a game, I slept in my dress shirt and dress pants. My entire outfit for the next day that I wore to the arena. I didn't wear my suit jacket to bed, though. That felt too restrictive. But for the rest of the time, I had to wear it. If I didn't, I was definitely going to play like shit. It was a thing I started doing last season after I needed to switch stuff up and it had been working, so there was no sense changing it now.

My life growing up was a little different than some. I lived in an area that didn't offer the hockey programs I needed to be in. I quickly outgrew what they had to offer and went to live with my grandmother when I was young. It was a weird time in my life to be uprooted and move hundreds of miles away from everything I had known.

She was truly a saving grace in my life. She took on having a young boy and became my primary caregiver. My grandmother was the one who was running me around to hockey all the time since my parents weren't around.

As soon as I was drafted to the Orchid City Vipers, she packed her bags and moved to Florida. She had always talked about moving south. She was sick of the Minnesota winters. When I left for college in Boston, she didn't move then. It was as if she was waiting to see where I would end up before she made any moves.

If there was one person who always put me first, it was her. Hell, I had tried to buy her a car after I got my first check and she got pissed at me. She insisted that I keep my money. She wanted me to build a life for myself rather than worrying about trying to take care of her.

I owed her a lot in life. She helped to shape me into the person I was today.

Although, if she knew I was wearing a wrinkled suit to every game, she would possibly have a few words to say about that.

“Come on, Wes,” Nico said to me as he stood from his spot and interrupted my thoughts. “Get out of your head and hurry up.”

“Yes, daddy,” I said mockingly as I rolled my eyes at him.

Nico gave me the middle finger and disappeared from the locker room. We had met in college and had been friends for years at this point. We were both signed to the same team and played in the AHL before getting called up to the NHL. It was like we were on this journey together, even if I was a bit of a thorn in his side.

It wasn't my fault he got annoyed easily.

I finished getting dressed and headed out to where the rest of the guys were. We got through our different warm-ups off the ice and then it was time to head back to the locker room to get ready to go out to the rink. We had some time between everything, but I tended to keep to myself in those moments. It varied from game to game with me, depending on my mood.

I was feeling a bit off after oversleeping and was struggling to get into the right headspace. I knew once I was out on the ice, that would change. My head would be back in the game and my surroundings would fade away.

After moving in a bit of a daze, I was completely dressed and heading down the tunnel to the ice with the rest of the guys. The cold air hit my face and I momentarily closed my eyes, inhaling deeply. This was what I needed. This was what made me feel centered and grounded. My feet moved effortlessly across the surface as I used the power in my legs to move me forward.

We went through our routine, warming up and stretching before taking shots on our goalie. Everyone on the team had their own way of doing things, but we had a sense of structure

and a way that we did things together as an actual team. We all worked together, moving as one unit before we had to head back to the locker room while they cut the ice.

Adrenaline coursed through my veins when it was time for us to go back out.

It was time for the game to start and I was finally in the head space I needed to be in.

We won.

And that only solidified the reason behind wearing my wrinkly suit every game.

“Well, looks like we’ll live to see another day of Cole walking in with his wrinkled-ass clothes,” Mac laughed as we were all getting dressed again after the game.

“We wouldn’t have won if it weren’t for my outfit.”

Nico snorted. “You’re probably right.”

I widened my eyes as I stared at my best friend for a second. “Wait, I’m sorry. What did you just say? Did you just say that I’m right?”

“Don’t push it,” he said with a smirk, shaking his head. “I will not be repeating myself so I’d suggest you store those words in your memory anytime that ego of yours needs a boost.”

“I don’t think he needs any help with that,” Lincoln laughed from where he was sitting. “What’s everyone doing tonight? Who wants to go out?”

“I’m down,” Mac agreed while Nico shook his head.

“I already have plans.”

I looked at him, cocking my head to the side as I raised an eyebrow. He simply narrowed his eyes at me, silently telling me to shut the fuck up. I couldn’t fight the smile that drifted across my lips and I quickly looked back to the guys. Nico had a little secret thing going on with one of our team’s photographers, but I wasn’t going to be the one to expose him.

“Sorry, fellas. I wish I could, but my grandma brought some guests to the game with her tonight and I told her I’d meet her at The Hall of Fame Lounge.”

The Hall of Fame Lounge was part of an exclusive membership seating area at the arena. They had access to this restaurant where they could get free food and drinks before, during, and after the game. After games, some of the players would go there, so the fans would have an opportunity to interact with the guys from the team.

I didn’t usually go there unless my grandma was here at the game, and tonight was a special occasion for her. She had brought her friend along and her two grandkids. I promised her I would meet them there afterward.

“Cool. If you decide to come out later, hit me up,” Mac said before disappearing from the locker room with Lincoln in tow. I waited until they were both gone before I met Nico’s gaze.

“Just don’t, Wes,” he warned me as he narrowed his eyes. His jaw was set and he shook his head.

My eyebrows pulled together. “I have no idea what you’re even talking about.”

His facial expression relaxed and something that resembled relief passed through his eyes. “I trust you. I trust you to not fuck this up for me.”

“I’m sure you can do that without my help,” I said jokingly with a wink. “I’m kidding. Your secrets are safe with me. You should know that by now.”

“Yeah, I know. I just don’t want to mess this up, you know?”

I stared at him for a moment, the concept logically making sense, but I couldn’t resonate with it. I had yet to meet anyone who had that type of an impact on my life. I’d had relationships in the past, but they were never serious. Never serious enough that I felt like I had something to lose. Like it was something I didn’t want to lose.

“You won’t.”

“Thanks, man.” Nico smiled at me. “Tell your grandma I said hi.”

I nodded as I rose to my feet. Nico left the locker room and I followed suit behind him. He went out through the exit while I headed in the direction of the restaurant. As I stepped inside, I noticed it wasn't too busy. There were only a few people inside and I said hi to the ones who recognized me as I was walking over to where my grandma was.

As I was walking past the bar, I heard someone call my last name from the other side of the room. I glanced over and smiled and waved just as I ran directly into someone else. I saw a flash of her light brown hair and my hand darted out immediately as I caught her before she fell onto the floor.

The sharp intake of her breath caught my attention. She stared up at me, wide-eyed, with her walnut-colored eyes staring back at mine. Time was momentarily suspended. My hands were wrapped around her arms, holding her upright. I breathed deeply, my heart pounding viciously inside my chest.

My hands lingered on her soft skin for longer than they should have.

And I couldn't look away from the shimmering hues of brown in her eyes.

CHAPTER FOUR

CHARLOTTE

We survived the game without Leo getting too drunk, although now we were back in the private area, he looked less than amused with the whole situation. He hated hockey, so I couldn't blame him. Phyllis insisted that we come back here after the game because she wanted us to meet her grandson. She had pointed him out on the ice while they were playing.

Number 7—Weston Cole.

I had only seen him with his helmet on, so I didn't get a good look at his face, but he was definitely attractive from a distance. His mocha-colored hair curled just beneath the back of his helmet and his jawline was strong and prominent. If he noticed us all sitting in the stands, he didn't indicate it at all.

"I'm going to go get a drink," I told my brother as Grams and Phyllis were talking about their upcoming pickleball tournament. "Did you need anything?"

Leo lifted his beer to inspect it and shook his head. "No, I'm good."

I nodded and looked to Grams and Phyllis. "I'm going to get a drink from the bar. Did either of you need anything?"

"You're too sweet," Phyllis beamed at me and shook her head. "Thank you, sweetie, but I'm okay."

Grams smiled at me. "I'll just take a bottle of water."

I excused myself from the table and walked over to the bar to get our drinks. I wasn't drinking much that night. It was

only my third can of an alcoholic seltzer drink and I wasn't really feeling much of a buzz. The woman from behind the bar handed both drinks to me and I thanked her, leaving a cash tip on the bartop before spinning on my heel.

I wasn't paying attention and ran directly into a warm, solid body. The impact threw me off-balance and I stumbled over my own feet before I felt a pair of hands grabbing my biceps. My eyes flashed to the stranger's and the air left my lungs in a rush as I met his gaze. His eyes were gray with what looked like swirls of silver and black hues dancing in his irises.

Holy shit.

His scent penetrated my senses and I inhaled the faint smell of cedar and cypress. It took me a moment for my brain to register that I was standing upright. I was no longer off-balance, although it felt like the earth had tilted even farther on its axis. His hands lingered on my arms, warm with a touch of roughness to his palms.

I finally snapped out of whatever the hell that was.

"Oh my goodness, I am so sorry," I apologized profusely, feeling a blush creeping up my neck. I shook my head in embarrassment. "I wasn't paying attention and didn't even see you there."

He cocked his head a bit, studying me as his eyes dropped down to my lips and back to my eyes. I refused to scan his face, but his jawline was chiseled, his nose straight and proportionate. "It's okay. It was my fault too." His voice was low, yet smooth like honey. A soft chuckle rumbled in his chest. "Are you all right?"

"Yes, of course," I said in a rush as he released me and took a step back. My skin tingled from where his palms were. "I just managed to trip over my feet." I laughed quietly.

His eyes continued to probe mine, a slow smile pulling on his lips. I watched them part, words dangling on the tip of his tongue as he was about to say something else, but I quickly filled the silence with my own words.

“If you’ll excuse me, I should probably get back to my family.”

He closed his mouth, his smile momentarily faltering before he recovered and nodded. “Absolutely. I apologize again, for running into you.”

I shook my head at him. “We’ll just have to call it a draw and both take the blame for this one.” I needed to get away from him. I couldn’t stop staring at the swirling shades of gray in his eyes. The last thing I needed was some sort of a distraction from a stranger. “Have a good night.”

“You too,” he said softly as I spun on my heel and began to walk back over to where Grams, Leo, and Phyllis were. My legs moved swiftly and my heart was pounding in my chest as I walked briskly, attempting to put as much distance between me and him.

The three of them looked over at me as I approached and my brow furrowed as Phyllis stood up. Her face lit up and she smiled broadly, but her gaze went directly past me. I stopped as I reached the table, confusion consuming me as I handed Grams her water and Phyllis stepped around me.

“There he is!” she said excitedly with laughter trailing after her words. I slowly turned around, my stomach sinking and my breath caught in my throat as I watched her embracing the same guy that I had just ran into at the bar. His eyes met mine as he wrapped his arms around her and hugged her tightly.

No fucking way.

They pulled apart and he threw his arm over the tops of her shoulders. Phyllis looked between the three of us, putting her arm around his back. “This is my grandson, Wes.” She glanced up at him. “You already know Evelyn. This is her granddaughter Charlotte and her grandson Leo.”

Wes stepped away from her. He reached over the table, holding his hand out to my brother. He was so close, too close as his arm just barely grazed mine. “It’s nice to meet you, Leo. Thanks for coming out tonight.”

Leo shook his hand. “Nice to meet you too.” He didn’t comment on the fact that he would much rather be anywhere than at a hockey game.

Wes straightened back up and turned to me as he held out his hand to me. I looked down at it before looking back up to his steel eyes as I slid my palm against his. His touch was gentle as he shook it softly. “So, I suppose now we get to formally meet, Charlotte.”

“Charlie,” I corrected him. “Everyone calls me Charlie.”

He stared at me for a beat, a soft breath escaping him as his hand lingered within mine.

“Did the two of you already meet?” Phyllis inquired as her eyes bounced back and forth between us.

Wes let go of me and took a step back as a smile crept onto his lips. “Ironically, we just ran into each other at the bar.” He chuckled as he looked at me and then back to his grandmother. “Literally. Neither of us were paying attention and physically ran into one another.”

I didn’t miss the twinkle in Grams’s eyes as she looked at the two of us with a grin. I narrowed my eyes at her in warning and shook my head. The last thing I needed was the two of them meddling and plotting and planning things.

“Well, that just sounds like some sort of divine intervention.”

“Perhaps it was just a coincidence,” Leo chimed in as he drained his beer. “Not everything is driven by fate or destiny. Sometimes random shit happens and they don’t mean anything.”

Grams’s gaze sliced to Leo’s. “Language, Leo.” She turned back to Wes and Phyllis. “You’ll have to excuse him. Someone is a little irritable today.”

Leo started to argue with Grams and Phyllis naturally got involved. And she was taking Leo’s side, which wasn’t helping the matter at all.

“Is he always like that?” Wes asked me with his voice low.

I shrugged. “Depends on the day. He’s a professional figure skater. Hockey isn’t really his thing after getting bullied by some of the players for figure skating.”

“That’s kind of fucked up.”

I whipped my head to the side and narrowed my eyes at him. “Don’t try and act like you aren’t like that. You’re all the same.”

His eyebrows pinched together. “What does that mean? Maybe I’m actually impressed by the skill it takes to be able to skate the way they do. Did you ever consider that?”

I stared at him for a second, looking for some type of detection that he was lying or joking. “The amount of hockey players I’ve encountered that didn’t judge male figure skaters has been relatively low.”

His face transformed. Mischief danced in his eyes as the corners of his lips lifted. “Then I think it’s safe to say that you haven’t met any decent ones until now.”

His smile was contagious and I lost the battle against my own. “Maybe you’re right.”

“I am,” he replied with a wink.

“Come sit with us, Wes,” Phyllis broke through the silence that had settled between us. We both turned to look at them. Wes sat down next to Phyllis, across from Grams, and I took my seat back beside Leo. He was scrolling on his phone with a scowl.

I elbowed him. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing important,” he waved me off. “Just my coach on my ass about when I’ll be back.”

“Did you know that Charlie is an author?” Grams asked Wes and caught my attention as she dropped my name. My gaze shifted to hers and I widened my eyes at her, shaking my head.

Wes laughed softly as he noticed my expression. “No, I had no idea.” His gaze pierced mine. “What do you write?”

I wanted to crawl into the plush seat I was sitting in. I hated talking about my books, especially to strangers that were turning out to potentially not be strangers. Then again, maybe I could get away with never seeing him after this awkward encounter. It was doubtful, considering the fact that our grandmothers were best friends.

“I write thrillers. Most of them have romance.”

He raised an inquisitive eyebrow. “Is that so?” He pulled out his phone and began to scroll and tap on the screen. “Give me a title. I want to order one.”

My stomach sank while my heart crawled into my throat. “What? No. You don’t need to do that.”

“Don’t be silly, dear,” Phyllis chimed in with a devious grin. “Your work is brilliant. You don’t need to be afraid to share it with people.”

I swallowed roughly. “I’m not afraid, I just don’t know that it’s everyone’s cup of tea.”

“I can be the judge of that,” Wes said softly. “If you don’t want to tell me, it’s okay.”

Dammit.

I shoved away the anxious feelings and waved my hand dismissively. I wasn’t sure he was going to want to read a romance novel, but it was all I had to offer. “It’s fine. My best-selling one is *Lie to Me Softly*.”

He typed in the title, his face lighting up as he showed the screen to me. “Charlene Danvers. Is that you?”

“It is. It’s a pseudonym because of the crazies out there.”

“I believe it,” he said with a laugh as he looked back at his screen. “It says it was a #1 *New York Times* bestseller. I’m intrigued, Charlotte,” he murmured as his gray eyes met mine once again. It was as if there were other words lingering on his tongue, but he didn’t speak them.

Whatever they were, they drifted off into the silence, but his eyes spoke a million words in a different language I had yet to understand.

Wes slowly rose to his feet. “I hate to rush out, but I have to be up early tomorrow morning because we’ll be flying out for a few games we have on the West Coast. It was lovely to see you, Evelyn.”

“Don’t be a stranger,” she said with a smile.

He looked over to my brother. “It was nice to meet you, Leo.”

“Likewise,” he said with a nod. “Good luck.”

“Thanks,” Wes said with a smile before looking at me. “And it was a pleasure meeting you, Charlotte.”

“Charlie,” I corrected him again.

He simply smiled before turning to leave. My eyes followed after him and I couldn’t help but feel a rush in my veins. I shook my head to myself in an attempt to push him out of my mind.

It didn’t work.

And later that night as I was drifting into a deep sleep, I was met by those steel-colored eyes and the sound of my name rolling off his tongue, like that was exactly where it belonged.

CHAPTER FIVE

WES

We had finished our third and final away game and I was ready to be home. I had grown accustomed to the humid air in Orchid City and was a little tired of being away. As much as I loved playing hockey professionally, as much as I was living my dream life, there was a part of me that liked being in one place. Where everything was familiar. Being on the road was sometimes tiresome.

Our flight was leaving in about three hours, so we stopped at a restaurant that wasn't too far from the airport to get dinner before we had to leave. I couldn't help but watch Nico as he sat across from me at the table. He kept staring at his damn phone and I knew exactly why. I just couldn't quite seem to understand the grip this girl had on him.

"You keep looking at your phone like it's a bomb that's about to detonate," I said to him as the rest of the guys were engaged in their own conversation.

Nico rolled his eyes at me. "No, I don't."

"Sure you do," I argued before taking a sip of my drink. Maybe I was wrong. Maybe it had nothing to do with Harper. "You've been doing it for days now. I can't tell if you're waiting for good or bad news."

Nico glanced around, noticing that no one was paying attention to us. He lifted an eyebrow. "I'm not waiting for either."

I mirrored his expression and did the same in return. "So, it's more of a *who* then, instead of a *what*." A coy smile played

on my lips. If he wasn't going to take the bait, I was going to go digging for answers. "It's the photographer, isn't it? Harper?"

Nico glared at me like he wanted to take his knife and drive it into the side of my throat. "Dude, shut up about her."

I stifled a laugh and took another swig of my beer. "That's what I thought."

"No one can know about that shit at the club and you do not know how to keep your mouth closed." Nico let out a breath before lowering his voice. "If I want any chance of anything else happening with her, I can't have anyone knowing."

I didn't realize how deep he was in. I thought at first it was just a fleeting thing—just a fling between the two of them—but I was wrong. Nico was serious about her, even if he didn't want to admit it. There was a part of me that felt jealous. Jealous that I hadn't experienced that. I had nothing to lose. No one to lose.

"Ah, shit, her job with the organization," I realized as I dropped my voice to match his. She had more to lose than him, but he didn't want to lose her either. "There has to be some kind of a loophole or a work-around."

Nico shrugged and sipped his beer. "Trust me, I already have a plan because I need her."

Well, shit. I wasn't expecting him to flat-out admit it, but here we were.

"Damn, dude, you plan on wifing her up this quickly too?"

An exasperated sigh escaped him and his nostrils flared. "It's not completely like that. Just hear me out... but I need her around to play like I did the other night."

My eyes widened. There was more to it than just his physical attraction. He was using her the same way I used my suit. It wasn't uncommon. If we found something that stuck and worked for good luck, we held on to it. I wanted a damn good luck charm instead of my suit.

Nico already had one, though. His ball of tape that he collected every season. It was more of a tradition than a good luck charm, but he put a lot of weight on that damn ball.

“What about Ballsy?”

Nico laughed, his smile stretching across his lips. “Ballsy is one thing I will never, ever give up, so don’t worry. She’s not a threat to him.”

I couldn’t help but laugh along with him. He kept the ball of tape in his guest room like it needed its own bedroom. Like it was an entity. I couldn’t judge him, regardless of how ridiculous it was. “Oh, thank God. I don’t know what we would do if you threw out that ball of tape. What version of Ballsy is this one anyways?”

“I honestly don’t even know,” he said with a shrug. “I stopped counting after it was Ballsy the Tenth.”

Mac cleared his throat from beside me and Nico and I both looked at him. “Sometimes I really wonder about the two of you and question the stability of your mental health.”

“If you need to worry about either of us, it would be him,” Nico offered while motioning to me.

My mental health was questionable at times, but come on. I barked out a laugh, attempting to brush off the uncomfortable feeling that pricked my skin. “Says the guy who has a ball of tape THAT HE NAMED.”

“Oh, yeah, I heard about that,” Mac said with a peculiar look on his face. “This is something I have to see sometime.”

“It truly is a work of art.” Nico smiled brightly, as proud as can be about a ball of trash. “I have a picture of the one from last season if you want to see it.”

Nico picked up his phone to find a picture, but the screen lit up before he even touched it. I raised an eyebrow as he quickly tucked his phone away and brushed off Mac’s inquisitiveness. Mac shrugged and Nico narrowed his eyes at me in warning. I fought the urge to roll my eyes at him. He was a little over the top with how under wraps he was trying to keep this thing between him and Harper.

If anyone else knew, they wouldn't give a shit. Sure, it was risky, but I didn't see anyone from our team running to tell the GM about it.

I directed my attention away from him, falling into an easy conversation with Mac about our flight. I was only partially listening to him, though, as my mind was beginning to wander. As much as I enjoyed my life, there was something missing. Something that I couldn't quite put a finger on.

Lincoln stood up from his seat and knocked on the table to get everyone's attention. "Coach wants us ready to leave in ten minutes, so be ready, boys."

We all finished our meals and paid our tabs before heading to the airport. Everyone boarded the plane and took a seat. I glanced over at Nico who was staring at his phone, typing a message. I was happy for him. He deserved happiness; I just hated how he had to be secretive about it. It had to be draining, constantly feeling like you were looking over your shoulder.

He wanted to protect Harper even though they were still in the beginning stage of getting to know one another. There was a part of me that wanted to experience that too. I wanted the feeling of my soul being set on fire. Watching Nico fall in love gave me mixed emotions. There was a part of me that didn't want it. He was so consumed by her already. It was so easy for that to be torn away, and then what?

You were left with nothing but a broken heart.

The more I thought about it, the more it sounded like a fucking scam. Falling in love wasn't worth it.

Reaching into my backpack, I pulled out the book that my grandma gave me before I left Orchid City. *Lie to Me Softly*. Charlotte's book. I was already close to being done with it. It had completely captivated me and I didn't even mind the romance that was in it. The way she told a story, the way her words were woven within one another. It sucked me right into the world she had created. There were so many twists and turns, it was like being thrown into the middle of chaos and not knowing what was up or what was down.

As I dove back into the story, I couldn't help but wonder if this was like looking inside Charlotte's mind. It was beautiful and maddening, just like her. *Fuck*. I shook my head. I couldn't think of her that way. There was something about her that softened my heart. She was precious. She deserved to be protected at all costs. And if I let my mind become obsessed with her, she wouldn't be safe.

She would never be safe because it would never be anything serious for me.

I refused to let myself fall into the abyss like Nico had. Charlotte needed someone who could give her what she deserved. All I could give her was a good time and some memories. Nothing lasting. Nothing forever.

Who was I to determine what she needed? I really didn't even know her, but I wanted to. I wanted to know more about her. What made her brain tick? What made her be able to create a story like the one that was in my hands? It was nothing romantic, but more of a curiosity I wanted to satiate.

I was extremely intrigued by her.

We were getting ready to take off. I quickly pulled out my phone and opened up Instagram. I hadn't done any research on her, but I couldn't help myself. I typed in her pseudonym and went to her profile. My finger tapped on the follow button. There was nothing forward about it. I was merely just a fan who decided to follow my new favorite author.

I should have just left it at that, but I didn't. I watched her story, which was brief and short. There was an announcement that she shared from a local bookstore in Orchid City. She was making an appearance there for a small signing. It wasn't an event that I had ever attended before, but I could go and show my support. I was sure my grandmother would probably be going.

My attraction to her was undeniable, but I couldn't let it go past that. I was already fighting the urge to message her about this damn book. I was nearing the end of the story and I needed to rant to someone about it. If there was anyone who

would understand the emotional turmoil it was putting me through, it would be the creator of the masterpiece.

We were getting ready for takeoff and our coach was telling everyone they needed to put their phones away. I let my impulsive side take over and quickly tapped on the message button.

WES

I don't know what kind of addicting substances you put in this book, but I need to discuss it immediately. I have theories and I need someone to listen to them.

I sent the message and quickly closed out of the app. It was an entirely impulsive decision, one that I maybe shouldn't have made, but it was too late. We were already in the air and I couldn't unsend it now. Setting my phone down, I returned my attention back to the book and fully immersed myself in the world that Charlotte Wells had created. She would never be Charlene Danvers or Charlie to me, even though that was who she was to the rest of the world.

To me, she was simply Charlotte.

The girl who had caught my attention with those mesmerizing brown eyes and soft, light brown hair.

Fuck.

CHAPTER SIX

CHARLOTTE

I stared out at the sky, watching as the colors changed from the sun setting in the distance. It was tucked beneath the trees, but it cast its light across the wisps of clouds. I let out a deep breath and ran a frustrated hand down my face. My eyes dropped back down to my laptop in front of me. It was nothing but a blank page. A wordless document.

After my brother left to return back to Idyll Cove, I cut myself off from all distractions and got sucked into my work. I had an idea. A bright, fresh story that seemed like it was what the market would be looking for. I promptly sent it to my editor and she responded back to me early this morning.

It was a storyline that had already been written by someone else. It was an outdated and overproduced idea. It felt new to me because it was something I had never written before, but someone else had already beat me to it.

That left me back at square one this morning.

And I couldn't come up with a single fucking idea that spoke to me.

The amount of times I had written and deleted something today was appalling. It was pathetic. I never had issues in the past with coming up with storylines. I loved plotting, fleshing out the characters and the story before diving in deep. This subgenre was outside of my realm of comfort. I felt like a fish out of water, flailing and flopping around on the ground.

There had to be something I could write. Something that my editor would approve of.

I was lacking inspiration and I needed to find it.

I needed a muse.

Letting out a sigh, I picked up my phone from the table beside me. It was on Do Not Disturb mode since this morning and I was only using it to listen to music. Deciding against my better judgment, I ended up doom scrolling through TikTok before checking my Instagram. There were a ton of notifications and messages—presumably from readers—that I didn't have the mental energy to respond to, except for one message request that caught my eye.

I opened it and my stomach dropped when I saw who it was from. Weston fucking Cole.

I stared at it for a moment, my heart doing a stupid little pitter-patter thing. I was a little confused and a little excited by it. We saw each other a few nights ago after his game. Well, we met that night and haven't spoken since. Not that we would have had any reason to. The message was from a few hours ago. Perhaps it was a mistake.

There was something about Wes that had piqued my interest that night. Regardless of how many times I corrected him, he refused to call me anything other than Charlotte. It annoyed me, but there was a part of me that kind of liked it.

Grams wandered outside and was staring at the pool before she looked over to me. I was looking up from my phone, hesitating. I wanted to open it out of interest, but I was also afraid. I wasn't sure what it could possibly be about.

“What's wrong, Charlie?” she asked me as she sat down on one of the lounge chairs. “You don't look well.”

“Huh?” I said as I shook the thoughts from my mind. Shaking my head, I forced a smile on my lips. “Nothing's wrong. I have a message from Wes and I'm not sure what it's about.”

I knew I made a mistake the instant her face lit up.

“Did you read it?”

“Not yet.”

She stared at me for a minute. “What are you waiting for?”

My eyebrows pulled together. “Why are you so concerned about it?”

She smiled sheepishly and waved a dismissive hand at me. “I’m not concerned, honey. I was just wondering.”

“You’re a meddling old woman,” I said jokingly with a smile.

“I beg your pardon,” she scoffed. “I am not an old woman.”

I laughed softly. “I suppose you’re not that old, but you sure do love to meddle.”

She smiled at me and winked. “All I’m saying is, Wes is a very attractive young man and he is quite the gentleman.”

“Grams,” I warned as I gave her a knowing look. “You know I’m on a deadline. I don’t need any distractions.”

“How is the book coming along anyways?”

An exasperated, frustrated breath escaped me. “It’s not. I cannot get my brain to cooperate. I’m going to try again tomorrow. I thought maybe I’d go to the beach and try to write.”

She nodded encouragingly. “I think that would be good for you.”

My phone vibrated in my hand and a notification popped up from Instagram. I swallowed roughly and opened the app again, seeing I now had two messages from Wes.

“Was that him again?”

I looked up at Grams. “I don’t know what he wants.”

She shrugged with a mischievous smile. “You won’t know if you don’t read it.”

The curiosity was burning inside me. My heart picked up the pace, pounding a little harder and a little faster inside my chest. “Fine, I’ll read it.”

Grams smiled and I dropped my gaze back to my phone. There was a little green dot next to his picture, showing he was currently online. My finger hovered and I hesitated a few more seconds. I sucked in a deep breath and tapped down on the screen.

WES

I don't know what kind of addicting substances you put in this book, but I need to discuss it immediately. I have theories and I need someone to listen to them.

I know that you're there, Charlotte.

Shit.

He read my book. I wasn't sure how I felt about it but his words were like a rush of dopamine. And his last message. He didn't call me Charlie. He must have seen that I was active on Instagram and assumed I was avoiding reading his message—which was exactly what I had been doing.

“What did he say?” Grams broke through my jumbled thoughts.

I lifted my gaze to her. “He read my book and wants to talk about it.”

She smiled brightly, but didn't comment on that. She and Phyllis were such meddling women. I knew how they operated. They loved to sit around and gossip. This was going to give the two of them something to talk about, although I couldn't help but wonder if they were behind all of this. Phyllis did give him the book, after all.

CHARLOTTE

Sorry, I was working.

Color me curious, though... let me hear your theories.

Grams busied herself with a book she brought outside to read, although I didn't miss her looking at me from the corner of her eye. The crickets were chirping as the sun set even farther. The solar lights around the perimeter of the backyard were lit with a soft glow and the light on the lanai was shimmering beneath the surface of the water.

WES

I don't even know where to begin, but I'm certain that this isn't a conversation to have through messages.

My heart pitter-pattered again.

CHARLOTTE

What are you implying then?

WES

I just got back to Orchid City. Do you have any time to spare this week to meet me for lunch?

CHARLOTTE

You want to meet for lunch to discuss my book?

This was absolutely bizarre, yet I was completely fixated on this conversation.

WES

Yes.

I chewed on the inside of my cheek. This was an unwanted distraction. Had it been any other time, I would have said yes. If I wasn't on a deadline, I wouldn't have had a second thought. Actually, that was a lie. I would have had a million

thoughts about it. With my unmedicated ADHD, my brain would have gone wild with this.

It threatened to right then.

He was going to derail my focus. It wasn't like I had much at this point anyway. I was lacking any inspiration. I refused to slip into a state of writer's block, but I couldn't force a story. However, maybe he could help with that. There was a chance the distraction could help. If I was separated from my work—that was nothing at this point—I could approach it again with a clearer head.

Or this would completely derail everything and set me back even more.

WES

Is that a yes or a no, Charlotte?

I should say no. This book needed my complete attention, but it wasn't going to get it. Not when he was now penetrating my mind. If I didn't entertain this idea, I was going to hyper fixate on it. I needed to just get it out of the way and then I would be able to focus.

CHARLIE

I'm free tomorrow, if you're available.

The sooner the better and then I could get back to work.

WES

Perfect. Meet me at Ain't That A Bisque around twelve.

CHARLOTTE

Sounds good. I'll see you then.

WES

Good night, Charlotte.

I stared at the thread of messages once more before abruptly closing out of the app. I dropped my phone down onto the table in front of me. Staring out at the water, I began to pick at the skin around my nails. It was a nervous habit of mine and something I did almost to help calm my chaotic brain.

Grams was silent, but she had closed her book and I could feel her eyes on me. She was studying me, waiting for me to be the one to open the conversation. I appreciated her not pushing or pressing. She was going to find out eventually and I didn't want to lie to her. There was no reason for keeping any of this a secret from her.

We were simply getting lunch to talk about a book. It was nothing more. I wasn't blind. Weston Cole was attractive and extremely charismatic. It would never be anything more, though.

Calm down, Charlie.

"We're going to meet for lunch tomorrow because he wants to talk about my book."

Grams raised an eyebrow at me with a ghost of a smile. "He read it?"

I nodded. "So he says. He has some theories about it and wants to discuss it."

"Hm," she mused, although I could see the metaphorical wheels in her mind turning. "Well, that should be nice. Maybe it will help you with the book you're writing."

"I'm hoping it will help me come back to this with a clearer mind so I can finally come up with an idea."

Grams's face lit up and she lifted both brows. "Can I suggest a possible idea?"

I shrugged. At this point, I would take anything from anyone. “Sure, why not.”

“You’re supposed to write a romance, right?” she asked and I nodded. Her mouth twitched. “You could use all of this as inspiration.”

I stared at her for a moment as words seemed to not exist in my brain. It took a few seconds before I could get it to cooperate. “What do you mean?”

“The way the two of you met. Him reading your book and wanting to meet up with you. This is all perfect material for the unraveling of a love story.”

I groaned and dropped my head back before lifting it to look at her again. “Come on, Grams. I can’t get involved with him just for the sake of finding some kind of inspiration.”

“You don’t have to get involved with him, honey. I know you aren’t looking for anything like that and he lives a different life as a professional hockey player.” She paused and adjusted in her seat. “But that doesn’t mean you can’t let your mind wander. Use these little things that have happened as the building blocks and then just create a story from it. What would happen if the two of you were to fall for one another?”

It wasn’t a bad idea. She was right—every aspect so far was absolutely perfect. I could use it all as inspiration and weave my own story. There were so many possibilities. It was as if she turned the light bulb on inside my head and my brain was already going on a ride of its own.

“You’re a genius,” I told her with a smile as I opened up my laptop. I had something to work with. The creativity was already brewing inside me and I needed to spill it out onto the pages. I needed to run with the idea and felt as if I could plot the entire thing.

Grams stood from her seat, grinning widely. “I’ll let you get to it.”

“Thanks, Grams.”

“You can thank me after this one becomes a bestseller,” she said with a wink before disappearing back into the house.

I let my mind run rampant and my fingers danced across the keyboard as I dove in headfirst. This was exactly what I needed, and now I looked forward to meeting with Wes tomorrow.

Things were finally aligning.

I finally had found my muse.

It was just a bit of a shame that that was all Weston Cole would ever be to me.

CHAPTER SEVEN

WES

I arrived at Ain't That A Bisque, a local soup and sandwich shop, fifteen minutes before I was supposed to meet Charlotte. I was never early for anything, except for maybe a hockey game. This morning was completely different. I woke up before my alarm even went off and laid in bed for a solid hour, not letting myself get up. Sleep never found me again and I found myself unable to concentrate on anything.

It was almost as if I had some type of mental freeze. Like I couldn't complete any tasks until after meeting her for lunch. I wasn't the type to get nervous or anxious about much. This was a first for me. I wouldn't go as far as to say that I was feeling anxious about meeting her, but there was something deep inside of me that felt unsettled.

And then she walked into the damn room.

Everything stopped.

My breath caught in my throat and my heart pounded erratically. My body moved involuntarily as I rose from my seat to greet her. She was wearing a pastel pink sundress that hugged her waist before fanning out around her hips. It shifted as she walked, brushing across her sun-kissed thighs. Her light brown hair was pulled back in a ponytail and it swung behind her as she walked with nothing but confidence.

Goddamn, the effect she had on me. This was not supposed to be happening.

I cleared my throat and tried to shove the unnatural feelings deep inside as I smiled brightly at her. Charlotte

reached the table I was standing beside and she stopped in front of me. Her brown eyes were light like honey.

“Hi,” she said softly with her lips pulling upward in a shy smile. The sound of her voice slid across my eardrums, caressing them in a silky melody.

Words fucking failed me. They never did that. I never had issues talking to girls, I just had issues with commitment. I felt fucking tongue-tied and it took me a moment to recover.

“Hey you,” I said, pulling out a chair for her. “Come, sit.”

Charlotte set her purse down and tucked her dress beneath her thighs as she sat down. “Thank you,” she said quietly as I pushed the chair in for her. “You’re quite the gentleman, Weston Cole.”

I chuckled as I took my seat across from her. She had no fucking clue. “I’m not an animal, Charlotte. My grandmother taught me manners.”

“Did you live with her?” she asked me before shaking her head. “I’m sorry, that was an invasive question.”

“It was a harmless question,” I assured her. “My mom lives in Arizona where there weren’t many opportunities for growth in hockey. I outgrew everything there was to offer where we lived, but my grandmother lived in Minnesota. The sky was the limit there, so I went to live with her when I was a teenager.”

Charlotte studied me. “That must have been hard, to leave everything you knew to go live somewhere completely different at that age.”

I shrugged with indifference. “It didn’t bother me. I only cared about playing hockey and if I wanted any shot at having it be my future, it was what I had to do.”

“Well, it looks like it paid off.” Her smile reached her eyes and hues of brown shimmered in her irises.

“It did, but it took a lot of work. Even though I was a skilled player growing up, I still had to work my ass off to get to where I am now. It wasn’t easy.”

“I believe it,” she said softly. “After watching what my brother went through to get to where he is with figure skating, I can only imagine the amount of hours you put in on and off the ice.”

My lips parted as I was about to respond, but we were interrupted by our server. We paused the conversation, each of us ordering a water. It was the middle of the day and I needed to have a clear head before my evening workout. I waited until she had left the table before making a joke to Charlotte about it being too early for cocktails.

I tilted my head to the side, as she was silent and kind of staring past me.

“Charlotte?” My voice was tentative and she abruptly looked back at me. “Are you okay?”

She nodded while folding her fidgeting hands in her lap. “I’m good. Sorry, what were you saying?”

I studied her, wondering where she had gone for that brief moment. Our server came back to the table with our waters and when she asked for our order, neither of us had even bothered to look at the menu. She left again with the promise of returning shortly.

A soft laugh rumbled in my chest as my eyes met hers. “Let’s figure out what we want to eat before she comes back again. And then you’re going to wish that you didn’t agree to have lunch with me.”

Charlotte cocked her head to the side, her eyebrows pulling together. “Why is that?”

I cracked a smile. “Because I have so much to say about the book.”

Charlotte

Ducking my head, I bit back my grin as I felt heat creeping up my neck. There was nothing quite as vulnerable as putting your thoughts out into the world on paper for others to read and digest. Talking about it made me feel even more

uncomfortable. I couldn't deny him, though. If Weston Cole wanted to talk about my damn book, that was exactly what we were going to do.

Our server appeared back at our table after the two of us scanned our menus and each settled on what we were going to order. It wasn't long before she was abandoning us once again and Wes was staring at me with an unreadable expression.

I wanted to reach inside his mind and dissect his thoughts.

I couldn't help it. It was the creative in me. I loved to know what made people do and react the way they did. I loved being able to take that and transcribe it on paper, weaving a story with my words as I explored the human psyche.

"Charlotte... that book you wrote—the one I read... it was an absolute masterpiece." He paused for a moment, lifting his glass to his perfectly plump lips before taking a sip. I couldn't even hide the blush that was creeping across my cheeks. "I'll be honest, I love to read. I don't get to do it as much as I'd like, unfortunately. I could not put that damn book down."

Lifting my hand, I brushed a stray hair from my face. "Thank you. That really means a lot."

His eyebrows drew in together. "That's a very generic response coming from someone whose brain works in a beautiful fucking way. Give me more than that, Charlotte. Are you always uncomfortable accepting a compliment?"

I stared at him for a beat. "Are you always this invasive?"

"Like a fucking disease," he said with a mischievous grin. "Where did you get the idea to write a book like that? I did not expect that ending. You had me convinced that it was Arian's lover who killed his wife. But I was so wrong. The entire time, it was his brother!"

"Arian would have been too obvious, but the evidence had to suggest it was someone else. His mistress was an easy choice and easy to frame."

"His brother did not strike me as the villain. He was so likable, so charismatic. He was there for Arian, but now that I think about it, he was the mastermind behind the entire plan."

Wes's eyes lit up as if he just pieced something together. "He was in love with Helena."

I smiled, nodding. Wes wasn't lying; he really was captivated by the story and the characters. For the first time in a long time, I felt at complete ease talking about one of my books.

"He watched his brother live the life he wanted with the girl he always wanted. He never admitted his feelings to anyone, but there were little glimpses into it."

"When he went to talk to her and told her about Arian's mistress, she refused to leave Arian." Wes shook his head almost in disbelief that he didn't make the connection before. "That was what set him off, wasn't it?"

A soft laugh escaped me. "Do you want me to tell you?" I asked him as I grabbed my glass of water. He made me feel completely comfortable and it was a welcoming feeling.

Our server reappeared at the table with our food. I had gone with a salad and Wes chose a sandwich. I thanked her before she disappeared again and I slowly took a bite, chewing the lettuce as I looked back to Wes.

Wes ignored the food in front of him as he propped his elbows on the table and set his chin in his hands. His steel gray eyes penetrated mine with such intensity, I could feel it in my bones. "Tell me everything."

"Arian's brother, Smith, was in love with Helena. He thought that when she found out about her husband's affair she would leave him and then he would have his chance. He could swoop in and save the day. He would be the one there to mend her broken heart. But she didn't. Instead, she broke his heart when she chose to stand by her husband."

"But her husband never ended things with his side chick," he argued with his eyebrows drawn together. "Why would she stay with him?"

I let out a deep breath. "Because love is a weakness. It makes us blind. It makes us do stupid things."

Wes was silent for a moment as his eyes slowly searched mine. “That’s what the story was really about... it wasn’t about the affair. It wasn’t about the murder. It was about what love can do to someone.” He continued to study me.

I swallowed roughly, shifting in my seat. His words snaked around my soul, leaving me feeling bare and exposed. My messages and what drove the story was never something that could be easily dissected, yet Wes had figured it all out. It was as if I had opened the door to my soul and he was staring directly inside.

“Who hurt you?” he asked after an undetermined amount of time had passed between us.

My head tilted to the side. “Excuse me?”

“A person doesn’t write something like this with such a strong message without experiencing the negative effects of being in love.”

His words struck a nerve and I leveled my gaze on his. “That’s a bold statement coming from someone who doesn’t know me.”

“Perhaps I’m wrong then,” he said carefully, but there was something lingering in his gaze. “Either way, it was a captivating story. You managed to write a thriller that was a romance but at the same time it wasn’t. You are a master at your craft.”

I choked out a laugh. “Tell that to my editor who keeps rejecting all of the ideas I’ve sent her recently.”

Wes chewed a bite of his sandwich and swallowed it down. “Why does she keep rejecting them?”

A sigh escaped me. Other than Grams, no one knew of my recent struggles. “I signed a deal to write outside of my normal genre. It’s proving to be a lot more challenging than I expected.”

“What are you supposed to be writing?”

The level of comfort I felt with him was a little alarming. I should have listened to the warning signs in my brain that

were screaming at me to stop oversharing. It was a problem I had. Once I started on something, I had difficulties dialing it back. And now I was caught in a full-fledged word vomit moment.

“They want me to write a romance series... one that is light and fluffy, without the suspense and murder stuff.”

A grin lifted Wes’s mouth. “That must be a challenge for someone who clearly hates love.”

“I never said I hate love,” I argued before sipping my water. “I’m just better at writing the darker stuff.”

He shook his head. “I find it hard to believe that there’s anything you can’t write.”

“Well, you’d better believe it. I’m on a deadline and if she doesn’t approve of something soon, I’m going to be royally fucked.”

Wes set down his sandwich and folded his arms on the table as he contemplated my words. “It’s simple. You need romance in your life. You need some inspiration.”

The entire plot I had written out last night was humming inside my mind. I had taken Grams’s advice and plotted an entire story last night. I already had my inspiration. He was sitting directly across from me.

“Who’s to say I haven’t found it already?”

Why the hell did I say that?

A lazy grin pulled on his lips. “I’d hoped you did.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

CHARLOTTE

I stared at my computer screen, my lips stretching wide in a grin as I got the final approval from my editor. Her team was in love with the idea that I presented to them. They felt that it was new and fresh and unlike anything else that was popular in the market at the moment. It was perfect, because I was already feeling a heavy dose of inspiration and had written the first three chapters.

The words had been flowing from me like an endless river. It was a beautiful thing when that happened. When everything just clicked into place and the story moved effortlessly. Sure, I had no real inspiration except for the thoughts and scenarios in my mind, but it was still helping.

Having lunch with Wes helped immensely. Talking to him about one of my most popular books was liberating. He brought a sense of comfort and had such an ease to him, it was like I was talking to an old friend. Someone who wasn't judging me for the material I wrote. Although, there was one thing he said to me that had been stuck in my brain for the past three days.

"A person doesn't write something like this with such a strong message without experiencing the negative effects of being in love."

He wasn't wrong, but I didn't like feeling exposed like that. It was like he could see inside me, directly into my pain. It wasn't there anymore. It didn't linger, it didn't fester. I had let the heartbreak dissipate long ago. Writing that book was

cathartic. It helped me to work through all of the things I was feeling.

About four years ago, I was dating an older man. I was young and stupid and had no idea that he was living a double life. We only dated for about six months—but it was six months too long. I met him one night while I was working at my parents' marina. He had come to inquire about storing his boat there and we happened to hit it off.

He came back two days later and asked me to dinner. The rest was history after that. He wasn't from Idyll Cove. He lived in Somermount, about forty-five minutes inland from the coast. I should have known it was a red flag that he never invited me to his place. Instead, he always visited me at my apartment, insisting that they were doing construction on his building and that he liked to get away from the city.

Little did I know, he lived in a whole-ass house with a white picket fence and the perfect wife. They had two kids and a damn golden retriever. It was straight out of a magazine. He was living the American dream... and fucking some stupid college girl in his spare time.

He rarely spent the night at my place and I didn't really question it. He was an emergency room doctor, working crazy hours, and we both had our separate lives. I just had no idea how separate they really were.

One night, he stayed. His phone kept going off in the middle of the night and I caught a glimpse of the screen as I woke him up. It was his wife. I heard everything she said. Their four-year-old daughter was sick and she was taking her into the emergency room. She was expecting to see him there because he was supposed to be on call.

He lied to her. He wasn't on call. He was in my goddamn bed after fucking me a few hours before. I felt so nauseous when the shock wore off and I realized what was going on. He didn't deny a single thing as he got dressed to leave. He looked me dead in the eye and told me that I was a fool if I thought there was something more between us other than sex.

He was a narcissistic bastard. There was no remorse, no guilt. It was clear this wasn't the first affair he had. And I was a fucking idiot for thinking I was falling in love with him.

I felt betrayed and was in a world of pain after it all happened. We never spoke again, which I was thankful for. But it took me some time to get past.

I was a struggling author at the time. The first advance that I received for my first series wasn't very much. Working at my parents' marina was still a necessity if I wanted to be able to afford my own place and live. I poured my heart and soul into *Lie to Me Softly* after he broke my heart. That book was what made my career take off.

Even though there was a part of it that felt tainted because it was tied to him, I realized it wasn't about that. It was about the entire story I was able to craft from my own pain. It helped me to work through everything I was feeling and experiencing. And killing people off in books always seemed to help with processing. I've come a long way since then. My life was peaceful and I was happy now.

I learned a lot from that experience. I knew to never put myself in such a vulnerable situation like that again.

Which was why I kept everything superficial. Any of the guys I dated after Caleb were all just for fun. There was no deep connection and the moment that I felt like I was developing feelings, I ended things. It was the way it had to be if I wanted to protect myself and my heart.

Wes was right.

I was jaded.

I hated love, but I loved the thought of it. It wasn't for me, but that didn't mean I didn't enjoy it for others.

And now, here I was, writing the fluffiest romance I had ever written and loving every damn second of it. This new story had me kicking my feet with excitement. The banter, the charismatic characters. As long as Wes didn't read this one, I would be good. If he read it, he would know he inspired the main character.

As I finished up my chapter for the day, I felt good about it. Diana had approved the plotline. I was given free creative rein over the idea, until it was time for me to hand the manuscript in to her. I had six weeks to write it. I was already making good time.

Creativity for me was like a well. I knew that if I drained it too quickly, it would dry up. I had to take my time. I needed to properly flesh out the characters and the plot. I was giving myself goals for every day and since I hit mine, it was time for a reward. I still hadn't been to the beach like I planned, so I packed up the little workstation I made for myself on the veranda and slipped back inside.

Grams was playing pickleball with Phyllis today and they had some errands to run afterward. The house was empty and quiet. I pulled out my phone and turned off the Do Not Disturb option before texting my brother. I missed him and wanted to see how things were back home. Even though I was still near the beach, I missed Idyll Cove. I missed the quaint, sleepy little town where we moved on island time.

I grabbed a bathing suit and changed into it before pulling an oversized t-shirt on to cover it up. My phone dinged from where I set it on my bed and I quickly pulled my hair back into a ponytail before checking my notifications. I was expecting a response from my brother, but my eyebrows furrowed when I saw it was a number I didn't recognize.

UNKNOWN

What are you doing today, Charlotte?

I tilted my head to the side, confusion encapsulating me.

CHARLOTTE

Who is this?

UNKNOWN

Take a guess.

I'll give you one hint... it's your newest, biggest fan...

My heart sped up in my chest. It was him. Of course it was.

CHARLOTTE

How did you get my number, Wes?

WES

Damn. Was I that obvious?

CHARLOTTE

Unfortunately.

WES

Indeed, that is unfortunate.

And to answer your question, my grandmother. After we had lunch, I realized I didn't get your number. Lucky for me, she happened to have it.

Those damn meddling old women. I should have known Phyllis would give my number to him. I couldn't help but wonder what he wanted it for. After we had lunch, we simply parted on having a good time and doing it again in the near future. I didn't think he was serious about it. I had no plans of seeing him again, especially because of the way my stupid stomach fluttered when he was around.

He wasn't what I needed.

Unless he was on the same page as me...

CHARLOTTE

Lucky you.

WES

Do you have any plans today?

I smiled to myself as I dropped down onto my bed. He was persistent, I would give him that. He could be a welcomed distraction instead of one I fought to stay away from.

CHARLOTTE

I just finished up my work for the day and was getting ready to head to the beach.

WES

Well, isn't that convenient. I was thinking about doing the same. Have you gone yet since you got here?

It surprised me a bit to hear he had the same plans in mind. Perhaps he didn't and it was simply because I had said it first. I laughed to myself as I imagined telling him something outlandish other than the beach. Would he have had the same response then?

CHARLOTTE

I haven't.

WES

Let me take you and show you around. I know of a spot that isn't as well known to the public. It's never crowded.

I weighed my options. I could go to the beach alone and relax and explore, or I could go with him. He knew more about Orchid Beach than I did. It wouldn't be such a bad thing to let him show me around. Plus, I wasn't in the mood for a crowded beach. I also didn't know anyone here except for Grams and Phyllis. My best friend, Aurora, was all the way back in Idyll Cove. I had no one here and even though I was typically immersed in my work, it made life feel even more isolated than it normally felt.

It wouldn't be anything more than a new friend showing me around.

Nothing more than that, just like when I met him for lunch the other day.

I chewed on the inside of my cheek. Fuck it. It wasn't going to hurt anything. He was harmless and when I met with him the other day, I found myself enjoying his company and the conversations between us. As long as neither of us got too invasive with the questions.

CHARLOTTE

I would like that.

WES

It's a date.

My eyes widened and my stomach dropped while the butterflies simultaneously fluttered inside. My heart quickened. What the hell?

WES

Calm down. I'm only kidding. I'll be there in about twenty minutes to pick you up.

I let out a breath and shook my head as I glared at myself in the mirror across from my bed. My body betrayed me with the response to his text. Those reactions couldn't happen, even if that rush of serotonin felt like magic in my veins.

Goddammit.

This was a bad idea.

CHAPTER NINE

WES

After practice this morning, I couldn't help but feel unsettled. Usually skating helped to work out any weird feelings I had. If my mind was distracted, all I had to do was put on my skates and head for the ice. If there was ever anything troubling me, it was as if the background noise all faded away as soon as I began to skate. It probably wasn't the best way to deal with my problems, but it helped to keep me centered. Playing hockey grounded me, in a sense. I had devoted my entire life to the sport. It was only fitting that it was also my own personal form of therapy.

I was lucky. I enjoyed the game. Most guys did, but there were always a few that had the fun sucked out of it from their parents when they were kids. I saw it happen to a lot of people that I had played with before. On a professional level, it was a little bit different. There was a level of passion you had to have to make it work for you. I was fortunate enough that I got to make a living doing something I absolutely loved.

But this morning, there was a feeling I couldn't seem to shake. And that feeling had a name...

Charlotte.

She was stuck in my head and I couldn't get her out. Ever since I read her book and got a small glimpse into her mind, I found myself wanting more. There was something about her presence that had me wishing I was around her when I wasn't. I wouldn't quite call it missing her—you couldn't miss someone you didn't know. Perhaps it was a longing.

Jesus, this was all fucking weird and I didn't like it.

I didn't do this kind of stuff.

If there was a girl I was interested in, we'd hang out, probably fuck, and that was all it would be. I wouldn't find myself meeting up with her in the middle of the damn day for things that friends would do. I didn't have time to entertain relationships or worry about making sure I was keeping someone happy.

I worried about myself and my teammates. Everything else was kind of obsolete... until now. Until I found this damn girl stuck inside my head who I hadn't even tasted yet. Something was wrong. There had to have been a planet in retrograde or some shit, because this was abnormal and unnatural.

When I got to the gate of the community where Charlotte's grandmother lived, I gave the man both of their names and he called Evelyn's house before letting me pass. It was a short drive before I pulled up in front of the house number Charlotte sent to me. I waited for a few moments, studying the aged palm trees in the front yard before she finally came outside.

My head turned and I looked to the massive front door as I saw it pull open. Charlotte's hair was pulled back in a French braid, but curled tendrils framed her face. She had an oversized t-shirt on that hung just to the center of her thighs. As she turned her back to the car, I noticed a small sliver of black from her shorts under the hem of the shirt. I watched her in quiet consideration and admiration. She was breathtakingly beautiful.

Her eyes were shielded by sunglasses and I couldn't tell if she was looking at me or not as she finally walked to the passenger's side of the car. Every time I had seen her, her hair was always smooth and tamed. I wanted to see it wild and untamed. I wanted to run my fingers through her silky curls and grip the back of her head as I—

Charlotte jerked on the handle of the door, but it didn't move. It was enough to pull me from the thoughts I was not supposed to be having. I wasn't quite sure how my brain went from watching her walking through the door to imagining

myself gripping the back of her head. Charlotte pushed her sunglasses up over the crown of her head and leaned down as she knocked on the window.

Within the span of ten seconds, my brain had turned to mush. I quickly recovered, adjusting myself in my seat as I hit the unlock button on the door. Charlotte pulled open the door in a haste and climbed inside.

“Sorry about that,” I said to her with a small smile as she strapped the seat belt across her body. “I have a habit of forgetting to unlock the doors.”

She pulled her sunglasses back over her eyes, but not until after her gaze collided with mine and I caught a glimpse of those shimmering brown eyes. “It’s okay.” She flashed her white teeth at me. “Thanks for taking me along with you. I didn’t really have any plans for where I was going or what I was doing today, so this worked out perfectly.”

Her energy was infectious. The smile on my lips grew. “I am more than honored to be the one to escort you around town.”

She tilted her head to the side and raised an eyebrow before laughter spilled from her perfectly plump lips. The lithe of her laugh caressed my eardrums and I couldn’t help but stare at her, completely captivated. “That just sounds weird and too formal.”

“I mean, it’s not a lie.” I shrugged before shifting the car into drive.

Her eyebrows pulled together. “You’re showing me around town. You’re not coming along for my protection.”

I glanced at her from the corner of my eye as I drove out onto the street. “I’m accompanying you. I’m showing you the lay of the land. And if for some reason you need protecting, I’ll protect you.” My hands gripped the steering wheel at the thought.

“You don’t even know me. How do you know I’m not a really bad person?”

Why the hell did she have to challenge everything I said?

I liked it.

I let out a sigh and shook my head as I bit back a smile. “I know you well enough, Charlotte. Believe it or not, I’m a good judge of character. You try to wear a mask, but I can see through it. You wear your heart on your sleeve without even realizing it.”

“That’s not true.”

I glanced at her as we pulled out of the community. “You’re argumentative as hell. You care and feel things deeply. You study the world around you and try to analyze everything that everyone says or does.”

You hate love, but there’s a part of you that wants it. You write the ugly parts about it because that’s all you’ve experienced.

I didn’t dare to utter the last two sentences aloud. It wasn’t somewhere I needed to tread because it wasn’t something I could help her with.

She stared at the side of my face as I continued to drive. “You’ve met me twice. We’ve had a few conversations and you gathered all of that information already?”

“You’re not the only one who studies people, Charlotte.”

We settled into silence as I turned the car onto the road that led to the beach access area. It wasn’t far from Charlotte’s grandmother’s house and it was close to Nico’s condo. It wasn’t known to people who weren’t local and it was a little bit of a walk through a wooded area. The tension was thick in the air between Charlotte and me, and I needed something to brush it away.

“How is your book coming along?”

That felt like a safe question to ask. It was something extremely relevant in her life and it wasn’t too invasive. Things between us seemed to grow intense just when we were simply having a conversation. There was undeniable chemistry that sizzled in the air when we were near one another and I hoped the electricity was just a byproduct of that. It would have been crushing if it were a warning sign.

I had enough of those and already knew I needed to keep my distance from her, but I didn't tend to use my proper judgment. I had a habit of going against the grain and doing whatever it was I wanted. Even if it wasn't always in my best interest. The only thing I truly took seriously was hockey. If she were a threat to that, then I wouldn't even be driving with her in my car right now.

"It's going well, actually. My editor approved of the idea I sent to her and the words have been flowing."

I couldn't help but smile. I didn't miss the comment she made about her inspiration the last time I saw her. It wasn't confirmed, but I had an idea of what may have been making her feel inspired. I had a few ideas of some other things that could help her in that department...

"That's great to hear," I smiled at her as I put the car in park. "I can't wait to read it when you're finished and it's published."

The color drained from Charlotte's face and her eyebrows lifted above her sunglasses. "What do you mean?"

"I want to read your book, Charlotte."

She shook her head, a nervous laugh escaping her as she unbuckled her seat belt. "I can assure you that you don't want to read it. It's a fluffy romance. You don't strike me as the type to like something like that."

"I've read your words inspired by heartbreak. I want to read your words that are inspired by something else."

She stared at me for a moment with her lips parted. She was surprised. There was something in that book she didn't want me to know about. That only made me more intrigued. I was going to find out whatever it was that she was hiding.

I wouldn't fall in love with her, but that didn't mean I was keeping my distance. My mind was officially made up.

Charlotte Wells never stood a chance against me.

And apparently, I never stood a chance against my attraction to her.

CHAPTER TEN

CHARLOTTE

He could not read the book I was writing. If I had any say in it, he would never even know the title or see the cover of it. Wes had no idea that I was drawing inspiration directly from him; directly from our interactions. There were a lot of made-up scenarios because it was fiction, but no one would know there was a correlation between the hero in my book and Wes besides Wes.

There were little subtle things—things he surely wouldn't miss.

He could never read this book or I would be completely exposed.

I had no plans on acting on my attraction for him, but I did what Grams suggested. I was creating a story as if there was a chance between the two of us. If I weren't jaded and he wasn't someone afraid of commitment. He didn't have to tell me that for me to make an appropriate assumption. Wes didn't strike me as a relationship type of person, but the one in my book was all in. He was head over heels in love and it would just be embarrassing to have him read what I imagined between us if we were actually compatible.

We were better as just friends. I enjoyed his company, I enjoyed the conversations. The view was something I would never complain about, but that was as far as it could ever go.

“Come on,” he said softly as he killed the engine and climbed out of the car. My body moved of its own accord and

I did the same as him. I met him by the trunk as he opened it and pulled out two chairs and an umbrella.

“You came prepared.”

Wes smiled at me, revealing dimples in his cheeks that I hadn't noticed before. His eyes glimmered under the light from the sun above, shimmering like polished metal. “You never know when you might end up sharing the day with someone at the beach.”

He surprised me, but he was a pleasant surprise. I couldn't quite figure him out. Wes appeared to be carefree, like nothing really bothered him. There was a subtle arrogance to him, but he was extremely confident. Not in the way that he came off as cocky and obnoxious. He was just sure of what he was doing. I couldn't help but find myself wanting to dig deeper.

I followed after Wes as we walked onto a path that led through a small trail of trees. It was a short walk and took less than a minute for us to reach the beach. The trees opened up and we walked out onto the sand. It was slightly off-white, similar to the beaches you might find in the Caribbean. The sand was soft and powdery and I kicked off my flip-flops, feeling the warmth between my toes as I walked alongside Wes.

He watched me, pausing for a minute, and mimicked my actions before nodding his head toward the ocean. My gaze followed him and I surveyed the area, noting there were only a few other people scattered amongst the shore. It really was a slice of heaven. A secret place that not many people knew about. Wes walked far enough away from the other people, it was almost as if it were just the two of us here.

Lifting the straps on the chairs from his shoulder, he dropped them onto the sand. I grabbed them as he began to put the umbrella into the ground. I opened the chairs and set them down before setting my bag on one. The hem of his shirt rode up his back, showing his supple sun-kissed skin. Wes stood upright, opening the umbrella before reaching behind his back to grab a fistful of his shirt.

I was frozen in place, my feet becoming one with the granules of sand beneath them as I watched him pull it away from his body. My eyes scanned the planes of his torso, over every muscle that was carved there. He was fit and athletic, not ripped in a body builder way. My mouth went dry at the sight of him and I didn't even allow myself to feel any shame.

He was perfectly sculpted—every inch of him. His thighs were thick, most of the muscle most likely from him skating. I needed to stop staring before it was noticeable. His gaze caught mine and I abruptly dropped my eyes away from him as I fiddled with my bag. I stared at it with my eyes wide as I tried to get my shit together and fight the blush that spread across my face.

“What’s in your bag that is so interesting?”

There was a hint of amusement in his tone and I pulled out my sunscreen and held it up to show him.

“Oooh, sunscreen. So interesting,” he mocked with a chuckle as I squirted some onto my hands. “I’ve never seen someone blush from reading the ingredients on a bottle of lotion before.”

I whipped my gaze to his as I slid my fingers beneath the waistband of my shorts and slid them down my legs. “I wasn’t blushing.”

Wes’s nostrils flared and I watched his silver eyes as they followed my movements as I squirted some lotion onto my hands and began to rub my legs. Just for good measure, I moved my hands deliberately slowly as I made sure to cover every inch, circling my palms against my flesh. He wasn’t good at concealing anything from his expression. There was a fire burning in his steel eyes as his gaze traveled over my legs until he reached my eyes.

Heat crept up my neck and spread across my face. I didn’t bother ducking my head. It was hot outside and felt like the temperature had only risen.

“You’re blushing again, Charlotte.”

I grabbed the bottom of my oversized t-shirt and lifted it above my head, pulling it away from my body. My eyes met his and I dropped my shirt into my bag. “The sun is hot.”

He tilted his head to the side, amusement dancing across his expression as he smirked. “It is, isn’t it?”

Wes turned his back to me and began to walk across the sand toward the water in the distance. The sun cast its light across the surface. The ripples in the water shimmered, dancing as it moved to its own siren song. There was something alluring about the ocean. It was a force that was difficult to fight.

“Are you coming?” Wes called from where he was, a few yards ahead of me. He was looking at me over his shoulder and I allowed myself one last longing look as I traced the muscles in his back with my gaze.

I nodded and quickly began to move across the sand, heading in his direction. Wes continued to move and had just reached the water as I caught up to him. He stepped in and I was right beside him. The water was warm, yet refreshing with the heat of the sun beating down upon my shoulders.

Wes kept moving and I stayed with him, careful to not get too far away. As much as I enjoyed swimming, I also knew there were dangerous animals lurking in the waters. The ocean was unpredictable. The last thing I wanted to do was get separated from him and have something happen. We kept moving past where the waves were breaking until the water was lapping against my chest. Wes glanced over at me with a smirk before he dove in headfirst.

A gasp escaped me and my eyes widened as I watched him disappear beneath the surface. The water was clear, but it wasn’t clear enough for me to see him without any issues. It was cloudy and I could see the outline of his body as he swam away from me.

My body swayed with the movement of the ocean and I felt unsteady. My heart pounded erratically in my chest. A breath of relief escaped me as Wes’s head broke through the

surface. He was farther away than I liked and I stared at him for a moment.

“Are you coming out here?” he asked me from where he was floating.

I shook my head. “I like to be where I can stand.”

“I promise you’re safe with me, Charlotte,” he assured me, his voice tender and soft.

I swallowed roughly as I weighed my options. I could easily get eaten by a shark where I was standing or I could swim out with him and suffer the same fate. Pushing the intrusive thoughts from my head, I decided to go with the impulsive side of my brain and I slipped beneath the surface as I swam out to him.

Breaking through the water, I took a deep breath, filling my lungs with the salty air. Wes was only about two feet away, but the beach felt like it was miles away. He smiled, his dimples showing as we were both treading water. I couldn’t touch the ground with my feet and I didn’t realize how far out we were until that moment. Anxiety washed over me as I began to kick my feet harder.

Wes’s face faltered as he stared at me for a moment. He closed the distance between us, moving until he was within arm’s reach. “Just breathe, Charlotte,” he murmured softly. “I won’t let anything happen to you.”

“I can’t touch,” I whispered the words, my body filled with fear. We were so far away from the safety of the shore. “I need to get back to where I can stand.”

I should have listened to the logical side of my brain. The part of my mind that knew this wasn’t something that I liked. Now it was too late. I swam out into the depths that I would typically avoid and was hyperfixating on every bad thing that could happen to me out here. It was borderline embarrassing, but the anxiety was so heightened, I couldn’t even think straight.

Wes moved to me, wrapping his arm around my waist. His skin was soft under the silkiness of the water. He swam the

two of us back to where I could touch, but he didn't let me go. His arms were both wrapped around me, his head tipping down as his gray eyes searched mine desperately.

"Thank you," I let out a breath and shook my head before a nervous laugh slipped from my lips. "I'm sorry about that. I had a moment of panic when I realized how far out we were."

"It's okay, Charlotte. You don't have to apologize." He paused for a moment, his eyes focused solely on mine. "I meant what I said. You're always safe with me, okay?"

I stared back at him, feeling the intensity of his gaze. He didn't waver. He didn't release me. My heart pounded inside my chest and a warmth spread through my veins. I trusted him and I wasn't even sure why, but I could tell he meant what he said. Wes was charming but he didn't strike me as a manipulative person.

"Okay," I said quietly as I nodded. I believed him—I truly did—and I felt safe with him.

I was lost in the depths of his steel gray eyes. Wes moved one hand from my waist and lifted it to my cheek. His fingertips were wet from the ocean water and he brushed some stray curls from my face. He dragged his fingers along the underside of my jaw.

My breath caught in my throat and a wave pushed against us, throwing me off-balance. I grabbed onto his biceps, holding on as his hand tightened around my waist.

"Has anyone ever told you how breathtakingly beautiful you are?"

My lips parted slightly and I let out a soft breath. I'd been told that I was beautiful, but it always felt like it was a lie. No one had ever put it into words like that. No one had ever looked at me the way Wes was looking at me in that moment.

"I need to be honest with you, Charlotte." His voice was gentle, but there was a hoarseness to his tone. "I'm not the type of guy who does relationships. But I'd be lying if I said I wasn't attracted to you. The chemistry between us is like an electrical fucking current and I know you feel it too."

My eyebrows pulled together. “How could you possibly know that?”

“Your body betrays you, sweetheart. I didn’t miss the sharp intake of your breath. I’ve caught your lingering gaze. I told you, you’re not the only one who studies people.”

I swallowed. “So, what are you saying, Wes?”

“I’m saying that I want to see more of you. I’m drawn to you, Charlotte. You’re under my fucking skin, like an itch I can’t scratch.”

“I want to see more of you too,” I admitted as my eyes drifted between both of his. “I’m not looking for anything. I don’t need distractions. I don’t need strings.”

A smirk lifted his lips. “But what you do need is some inspiration.”

“I do,” I said softly, as his fingers tilted my chin up. “Are you propositioning me, Weston Cole?”

“Let me help you with your inspiration. It can be strictly research, for the sake of your book.”

I raised an eyebrow. “And what do you get out of it?”

“I’m not looking for anything in return but a good time,” he said as his hand drifted across my face and he dragged his thumb across my bottom lip. “I want whatever you’re willing to give me.”

I considered his offer. I wasn’t committing to anything real. He wouldn’t have to know what I was writing, but I could use his help for research purposes. I could explore a positive experience with another person without having the worry of getting my heart broken.

“You have yourself a deal,” I pulled my hand away from his bicep to shake his.

He looked at my hand and back to me. He lifted his other hand to cup the side of my face. “Fuck a handshake,” he murmured as his face dropped down to mine. “Write this into your book, sweetheart.”

And his lips crashed into mine.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

WES

There was no hesitation as I dipped my face down to hers and claimed her mouth with my own. Her lips were soft and felt like silk as I kissed her with a tenderness. Our surroundings faded. It was just the two of us, standing in the ocean as the waves broke around our bodies. One hand cupped her jaw and I slid my other around the back of her head, pushing my hands through her hair that was wet from the saltwater. Charlotte's hands were back on my biceps, her nails digging into my skin as she held on to me.

My tongue slid along the seam of her lips, urging her to open them. She obliged, sighing into my mouth as my tongue slid against hers. I stole the air from her lungs, breathing her in as I deepened the kiss. Gripping the back of her head, I tilted it back farther, giving me as much access as she would allow. Charlotte kissed me back with such a gentleness that it was tangling around my heart. She tasted like my new fucking addiction.

I refused to allow my mind to drift. The only thing that mattered was her hands on me and the way our mouths were fused together. I wanted to melt into her. Dropping my hand from her face, I wrapped my arm around her lower back and pulled her body flush against mine. My cock was already hard, pushing through my swim trunks, but I didn't care. I wanted her to feel the effect she had on me. I wanted her to feel how fucking mad she was driving me.

The intensity between us was growing with every breath, every swipe of her tongue against mine.

Jesus fucking Christ.

An urgency was building and a heated lust was lacing itself in my veins. I slowed the kiss, loosening my grip on the back of her head. It was a slow and torturous dance and I couldn't get enough, but I knew I had to stop. I didn't want to rush this with her. Time was fleeting and so were moments like this. I wanted to enjoy every single one with her until we were done with each other.

I pulled away from her, softly kissing her lips once more before a ragged breath escaped me. Charlotte was completely breathless, her face flushed as she peered up at me through her dark, thick lashes. My hand released the back of her head and I slid my fingers beneath her chin, tipping her head farther back to stare into her eyes.

Charlotte's lips were parted, plump, and red from our kiss. She looked at me with a heated gaze. Her eyes were slightly glazed, her eyelids hooded. "That was unexpected."

"All for the sake of research, sweetheart," I smiled at her before abruptly releasing her face.

Her body swayed in the water and she took a step back as she continued to study me. I watched as she instinctively lifted her hands to her lips and touched them. I smiled, knowing I was the one who made her mouth look like that. The pink tint on her cheeks was because of me.

She was unexpected.

The warmth of the sun disappeared from above us and I looked up to the sky. Dark, ominous storm clouds were closing in on us, shielding the sun. Charlotte's gaze followed mine and she glanced at me just as a rumble erupted through the clouds. Leave it to a Florida storm to ruin the moment.

Reaching out for her hand, I slipped mine into hers and pulled her from the ocean with me. She didn't hesitate and we walked in a comfortable silence onto the beach to where our stuff was. The salty breeze drifted across the surface of the sea and coasted over my skin. Charlotte let go of me as she reached for her towel and wrapped it around her body.

Charlotte shoved her things into her bag and began to close the chairs as I worked to get the umbrella out of the sand. Large droplets of rain began to fall and thunder rumbled again in the distance. Just as we had everything ready to go, the sky opened up and raindrops began to pound down upon us. Charlotte threw her bag over her shoulder and fumbled with the chairs before attempting to run through the sand. I grabbed the umbrella and sprinted after her.

“Shit!” she said loudly as she tripped and dropped one of the chairs. She glanced back at me, a smile pulling on her lips, and she abandoned the damn thing before running to the coverage provided by the trees ahead.

Laughter fell from my lips and I picked up the discarded chair and ran to where she was. The rain continued to fall, the drops cold on my skin and the trees doing little to shield us from it. We slowed to a brisk walk as we headed toward the parking lot. Charlotte paused just as we reached the end of the trail.

“Do we make a run for it?”

I looked at her with a slow smile. “Everything’s already soaked. I don’t think it makes much of a difference at this point.”

“Well, shit.”

I laughed again and she joined in, the sound like a melody to my ears. “Come on,” I told her as I stepped past her and walked toward my car. The ground was soaked and the rain showed no signs of letting up anytime soon. The storms typically passed quickly, but this one was lingering. Charlotte followed me and she handed me the other chair and her bag to put in the trunk. Lightning flashed across the sky and thunder rumbled loudly. We both jumped from the sound of the crack and didn’t waste any more time before we climbed into the car, completely drenched from the rain.

I started the engine and the air conditioner came blasting through the vents. I quickly turned it off as the air chilled my skin. Charlotte shivered slightly and I glanced over, noticing the goosebumps erupting over her flesh. Reaching into the

back seat, I grabbed a blanket I kept in there and handed it to her.

“Thank you,” she said quietly as she wrapped it around herself. “What about you?”

I shrugged with indifference. “I’ll be fine.”

Rain pelted down on the car and Charlotte frowned as she glanced out the window before looking back to me. “So much for a day at the beach.”

I put the car in reverse and began to pull it from the parking spot. My gaze met hers once more. “I guess that just means we’ll have to try again.”

My feet moved across the ice as I skated out to the center of the rink. There were only two minutes left in the period and we were already up by four goals. It was a pretty pathetic game for the other team, which only made things easier for us. I found my spot around the face-off circle and waited for the ref to drop the puck. It hit the ice and play began. I skated backward, my legs working overtime as Nico passed me the puck. I surged forward, weaving through two other players as I headed down the left side of the rink toward the goal. Nico and I had worked through multiple plays like this before and since we were on the same line, we tended to work in tandem together.

He took a spot by the right side of the net, moving away from one of the opposing players, and I quickly passed the puck back to him. He lifted it in the air with his stick, sending it top shelf, just above the goalkeeper’s shoulder. We were practically unstoppable. Nico slammed his shoulder into mine in celebration and I didn’t miss the way he glanced over to where Harper was set up with her camera.

I followed him back to the bench since our shift was over. The next line went out and we sat to watch the rest of the game. My body ached and my lungs were desperate for oxygen. Time flew by in a flash and we were heading back down the tunnel with another win under our belts. The boys

were buzzing and the energy was electric after our win. Everyone was loud in the locker room—so loud you would think it was a playoff game or something. Nico sat down on the bench a few spots from me and we both started to strip out of our gear.

I stripped down to my boxers, in desperate need of a shower. Mac was beside me rambling on about something, and I saw Nico on his phone. Instinctively, I looked at mine, smiling when I saw there was a text from Charlotte.

CHARLOTTE

Nice win.

After I dropped her off from our beach trip yesterday, I couldn't help but have her stuck in my head. I resisted texting her last night, but I caved this morning. I woke up and she was the first thing on my fucking mind, so I texted her. She told me she was busy with writing so I gave her space. I hoped that little bit of inspiration from yesterday had kicked her creativity into gear. I couldn't fight the grin that broke out across my face.

WES

If you ever want to watch a game in person again instead of on TV, let me know.

CHARLOTTE

I'll keep that in mind.

As much as I wanted to see her tonight, I knew she needed to work and I planned on surprising her tomorrow at her event. The fact that she took the time to watch the game did something to me that I wasn't sure I liked. My heart beat a little harder. A little stronger. My stupid fucking stomach fluttered like I was back in middle school talking to my crush.

It had to have been from the adrenaline of just getting off the ice. Surely, it had nothing to do with her.

I needed a damn distraction.

Nico was focused on his phone, so I walked over and stopped behind him. He was my best friend and we were like family. He was easy to get a rise out of and I was like a bored child, always getting myself into trouble by being a thorn in his side. On his phone was a thread of messages between him and Harper, talking about the two of them meeting up. She had a friend who was going out with them too.

“The Lounge,” I said out loud, reading the message from Harper over his shoulder. He glanced back at me. “Who is Ava?”

Nico narrowed his eyes at me, per usual. He loved me, even if he hated to admit it. “Do you understand privacy at all, bro? Who the fuck reads someone’s messages over their shoulder?”

Lincoln laughed from down the bench when he heard Nico scold me. “You act like you don’t know how he is.”

I dropped down onto the bench beside him and shrugged. “Sorry, dude. You know I’m just nosy sometimes.”

“Yeah, I know.” Nico stared at me for a moment like he was contemplating his next words. “You want to come along?”

I tilted my head to the side, a smile pulling on my lips. He knew I had menacing tendencies, so it surprised me that he was inviting me out with them. “Are you sure? I don’t want to be like a third wheel or anything.”

“It’s not a date. Harper and I are just friends and she’s going to be there with her friend, so it’s not a date at all.”

“Right, right,” I said, shaking my head. He was such a goddamn liar. “I need to get a shower and you know I’m down.”

I made haste in the shower and we met back up by the exit. Nico kept all conversation away from anything about his relationship with Harper as we drove to the bar. I didn’t bother

bringing up Charlotte. He knew nothing about her and I wanted to keep it that way. Plus, it was nothing serious between the two of us. I wasn't the one who normally kissed and ran to tell someone. Nico may have told me all his secrets, but I kept mine to myself.

"Tell me about Ava," I said to Nico as we walked through the parking lot to the bar. "That's her name, right?"

"I'm pretty sure she has a boyfriend."

I chuckled. "Like that means anything." I had to play the part. If I didn't, Nico would definitely suspect something, and he already questioned me on the romance novel I was reading on the plane the other day. I didn't need him digging any more than that.

He glanced at me from the corner of his eye. "Just don't."

I held my hands up in innocence. I needed a distraction from Charlotte, but I wasn't looking to find that in someone else. "Fine. I'll be on my best behavior and won't do anything with your girl's friend."

Nico cut his eyes at me. "She's not my girl."

"Right." I rolled my eyes with my tone heavily dripping with sarcasm. "So, you wouldn't mind if she went home with someone else then tonight, right?"

Nico didn't say anything. His jaw clenched and he gave me an icy glare.

"Fucking liar," I mumbled as I held open the door for him. I couldn't really say much, though, because I was just as much of a liar as he was. Here I was, playing the playboy part like I was interested in his girl's friend when it was just a facade.

I had no interest in anyone other than Charlotte Wells.

CHAPTER TWELVE

CHARLOTTE

I stood outside the bookstore and stared at my picture in the window. Ink Stained Pages was a small independent bookstore in the heart of Orchid City. They invited me and another author to come for a few hours today to sign books. Small events like this were usually my favorite. They typically didn't have large crowds and I could sit all day and be surrounded by pages that were stained with ink.

I had assumed incorrectly about this particular event.

The store wasn't due to open for another half an hour and there was already a line outside.

"Look," a woman's voice sounded to my right. "There's Charlene Danvers."

Charlene had become my alter ego. She was well spoken and put together, unlike my true self. My head may have been a chaotic mess, but when it was time for me to step into this role, I transformed. I was like a chameleon, changing colors and accepting the role I needed to play. I glanced over and raised my hand to wave, offering a warm smile just as the owner of the store opened the door for me.

I ducked my head and quickly stepped inside before she shut it behind me. The bell above dinged and she flipped the lock over. She turned to face me, letting out a deep breath before smiling brightly.

"Hi, Charlotte! I'm Letty, we spoke over the phone." She was a few inches shorter than my five-four. She was slender with bright red hair and freckles dispersed across the bridge of

her nose and cheekbones. I wasn't a good judge of age, but she appeared to be in her forties or fifties if I had to guess.

I smiled back at her. "It's so nice to meet you in person. I'm sorry I wasn't able to stop by sooner."

Letty waved her hand. "No worries. You're here now, and that's what is important." She paused and glanced out the window with emotion filling her eyes. "Look at that out there. I don't know the last time we had a line like that outside before."

There was a pulling sensation on my heart. It was a cute, quaint little store. It didn't feel claustrophobic or like it was too small. It was just the right size with the best selection of books. Stores like this in the middle of the city depended heavily on foot traffic. And they had such big competition with their competitors being huge franchises that had stores all over the country. Places like this always had a special place in my heart. They deserved just as much attention, if not more.

"Charlie, this is Vera," Letty said as she introduced me to the other author who was here. Vera Ender. I had never met her before, but I knew she wrote more in the romantasy realm. We were two starkly different authors, but hopefully that would work in the bookstore's benefit. They could get readers from both different genres.

"Hi, Charlie," Vera said with a smile. She was gorgeous. Straight, sleek black hair that reached the middle of her back with the brightest blue eyes. She looked like she should have been walking down a runway instead of hiding behind a keyboard, crafting a magical fantasy world. I couldn't help but feel a bit self-conscious in her presence and like I was about to break out into a fangirl moment.

It wasn't often that it happened, but I devoured everything Vera wrote. I always found it really challenging to read anything that was similar to what I was writing. Since I wrote romantic thrillers, I found myself drawn more to reading fantasy. And Vera wrote some of the best books I had ever read before.

“Hi, Vera. It’s so lovely to meet you. I am a huge fan of yours.”

“No way,” she said with a soft laugh. “I have read almost everything you’ve written.”

It was such a bizarre encounter, but I couldn’t help but feel completely at ease. There was no reason to be intimidated by her. We were no different than one another and were both trying to play it cool while meeting each other. Letty motioned for the two of us to come with her.

“Are you local?” I asked Vera as we followed Letty over to two tables that were set up to the left of the entrance to the store. Our publishers had sent some promotional bookmarks that were set on them, along with the books that Letty had ordered for the signing. Each table had a black table cloth draped over it and our names were hanging on banners on the fronts of them.

Vera shook her head as she stepped up to her table. “I’m from Miami, so not exactly local, but close enough I could drive here.” She walked around to where her seat was. “What about you?”

“I’m from North Carolina, but my grandmother lives here in Orchid City and I’ve been staying with her while I try to finish this book I’m working on.”

Vera nodded in understanding. “Needed a change of scenery to get the words flowing?”

“Yep,” I said with a smile. Our careers were often misunderstood and it was nice talking to someone who was living the same experience as me. She understood exactly what I was going through. “I was having difficulties drawing inspiration where I live.”

“Well, I hope you’ve found your inspiration here,” Vera told me as she pushed her hair behind her ears and smoothed the front of her dress.

My mind drifted to Wes and that kiss from two days ago. He gave me something to write into my book and that was exactly what I did with that small piece of inspiration. The

thought of what else he might have to offer made me nervous. There was a touch of anticipation that made my heart race.

“I did,” I told her, ducking my head to busy myself with my books in an effort to hide the blush that had crept across my face. Damn Weston Cole and the profound effect he had on me. I blamed it on the kiss. If that hadn’t happened, I would have just been left to my imagination and could have ignored the attraction I had to him.

The real thing was more than I could ever have imagined.

“All right, ladies,” Letty called over to us as she stood in front of the door. “Are you two ready for your feral readers out here?”

My eyes met Vera’s and we both looked at Letty with a smile. “Let them in.”

She unlocked the door and pulled it open, letting the line of readers funnel inside. There were a few people that walked past the line and were perusing the store. The rest came straight to us. It was a surreal event. For something that was supposed to be so small, I was blown away by the turnout.

We had a steady line for three hours and spent the entire time in a whirlwind of signing and talking about our books with new and old readers. At one point I looked up and met Letty’s gaze from where she was standing behind the register. I didn’t miss the moisture in her eyes and it pulled at every damn heartstring inside my chest.

I took a seat at the chair behind the table as my feet were a bit sore from standing the entire time. The line wasn’t as far outside the door and we only had about an hour left to sign. I already told Letty that I would stay as long as the line continued and Vera agreed to do the same. If it helped the store, if there were people who still wanted to see us, I wasn’t going to leave just because my scheduled time was up. I was here for them, just like they had showed up to support us.

Grams and Phyllis came through at one point, each of them buying additional copies of my books to get signed. I was expecting Grams but it was a pleasant surprise to see Phyllis

too. Leo wasn't able to come down this weekend because he had a competition. I didn't expect him to anyway. He was always there for me, always supporting me in whatever way he could, the same way I did for him.

We were both grown, living our own lives. We would catch up sometime later tonight or tomorrow. After all, I needed to hear all about his competition and I knew he would want to know how today went.

With my head down, I finished signing the book in front of me and smiled at its owner after thanking her. She stepped away and as she did, the air left my lungs in a rush when I saw the next person in line behind her. Steel eyes met mine and the dimples in his cheeks threatened to reveal themselves as the corners of his lips slowly lifted upward.

“Wes?” I practically whispered as I rose to my feet.

“Surprise,” he grinned as he stepped up to the table.

I tilted my head to the side. “What are you doing here?” Phyllis had to have said something to him about it.

“I came to see you. I was hoping I could get you to sign a book for me.”

He held out the copy that Phyllis must have given to him. I reached out to take it from him. My fingers accidentally brushed against his and I inhaled sharply as I felt the electricity of his touch. My heart pounded erratically in my chest. I remembered the feel of his hands on my bare skin while we stood in the ocean together.

“You can address it to the love of your life,” he said with amusement in his tone and grinned like the Cheshire Cat as I pulled my hand and the book away.

My eyes widened slightly and I forced out a laugh as I quickly recovered. “You wish.”

“Wes will do—for now.” I could feel his eyes on me as I sat down and flipped open the book and began to write inside it. “You’re quite popular. I waited in line for two hours, at least.”

I finished what I was writing and handed the book back to him, careful to avoid his touch again. “You didn’t have to come and wait. I could have signed it for you another time.”

“I didn’t mind. I would wait however long it would take to be able to see you.”

My breath caught in my throat. “Thank you for coming out. I really appreciate it.”

“It was my pleasure.” He paused for a moment, glancing over his shoulder at the line that was waiting behind him. “I’ll let you get back to it, but text me when you get out of here if you’re not busy this evening.”

“Why?” I blurted out the question and instantly wanted to take it back after realizing how stupid it was. Why couldn’t I have just had a normal response, like *okay* or something like that?

Mischief danced in his gray eyes and amusement washed over his expression. “Because I want to see you without a line of readers breathing down my neck.”

I stifled a laugh and nodded. “Okay, I will.”

“Good answer, sweetheart,” he said as he turned around. I watched him walk away until he disappeared into the crowd and I couldn’t see him anymore.

“Was that your boyfriend?” Vera asked me quietly from where she was sitting. She had an inquisitive look on her face.

“What?” My eyebrows scrunched and I shook my head at her. “No, he’s just a friend.”

Was he even my friend or just someone I made an arrangement with because somehow he became my fucking muse?

Vera laughed out loud. “I saw the way he was looking at you. He’s not going to just be your friend for much longer.”

Someone walked past me and stopped in front of Vera as another person stepped up to my table. I forced a smile onto my face and began to talk about my book to the reader who wanted me to sign her copy. No matter how hard I tried, I

couldn't push Vera's words from my mind. They lingered, swirling inside my brain as a constant distraction.

She was wrong.

Wes was my current muse and that was all he would ever be.

As soon as I finished this book, I'd be back in Idyll Cove and he'd be a distant memory.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

WES

The rest of the day dragged on and it felt like time was moving in slow motion. After leaving the bookstore, I wandered aimlessly around town. Orchid City wasn't big by any means. I walked the streets, peering in the windows of the stores as I strolled past them. I had time to kill, but I didn't want to seem like I was a creeper and linger while waiting for Charlotte. I wasn't sure how long her signing was going to take, but judging by the line of people that continued out the door when I left, it was safe to assume she was going to be a few hours.

I ended up walking to the park that was situated in the center of the city. It wasn't a far walk from the arena. I would have to be back there tomorrow morning. We had a very strict schedule that we followed during the season and when we had games in the evening, we always had a morning practice. It was a rather demanding job, but it was one I wouldn't trade for the world. My legs powered on and I walked through the gardens in the park and ended up stopping by the pond that was in the center.

There weren't many people walking, just a few with their dogs or couples taking a leisurely stroll. I found a bench and took a seat, staring out at the water as I waited to hear from Charlotte. I watched the ripples in the water and pulled out my phone, scrolling through my messages until I reached Nico's name. I tapped on the Call button and held the phone up to my ear.

"What's up?" he said as he answered my call.

I leaned back against the bench. “Nothing. I’m bored so I thought I would see what you were up to.”

“Where did you go last night? You disappeared from the bar and then when I texted you to tell you I was heading out, all I got was a thumbs-up.”

My mind drifted back to the night before. I hung out with Ava for a little bit and found out that she was also a photographer for the team. I saw the way Nico and Harper were getting pretty cozy and then Ava’s boyfriend showed up. Being out lasted as a distraction for a little bit, until I was reminded that I was there alone. Ava had her boyfriend—not that I was interested in her—and Nico had Harper there with him. I had no one. And for the first time in a long fucking time, it made me feel uncomfortable.

“I went home.”

Nico was silent for a beat. “By yourself?”

I rolled my eyes. “Yes, by myself. I think my days of sleeping around are over.”

“I’m sorry. Where is Wes and what did you do with him?” Nico laughed and I shook my head. “Are you okay?”

“Fuck you, man. Before Harper came into the picture, you were no different. You didn’t care who you ended up going home with or who you brought home.” I paused for a second and let out a sigh. “I’m just kind of over it, you know? I don’t want a relationship or anything, but it’s just getting a bit old.”

“Okay... this is new. Who is she?”

I half choked, half laughed. “There’s no one,” I lied. Charlotte was just a friend. Just because I wanted to break my old habits didn’t mean she was anything more in my life. “I think it’s just time for me to grow up.”

“I don’t know that I believe you, but I also know you well enough to know you probably wouldn’t tell me if there was someone.”

“I probably wouldn’t,” I chuckled. “At least, not until it was something worth telling you about.”

“Hmm. Fair enough.” Nico said something to someone in the background, but I couldn’t make out the sound of their voice. “So, Weston Cole is turning over a new leaf in life.”

I shrugged, even though he couldn’t see the movement. “I don’t know about all that. I’m just making some changes. We’re getting old, Nico.”

“Oh, Jesus, don’t start with that. I’m happy for you and the changes you want to make, but don’t start acting like we’re that old.”

“How was your night with Harper?” I questioned him, abruptly shifting the conversation away from myself.

He was silent for a moment. “It was fine.”

I heard someone in the background and the dots connected. “You’re still at her place, aren’t you?”

“Well, I gotta go. I’ll see you tomorrow morning.”

Nico hung up without another word and I couldn’t help but laugh out loud at his absurd behavior. In all the years I knew Nico, I had never seen him like this with someone else. It was refreshing and I was happy for him. He deserved to find some kind of happiness...

We all did.

After walking around town and the park, I ended up just going home. I had a routine I did the night before a game and nothing was going to change that. I ate dinner, showered, and put my suit on for tomorrow. It was a ritual I had. Every night before a game, I would put my suit on that I was supposed to wear to the arena. I slept in it, wore it to morning practice, only changing into my gear, and then I put it back on until it was time to come back for the game. Then I changed into my warm-up outfit and then my gear again. It was extremely ritualistic, but I was also a tad superstitious. I had been playing really well since I started doing it, so I didn’t want to risk it and change things up.

I normally stayed in the night before a game and I was waiting to hear from Charlotte anyway. It was a little after nine when I was watching hockey highlights on TV and my phone vibrated as a text message came through. I felt like a little kid on Christmas morning. My stomach had nervous little rumbles and I sat upright, opening up the message immediately.

CHARLOTTE

Hey.

I smiled, imagining the softness of her voice.

WES

Hey, superstar. How did the rest of the event go?

CHARLOTTE

It went well. There were so many people. Thank you again for stopping by.

When I first met Charlotte, I didn't realize how well known she was. It wasn't until after I did my social media stalking of Charlene Danvers that I came to the conclusion that she was practically famous in the book world. She had won awards, she had made lists. She was loved by the masses and had a huge following. Even after knowing what I knew about her, it didn't fully set in until I saw the line of her fans earlier today. So many people were there to see her, that had fallen in love with her words.

She was fucking amazing and I wasn't sure she even knew that.

She was so humble and almost shy about what she did for a living. To her, it was like it was a normal thing and nothing to be boastful about. Charlotte Wells was someone to be admired. I still couldn't believe it. I didn't feel inferior around her, but I felt like everything I had accomplished was nothing

compared to her. She was changing the world for some people... I was simply providing a means of entertainment by playing a damn sport.

WES

Of course. I had to come to support my favorite author.

CHARLOTTE

You think you're such a smooth talker, don't you?

WES

It's not my fault that you're not immune to my charm.

CHARLOTTE

You wish that were true.

WES

Tell me it's not.

I watched the three small dots pop up on the bottom of the message screen and disappear. It happened three more times and I chuckled. She thought she was witty, but she couldn't come up with a response.

WES

You can't, can you?

CHARLOTTE

My parents taught me manners. I don't want to hurt your feelings.

She was fiery. Her attitude had me hooked. Just when I expected her to say one thing, she came out of left field with an unexpected response.

WES

I like you, Charlotte Wells.

CHARLOTTE

Good.

What are you doing right now?

I looked up at the TV and back to my phone. I hadn't decided if I was going to break my routine or not, but if there was anyone who had me questioning it, it was Charlotte.

WES

Watching hockey highlights. What about you?

CHARLOTTE

Sitting out by the pool.

I stared at the screen, watching the three bubbles as she typed another message.

CHARLOTTE

Did you want to come over?

An anxious feeling washed over me at the idea. I wanted to. I wanted to see her.

WES

Is your grandmother home?

CHARLOTTE

She is and she's nosy as hell.

WES

Why don't you come to my place instead?

It was a win-win, really. I wouldn't have to break my routine and it wouldn't cost us the game tomorrow. I could still see her and we wouldn't have to worry about her meddling grandmother who would undoubtedly go running back to mine to gossip. A part of me wanted to give them something to gossip about.

CHARLOTTE

That's probably a better idea. What's your address?

I sent it to her, smiling to myself as I adjusted my tie.

CHARLOTTE

I'll be over in a little bit.

WES

See you soon, Charlotte.

Setting my phone down, I got up and quickly straightened up my apartment. I kept things relatively clean, so there wasn't much for me to do. I wandered around aimlessly, checking to make sure all my dirty clothes were in the hamper and I even lit a damn candle. Never had I cared before about someone else's opinions of my living space, but none of those people were Charlotte. I didn't know what the hell she was doing to me.

The doorbell rang, the sound echoing through my condo as I grabbed a water bottle from the fridge. I never drank anything but water or sports drinks the night before a game. I straightened my suit jacket, like it made a difference, and walked directly to the door. Inhaling deeply, I shook off the weird nerves and unlocked the door. As I pulled it open, the air was pulled from my lungs.

Charlotte was standing on the other side with a bottle of wine in her hand. She was wearing a pair of black sweatpants and an oversized crewneck sweatshirt that said Read the Fucking Book. I smiled at her, at the sight of her looking so goddamn innocent and vulnerable. Her face was free of makeup and her curls were wild around her face. This was the side of Charlotte I was so desperate to see.

She tilted her head to the side, a look of confusion washing over her expression. "Um, is this not a good time?"

"What do you mean?" My eyebrows pulled together, equally matching her confusion.

She pointed at my chest. "Your suit. Are you going somewhere?"

"What? No," I shook my head. I didn't even think about it until now. A laugh escaped me and I pulled the door open wider. "Come inside and I'll explain."

She raised an eyebrow at me and an infectious grin spread across her lips. "I can't help but feel like I'm underdressed."

Charlotte stepped past me and her arm brushed against my chest as the smell of lavender and honey invaded my senses.

I inhaled deeply, savoring her scent while I closed the door behind us.

"You look perfect."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

CHARLOTTE

I walked inside Wes's apartment and turned to face him as he closed and locked the door behind us. I kicked off my shoes out of habit and left them beside his own shoes. He smiled at me, completely at ease, as he walked past me and headed down the short hallway to his kitchen. I followed after him, watching him as he walked deeper into his own space. It was clean, neat, and orderly. His confidence radiated from him as he paused in the kitchen and turned to look at me. There wasn't a single thing out of place. His sink was cleaned with no dirty dishes in it. Either he cleaned up and was prepared for me before I came or he kept things like this all the time.

I was hoping for the latter. Clutter was never something I was a fan of. It was distracting to my brain. I wasn't the most organized person, but I was the type to purge things before hoarding them. I kept my own space free of clutter, even though there was always a bit of disarray.

Wes opened one of the cupboards and reached inside before pulling out a wine glass. I watched him as he closed it, my eyebrows pulling together when I noticed he only had one. Maybe I shouldn't have brought wine. I wasn't a big drinker, but it felt like the right thing to do when coming to someone's house.

He continued to walk and I followed him into the living room. He took a seat down on the plush gray couch and I sat down two cushions away from him. This was like uncharted territory. I wanted to tread lightly because I wasn't sure what his expectations were. I didn't even know what my own were.

When I invited him over to Grams's house, it was more on a whim than anything. I decided to take a chance and it felt less intimidating to have him there. When he suggested I come here instead, I didn't even question it, but now that I was here, I couldn't help but feel a touch of nervousness in my veins.

Wes reached over and took the bottle of wine from me and poured some into the glass before handing it to me. I was a bit hesitant as I took it from him while he studied my features.

"Do you not drink?" I asked him as I held on to the stem of the wineglass, not drinking any of it.

"I do," Wes said with a smile. "I have a game tomorrow evening so I'm trying to hydrate," he explained as he held up his bottle of water. "I usually don't drink the night before. It's just a habit of mine, but you're more than welcome to."

I looked at the glass of wine and then back to him before setting it down on the coffee table. "I don't really like wine, if we're being honest. I just brought it along because it seemed like the polite thing to do."

His smile grew wider. "For future reference, I don't like wine either."

I couldn't help but laugh as I shook my head. "Well, shit. I'll keep that in mind for the future."

Wes fell silent and I stared back at him, staring into his molten silver irises. I pulled my feet up onto the couch and tucked them beneath me as I turned to face him. Wes's body was facing mine and he propped his elbow on the back of the couch before setting his chin on his hand.

"So, what's with the suit?" I asked him with curiosity lingering in my tone.

"Another habit before a game," he said with a sheepish smile. "I have this routine. The night before a game, I eat dinner, shower, and get dressed for the game."

I raised an eyebrow at him as I processed his words. "Isn't your game tomorrow evening?"

He nodded, a soft laugh rumbling in his chest. “I was playing like shit and one night I was feeling defeated and put my suit on and ended up falling asleep in it. I played the best game of my career the next day. I’ve been doing it ever since and so far it has brought me nothing but good luck.”

I couldn’t help myself. I laughed. Loudly. Wes stared at me, his head lifting from his hand. His eyes were trained on my face and he cocked his head to the side. The corners of his mouth twitched as I grinned at him and held up my hands in an innocent gesture. “I have my own quirks, so no judgments from me.”

“That laugh felt pretty judgy,” he said playfully. “I know, it’s fucking weird. I promise that I wash it, so it’s not like I’m wearing dirty clothes every time I put it on. And I don’t sleep in a jacket or tie. I wear it and then change when I get to the arena.”

With careful consideration of his words, I nodded in understanding. I didn’t think there was a person out there who wasn’t superstitious in some way, shape or form. It was no different than specific things I did to help my writing. Whether it was a place or a strict routine I had formed, if it worked, I continued to do the same. Wes might have a little bit of a different thing going on here, but it was the same concept.

“Hey, you’re not supposed to fix it if it isn’t broken, right?”

Wes stared at me, the varying shades of gray dancing in his eyes. Something washed over them but I couldn’t quite put my finger on what it was. “You’re right,” he said softly, still staring at me. Silence settled between us and his gaze was intense. A moment passed... or maybe more. Time ceased to exist and my stomach fluttered with the way he was staring at me. “Did you want to watch a movie?”

His question caught me off guard. “Sure, as long as you don’t make me pick what we’re watching.”

“Deal,” he agreed as he grabbed the remote from the coffee table. He scrolled through the selection and settled on a horror movie.

He got up and shrugged off his suit jacket before turning off the lights. He settled back down on the couch and closed the distance between us as he sat down directly beside me. The movie started and I watched him roll up his sleeves, revealing his toned forearms. The veins in his hands rose from his skin and I fought the urge to reach out and trace them.

I stared at the TV as the movie played, but I didn't watch a single second of the actual film. I was acutely aware of how close he was and the heat radiating from his body. His scent penetrated my senses. He smelled faintly of cedar and cypress, the same smell I remembered from the first time we met. It was ingrained in my mind and it had become my favorite scent.

Wes's apartment was cold and a shiver slid down my spine as I felt the goosebumps cover my flesh. Instinctively, I wrapped my arms tighter around myself in an effort to find some warmth. Wes turned to look at me and I could feel his eyes on the side of my face. I dropped my hands away from my arms and tried to shake away the coldness that was encapsulating me.

“Are you cold?” he asked me softly.

“I'm fine,” I told him with a smile, but he ignored me. He leaned over to the right and lifted up the bottom of the chaise lounge. It had storage beneath the cushion and he pulled out a blanket.

I watched him carefully as he unfolded it and moved back to me. He lifted his arms, wrapping them around me, although he wasn't touching my body as he wrapped the blanket around me. His hands landed on my shoulders as he rubbed them up and down my arms. “You're sensitive to the cold,” he mused as the warmth from his hands and the friction of the movement warmed my body. It was more than just that. It was his gray gaze searching mine, the way he was so attentive, and how gentle he was. “Ironic that you would find yourself in the company of someone who lives on the ice.”

“And in an icebox,” I laughed quietly. He had to have had his air conditioning set in the 60s because it was fucking

freezing.

“I’ll remember to change the temperature for you.”

His voice was soft and gentle, just like his lingering touch. He didn’t move his hands away from me. Instead, he lifted one hand to brush a curl away from my face while the other rested on my collarbone. He twirled the curl around his finger, his eyes desperately searching mine.

“I really want to kiss you, Charlotte.”

I stared back at him, my breath catching in my throat. His eyes never left mine as he slowly played with my hair. “What are you waiting for?”

He gave me a crooked smile before pushing his hands through my messy hair. One hand held the side of my face while the other cupped the back of my head. He tilted my head back as he moved closer. His face dropped down to mine. I inhaled sharply as his lips brushed against mine. “That’s exactly what I was waiting for.”

His mouth captured mine in one swift movement. He stole the air from my lungs as his lips tasted mine. There was a tenderness in the way he kissed me. Soft and sweet. Like we had all the time in the world. His tongue moved past my lips, sliding against mine as he deepened the kiss. My hands found the front of his dress shirt and I fisted it in my hands as I held on to him. The movie played in the background, but all I could think about was him. He tasted faintly of mint and my senses were in overdrive as he consumed me entirely.

Wes was a quiet force, but he shook me to my core. His one hand was still around the back of my head, but the other dropped down to my waist. He pulled me closer and I moved with him as he sat back against the couch. I straddled his lap, slowly lowering myself down onto him as he continued to draw the air from my lungs. What started out as soft and tender, turned into a furious frenzy. There was an urgency in the way he kissed me. His tongue swiped mine, dancing together as they were tangled in one another. His grip tightened in my hair and my hands fell to the buttons of his

shirt. I could feel how hard he was beneath me and his cock throbbed through all the layers of our clothing.

I needed more of him.

As I began to undo the top button, his hands flew to mine and he pulled them away. His movements confused me. “Not tonight, sweetheart,” he murmured against my mouth. “Trust me, I want nothing more than to have my way with you, but I can’t. It’s bad luck if I take off my suit.”

My lips parted as I went to argue with him, but he quickly silenced me with his own. This kiss was brutal as his tongue tangled with mine. His mouth softened and he slowed the kiss before he abruptly broke away. “What the fuck are you doing to me, Charlotte?”

His voice was hoarse, thick with need and emotion. He pulled my face back to his and kissed me until the early hours of the morning...

Until we were both out of oxygen and the only thing we were breathing was one another.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

MAC

Everyone was moving around in the locker room with a sense of purpose and I was simply walking around in a daze. Charlotte didn't spend the night yesterday, but she didn't leave until close to two o'clock in the morning. And we didn't even really do anything. Like two teenagers in high school, we spent the night making out on my couch while feeling up one another through our clothes. I refused to strip down and fuck her. As much as I wanted to, I didn't. There was a part of me that wanted to take my time with her. I wanted to enjoy her and not rush things. I wanted to savor every touch and every taste of her.

And the anticipation was part of the fun. The game we were playing was a little risky. Drawing things out gave more of a chance for feelings to get involved, but whatever. It would be what it was supposed to be in the end.

Charlotte didn't question me on the fact that I didn't want to take my clothes off last night. I couldn't risk it. I wouldn't take them off for the sake of getting my dick wet and potentially fucking up the game today. Although, I wasn't exactly focused, so it wasn't making much of a difference at this point.

"WESTON COLE," Nico practically yelled my name from where he was sitting on the bench. I was staring off, only half dressed with one skate tied. I snapped out of it and glanced at him as he gave me an incredulous look. "Dude. Fucking pay attention."

“What’s going on with you, Cole?” Lincoln questioned me as he folded his hands in his lap.

Mac was watching me with a look. “Are you good, man?”

Fuck.

This was the last thing I needed. I needed to get my head out of my ass and focus. I couldn’t keep thinking about Charlotte and the way her lips felt against mine. The soft sighs against my mouth as she ground herself against my hard cock. Jesus fucking Christ. This was the last thing I needed. She was supposed to be a good time, not a goddamn distraction.

I looked between the three of them. “My bad. I didn’t sleep well earlier,” I explained, which wasn’t fully a lie. My pregame nap was shit. I tossed and turned until putting on a movie that helped me to doze off for a total of twenty-five minutes. It was a terrible experience.

“Well, get your shit together. We can’t afford to lose any games and we need you to be present.”

I smirked at Nico and nodded. “Yes, daddy.”

He gave me the middle finger. “You haven’t earned the privilege to call me that.”

Mac laughed out loud. “I don’t know about the two of you.”

“It’s okay to be jealous, Mac,” I said with a wink. “I’d be jealous of Nico too.”

“Why the fuck would he be jealous of me?” Nico huffed.

“Because he isn’t wrapped around my finger like you are.”

Nico laughed loudly. “Yeah, right. You’re mental.”

“There’s something wrong with you two,” Lincoln added as he shook his head. “You take bromance to a whole different level.”

Everyone finished getting ready and I finally put my other skate on and tied it. I was a discombobulated mess today, but I was slowly getting my shit together. I wasn’t going to be able to see Charlotte tonight since we were going to be leaving later

to go on the road again. It was as if she heard me because my phone vibrated and I checked it. There was a message from her wishing me good luck. I texted her back, thanking her before turning off my phone.

I appreciated her reaching out, but I needed to clear my mind. The guys were right. I needed to get my head in the game. Charlotte would have to take a back seat. After all, it wasn't like it was anything serious. It couldn't be.

We headed out to the ice for warm-ups and I was able to draw myself out of my head. Everyone went through their routine of stretching and taking practice shots on our goalie, Wolfe, before we went through some shooting drills that we always did before the game. All of the guys were feeling the energy of the crowd inside the arena. It was loud and the music was louder, drowning out the sounds of people standing by the glass watching us as we warmed up.

Everyone headed back into the locker room while they cut the ice with the Zamboni and then we were making our way back to the bench for the game. I was ready. I was more ready than I felt when I first walked in. Charlotte still lingered in the back of my mind but I was able to tuck her away to think about later. Our coach had switched things around and had Nico and I both on the first line. We were sent out to the ice to start off the game and we both had something to prove. If you were given an opportunity like that, it was one where you did everything in your power to make sure you didn't fuck it up.

I couldn't afford to fuck any of this up, especially after working so hard for so long to get to this point.

We took our spots on the ice and the energy in the air was electric as we waited in anticipation for the ref to drop the puck. Nico was bent down, in the proper position for the face-off. He looked at me from the corner of his eye, making sure I was where I needed to be for when he won it. And he did. The puck hit the ice and Nico battled with the other player for it before sending it back to me. I caught it with the toe of my stick and headed down the ice, weaving between players as I stickhandled around them. I fell back as we entered their zone before passing the puck to Mac who was by the net.

He took a shot on their goaltender and it was deflected. I moved around the other side and Nico sent it around the boards to me after battling for possession behind the net. We applied the pressure, hanging out in their zone for as long as we could, taking multiple shots. One of their defensemen managed to steal the puck from Lincoln and they headed back down the ice. I was barely out of breath from the short shift as I headed back to the bench.

“Good shift, boys,” our coach told Nico and I as we both sat down. I stared out at the ice, watching as the game played on, feeling the burn in my lungs. I was in the zone and nothing else mattered except for the puck sliding across the ice.

I fucking lived for this shit and nothing else.

We had another win but no one dared to speak about the streak we were on. It was known to be bad luck. No one ever uttered the word *shutout* if the other team hadn't scored. It always ruined everything. It was like the universe knew as soon as you said a word like that aloud, the other team would score and it wouldn't be a shutout. God forbid if we talked about the streak we were on. It would quickly come to an end.

All of the guys were riding the high from our win as we headed to the airport to hop on the team's private jet. We were only flying a few states away and it was just a short stint in the air. We were going for one away game and would be flying back home tomorrow night. We could have flown out early in the morning tomorrow, but it was usually better for us to wake up where we needed to be.

Nico was distracted and I turned in my seat to face him as we were in the air. I texted Charlotte before we got on the plane but I had to turn my phone onto airplane mode. She hadn't texted me back before we took off. She told me when she left my house that she had a lot of work to do today, so I tried to stay out of her hair. I wasn't going to bother her when she was in her creative space. Unlike me, she seemed to be better at turning it off when she needed to. She also put her

phone on Do Not Disturb mode so I knew she couldn't afford any distractions.

Neither of us really could.

"I heard Harper is coming along," I muttered to Nico, making sure no one else heard us.

Nico looked at me, giving nothing away from his expression. "Yeah, her boss approved of her coming along for the game. She'll be working, though, so it's not like I'm going to be seeing her or anything."

"I mean, I wouldn't expect you to see her when anyone was looking." I told him. "I think the two of you are safe, though. No one has any idea or suspicions."

"Let's just hope it stays that way," he said with a sigh as he shook his head. "I made the mistake of telling her that her job didn't matter and she could come live with me and I'd take care of her. She didn't seem to appreciate that too much."

I couldn't help but laugh as I imagined Harper's reaction to that. I didn't know her that well, but she was definitely the strong, independent type. She didn't strike me as the type to let someone else take care of her. "I can only imagine how that conversation went."

"Hopefully as soon as her business gets up and running and she's doing what she wants, then she can quit working for the team."

I studied him for a moment. I could tell it was weighing on him and not because his job would be in jeopardy. The team couldn't afford to lose him, even if he was involved in a scandal like sneaking around with one of the team's photographers. It was completely prohibited, but he wouldn't suffer any real consequences. He would most likely get a slap on the wrist, but Harper would be fired. She was more disposable than he was. They could easily replace her. I knew it was bothering Nico because he didn't want to be the reason why she lost her job.

He also wanted to be with her without having this extra shit getting in the way.

I was glad I wasn't in his position, but I felt bad for my best friend. I hated to see him bothered like this.

"A word of advice," Nico said with half a smile as he cocked his head to the side. "Don't ever get involved with someone who works for the same team you play for."

I chuckled and flipped my book back open. It was another Charlene Danvers book. "Noted. That won't ever be a problem."

"What's with you and the books?" he finally questioned me. "I know you like to read, but since when do you read romance?"

I shrugged. "It's not like fluffy, smutty romance. They're all suspense and thrillers. The romance is kind of the subplot to it all."

Nico gave me a strange look, but he didn't ask any more about it. I was glad. He had his own secrets and I wasn't ready to share mine yet.

It was late in the night and we were all in our rooms when Charlotte finally texted me back.

CHARLOTTE

I hope you got to Las Vegas without any issues. I'm so sorry I didn't text you back earlier. I had a day filled with meetings and then had to get in my daily word count.

I smiled as I read over her words. I was glad to finally hear from her.

Her texts weren't enough, though. I had a fucking problem.

WES

Do you want to FaceTime?

CHARLOTTE

I look like a troll that just crawled out from underneath a bridge, but sure.

I didn't waste any time before calling her. She could never look like that and even if she did, she would be the most beautiful troll I had ever seen.

"Hey," Charlotte said softly as she fumbled with her phone. She was already in bed and the soft glow from her bedside lamp was illuminating her face. "I checked the score of the game. Congrats on another win."

My heart practically skipped a beat as my stomach did a weird flip. She took the time to check the score and she had no idea how much that meant to me. She wasn't even a hockey fan.

Who the fuck was this girl?

And what the hell was she doing to me?

"Thanks. It was a good game tonight. I'm ready to get the one tomorrow over with so I can be back in Orchid City."

Charlotte nodded. "Does the travel get tiresome?"

"It does. Sometimes I just like to be home, you know?"
And if I'm home, I can see you.

"I get it. I've never traveled like that except when I had to go on a few tours for book releases, they always left me feeling drained." She paused for a moment, adjusting in her bed. "It always took me a few days to recover from it when I got back home."

"I never have time to fully recover," I said with a laugh. "We just keep going and going until the season is over and then things slow down a little bit, but we still have to practice and train."

She smiled at me. "Well, I think it's all pretty amazing."

"I think you're pretty amazing."

I almost cringed at how stupid that sounded. I couldn't help myself. The words left my lips without any warning and I had no control over them. It threw me for a loop, but Charlotte didn't seem to miss a beat.

“Can I see you when you get home?” she asked, a slight hesitation to her words. “I don't want to bother you because I'm sure you'll be exhausted and everything.”

I smiled and shook my head. “I want you to bother me, Charlotte.”

She laughed softly and the sound was like a melody. “You're going to regret saying that.”

I stared back at her through the screen, wishing I could reach through it and touch her.

There wasn't a single thing I would regret about her.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

CHARLOTTE

WES

Can I see you tonight?

I smiled as I read Wes's message as it came through since I forgot to put my phone on Do Not Disturb. He got in late last night from his away game and I didn't hear from him after his plane landed. It was in the middle of the night, so I imagined he didn't want to bother me. He didn't waste any time, considering it was only nine o'clock in the morning now. I had a lot of work I needed to get done and I was already sitting out at the pool clacking away on my keyboard.

CHARLOTTE

Of course. Did you want me to come to your place?

WES

How about I come pick you up and we can get dinner and go from there?

Even though he came off a bit cocky and forward, he still had a side to him that was a gentleman. Whenever it came out, it had a habit of surprising me. It was a little unexpected since

Wes was extremely charming and never seemed to be at a loss for words.

CHARLOTTE

That sounds perfect.

WES

Good answer. Get back to work. You have a book to write that I'm waiting to read.

I couldn't help but feel an anxiousness in the pit of my stomach. There was no way in hell he was going to read this, though. I could use his help with some research for the spicier scenes I was about to be diving into. My fingers hovered over the keys and I resisted the urge to ask him.

Things would happen if and when they were meant to happen.

A message from my brother came through at the same time and I used that as a quick distraction from Wes. I opened it up and there was a whole damn paragraph of him going off about something going on with his figure skating partner. They had been skating together for years and now she was pregnant.

I texted him back, asking him if I could call him in a little bit, and he never responded. Leo had a way of getting worked up, but he was always there for me when I needed him. As his sister and best friend, it was the least I could do.

Another message came through from Aurora, my best friend who I grew up with in Idyll Cove. It was almost as if the universe had alerted everyone and told them I had stopped writing so they all decided it was the opportune time to text me about something. Aurora was also the cover designer who I worked with on all my covers. She was doing the one for this book and wanted to go over some concept designs that the publisher's team brought to her.

She received the same message my brother did and I finally turned my phone on Do Not Disturb. I had work I needed to get done, especially if I wanted to try and do anything with Wes tonight.

After getting halfway through the chapters I needed to write, I allowed myself a break for lunch. I called my brother, but he didn't answer. He was most likely practicing and I felt bad that I didn't talk to him earlier. I texted him and told him to call me when he was free and instead I called Aurora.

“Hey, girl!” Aurora’s soft voice came through the phone. “How are the words coming along?”

I smiled. “They’re coming. I was so reluctant and nervous when I started writing this book, but it has been going really well.”

“So, the move was totally worth it then. It sounds like it has been great for your creativity and inspiration.” She paused for a moment and I could hear the interest in her voice. “Are you still seeing that hockey player?”

I snorted. “We’re not seeing each other, Rory. We’ve just been hanging out and I’ve been able to use it to help write this book.”

“Girl, your life is practically a book right now. When are you going to use him for some other research?”

“If it happens, it happens. You know I didn’t come here looking to meet anyone,” I reminded her as I headed inside the house to the kitchen. Grams was out running errands so I had the house to myself. She had a habit of leaving during the day when I was working, which I secretly appreciated. “Not to change the subject, but after I finish this book, you should come down for a few days.”

“Shit, you don’t have to ask me twice. You let me know when and I’ll be there.”

Aurora and I finally got into what we were supposed to be talking about and went over the design concepts for the cover.

I trusted her with her work. She created literal magic and we were such a great team together. I was forever grateful for her being able to work with my publisher on all of my projects.

After we ended the call, I practically shoved my salad down my throat and dove back into my work while trying to ignore the fact that I was going to be seeing Weston Cole again tonight.

“Well, look at you.” Grams smiled brightly at me, taking in my dress as I walked out into the living room. “You look beautiful. Where are you going tonight?”

I chewed on the inside of my cheek and brushed a curl from my face. I was hesitant to tell her, but since Wes was picking me up at her house, there was no sense in lying.

“Wes is picking me up to go get dinner.”

Grams raised her eyebrows at me as mischief danced in her eyes. “Wes as in Phyllis’s Wes?”

“Yes, Grams. The only Wes either of us know.”

She laughed softly. “I told Phyllis the two of you were going to end up dating. She thought it would take a little while longer before you both gave in to one another.”

“We’re not dating,” I told her before I paused and tilted my head to the side. “Wait, do the two of you have some sort of bet going on?”

She shrugged. “We’re both competitive people who like to gamble.”

“You are both menaces.”

“Now, honey, you know that it’s all in good fun.” She rose to her feet and walked over to me.

I pursed my lips. “You know you’re a damn menace.”

She laughed again. “I never said I wasn’t. We’re just two old ladies. Let us enjoy ourselves while we get to watch two young people fall in love.”

“Grams! We’re not falling in love. We’re not dating. We’ve just been hanging out as friends.”

She raised her hands in an innocent gesture. “Okay, okay. Whatever you say.” The doorbell rang, effectively cutting her off. I wasn’t sure if I was grateful or not because I knew who rang it. “I’ll let you go get the door. The two of you have fun and I won’t wait up for you,” she said before she pressed her lips to my cheek and disappeared onto the back patio.

I inhaled deeply, sucking in a breath as I smoothed out my purple sundress. I had no idea where he was taking me tonight, but with the Floridian heat, a dress felt like it was always an appropriate outfit choice. The humidity hadn’t been kind to my curly hair, so I decided to let it be natural instead of trying to style it and have it turn into a frizzy mess.

Wes was standing on the other side of the door with his hands tucked in the front pockets of his gray seersucker shorts. His molten steel eyes raked over me as a slow smile lifted the corners of his lips. His gaze settled on mine and I blushed under the intensity of his stare.

“You’re breathtaking, Charlotte.”

I swallowed roughly and smiled. “Thank you. You don’t look so bad yourself.”

He stepped inside and looked over at me as he held out his elbow. He was wearing a plain black t-shirt revealing his tanned, toned arms. “Shall we?”

“We shall.” I nodded as I linked my arm through his. His scent invaded my senses and his skin was warm against mine as he led me to his car. As he opened the door for me, the butterflies in my stomach fluttered to life.

I slid into the seat and he closed the door behind me while I tried to snap out of it. My brain had the audacity to forget that this wasn’t an actual date. Wes rounded the front of the car and got into his seat before turning the engine on.

“Where are we going?”

“There’s this restaurant on the water that I haven’t been to yet and I thought we could try it out together.”

I raised an eyebrow at him. “How do you know I haven’t been there before?”

Wes fought back a smile. “Have you been to Coastal Kitchen yet?”

I shook my head, grinning at him. “Nope.”

“That’s exactly what I thought,” he said with a chuckle. He stared at me for a moment, his eyes searching mine. “You’re irresistible.”

My breath caught in my throat and my lips parted as my voice failed me. Wes pulled out of the driveway and his words floated around in my head. It was just his charm. He didn’t mean any of it—they were simply just words.

The restaurant was only about a fifteen-minute drive down the coast. It was situated right along the beach and was absolutely amazing. Talking to Wes was so damn easy. There was just something about him that was so comforting. We talked until well after our meal, discussing both some of the most mindless and deepest things possible. He asked random questions, wanting to know every single detail about me.

I couldn’t help but give him everything he wanted without hesitation. He just had this effortless way of pulling it out of me.

As we finished our meal and he paid for our bill, his steel gray eyes met mine from across the table. “I’m not ready for tonight to be over yet, Charlotte,” he said softly as his gaze burned into mine. “I’m not ready to take you home.”

I stared back at him, my gaze unwavering as the butterflies fluttered in my stomach once again. My heart pounded erratically, but I ignored the drumming in my chest.

“So don’t take me home then.” I paused, letting out a breath. “Take me back to your place.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

WES

“D on’t take me home then. Take me back to your place.”

Those two sentences that just fell from her sweet lips had me already on my feet, waiting for our server to return back to the table with my card. Charlotte was watching me, studying my movements from where she was still seated, but I didn’t miss the fire burning in her eyes as I stood. I shifted my weight on my feet, ready to walk the fuck out of that restaurant with her without signing the check.

“This guy needs to hurry the hell up,” I muttered and Charlotte laughed softly. I glanced over at her, a smile pulling on her lips as she simply shook her head.

She followed suit and vacated her seat. “I’m going to go outside and wait for you by the car.”

“Absolutely not.”

She tilted her head to the side with a questioning look on her face. “Excuse me?”

“The last place you need to be alone is in a dark parking lot.”

Defiance washed over her expression. She pushed her shoulders back, straightening her spine as she lifted her chin. “Watch me.”

My lips parted and I went to speak, but she was already turning away from me, striding through the restaurant. Goddamn her and her need to challenge me. I stared after her,

feeling a spark of irritation mixed with a spark of excitement. I couldn't wait to get to her.

"Here you are," the server said from behind me. I quickly whipped around to face him, abruptly taking the black book from his hand. I plucked my card out of it, signed the check, and left the tip amount before setting it on the table. My strides were long and purposeful as I moved through the restaurant, heading toward the exit.

I didn't see Charlotte at first when I stepped out into the parking lot. There were two lights that gave off a dim glow, barely illuminating the area. I caught a glimpse of her hair moving past two cars in the next row. My footsteps were quiet and I headed in her direction.

"Fuck," she muttered to herself as she came to a halt. "Why can't I find his damn car?"

She didn't hear me as I approached her from behind. I didn't stop moving. "Because you're in the wrong row, sweetheart."

Charlotte spun around to face me. I was already stepping into her space, standing less than a foot away from her. She gasped and the light above highlighted the soft, delicate features of her face. "You scared me."

"Did I?" I stepped closer and she took a step back. "What if it wasn't me? What if someone else had followed you out here?"

A fire was burning deep in her gaze. "I would run away."

"But you wouldn't run from me, would you?"

Something different flickered in her expression. Challenge, lust, amusement. The corners of her mouth twitched. "You wouldn't be able to catch me if I did."

A chuckle vibrated in my chest. "Try me."

"Yeah, okay," she laughed, waving her hand dismissively.

"I mean it. You think you can outrun me?" I paused and motioned for her to go with my hand. "Go ahead. Run."

Charlotte leveled her gaze with mine and she fucking smirked before spinning around and taking off through the parking lot. I counted two heartbeats in my chest to give her a head start before I broke out into a run, chasing after her. She was quick and smart, dodging between cars, but I was faster. My strides were longer and my legs had more power to them. She wasn't thinking as she cut through another row.

I went on the opposite side, heading in the same direction she was going. She thought I was behind her, but I wasn't anymore. I was cutting the corners and cutting her off. She whipped around my car, not knowing I was on the other side of it. I surged forward, my arms wrapping around her frame as she collided into my chest.

Spinning her around, I chuckled, tipping my head down to look at her as I backed her up against my car. "Checkmate."

"That wasn't fair," she said as she tried to catch her breath.

I loosened my arms around her, moving my hands to cage her in as I pinned against the side of my car. "You said I couldn't catch you, but you were wrong. You're out of moves, sweetheart."

"Then it's your move," she breathed, her chest rising and falling with every shallow breath that escaped her. My heart was hammering away against my rib cage. My body was pressed against hers. I lifted one hand away from the car, sliding it along the side of her throat before grabbing the back of her neck.

My mouth collided with hers with nothing but urgency and need driving my movements. Charlotte held nothing back. Her arms wrapped around my waist, her hands fisting the back of my t-shirt. She tilted her head back without my guidance, giving me deeper access as her lips parted. My tongue slid across hers and they tangled together as I tasted the coconut from her cocktail on her tongue.

I wanted more. I needed more.

Charlotte's lips moved with mine. My cock was already hard, pressing against her, and she thrust her hips forward as

she pushed against me. I shifted, pinning her ass back against the car. A soft moan escaped her and I swallowed the sound. Her grip tightened on my shirt and she held me close.

“Fuck, I want you, Charlotte,” I murmured against her lips. “So fucking badly.”

“What are you waiting for?”

I pulled away from her, shaking my head. “I’m not fucking you against my car in a parking lot.”

“Why not?” she breathed, pressing her hips against me again. “What if I told you that’s what I wanted you to do?”

I groaned as I slammed my eyes shut. I opened them and stared down into the fire burning in her shimmering brown eyes. “I’d tell you maybe next time because right now, I want to take you back to my bed and worship your body.”

“Aww,” she smiled at me, batting her eyelashes, “Weston Cole is a romantic.”

“Don’t test me, Charlotte.” I nipped at her bottom lip. “I’m not above fucking you right here.”

She lifted her chin, again with a challenging look in her eye. “I don’t believe you.”

I stared down at her. There were so many fucking things I wanted to do to her. I wanted to strip her naked and taste every inch of her skin before sinking deep inside her. I wanted to know what she tasted like when she came on my tongue. I wanted to fuck her until my name was the only fucking word she could speak.

I also had an intense need to be inside her, and she was fracturing my resolve.

“Fuck it,” I growled as I dropped my hands down to her ass and hoisted her into the air.

Her dress was bunched around her hips and her legs instinctively wrapped around my waist. She lifted her arms and linked them around the back of my neck. I pinned her against the car with my hips as I reached down to undo my pants. I pushed them down just far enough to pull out my

cock. It throbbed against the warmth of her center and I slid my finger over the small triangle of fabric covering her pussy.

“You’re fucking soaked already,” I growled against her collarbone before nipping at her flesh. I pushed her thong to the side and gripped my cock in my hand. I slid the tip of it through her arousal. “Are you on birth control?”

She nodded. “I have an IUD.”

“Thank fuck,” I groaned as I pushed inside her. She was so fucking tight, her pussy instantly clenching around me as I filled her to the brim with one fluid movement.

“Jesus Christ,” Charlotte moaned, her head tipping back against the roof of the car. I shifted my hips, slowly fucking her. “Harder.”

I chuckled, trailing my lips over the tops of her breasts. “Patience, sweetheart.”

“I have no patience. I want you to fuck me, Wes. Don’t hold back.”

“I can’t do all the things I want to do to you here,” I told her as I pulled out until just the tip was inside her and then slammed back into her. She cried out. “You’d better be quiet unless you want someone to come out here and find us like this.”

“Then you’d better hurry up and fuck me,” she retorted, dropping her voice lower as she shifted her hips against me.

I pinned her back against the car. “I’ll give you what you want, but when I get you in my bed, *you’re* going to give me what *I* want.”

“Are you saying you don’t want this?”

I shook my head. “Oh, I do. I just want more. I’m fucking greedy, Charlotte. So when I take everything you have to give, don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

Her face dropped down to mine and her lips melted against me as she pushed her tongue into my mouth. Gripping her ass, I began to move harder and faster, fucking her with a fervent need. I drove into her over and over again, deeper and deeper

with every thrust. I wanted to be in as deep as possible, feeling every inch of her as her pussy clenched around me.

My balls constricted and a warmth was building in the pit of my stomach. I continued to pound into her, breathing her in as our tongues tangled with one another. My fingertips dug into her skin, biting into her flesh. Charlotte moaned into my mouth and it only made me give her exactly what she asked for.

I fucked her harder. The car was rocking from our movement and her hands were fisted in my hair. She felt like a vise grip around my dick, clenching more and more with every thrust. It wasn't long before fire erupted in my veins and I slammed into her, just as the walls of her pussy began to contract around me. We were both falling over the edge, coming undone as she shattered around my cock, and I lost myself inside her.

I didn't stop moving, slowly thrusting in and out as I filled her with every last drop of my cum. It was an impulsive decision, even though it was something she had consented to. I never, ever came inside of anyone. It wasn't something I did, just out of precaution.

That sense of control was completely lost with her.

I pushed the thoughts from my mind as she kissed me softly before lifting her face from mine. My cock was throbbing inside of her and I was riding the high of Charlotte, my body tingling with a warmth I could never put into words. She stared down at me in a satiated daze.

“Still want to go back to my place?” I murmured against her lips as I set her down on her feet. I released her and she straightened her dress as I pushed my cock back into my pants and fastened them.

Her eyes were glazed over but her lips lifted into a lazy grin.

“Absolutely.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

CHARLOTTE

I settled back against the seat as Wes sped down the streets toward his apartment. My legs ached a bit, but there was a deeper aching feeling inside of me. I was in a bit of a daze, a bit in shock. He had just fucked me against the side of his car in the parking lot of the restaurant. It was something I had never done before and the excitement was still racing through my veins. I turned in my seat to look at him and studied his profile. Wes glanced at me from the corner of his eye with a smirk playing on his lips.

“I can feel your eyes on me, Charlotte.” He laughed softly and released one hand from the steering wheel and grabbed my thigh instead. “Penny for your thoughts?”

“I was just thinking about what just happened... anyone could have walked out and found us.”

He turned to look at me with the same dazed look in his eyes. It mixed with the lust and need building inside him. “They didn’t, though, did they?”

My mouth twitched and I bit back a grin, shaking my head. His fingers were trailing up my thigh and I could feel his cum coating my legs. He had left me a mess and I would be lying if I said I didn’t love it.

“You liked it, didn’t you?” he asked me, but it wasn’t really a question at all. His voice was hoarse and thick with need. “You loved the thought of getting caught.”

I squirmed in my seat and under his touch as his fingers trailed farther up my leg, biting into my flesh as he tightened

his grip around my thigh. “Maybe.”

“Fuck, I love it,” he growled and stepped harder on the gas. “Such a dirty fucking girl, but you’re all mine to enjoy.”

He whipped his car into the parking lot, the tires screeching under the force. He pulled into the first spot and abruptly slammed the gear shifter into park before killing the engine. Wes was out of his door before I even realized it. As I unbuckled my seat belt, he was already opening my door and pulling me from my seat. I yelped in surprise as he hoisted me into his arms.

“You know, I’m very capable of walking myself,” I giggled as he shifted me in his grasp and carried me into the building.

“What would the fun in that be?” he murmured against my shoulder before nipping at my skin. He stepped into the elevator and dropped me down to my feet as he pressed the button to his floor. There was no hesitation as he backed me up against the wall and claimed my mouth with his own. His lips were urgent against mine, pushing them open with his tongue before he dipped inside. His hands were in my hair, gripping my scalp as he pulled my head backward. I moaned into his mouth as he ground his pelvis against mine. He was already hard as a fucking rock and I was about to beg him to fuck me right then and there.

As the elevator dinged and the doors slid open, he pulled his mouth away from mine and lifted me back into his arms. My dress was hiked up over my ass and my hair was a tangled mess. Thankfully we didn’t pass anyone in the hallway and his strides were long, covering a lot of ground with every step. He rushed inside the apartment, kicking the door shut behind him as he carried me straight to his bedroom. The mattress was soft and plush beneath my body as he lowered me down and followed me onto the bed.

His lips found mine in a haste and he breathed me in as his tongue danced with my own. It was like he couldn’t figure out what part of me he wanted to touch first. Grabbing my biceps, he hauled me into a sitting position with him and abruptly

lifted my dress up over my head. The air in his apartment was cool, but not nearly as cold as it was the last time I was here.

“Fuck, Charlotte,” he groaned as he pulled back and looked at me. His hands cupped my breasts and rolled my nipples between his fingers. “No bra?”

“It wasn’t needed with the dress I wore tonight.”

His eyes met mine and they burned with a bright fire inside. “Never wear one again.”

“Okay,” I breathed softly, biting back a moan as he pushed me back down onto the bed. “Did you turn off your air conditioner or something?”

He lowered his mouth to my chest and trailed his lips across my flesh. “You don’t like the cold.”

Wes pulled my nipple between his teeth and lightly bit down. I cried out, my back arching from the pleasure. A warmth built in the pit of my stomach and the butterflies fluttered inside. He remembered I was cold the last time I was here, so he made sure it was a more comfortable temperature in case I came back with him. Wes’s hands and mouth trailed over every inch of my skin and he began to lower himself down my body, making his way to my center. He pulled my panties down my thighs, swiftly removing them from my body until I was left completely naked. Bare and exposed under his wandering gaze.

“You’re so fucking gorgeous. You’re a gift from the heavens that I don’t deserve.”

My body tingled under his featherlight touches. His fingertips found the apex of my thighs and he dragged them through my pussy lips, through the mess we had made earlier. He lifted them and they glistened with our cum. Wes’s gaze was a burning fire as it collided with mine, and he pressed his fingers to my mouth. “Open, sweetheart. I want you to taste us.”

I slowly parted my lips and he slid his fingers into my mouth. “Suck,” he demanded, his voice dark and hoarse.

Swirling my tongue around his fingertips, I sucked our combined releases from his flesh. He groaned and I closed my eyes, savoring the sweet and salty taste on my tongue.

“Jesus fucking Christ,” he growled as he pulled his fingers from my mouth. I watched him as he settled between my legs, lowering his face down to my pussy. “My turn to taste.”

My lips parted and I went to stop him, but any coherent thought vanished from my brain as he ran his tongue along my center. He licked me again and again, lapping at my flesh before sliding his tongue inside me. I was a mess of moans, writhing under his touch as he continued to taste and tease me. I’d never had someone go down on me after coming inside me. I couldn’t fucking see straight as he flicked his tongue over my clit. He was relentless as he fucked me with his mouth and my hips bucked against him.

“That’s it, sweetheart,” he murmured against me as he continued to eat me out. “Give me all of you. Give me everything.”

My hands fisted his hair, pushing his face between my legs. He growled against my clit and the vibration nearly sent me soaring over the edge. He flatten his tongue, increasing the pressure on the most sensitive part of my body. He was unforgiving and relentless as he took everything from me. It wasn’t long before I was crying out as my orgasm erupted through my body. It spread through my veins like a burning fire and I didn’t bother to hold back as I came apart beneath his mouth. Wes didn’t stop until I was completely spent with nothing left to give.

He lifted his face from between my legs and grinned as he stood up. My chest rose and fell with every shallow breath that escaped me. His eyes never left mine as he stripped out of his clothes and wiped our cum from his chin. I watched him, completely naked as he crawled onto the bed until his face was hovering above mine. My legs were still parted and he settled between them, pressing the tip of his cock against my entrance.

“I don’t think I’ll ever be able to fuck you out of my system, Charlotte,” he growled as he pressed inside me, filling me to the hilt with one thrust. My hips lifted and I moaned as he planted his hands on the bed beside my face. “You’ve nestled yourself inside my bones, deep within the marrow.”

I was left speechless as his words penetrated the crevices of my mind, branding themselves inside my memory. Lifting my hands, I clutched his biceps, holding on as he began to move his hips. His movements were slow and his strokes were long as he slowly began to move in and out of me. He would pull back, just so the tip was the only thing inside me, before he plunged back in.

“I’ll never be able to get enough of you, Charlotte.”

“Good,” I whispered as he lowered his face to mine. “Because I want more of you. I want all of you.”

He nipped at my bottom lip as he fucked me slowly. “I want to spend the rest of the night pretending you’re mine.”

“I’m no one else’s.”

It was the truth. I hadn’t so much as thought about another man since I met Wes. I didn’t want anything more than this with him, but while I had him like this, I was going to enjoy every moment we had together. Until our time was up and we had to go our separate ways. I didn’t want there to be any strings attached, but I could pretend he was mine too, even if it was only in my mind.

“Good, because I don’t like to share.”

His mouth captured mine and he slid one hand down under my ass to lift my hips for better access. Our surroundings faded away and he consumed me. I couldn’t think or see straight. Every thought was him. Him and those molten silver-colored eyes. He drove into me, pistoning his hips, pushing me into the mattress with such force. He was breathing me in, draining the oxygen from my lungs. My head was swimming and I was lost in his touch and the way he felt inside me. The way his tongue felt against mine. The way he tasted of both of our arousals.

This was everything.

Abruptly, he broke away from me and lifted onto his knees, slowly pulling out of me. My eyes widened as I stared up at him, unsure of whether I did something wrong.

“Do you trust me, sweetheart?”

I nodded. It was the truth. I didn't want to, but I did.

“I don't want to do anything without your permission. I want to fuck you from behind.”

I smiled up at him, at the tenderness in his voice. “You don't have to ask.”

That was all he needed to hear. His hands gripped my hips and he quickly flipped me onto my stomach. “Get on your knees,” he purred from behind me as his fingers trailed over my ass cheeks. “Put your ass in the air for me.”

Obedying his command, I pulled my knees beneath my body and lifted my bottom up. He settled behind me and pressed his cock against my center. He pressed one hand against my back, lowering my chest down to the bed so it was just my ass that was in the air. “You're so good, so perfect,” he murmured as his fingers skated over my flesh. “One day, I want to fuck you here,” he whispered as he dragged his finger over my puckered hole. I jumped under his touch. It was something I had never attempted before, but I trusted him. “Not today, sweetheart. One day when you're ready for me.”

He thrust deep inside my pussy and I cried out as my hips were pushed forward. His hands gripped my hips and he began to move with more urgency, like he was racing against time. I pushed back against him, taking him deeper and deeper with every thrust.

“Harder,” I begged with the side of my face pressed against the bed. My voice was pleading and I didn't even care how vulnerable I sounded. I was feral for him in that moment. I needed the release. I needed his release. “Please, Wes. Fuck me harder.”

“God, I love when you fucking beg like that.”

Pulling out until just the tip was inside, he took a breath and slammed into me. I cried out as he gave me exactly what I asked for. He showed no mercy, pounding into me over and over again until my legs were shaking. He fucked me harder with every thrust, undoubtedly bruising my insides. The pain mixed with the pleasure and I pushed back against him every time he slammed into me.

It wasn't long before his movements became frantic. We were both a mess of moans and our sounds were filling the bedroom, mixing with the sounds of skin against skin. He rocked into me once more, stroking my insides, hitting the right place that had me plummeting deep into the abyss of euphoria. My orgasm took over my body and I was seeing stars as I cried out his name. Wes was right behind me, thrusting into me until I was filled to the brim with his cum. He slowed the movement of his hips, milking his cock until there was nothing left to give.

My arms gave out and I collapsed onto the bed. I was completely satiated and thoroughly fucked. Wes slowly pulled out of me and disappeared from the room. He was only gone for less than a minute before he came back with a warm washcloth. He was quiet as he cleaned me up and I let him as I felt like I was about to slip into a comatose-like state. After he was finished, I excused myself to go to the bathroom quickly.

When I returned, he was still naked but lying in his bed waiting for me. He motioned for me to come to him and I didn't hesitate. I climbed onto the mattress and settled down beside him, nestling against his side as he wrapped his arms around me.

“Stay with me tonight?” he practically whispered as he buried his face in my hair.

Okay,” I agreed, my voice soft against his skin.

He tightened his arms around me, tangling our legs together as he held on to me like he was afraid if he loosened his grip, I might slip away.

I loved his warmth. I loved how safe he made me feel.

And I wasn't sure I ever wanted to leave...

CHAPTER NINETEEN

WES

It had been almost a week since I had last seen Charlotte and I was beginning to feel like I was losing my mind. Almost a week since I fucked her on the side of my car before taking her back to my place to have my fill of her. I let her spend the night. No one had ever spent the night at my place. It was a complete mind-fuck and I was nowhere near done with her. Between my practices and games and her writing schedule right now, it had been damn near impossible trying to find time to see one another.

I knew how immersed she was in her writing, the last thing I wanted to do was interrupt her work. I was usually exhausted by the end of the day and she was working well into the evening. We talked every day, whether it was through texts and calls or FaceTime. It wasn't ideal, but it was the only thing that was working for us.

And I was going to take whatever time I could have with her, regardless of how it was spent.

I wanted to see her. I needed to see her. She was getting close to finishing her book and the pressure was on for her. I could hear the tiredness in her voice whenever we spoke. She went from taking her time and working through it to working like a madwoman. She needed a break, but I couldn't tell her that. She had to decide that on her own.

The guys were already in the locker room getting ready when I arrived at the training facility. I wasn't late, but I

wasn't early and Coach Anderson wasn't particularly fond of us running behind.

"Anderson didn't see you when you got in, did he?" Nico questioned me as I took a seat next to him. He was pretty much dressed already, except for his skates, helmet, and gloves.

I shook my head, moving quickly as I began to dress. "I didn't see him anywhere, so I'm hoping he doesn't notice."

"Where were you?" Nico asked as he directed his attention back to his feet.

"I just wasn't paying attention to the time and got a late start driving here. It's all good, though, I'm here now."

Nico looked at me as I slid my socks over my shin guards. "Listen, you know I don't normally like to ask uncomfortable questions, but are you okay?"

My eyebrows pulled together and I studied his expression. There was a touch of worry washing over his eyes, which wasn't something Nico typically displayed. "I'm good. I've just been distracted."

He sighed. "Are you ever going to tell me what's actually going on?"

I smiled and shrugged. "Eventually, yeah."

He didn't press any harder, instead letting the topic go as we finished getting dressed and headed out onto the ice. Coach Anderson was already out there waiting and thankfully, I wasn't the last one out. It went unnoticed that I wasn't on time like everyone else and I was glad for that. The last thing I needed was to be on the chopping block with our coach.

He wasn't a bad guy, but he wasn't the easiest to get along with. He demanded greatness and if you weren't going to be able to keep up or meet his expectations, you were immediately on his shit list.

We all skated around the arena, working our legs and pausing to stretch on the ice before we got down to practice. We worked through different drills that had sweat dripping

down my back. Practices were always grueling and I always worked like I had something to prove.

Even if I was a little mentally distracted.

Fucking Charlotte. I couldn't stop thinking about her.

Nico passed the puck to me and I almost missed it. I glanced at our coach and he was looking at Lincoln and Mac instead. Thank fuck for that. If he saw me standing here with my head in the clouds thinking about something other than hockey, I would have been skating the length of the ice with no stick and puck for the rest of practice.

Time felt like it dragged on, but before I knew it, time was up and we were heading off the ice. As I sat in the locker room, I tuned out the rest of the guys as they were all talking amongst themselves. Something strange had washed over me. It was the most absurd feeling I had ever had and I couldn't find the right words to describe it.

I had spent the majority of my life eating, sleeping, and breathing hockey. My love for the game hadn't disappeared, but there was a shift in what was important to me.

She wasn't supposed to be one of those things...

Yet I couldn't get her out of my fucking head.

My grandmother was already at the restaurant, waiting at a table for me when I walked in. I had gotten out of practice a little later since I needed to get a shower. Her face lit up as she saw me walking toward her table and she rose to her feet to pull me in for a hug.

"Wes," her voice was soft and warm. She released me and took her seat back at the table. I sat down across from her. "How are you, sweetie? How was your day?"

I shrugged with indifference. "It was good. Practice was exhausting. How was your day?"

"Oh, it was lovely," she said with a smile. "Evelyn and I met up to play pickleball this morning and then we had lunch at the country club. She's been trying to stay out of the house

so Charlie can work without any distractions, so we ended up going to some shops downtown.”

Charlie. *Charlotte.*

“That sounds like it was a lovely day. I’m so glad that you and Evelyn have each other to spend time with.”

My grandmother continued to smile as mischief danced in her eyes. “So am I. From what she told me, it seems like you’ve also found someone else to spend your time with.”

I stared at her for a moment. My heart pounded in my chest. I hadn’t spoken about Charlotte with her, but judging by the way she was looking at me, she knew. Of course she knew. If Evelyn knew, then the two of them were bound to gossip about it.

I picked up the decanter of water from the center of the table and poured it into my glass. “You mean Charlotte.”

My grandmother nodded. “Evelyn said the two of you have been talking frequently and spending time with one another.”

I nodded, taking a sip of my water. “We have. I haven’t seen her in the past week because our schedules haven’t been matching up.”

“She’s a great girl,” my grandmother said with admiration. “And you already know how highly I think of you.”

“She is pretty great,” I agreed as I smiled back at her. “We’re just friends, though, so don’t go getting any ideas. I know how the two of you are together when you get to gossiping.”

She simply smiled at me but didn’t bother to argue as our server came over and we both ordered. The small restaurant offered the homestyle cooking that she loved. I had a go-to order when we were here, so I just went ahead and ordered that without needing to look at the menu.

“You know, I just want the best for you, Wes,” my grandmother said with a touch of sadness in her voice after our

server had departed from our table. “I want you to be happy in life.”

I tilted my head to the side. “You don’t think I’m happy already?”

The sadness seeped into her expression and she gave me a small smile as she shook her head. “I don’t think you aren’t happy, but I don’t think you are as happy as you let the rest of the world to believe.” She paused for a moment, folding her arms on the table. “I’m not saying you need to be with someone else to be happy. There are plenty of people who are single and happy and if I’m being honest, I truly believe you have to find happiness within... I just worry about you sometimes, honey.”

I forced out a laugh, ignoring the clenching feeling in my chest as her words struck me. “I promise you I am fine. I love my life. Sometimes, I do act happy when I’m not, but it doesn’t affect me in a negative way. It just helps me to keep moving forward and to not worry about any negative bullshit.”

She stared at me for a moment with a contemplative look on her face. “I know you. You don’t like to bother or burden anyone. It’s in your nature. Do you remember when you were probably fifteen and there was a clinic you had that we forgot to put on the calendar, so instead of asking me to drive you, you tried to walk the five miles to the rink on foot?”

I grimaced at the reminder. Five miles wasn’t that far, but when you were lugging a massive hockey bag full of gear, trying to juggle a water bottle and two sticks, it wasn’t the easiest of journeys.

“Yeah,” I said with a soft laugh as I shook my head. “You were driving me everywhere all the time. It was my fault we didn’t put it on the calendar, so I didn’t want to bother you with taking me.”

“You’re not a bother to people, Weston. You can ask them for help. You can let them get close. It’s not a bad thing.” A sad smile pulled on her lips. “When I think about how you keep everyone at arm’s length, it sometimes hurts my heart for you. It makes me think of your grandfather. He was the same

way when we first met. He was afraid to let me in because he didn't want to get hurt. Eventually, his walls crumbled and I couldn't have imagined my life without him."

"The two of you were different, though," I told her with reluctance. "You were soulmates. I haven't found that with anyone yet."

She studied me for a moment. "One day, you will and it will be the most amazing thing you'll ever experience."

I swallowed roughly, refusing to let my brain entertain the thoughts of Charlotte. "I hope you're right."

She smiled. "I am."

CHAPTER TWENTY

CHARLOTTE

I stared at my computer screen and drummed my fingertips along the keys, not putting enough pressure to hit any of the letters. There was something that felt like it was missing from the story and I couldn't put a finger on it. Diana had been happy with what I sent over thus far, but there were so many steps to the process of publishing a book it hadn't even been through yet. I read over everything I wrote before sending it to her, and then she would do a read-through before diving in to do an edit and tear it apart.

It was a long, drawn-out process and they wanted to be able to get it out by next summer, which was why I needed to have a completed manuscript as soon as possible. I would get it back from Diana after she ripped it to shreds and then we would enter the rewriting process and it was rinse and repeat until the entire thing was perfect. That didn't even touch the following three books I would need to write in the series.

There was always a point where I started to feel like the story was stale and then I wanted to trash the entire book. In a moment of self-doubt, I texted Aurora because I needed someone to talk me off the ledge of throwing the whole thing out. Instead of texting me back like a normal person, she promptly called me.

"You are not going to touch anything you've written, do you hear me?" she said as soon as I answered the call. Her voice was stern because she knew that was what I needed. It was all part of my process and Aurora was always there to talk me down.

“I just feel like it’s complete shit. I’m so close to being done, but I feel like it’s missing something. I don’t know if it’s missing something emotional or high stakes or what it is.”

Aurora sighed. “Charlie, this is what you do. You write a killer book and then your self-doubt creeps in. I am telling you it is great the way it is. If you want to add some high stakes, make them have some kind of rift in the relationship. Nothing too big or bad, though, because your readers want a happily ever after.”

I mimicked her sigh. “Can’t I just kill one of the main characters and call it a day?”

“No, you fucking psychopath. You’re writing a romance, not a thriller. They want a sappy love story. They want to feel all warm and gooey inside. You cannot kill anyone, do you understand me?”

“Yes, mother. I will not kill any of my characters.”

“Just keep writing. Look over your plot, find somewhere that you can plug in an external problem but make it an easy one to solve.” She paused for a moment. “And for the love of God, from someone who enjoys reading romance novels, please do not have it be some type of miscommunication.”

I sighed again. “You are the romance guru, so whatever you say.”

“Thank you. Now get back to writing.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Love you, bye!” Aurora ended the call before I had the chance to say anything else. I was forever grateful for having her in my corner. She knew how to help me when I really needed it. She wasn’t afraid to tell me the things I didn’t want to hear, especially when it was something I needed to come to terms with.

I took her advice and didn’t bother rereading any of my words. Instead, I went back to the drawing board. As I began to replot the last ten chapters of the book, my phone vibrated as a message came through. My heartbeat quickened when I saw Wes’s name on the screen.

WES

Hey, stranger. When do I get to see you again?

I couldn't help but smile. He was so dramatic. I was the furthest thing from a stranger to him now. We hadn't seen each other in almost a week, which had been torture, yet it also felt necessary. After sleeping together, I knew I needed to take a step back. I couldn't let him in, not in the way he was creeping beneath my skin.

This was only temporary. I couldn't give him my heart.

CHARLOTTE

Try back again in like three months.

WES

Three months?! I'll probably die if I have to wait that long to see you again.

I laughed and shook my head. He was borderline ridiculous, but he was extremely entertaining. Not to mention he was really good at a lot of different things... those were all just added bonuses.

CHARLOTTE

You are overly dramatic.

WES

You love it, though.

CHARLOTTE

I plead the fifth.

The last thing I was going to do was admit the effect he had on me. I couldn't admit it when I was already living in a state of denial because I refused to acknowledge it myself. He was charming—I was certain he had this effect on everyone who encountered him, whether it was on an intimate level or not.

WES

You wound me, Charlotte.

Seriously, though... three months?

CHARLOTTE

No. I was just being dramatic myself.

If I were smart, I would never see him again.

WES

What a hypocrite.

Are you free tonight by any chance?

There was an instant twinge of guilt and my stomach rolled with the feeling. He had only asked me two other times this past week and I turned him down both times. Now, I was going to have to turn him down again and I couldn't help but feel like a complete asshole for it.

CHARLOTTE

I'm not. My brain had the brilliant idea to change some things with this book, so now I'll be spending the rest of the day and night reworking the last ten chapters of this stupid thing.

WES

Well, that does not sound fun at all. Maybe it's for the best with the book, if you feel like you're making the right decision.

Who the hell was this guy?

He never once questioned anything I ever said when it came to my work. He barely even understood what I did and he was so goddamn supportive. Instead of adding to the guilt of me turning him down, he was nothing short of sympathetic and supportive.

I needed to get him out of my life before he became a permanent fixture.

CHARLOTTE

I think it is. I feel like it will add to the story and make it better.

WES

Then that is all that matters.

I have to leave again tomorrow but maybe when I get back we can find some time to see each other?

Other than Aurora and my publishing team, there wasn't anyone I really talked this openly about my work with. I talked to Leo from time to time, but he had his own life and I didn't

want to bother him with it. Wes was genuinely interested. He loved talking to me about me and it was so weird and felt so unnatural. I couldn't help but feel like he just understood me and even if he didn't, he was willing to be as accommodating as possible.

CHARLOTTE

That would be perfect.

I stared at my computer screen, realizing exactly what it was that the story was missing. There were intimate scenes, but they didn't have enough depth. They were more closed door and I knew I needed to open said door. I needed to let my readers inside, to see the connection between the characters. The external conflict needed to be a threat to the connection they had. It needed to threaten their relationship, but I needed them to solve it together.

My eyes fell back to my phone as I chewed on the inside of my lip. If I was going to write steamier scenes, I knew what I needed to do. I was lacking the inspiration for that. Wes could give me exactly what I needed.

CHARLOTTE

I have a favor to ask you...

WES

I'm all yours, sweetheart.

My heart practically melted as I read over the sentence three times before shoving the feeling away.

CHARLOTTE

Would you be willing to help me with some research?
When you get back, of course...

WES

It would be my honor ;)

Locking my phone, I set it back down on the table as a feeling of giddiness filled me. After the other night with him, I came home feeling so inspired and wrote a very steamy scene. It was strange for me to put it in words and I had struggled with it since then.

We were tiptoeing along a very precarious line.

Wes was the inspiration I needed for the romance I was writing. He was the perfect example of how a man should treat a woman. Even if I had agreed it would never be more than a physical connection, I still got glimpses of him that were enough to make my imagination run wild. I could only imagine how he would be if he were in a relationship with someone, and I wrote that image into the book I was writing.

As long as I kept my feelings to myself, everything would be fine.

I couldn't let fiction and reality mix together. If I did that, there would be no way for me to escape an inevitable heartbreak from him.

And that was the last thing I had come to Orchid City for.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

WES

We were on the ice, warming up before the game was about to start. I went through my typical exercises, stretching on the ice before skating around. I saw Nico skate past our team photographers and shook my head, chuckling to myself. He smiled to himself, pushing a puck along with the blade of his stick. I pushed off on the ice with the inside edges of my skates as I headed over to Nico.

I bumped my shoulder into his as I came up beside him. “You’re awfully smiley today,” I said softly with a smile. “I wonder why that is.”

He tilted his head to the side, giving me a sideways glance. “No idea what you’re talking about.”

“Mhm,” I murmured as I stole the puck from him. “I’m sure it doesn’t have anything to do with a certain someone who came along for the trip.”

Nico lifted my stick with his own and took the puck back before skating over to our goalie. He took a shot and I followed behind him, taking the rebound shot that bounced off Wolfe’s block. Nico skated back around the net and I sent the puck top shelf above Wolfe’s left shoulder.

Warm-ups ended and we headed back into the locker room while the Zamboni cut the ice. Music was pounding through the arena and it wasn’t long before we were all walking down the tunnel. Kids hung over the railing from the stands as we walked through the opening and I lifted my gloved hands to

give them all fist bumps. I remembered what it was like as a kid, especially as one who lived for the game of hockey.

Something so small, so simple, could make all the difference in someone's life.

Since I was on the first line, I took my spot on the ice for the national anthem. I rocked my body back and forth, shifting my weight on my skates to get the blood pumping. The singer's voice was loud and high pitched as she sang into the microphone. I stared straight ahead, focusing on nothing as I pushed the sound from my mind. My head was in the game with Charlotte lingering in the back of my mind. I had tucked her away in a safe place inside there and I would entertain those thoughts after we won the game.

After the song was over, I slid my helmet onto my head and took my position outside of the face-off circle. Nico was in the center, crouched down, ready to battle for the puck. The ref dropped the black puck onto the ice and it was go time. Nico won the battle and we were all moving across the ice, chasing after the puck.

The game was intense and the tension was so fucking thick. Their team was a decent matchup with us and they weren't making this an easy win by any means. We were tied 2-2 and everyone was so goddamn exhausted. We had no choice but to keep pushing on. When you reached the point of exhaustion to the extent that you felt like you couldn't move your legs, you worked even harder. It had been instilled in all of our minds. It was the only way to play and this wasn't a loss that we were going to willingly give them.

Then again, they weren't exactly ready to hand it over to us either.

The third period was flying by and we only had three minutes left. Everyone was ready for the game to be over, but if we could just keep the game tied, then we would slip into overtime. Even though we were ready to be done, no one wanted to lose. We had quite the streak going but it didn't take much for something to disrupt that.

Playing against a team that was an even match when it came to skill was exactly what would ruin a winning streak. And in a fast game like hockey, fractions of seconds were so goddamn important. Anything could change with the right shift in play and that was what ended up happening to us.

I pushed forward, attempting to shoulder past one of their players as I watched their center get a breakaway. He snagged the puck from Mac after a clean hit left him stuck against the boards. Their center was barreling down the ice, his feet moving so fucking fast as he sped toward our net. Wolfe was anticipating his movements, but he couldn't read where he was going to shoot. I glanced across the ice, catching sight of Nico tangled up with their left winger.

He broke away from him and we were all chasing after the other team's center, but we weren't quick enough. No one was able to reach him or catch up to him in time. He sniped a shot right past Wolfe and the buzzer sounded loudly throughout the entire arena. You could feel the defeat as it settled around all of us. I slowed down, while the rest of the guys did the same, and their center celebrated his goal.

I watched, completely confused, as another player from the team celebrated too, as if it was his own goal. He skated over to the boards and jumped into the air. His hips slammed against the glass and my eyes widened as I saw Harper abruptly stand up and stumble backward. Nico was already moving across the ice, barreling directly toward the player.

Fuck. This wasn't good at all.

I began to move, skating after Nico as he went directly up to the guy and cross-checked him in the chest. The coy look on the player's face fell as he was pushed back into the boards.

“What the fuck was that for, bro?” he shouted at Nico as he threw his stick and gloves onto the ice. “You've been running at me all fucking night.”

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

“Goddammit, Nico,” I muttered as Mac came up beside me.

I hung back, letting Nico have his moment as he grabbed a fistful of the player's jersey and the top of his chest protector. All it took was one blow to the side of his head and the guy's entire body went limp as he crumpled onto the ice.

"Well, this isn't good," Mac said just as I began to skate toward Nico.

He didn't bother following the player onto the ice. He abandoned him and moved over to the glass, staring out to where Harper was. She had a bloodied napkin under her nose. It all happened within a matter of seconds and I didn't think anyone noticed the interaction but me. There were only a few minutes left and the other player was shakily getting to his feet from where he was laying on the ice.

Nico got a penalty but instead he just went straight back to the locker room. It left us fucked for the last couple minutes of the game. We were already fucking tired and now we were down a man during the penalty kill. We ended up losing and we all felt the effect from it. Defeat hung heavily in the air as we headed back into the locker room.

My best friend was already showered and dressed in his suit, picking at a scab that was forming on his hand. He looked fucking stressed and I knew why. Harper was hurt and he wasn't able to get to her. Thankfully, it looked like she just had a bloody nose, but I knew it was killing him.

"I saw what happened," I said quietly as I sat down next to him. "He's lucky you knocked him out with one hit."

Nico looked over at me and his eyes looked tortured. "He's her ex."

My eyes widened. It all made complete sense now. "Oh, fuck. So, what he did wasn't an accident."

Nico shook his head. "I need to see her."

"I know, man," I frowned, feeling so sorry for him. I would be the same way. If it were Charlotte... fuck. I didn't know what I would have done. "We'll be out of here soon enough. No one said anything about going out, so I'll cover for you when we get back to the hotel if needed."

“Thanks, bro. I appreciate you,” he practically whispered.

“It’s what I’m here for.”

We were like brothers. I would always have his back.

When we got back to the hotel, Nico disappeared and I headed up to my room without bothering with anyone else. The whole thing that happened during the game left me feeling unsettled. I couldn’t explain it. I just needed to talk to her. My phone was already in my hand and I pressed the Call button next to Charlotte’s name as I lifted it up to my ear. I let myself into the hotel room and closed the door behind me.

“Hello?”

I let out a sigh of relief. I didn’t know why I had a feeling that something bad had happened to her, but I did. Hearing the sound of her voice brought me a sense of peace. It washed over me as I kicked off my shoes and dropped down onto the bed.

“Wes?” Her voice was hesitant when I didn’t say anything in response. “Is everything okay?”

“Yeah,” I breathed as I sat up and shrugged off my suit jacket and loosened my tie. “I just needed to hear your voice.”

She was quiet for a second. “Did something happen?”

“Nico got into a fight with a player on the other team after he hurt the girl Nico is seeing.”

She gasped. “Wait, how did that happen? Is she okay?”

“Yeah,” I let out another sigh of relief before giving her a rundown of what happened. I paused after explaining it all before I let the words fall from the tip of my tongue. “After it happened, I just couldn’t stop thinking about it. It could have been you. If something ever happened to you... I just needed to hear your voice, Charlotte.”

She let out a shallow breath. “I’m here and I’m okay. I promise.”

“Not seeing you is literally driving me insane. I’ve been patient and understanding, but fuck. Talking to you isn’t enough for me, sweetheart.”

She was so silent I thought she had hung up. “We agreed to no strings. Don’t go getting attached, Cole.”

I couldn’t help but chuckle. She was quite possibly the most difficult person I had ever met.

“I would never.”

What a fucking lie.

It was too late. I was already attached.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

CHARLOTTE

When I woke up the next morning, my grandmother was sitting out by the lanai, sipping her coffee. I smiled when I saw how peaceful she looked, but then I realized she was focused on what someone else was saying. Phyllis was sitting there beside her, the two of them deep in conversation while they had their morning dose of caffeine. I stood inside, watching them. When Phyllis paused, my grandmother began to get animated. The two of them were comical to watch together. They were both devious women who loved to stir the pot. I couldn't help but wonder if they had been concocting this whole plan the entire time. Had they been the ones to set Wes and I up? They played it off as if it were divine intervention, but the dots were finally connecting.

Grams and Phyllis were best friends, they knew about one another's lives better than anyone else. Phyllis just so happened to have a single, handsome grandson and my grandmother had me who was also single. It was a perfect plan if you sat down and thought about it. Neither of them were stupid and I was beginning to question whether or not they were the masterminds behind this grand scheme.

After grabbing myself a piping hot mug of coffee, I slipped out through the already opened door and strolled over to where they were sitting. My grandmother quickly stopped talking about whatever she was saying and Phyllis laughed softly as they looked up at me. Both of their eyes were bright and there was a hint of mischief as they smiled at me.

“Good morning, sweetie,” my grandmother said sweetly. “Come sit with us.”

I smiled at her and Phyllis and took a seat on the cushioned loveseat that was across from the two chairs they were occupying. It was off to the side of the lanai and my grandmother had it set up like a small sitting area. Water trickled from the fountain out in the garden and the birds were chirping high up in the trees. It was a beautiful morning and it was so peaceful out here.

“How are you?” Phyllis asked me with a softness in her expression. Her hair was a soft brown, although I was sure it was dyed. Her wrinkles were soft around the corners of her eyes and around her mouth. She had aged gracefully just like Grams had. It was a bizarre thought sometimes to even think of them as being grandparents. They were both in their early seventies and didn’t seem like they were a day past fifty. I supposed that was the goal in life. Live long and live young.

I took a sip of my coffee before setting it down on the table separating us. “I’m doing really well. How have you been?”

“Oh, I’m just peachy.” She grinned. “Evelyn tells me you’re working on a new book. How is that going for you?”

I didn’t doubt that Grams had said something to her, but I wondered how much Phyllis and Wes spoke.

“It’s going really well. I’ve finally hit my stride with it and it’s been coming along nicely. I plan on having the first draft of book one completed within the next week.”

“You never cease to amaze me,” Grams said proudly before turning to Phyllis. “She’s been working nonstop on it. The only time I’ve seen her really take a break was to go spend time with that lovely grandson of yours.”

Shit.

I sucked my lip between my teeth and shook my head at her. “I’ve taken more breaks than that.”

“Wes told me the two of you have been spending some time together,” Phyllis offered politely, almost as if she could tell I was a bit embarrassed.

It was a nice offering, but it did nothing for the blush that was already creeping across my cheeks. “Oh, he did?”

She nodded eagerly. “He’s quite smitten by you, Charlie. I’ve never seen Wes talk about someone the way he talks about you.”

Lifting the hot mug to my lips, I took a large gulp of the burning liquid. I half choked on it and broke into a fit of coughs. What the hell was going on? It was like my brain had tripped over a wire and I was malfunctioning. Things were just casual between Wes and I. Whatever Phyllis had witnessed was nothing. He wasn’t smitten by me. He couldn’t be.

“Charlie, are you okay?” my grandmother asked me with a look of concern contorting her expression.

I waved at her and smiled, a small nervous laugh escaping me. “I’m fine.” I looked back to Phyllis. “And Wes and I are just friends. I’m sure whatever has you thinking he’s smitten is just a fluke thing. Maybe he’s just happy about something else in his life.” I looked between Grams and Phyllis. “I don’t know what the two of you have been scheming, but it’s not going to happen. I can’t help but think you guys set us up.”

Phyllis widened her eyes, pretending to look shocked. Grams simply smiled and shook her head. “We’ve done nothing of the sort. We didn’t plan on the two of you meeting like you did, but I’m glad it worked out the way it did.”

“When we went to that hockey game, you had no intention of me meeting Wes?”

“Well, I mean, I had hoped you would.” Grams laughed softly with no apology. “Can you fault two old women for wanting their grandkids to fall in love? I mean, it’s not like we’re betting on it or anything.”

Phyllis broke out into a fit of laughter. “Evelyn, you’re a terrible liar.”

I didn’t know whether to be amused or annoyed. They were seriously placing bets on Wes and me. “Out with it. Let me hear these outlandish bets the two of you have going on.” I wasn’t surprised. They both liked to gamble. They were the

type of women who would make the stupidest bets about the littlest things just to prove the other wrong. Their friendship was truly something to be envied.

“Well, I bet Evelyn that by the time the hockey season is over, the two of you would be together,” Phyllis told me.

“And I think it will happen sooner than that,” Grams said with a shrug.

I raised a questioning eyebrow at her. “Do you have a date?”

“When it’s time for you to go home.” She paused for a minute and looked between me and her best friend. “Mark my words—it’s not going to be as easy to leave as you thought it would be when you first came here.”

I stared at her for a moment. “That’s not really a bet.”

“No, that’s my prediction. I bet Phyllis it would be sooner than the end of the season. Most definitely before the end of the year.”

I couldn’t help but laugh. This was absolutely ridiculous. “The two of you are so wrong and I can’t wait to prove it to you.” I settled deeper in my seat and shook my head as laughter spilled from my lips again. My phone vibrated from the front pocket of my hoodie and I pulled it out, seeing my brother had messaged me. “What a ridiculous idea.”

LEO

Are you busy this weekend? I was thinking about coming down to visit.

CHARLOTTE

Please do. Come save me from these crazy old women.

LEO

Oh Jesus. Done. I'll be there late tomorrow night.

“Would you like to place a bet as well then, Little Miss I Don't Fall in Love?”

I nodded. “Yes, I would. I bet both of you that neither happens. I go back home and we continue on with our lives.”

“You have yourself a bet,” Grams said as she held out her hand to shake mine. I shook hers and then did the same with Phyllis. “We look forward to you losing.”

My phone vibrated again and I expected it to be my brother, but it was Wes. My heart rate picked up and I ignored the message for a moment. I grinned at the two of them, fully accepting their challenge. It was a foolish bet. I was telling myself one thing even though my brain and heart were pulling me in a different direction. I knew Wes wasn't someone for me to get involved with, so this was just another thing to help hold me accountable for making sure I didn't fully fall for his charm. Which was definitely going to be easier said than done. I could already feel myself being drawn to him.

I needed to make sure that Grams and Phyllis were both wrong. I couldn't risk getting my heart broken again... not after what had happened the last time.

“That won't be happening.”

Turning away from the two cackling old women, I looked down at my phone and opened the unread message from Wes. I smiled to myself, although I kept it hidden and made sure neither of them were paying attention to me. Wes had begun to make it a habit of texting me each day to say good morning to me. It warmed my heart and I hated it.

WES

Good morning, Charlotte.

CHARLOTTE

Well, good morning. Guess who I'm having coffee with right now?

WES

Clearly not me.

I rose to my feet as I felt a laugh about to escape me. I couldn't sit here in front of them and have a conversation with him. Grams looked up at me and smiled, and I told them I needed to get started on my work before I excused myself and headed back into the house. I waited until I was in my room with the door locked before messaging him back. He was bad for my health but I couldn't deny myself the pleasure of talking to him.

CHARLOTTE

You wish it was you, don't you?

WES

I do. But tell me who it was so I can decide whether or not I need to be pissed off or not.

Damn him. If I had a checklist of what I looked for in a partner, he would check every last box.

CHARLOTTE

Your grandmother is here having coffee with mine.

WES

Lucky her. I'm not pissed off, but that doesn't mean I'm not jealous. She gets your attention when I want it.

I shook my head to myself.

CHARLOTTE

You'll get your chance tonight.

We had made plans to get together tonight after I was done with my work for the day. I had a few meetings and a lot to do, so it wasn't going to be until well after dinner.

WES

What did my grandmother have to say? I hope she put in a good word for me.

CHARLOTTE

I think you can manage that one without her help. You'll never believe what the two of these ladies have going on.

WES

Entertain my curiosity, please.

I debated whether or not I should tell him. I was betting against both of them because I was fucking terrified of Weston Cole. I was afraid of the potential power he could hold over me. After my last heartbreak, I swore I would never allow myself to be in a vulnerable position like that again. I could already feel myself drifting toward Wes. He consumed my every thought. I wanted all of his time, all of his attention.

This wasn't good for me, but I needed to stand my ground.

CHARLOTTE

They're betting on us.

Wes didn't respond for a second and I let out a nervous breath. I instantly regretted sending that message to him because now I was terrified he was going to reject the idea. Ignoring the gnawing feeling in my stomach, I opened my laptop and let it boot up before I went to my document to see where I needed to dive in today. I read over the last thing I wrote and checked my outline again, even though my mind continued to wander. My phone abruptly lit up and I grabbed it quicker than I ever had before.

WES

What do you mean they're betting on us?

A sigh of relief escaped me. Thank God. I was already feeling the rejection but he had swiftly brushed it away with his response. This was the type of effect I didn't want him to have on me. I didn't need to be hanging on to his every last word. I didn't need to be desperate for a response from him. I needed to detach, but I couldn't quite figure out how to navigate doing that when he was already pulling me into the depths of him.

CHARLOTTE

Your grandmother thinks we will end up together before the end of the hockey season and mine thinks it'll happen before Christmas.

WES

They are insane. I can't believe they really have bets going for that. I shouldn't be surprised though... it tracks for both of them.

CHARLOTTE

Well, I bet against them because we already agreed nothing like that will ever be happening.

WES

Of course you did :)

I'm not sure you want my opinion on the matter right now, so I'm just going to keep my real thoughts to myself.

I stared at my phone. What the hell? He couldn't just give me the smallest breadcrumb and leave it at that. He was baiting me and knew damn well I wasn't going to hesitate before taking that bait.

CHARLOTTE

That's not fair. You don't know what I want or what I don't want.

WES

Tell me what you want, Charlotte.

CHARLOTTE

I want your real thoughts on it.

It took a few minutes before he responded again. They were the longest, most agonizing minutes of my life.

And when his message finally came through, my heart crawled into my throat.

WES

I can't wait for all three of you to lose your bets.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

WES

Charlotte was driving me insane.
And that was putting it mildly.

I didn't get involved. Everything was superficial and at face value. It was always just for a good time. A quick fun little thing that came with no strings attached. No feelings ever got involved. I didn't do this.

I didn't let someone else consume my every fucking thought, yet here she was, infiltrating every inch of my mind.

After practice, I hopped in the shower in the locker room and headed over to get dressed. I got back into my clean warm-up outfit and walked over to where Nico was sitting. He was on his phone and looked up at me.

"You want to hang out?"

I wasn't supposed to be seeing Charlotte until later tonight and needed something to pass the time. I didn't want to go back to my place to sit there and stare at the clock on the wall. Counting down the seconds and the minutes was only going to drive me further into the depths of insanity.

"Come over if you want. I just planned on laying around," Nico said with a shrug. After the game last night and him knocking out Harper's ex, I wasn't sure what was really going on with him. He didn't say much to me on the flight home and I really hadn't had the chance to approach the topic with him.

"You're not going to go see her?" I asked him. I knew he went to see her last night at the hotel, but I wasn't sure what

had really happened. There was a part of me that was curious, but I also didn't feel like it was my place to question him on it. He would tell me about it when he was ready.

Nico read the message on his phone and shook his head at me. "I'm pretty sure she just wants to lay low and I don't want to overstep at all."

I nodded, understanding him completely. "Probably a good idea. You don't want to scare her away with your obsessiveness."

Nico's eyes sliced to mine. "I am not obsessive."

I snorted. I wasn't judging him for what happened last night because if I was in his position, I would have done the same thing. But he was fucking blind if he couldn't see it himself. "Dude... you know what—I'm not even going to argue with you. If you can't see your obsession with her, then you have some serious issues."

To my surprise, Nico laughed as everyone began to file out of the locker room. "You know I would never admit something like that."

"Smart of you not to," I agreed with a smile. "Although, I'm not stupid. I see shit."

"I'm sure you do," he said as he grabbed his things. "Meet me over at my place. We can play Call of Duty or something."

"Deal."

I headed over to Nico's condo and the two of us were sitting on his couch, drinking a beer while we waited for the pizza to be delivered. We were just having mindless, bullshit conversations, both of us avoiding the topics that were plaguing our minds. They weren't much different, but Nico had no clue what was even going on with me. I still hadn't let him in on my little secret and I wasn't sure if I wanted to.

If I told him about it, it made it real. And Charlotte was so damn set on nothing happening between us. I couldn't even fault her, because I had been in complete agreeance with that.

Now, I wasn't so sure. I had no fucking clue what I was doing anymore. All I knew was that I needed to see her. I needed her out of my system or else this was going to transform into something I would potentially never be able to get myself out of.

Either way... I was fucked.

Conversation shifted and we began to finally approach the topic of what went down the night before. Nico was the one to bring up the fight and then he told me about when he went to go see Harper after the game.

"So, things are getting pretty serious between the two of you?"

Nico took a sip of his beer and I glanced at the TV as we lingered in the lobby of the video game, waiting for another match of Call of Duty to start for us to join.

"Yeah," he said with a hint of defeat in his voice. Jesus, I was beginning to understand exactly what he was feeling. "I don't know what to do about it."

I looked over at him and leaned forward in my seat so I could focus on the TV screen. "What do you mean? I mean, I know the shit between you and Harper is different since there's a lot at stake with her job and everything."

I wasn't quite following. He needed to just get on board with it. It was happening and there was nothing either of them could do to stop it now. He just had to go along with it at this point.

"Remember how I tried to get her to quit? I told her to just move in with me and let me take care of her."

My head tipped backward and a string of laughter fell from my lips. I couldn't help myself. I leaned back against the couch in a rush just as the game started. Regaining myself, I instantly shot back up so I could get into the game. "Fuck," I mumbled as I tried to focus on the game, feeling a little off-kilter. "Bro. You are such a liar saying that you aren't obsessed with her. I'm assuming she declined your proposition?"

Nico laughed. “Oh, of course. I didn’t think she would actually agree. She’s too independent to do something like that, but I figured it was worth a shot. She’s been working on shooting weddings and other things to try and get away from sports. Her dream is to have her own business doing that kind of stuff instead.”

I was completely supportive of this whole idea. It simplified things for them. If Harper didn’t work for the team, they were free to do as they pleased with one another. I wished I had an outside force that was keeping Charlotte and I apart. Instead, it was both of our own stubbornness. I knew she was terrified. She was jaded. Someone had made her bitter about relationships and being in love.

I didn’t want to somehow add to that pain. I was also afraid of relying on someone else. Of letting someone in on such an intimate level like that... It scared the ever-loving shit out of me.

I was silent for a moment as I mulled over everything he said. “You want my honest opinion?”

Nico didn’t look at me as he was fully immersed in the game. “No, but I’m thinking you’re going to give it to me anyways.”

“I think you need to tell her how you really feel. You know how short life is and I don’t know what the hell you’re waiting for anymore.”

As if I should be giving him any sort of advice when I was ignoring my own feelings.

The doorbell rang just as our round ended and Nico glanced over at me. “I did tell her how I feel.” He disappeared from the room to go get the pizza and returned as I took a sip of my beer and stared at him. I was fucking surprised as hell.

“Did you tell her that you’re in love with her?”

Nico flipped open the pizza box lid and momentarily froze. “What? No. Why the fuck would I do that?”

“Because that’s how you really feel,” I told him as I grabbed a piece of pizza. It was clear as fucking day. “You’re

only lying to yourself if you think you're not in love with her.”

Nico dropped down onto the couch and mindlessly stared at the TV. He didn't grab any food. He just sat there and stared like my words had some profound effect on him. Like he hadn't even realized his feelings for her until I just spelled it out for him.

“Don't worry,” I spoke into the silence as I swallowed my food. “I won't tell anyone your secret. I'm like a vault.”

Nico let out a sigh and grabbed a slice. “Am I that obvious?”

I shrugged. He may have had everyone else fooled, but I could see through it. He was good at keeping everyone else in the dark. “Nah, not really. I just know you well enough that I can tell.”

“I can't tell her.”

My brow furrowed. “Why not?”

“Because I don't want to complicate things any more than I already have. It will only make things messier.”

I lifted my beer to my lips and took a sip. “I don't know, bro. Things are always complicated. There's nothing you can do to change it, but I think it's worth telling her.” I set my beer down. “You might be surprised when you find out that she feels the same way.”

I saw the way the two of them interacted. I saw how they both looked at each other. If Harper didn't have the same feelings as Nico, then I clearly was reading everything wrong. I doubted that. I knew it in my heart, because I found myself looking at Charlotte the same fucking way.

Goddammit.

My phone vibrated and I pulled it out to find a message from Charlotte.

CHARLOTTE

Hey you. I'm finally done with everything for the day.

“How could you possibly know that?” Nico asked me as he sunk deeper into the couch.

“If you can't tell then you really are in fucking denial.” I rolled my eyes. It was almost comical that I was the one here giving him advice. “She looks at you like you're the only thing that matters, Nico. I think you'll be pleasantly surprised when you finally tell her how you feel.”

Nico was silent as he processed the words I spoke to him. I looked back to my phone and opened up the message from Charlotte.

WES

I'm over at Nico's right now, but I was just here waiting for you to be done.

CHARLOTTE

I don't want to rush you away from your friend if you're hanging out with him. We can always see each other another day if that works better.

I half scoffed when I read her message. She was a fool to think I was going to put off seeing her another day.

WES

Absolutely not. You tell me where you're at and I'm all yours, sweetheart.

CHARLOTTE

My grandmother's home. Did you want me to come to your place instead?

I loved the way she thought. I wanted to have my way with her without any interruptions. I wanted her all to myself.

WES

That's perfect. Meet me there in about twenty minutes?

CHARLOTTE

I'll see you then.

I abruptly rose from where I was sitting on the couch. "I hate to be the one who eats and runs, but I'm going to head out."

That pulled Nico out of his thoughts and he tilted his head to the side as he looked up at me. "Since when do you have plans that I don't know about?"

A wave of guilt washed over me. I couldn't help but feel like an asshole for keeping this from my best friend. I wanted to tell him, but I couldn't. Not yet. Not until I knew what the fuck was really going on. "Who said I have any plans?"

Nico's eyebrows scrunched. "You're abruptly leaving to go home and hang out by yourself?"

A chuckle slipped from my lips. Nico knew me well enough to know that I didn't particularly enjoy being alone. "Touché." I paused for a beat. "I'm just going to help a friend out with some research stuff."

"You have other friends?" he asked with a playfulness in his tone.

I gave him the middle finger. "You're a dick."

Nico stared at me for a moment, cocking an eyebrow at me. “How do you know all my secrets, but I don’t know yours?”

I couldn’t help but smile back at him. He knew all of my secrets but this one, and I wasn’t going to tell him that. “Because I’m the vault, not you.”

“Please tell me it’s not Harper’s friend, Ava.”

I had completely forgotten about her. I led him to believe that I was a little curious about her but I let it go after that night we met. Her boyfriend had shown up at the bar and I was the one who ended up disappearing while leaving them all there. I couldn’t help but stifle a laugh because he was completely off base.

“What?” I scowled at him. “Absolutely not. I promise it’s no one you know. It’s just this girl I met who I promised to help with some research for the book she’s writing.”

He had seen me reading her books on the plane, but must not have made the connection.

Nico raised his hands up to stop me. “Forget I asked.” He laughed while shaking his head. “I don’t even want to know about the shit you’ve gotten yourself into.”

Thank God, because I didn’t want to have to try to explain it all to him.

I laughed as I began to walk through his condo to the elevator door. “I’m not quite sure what I’ve even gotten myself into, but I’m along for the ride now.” It wasn’t a lie. I was most definitely along for the most exhilarating ride of my life. “Wish me luck!”

The elevator doors slid open and I heard Nico say good luck in a questioning tone before the doors closed behind me. The elevator began to move down to the lobby and I couldn’t help but laugh. One day I would tell him and it would all make sense.

But until then, I wasn’t ready to share Charlotte with anyone.

She was mine and only mine.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

CHARLOTTE

Wes texted me a few minutes before I pulled into his parking lot to let me know to come up and the door would be unlocked. I found a parking spot out front and headed into the building before taking the elevator to his floor. I nervously shifted my weight on my feet as I waited for the doors to open. It felt like so much time had passed since we last saw each other. I found myself missing him more than I would have cared to admit.

My footsteps were light and his door was closed when I reached it. I slowly began to turn the knob but it turned by itself in my hand. I released it and Wes pulled open the door for me. A gasp escaped my lips because he surprised me. A grin lifted the corners of his lips and he reached for me, swiftly pulling me inside with him.

He spun me around, his hands on my waist as he kicked the door shut behind us. His leg pressed between mine and he urged me backward until I was pressed against the wall just inside his apartment.

“Fuck, I’ve missed you,” he murmured before claiming my mouth with his own.

He was a whirlwind and I was completely swept up in him. I didn’t have a moment to think and hesitate. Instead, my instincts kicked into gear and I lifted my arms to link them around the back of his neck as I kissed him back. He tasted faintly of beer and the cedar scent of his cologne filled my

senses. His lips were soft and tender as he kissed me with a sweetness he hadn't shown me before.

There was an urgency behind the sweep of his tongue, but he was holding back. He was taking his time, touching and tasting, teasing me with his mouth as he explored mine. I was so completely fucked and I didn't even care at this point. Sliding my hands up the back of his head, I ran my fingers through his silky waves.

Is this what it felt like to fall?

Because if it was, I was never truly in love before.

"Charlotte," Wes breathed against my lips as he pulled away and rested his forehead against mine. "I've been going crazy without you. I don't know what the hell you're doing to me."

"Don't," I whispered, not fully trusting my voice. "I don't want to talk right now, I just want to feel."

He reached up and grabbed my hand and pressed it against his chest. "Do you feel that?" he said softly as he stared down into my eyes. His heart was pounding inside his chest, just beneath my palm.

I nodded, pulling my bottom lip between my teeth.

"Good." His face dipped down to mine and he pulled my lip from my teeth and in between his own instead. "That's because of you, Charlotte. You and no one else."

I swallowed roughly as he released his hold on my lip and ran his tongue across the small indents he left in my flesh. "Wes," I whispered in warning. I was terrified of what else might possibly fall from his perfect lips. I didn't want to hear it. I didn't need this to be any more complicated than it already felt like it was becoming. "You promised no strings."

He didn't speak another word. Instead, his hands dropped down to the backs of my thighs and he abruptly lifted me into the air. "I don't want to talk anymore," he said with a declaration as I wrapped my legs around his waist. I held on to his shoulders, feeling his firm muscles beneath my palms. "I just want you. Are you okay with that?"

“Of course,” I murmured as I kept my hold on him and let him carry me back to his bedroom. He moved quickly through his apartment, not stopping until he was laying me down on the plush mattress.

Wes released me and stood at the edge of the bed, his eyes probing mine as he stared down at me. He climbed onto the bed after a moment, settling his body over the top of mine. We were both fully clothed and he left me a tad confused as he laid there, peering down at me as he stroked the sides of my face. He was silent and his eyes were filled with so many different emotions. I wanted to reach inside his mind and dissect his thoughts, but the thought alone sent a shiver down my spine.

With the way he was looking at me, I was afraid to see what he was thinking. I was afraid of where it may lead my thoughts. He was dangerous to my heart and this game we were playing was beginning to feel like it wasn't a game at all. If it were, Wes was playing to win and he most definitely had the upper hand on me right now.

His mouth found mine in a slow and torturous kiss. He breathed me in, his tongue sweeping across my own. I tilted my chin, granting him access as he explored every inch of my mouth. He was draining the oxygen from my lungs and at that moment, I may have let him take every last breath from my lungs.

His hands slid down my body, calculated and effortless as he grabbed the hem of my shirt and pushed it up my torso. We only broke apart for brief moments, shifting our weight as he stripped me bare and I peeled his clothing from his sculpted body. His mouth roamed across the planes of my body as he inched lower and lower until he was settling between my legs. He looked up at me as he pinned my thighs down to the bed.

“I've been fucking dying to taste you, Charlotte.” He let out a soft breath, the warmth skating across my skin. “Let me worship you like the fucking queen you are.”

A moan escaped me as he slid his tongue against my flesh. He was consuming me and it felt like he was everywhere. His

tongue flicked my clit and warmth was building within my body as he continued to lick my pussy. His mouth moved against me, eating me like I was his last fucking meal. Wes knew exactly what he was doing, fucking me with his mouth, and I couldn't even fight against the primal need that filled me.

My hands reached for his head, my fingers tangling in his hair as I gripped the wavy locks. He growled against me, the sound vibrating against my center as it sent a shock wave through my entire body. "Don't stop, Wes," I practically begged as my hips involuntarily bucked. "Please don't stop."

"Your wish is my command," he whispered against my skin. "I want you coming on my tongue. I want you to fall apart into a million pieces."

His tongue circled around my clit and he didn't stop as he continued to fuck me with it. He dipped it inside me and my pussy clenched around him involuntarily. I was coming apart at the seams. He wanted me to fall apart and I was. I was so goddamn close to the edge.

"That's it, baby," he breathed as he continued to circle my clit. He released one thigh and slid a finger deep inside me. "I'll pick up the pieces and put you back together after I'm done with you."

He didn't stop. He was relentless and we were both driven by need. It didn't take long before my orgasm tore through my body. It erupted deep inside like a volcano. The molten lava spilled into my veins and I cried out as I shattered around his finger and tongue. He continued to lap at my pussy, drinking every single drop.

Wes pulled his finger from me and began to move up the length of my body before he sank deep inside me in one fluid movement. I was still in a daze, still riding out the waves of ecstasy from the orgasm he brought me to. My hands grabbed his shoulders and I lifted my legs to wrap them around his waist.

"You are the most beautiful person I've ever met, Charlotte. Inside and out." His mouth dipped down to mine

and I tasted myself on his lips. “I’m completely captivated by you.”

He kissed me deeply, his tongue instantly finding mine as he began to rock inside me. He was big and stretched me wide as he fucked me slowly. His cock slid in and out as he began to thrust his hips, taking his time while he stroked the walls of my pussy with his length. I wanted more. I wanted all of him. I wanted everything he had to give me.

Lifting my hips, I granted him more access and he moaned into my mouth as he dove in deep. He filled me to the hilt. “Jesus fucking Christ,” he murmured against my lips. “So tight. So fucking wet. And so fucking mine.”

“Yes, Wes,” I moaned as he thrust harder. “I’m all yours and no one else’s.”

“I hope you mean that, Charlotte. Because when I’m done with you, there won’t be anything left for anyone else.”

He shifted onto his knees and grabbed my ankles, pulling them away from his waist. He lifted them up to his neck and I hooked them around his nape as he flattened my thighs against his chest. Sliding his hands around my backside, he gripped my ass and lifted my hips as he began to thrust into me.

Wes was unforgiving as he began to move faster. Each thrust was harder. My hands fisted the sheets and I held on as the bed began to groan beneath us. My back was pinned down against the bed with my hips lifted up into the air. My ankles were barely holding on as I had them wrapped around the back of his neck. With one hand gripping my ass, he lifted the other to wrap his arm around my legs, keeping them flush against his torso.

“Goddammit, Charlotte. You take my cock like you were made for it.” He groaned and slammed into me again. “I love seeing you like this. Like a beautiful fucking mess.”

“Harder, Wes,” I moaned, urging him to not stop as I gripped the sheets tightly. “Please fuck me harder.”

His eyes were glued to mine. “Anything for you, my queen.”

He made good on his promise. He fucked me harder, fucking me straight into a whole different universe. Wes didn't stop until I was coming apart at the seams, splitting in two. I lost myself around him as my orgasm sucked me deep into a vortex. He thrust into me, murmuring my name as he spilled his cum deep inside me. We rode out the waves of euphoria as we drifted deeper into the abyss.

I wasn't sure when he pulled out of me, but he lowered himself onto the bed, pulling me into his arms as he rolled us onto our sides. We were breathless, each of us struggling with every shallow breath. He was behind me, his limbs tangled in mine as he wrapped himself around me. His touch was light as he ran his feather-like fingertips across every inch of my flesh.

"You're so goddamn perfect, Charlotte," he whispered into the darkness of the room. His words enveloped me in their warmth and he surrounded me with his presence alone. "I'm never letting you go."

"You said you wouldn't get attached," I reminded him, my voice sounding distant as I struggled to keep my eyelids open. I was completely satiated and exhausted, but I felt safe, like my soul had reached its final destination.

Like I was home.

Wes's voice was so quiet, if I hadn't been so focused on him, I would have missed the words.

"I lied."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

WES

Rolling onto my side, I stared at Charlotte as she slept. It was early in the morning and I almost slept through my alarm. Her body was warm, nestled beside mine. She barely stirred when the alarm sounded through the room. I was thankful. The last thing I wanted to do was disturb her when she looked so goddamn peaceful. She had to have been exhausted from last night.

My arm was tucked under her head and I brushed a hair from her face as I dragged my fingertips across her soft skin. She was so fucking perfect. We had both drifted off to sleep after round one last night, but we woke up at some point in the middle of the night for another taste. Charlotte was intoxicating. I couldn't get enough of her.

Her face twitched before relaxing again. Her breathing was soft and even, her head heavy on my arm. This was exactly where she belonged. After spending the night with her like this, I couldn't imagine her anywhere else.

I didn't want her anywhere else.

Memories of the night before flooded my mind. I told her the truth, that I had lied when I said I wouldn't get attached to her. Getting attached was never part of my plan. She was just supposed to be a good time. Another one that I could take or leave. Yet, here we were. There was no sense in denying it anymore. She deserved to know the truth... and what she decided to do with it was her choice.

I had fallen in love with her well before I realized it.

And there was no way to stop it now. It was far too late and we were in too deep.

“I can feel you watching me,” she murmured softly, so quiet that I almost didn’t hear her.

“I’m not watching you,” I argued as I pulled her closer to me. “I’m admiring. Am I not allowed to appreciate how beautiful you are? How peaceful you look when you sleep?”

She nestled her head against my chest. “You don’t have to try to charm me, Wes. You already have me.”

I frowned. “I’m simply speaking the truth, Charlotte. I know I don’t have to do anything to impress you.”

She laughed softly. “I didn’t say that.” She paused for a moment. “What the hell time is it anyway?”

“Early,” I murmured as I pressed my lips to her forehead and began to release her. “Go back to sleep. I have practice, but I’ll be back for you afterward.”

I slipped my arm out from under her head and watched her settle in the center of my bed. She grabbed my pillow and wrapped her arms around it, pulling it close to her chest as she buried her nose in it.

“Mmm,” she murmured, smiling the sweetest fucking smile as she looked up at me with a hooded gaze. “It smells like you.”

Grabbing the comforter, I pulled the blankets up over her shoulders, tucking her in as I placed a kiss on her temple. “Sleep, Charlotte. When you wake back up, I’ll be here.”

She nodded, still smiling as she closed her eyes. “I’ll be waiting for you.”

Thankfully, practice went by quicker than I thought it would. While it was happening, it felt like time was stretching on forever. We ended up doing some pretty intense drills, so it was easy for me to push away thoughts of Charlotte waiting for me in my bed. I was exhausted after we returned to the locker room. The rest of the guys were feeling the same pain.

We were fortunate enough that we didn't have a game until tomorrow night, so we could at least get some rest today.

No one really hung around after we were finished. The guys stripped out of their gear and put their clothes back on before heading home for the day. Nico and I walked out together when we left. The sun was already hot, even though it had only been in the sky for an hour or so.

"How did your research session go?" Nico questioned me with a mischievous look as we headed into the parking lot.

I couldn't fight the grin that stretched my lips wide. "It went well. Really well, actually."

"Are you going to see her again?"

I nodded, stopping by Nico's car as we reached his first. "I'll be seeing her as soon as I get home."

Nico stared at me for a second. "Wait... did she sleep at your place?" His eyes widened as a wave of confusion washed over his ocean blue eyes. "Dude. Who is she and what haven't you been telling me? You never let anyone spend the night."

I shrugged, but I knew he wasn't going to let it go now. I had given him a small piece and he was going to want to know everything. I was going to tell him eventually, but after my revelation this morning, there was no better time than the present.

She wasn't just a fling.

I wanted her as a permanent fixture in my life.

"I met her through my grandmother. I didn't bring her up before because it was just casual and nothing serious."

"Seems pretty fucking serious if you let her sleep in your bed," he said with a laugh.

The dampness from my hair clung to my fingers as I ran them through the tousled waves. "I don't know what I'm doing, bro. It wasn't supposed to be like this."

Nico stared at me before a grin stretched across his lips and he slowly shook his head. "I never thought I'd see the day

that someone would have you fucked up like this. Welcome to the club, my friend.”

“What the hell do I do?”

I had no idea how to navigate this. I fucked around and got attached. She was in my head, consuming my every thought. She was burrowed under my rib cage and cracked open my chest. Charlotte Wells had made a home for herself inside my heart. And I wasn't sure I ever wanted her to leave.

The things I felt for her were something I had never experienced before. They felt foreign, yet they felt natural. Like they were exactly as they should be. She was a force I couldn't fight. I had no choice but to succumb to the hold she had over me.

“You just have to go with your heart, man,” he said with an exasperated sigh. “You have to trust it. You've already let her in. Does she know how you feel?”

I shrugged. “I haven't told her.”

“Should I give you the same advice you gave me?”

Shaking my head, I laughed. “Nope. That won't be necessary, kind sir.”

Nico chuckled and pulled open the door to his car. “Am I going to get to meet this girl sometime?”

“If she doesn't decide to run in the opposite direction.”

He smiled. “If she stuck around this long already, I think you're good.”

“I don't know if that's a compliment or an insult.” I narrowed my eyes and tilted my head to the side.

“It's open for interpretation,” Nico threw at me before hopping into his car.

My apartment was quiet when I entered. I kicked off my shoes at the front door and my footsteps were light as I quietly strode to my bedroom. As I slipped inside, I saw Charlotte's light brown hair poking out from under the covers. She didn't stir

and I didn't want to disturb her while she was still asleep. Leaving her where she was, I headed into the bathroom and stripped out of my clothes before turning on the water to the shower.

The sound of the running water filled the room and I stepped into the hot water. Closing my eyes, I tipped my head back and let it stream down over my head and down my back. I washed the sweat from my body and my hair. My movements were rushed as I knew what was waiting for me in the other room. I wanted to crawl back in bed and spend the rest of the day tangled up in Charlotte.

After I was finished, I turned off the water and quickly dried off before wrapping a towel around my waist. I was quiet as I entered my bedroom and I abandoned my towel on the floor as I stepped into a fresh pair of boxer briefs. My feet carried me across the room and I pulled back the blankets, careful to not wake her as I slipped in behind her.

I closed the distance between us, wrapping my arms around her as I pressed the front of my body against the back of hers. She stirred under my touch and shifted against me.

"There you are," she breathed as I slid my hand around her waist. She grabbed it and pulled my arm tightly around her. "I missed you."

"I'm here now."

"Good." She was silent for a beat. "I like your bed, but I like it more when you're in it too."

I swallowed roughly as I buried my face in the nape of her neck. "You can be in my bed whenever you want. I'd have you in it every night if I had the option." I wanted to say more. I wanted to split my heart wide open and tell her everything.

She laughed quietly. "If only, right?"

I couldn't.

My jaw tightened. "Right."

She wasn't ready to hear how my feelings for her had blossomed from a seed into a full-fledged fucking field of

roses.

Her phone began to ring from the nightstand and she groaned as she shifted away from me and picked it up. Her brother's name flashed across the screen and she gave me an apologetic look before she answered it.

“Hello?”

I rolled onto my back as she sat up, and slid my hands under my head as I watched her.

Her eyebrows pinched together. “I thought you weren't coming until tonight.” She paused. “Is Grams there to let you in? I'm not home yet.” A blush crept across her face and she smiled sheepishly at me. “I'm at a friend's.”

I snorted and shook my head at her.

“Yeah, I'm at his house.”

I raised a questioning eyebrow at her as something pulled at my heart. Had she told him about me?

“Hold on.” She pulled her phone away from her face. “He wants us to meet him for lunch. Are you okay with that?”

“Absolutely.”

There was no hesitation in my answer. I knew she and her brother were close. If he was inviting both of us, then that meant there was more to it than just eating food. And I wanted to make sure he knew my intentions weren't what he probably suspected.

“Okay, we'll meet you there in an hour.” Charlotte ended the call with him and quickly looked over at me. “You don't have to come if you don't want to.”

Pulling my hands out from under my head, I reached for her. “Do you not want me to come, Charlotte?”

She bit down on her bottom lip as I pulled her body back against mine. “I do.”

“Then I'm already there.”

Her brother was already waiting for us in the small cafe when we got there. Charlotte walked over to him, smiling brightly as she pulled him in for a hug. He stared me down over her shoulder and as they broke apart, he smiled back at his sister.

“Leo, this is Wes. You remember him, right?”

I held my hand out to him. “It’s good to see you again.”

“You too,” he said gruffly as he assessed me with his gaze. I expected this. She was his younger sister and he didn’t know me well enough to pass judgment. He was protective of her, and I was a potential threat. If he knew we had been seeing one another, he had warrantable reservations about it all. He needed to know the truth—that I had no plans of ever breaking his sister’s heart.

We placed our orders at the counter before heading to the table Leo had saved for us. We all settled into our seats and got engrossed in a comfortable, safe conversation. Leo talked a bit about his figure skating and Charlotte filled him in on the progress with her book. She was supposed to be finishing it next week. The lingering question of what happened after that hung in the air, but Charlotte quickly shifted the conversation away before the topic was brought up.

Our names were called and Leo and I walked over to get our orders while Charlotte waited.

“Charlie is pretty enamored by you, Wes,” he said in a frigid tone as we reached the counter. He grabbed one plate of food and held it out to me. “She speaks very highly of you, but I don’t know you well enough to form any real opinion.”

“The feeling is mutual,” I told him as I took the plate. Neither of us moved as I turned to stare at him, waiting for him to speak again.

“What are your intentions with my sister?”

I grabbed a second plate. “I want whatever she will give me. I have no intentions of hurting her or breaking her heart. I just want her to be happy and I hope eventually that will be with me.”

His gaze was cold and hard. A muscle in his jaw twitched. “I believe you, or I don’t think you’d be here. I will only say this once... if you hurt her, I hurt you.”

“I would expect that,” I told him with a nod.

“Good.” Leo grabbed two of the drinks, leaving a plate and drink behind as we turned to walk back to the table. “She deserves the best, so don’t give her anything less.”

“I want to give her the world,” I admitted as my gaze met Charlotte’s from across the cafe. Her eyes were soft and her smile lit up her face. The way she looked at me shook me to my core. She reached deep inside and wrapped her hand around my heart. I was so fucking gone for her.

I wanted to be the reason behind the smile on her face.

Not just today, but every day.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

CHARLOTTE

I stared at my computer screen, my mouse hovering over the send button. I had finally completed my manuscript and it was ready for me to send to Diana. She had been reading along as I was writing, but we hadn't begun the editing process yet. It was still a long way from being completely done, but I felt like I could finally breathe again. The pressure had been released. The hardest part of it was over. The thing was finally fucking written.

Edits and rewrites were never fun but there was some sense of satisfaction knowing I had finished writing the first draft of book one. I was going to be able to have a little bit of a break before I had to dive back in after Diana and her team tore the whole thing apart. I let out a deep breath, feeling the nervousness in the pit of my stomach as I finally hit the send button.

It was done.

It was officially out of my hands now.

There was a heaviness that settled around me when I realized what that actually meant. It was time for me to go home. My time in Orchid City had come to an end. I came here for inspiration and I was able to find that in my surroundings and the people I spent my time with. It was unfortunate, but I was never meant to stay here. I had to get back home. I had a house that I had practically abandoned and a life and friends there. Well, considering I had become a recluse, my friends were mainly just my brother and Aurora,

but still. This was just a temporary part of my journey, not my destination.

And then there was Wes...

He was unexpected. He served his purpose in my life and I wasn't sure I was ready to close that chapter with him. I was in deeper than I had ever intended to be. Was it worth breaking my own heart just to go back to my normal life? In a way, I could protect myself if I ended things with him now. I could go back home and pretend like this never happened... even though I had written a whole-ass book that was inspired by him, so I wouldn't exactly be able to escape it.

I was fucked. I didn't know what to do.

Maybe I needed to go home just for the sake of clearing my head. I couldn't think clearly; I couldn't see straight when Wes was near me.

After seeing that my email was sent, I closed my laptop and organized my things on my desk. I grabbed my phone and sent a message to Aurora to let her know the book was officially finished. She was always in my corner, always there to cheer me on. It also helped that she was immersed in the writing world with me. She went to school for graphic design and then got into designing book covers when I started writing. It was perfect. She was able to get a job working freelance for a few different publishers, so she was able to bounce back and forth between different projects. I was insanely proud of how far she had come, just like she was proud of me.

AURORA

You better go out and celebrate!!

CHARLOTTE

Want to go out when I get home?

AURORA

Absolutely. Give me a day and time, but take some time off and enjoy yourself down there. It seems like you've been working your ass off while you've been in Orchid City. You deserve a break. I'll be here in Idyll Cove whenever you get back.

I smiled as I read over the message from my best friend. Maybe she was right. I had worked myself to the bone and I did need a break. My brain needed some time to unwind. Perhaps I wouldn't rush home. Idyll Cove wasn't going anywhere. It would be there waiting for me when it was time for me to go back.

And I needed to sort things out with Wes before I did anything.

He was the one thing that had me hung up and questioning everything. I was in the exact position I swore I wouldn't get myself into.

Grams was out in the garden pulling weeds when I had finally wandered outside. It was already well into the afternoon and the sun was still pounding down in the sky above. It was another beautiful day. Thankfully, the rain showers had held off until the evening and when they did come, they were gone within twenty minutes, and then it was beautiful out again. Humid and borderline suffocating, but still gorgeous weather nonetheless.

"Did you finish?" Grams asked me as I walked up to where she was and took a seat on the grass. She took off her gloves that were covered in dirt and turned around to face me on her knees.

I smiled at her and nodded. "I just sent it over to my editor. The book is done, until it's time to enter the next part of the process."

She beamed back at me, her smile reaching her eyes. "That is absolutely amazing, sweetie. I think this calls for a

celebration. We should get dinner on the beach or do something fun.”

“I’m open to whatever you want to do.”

“That’s dangerous, Charlie. You know how your old grandma is.” She laughed softly, and she was right. Grams was the type who would want to go skydiving or do something that would have your adrenaline in overdrive. She lived her life in the fast lane and perhaps that was what kept her so young at heart. “Maybe it would be more fitting if we went to play bingo or something.”

“Please,” I laughed at her, shaking my head, “don’t turn into a dinosaur on me now.”

“Never,” she promised. “If we went to get dinner, would you want anyone else to come along? Maybe a certain hockey player that you’ve grown relatively close with.”

I pursed my lips and gave her a look. “You’re absolutely impossible.”

Her smile was infectious and filled with mischief. “Is that a yes?”

“Yes,” I said with a sigh. “Invite Phyllis too.”

She nodded. “It’s a shame your brother just left. He could have celebrated with us.”

“I’ll see him sometime after I get back to Idyll Cove. I know he has a really busy schedule, but we’ll find time eventually. Plus, we don’t usually celebrate every single book release.”

“That’s absolutely preposterous,” she said with an incredulous look on her face. “You should be celebrating every single accomplishment. They are all worth being recognized.”

I stared at her for a moment. She was one of the biggest supporters of all the people she loved. If her friend hit a great shot in pickleball, she wanted to celebrate. She just wanted everyone to be happy in life and if there was any way for her to bring some type of joy into their lives, she was going to do that.

“Why don’t you give Phyllis a call and I’ll see what Wes is doing tonight?”

“That sounds perfect,” she said with a smile. “If there’s anyone else you want to come along, let me know so I can make sure we reserve enough seats.”

I rose to my feet and nodded at her as I pulled out my phone. “Thanks, Grams... for everything.”

“Of course, Charlie. You are one of my treasures in life. This is exactly what I’m here for.”

I gave her a smile and tapped on Wes’s name as I left her where she was in the garden. I opted out of texting him and decided to call instead. My stomach was in knots, not just because of calling him but because of what may lie ahead in the future. I didn’t want to tell him I had finished my book. I didn’t want him to know I was going to return home sooner rather than later.

“Hey, beautiful,” he said with a smile in his voice as he answered on the last ring. There was a bit of commotion in the background and I realized I wasn’t sure where he was and felt guilty for bothering him. It had been a few days since we last saw one another as I needed to get into hustle mode to finish writing. I couldn’t use the outside distraction at that point in my writing process.

“I’m sorry,” I said softly as I plopped down onto my bed. “If you’re busy I can just call you back later.”

“Absolutely not,” he told me as it suddenly got quieter around him. “I just came to Pier Six with some of the guys and our team’s doctor. He’s got it bad for this bartender who works here and he will not admit it. It’s actually kind of funny. Everyone’s been giving him shit the entire time.”

Pier Six was a bar and restaurant located at the end of the sixth pier on Orchid Beach. It was a well-known spot for locals and it ended up drawing in tourists too, mainly based on its location. It gave an authentic feel of what it was like being here at the beach. The atmosphere was great and you got to sit and eat and drink while feeling the ocean breeze wrapping

itself around you. The food was good and everyone who worked there was equally welcoming and friendly. I had only been there once, but it definitely left an impression on me.

“Poor guy,” I laughed as I settled down on the pillow. “That’s not fair to give him shit. Has he told you anything about the situation?”

“No, but it’s obvious. He won’t stop staring at her and made sure we sat at the bar where she was working. He’s been flirting with her the entire time, practically ignoring any of us that are here.” Wes stopped and laughed. “Okay, you’re right. Maybe I shouldn’t give him any shit. He hasn’t told me anything about it so I have no place to judge.”

I smiled to myself. “Good. Be nice, Wes.”

“I’m always nice. Especially where you’re concerned.”

His words sank into my soul. He had such a profound effect on me, I needed a second to recover. “Are you doing anything tonight? Grams wants to go out and celebrate.”

“Does that mean you finished your book?” he asked, excitement lacing through his words.

“I did.”

“This is amazing, Charlotte! I would love to come celebrate with you guys.”

I heard commotion in the background. “What are we celebrating?” a deep voice said.

“Shit,” Wes mumbled, and I heard him speak to the other person. “Nothing that concerns you.”

“Come on, don’t be like that, Cole.”

“Who is that?” I asked him.

“It’s Nico. I told you about him, my best friend. He’s just a nosy bastard,” Wes said with a laugh. I heard more muffled voices in the background and Wes said something I couldn’t make out. “These guys are relentless. Are you busy right now?”

I chewed on the inside of my cheek as I sat up in my bed. “No. I just finished everything for the day.”

“Did you want to come meet us at Pier Six for a drink? We can go meet your grandmother to celebrate afterward.”

My heart crawled into my throat. I hadn’t met any of his friends. The only person I knew was his grandmother and I had known her long before I even met him. The thought alone had me nervous but also, those damn butterflies started fluttering in my stomach. These guys were his teammates, practically like his brothers. They were his closest, most trusted people. He was allowing me access into his inner circle. I wasn’t sure what to make of it, but I couldn’t say no.

“I’ll head over there now.”

“Perfect.” I could hear the smile in his tone. “I can’t wait to see you.”

“Can’t wait to see you too!” someone yelled in the background, causing Wes to laugh.

“Hurry up. Come save me from these assholes.”

I couldn’t help the laughter that spilled from my lips as I hopped to my feet and quickly changed into a dress. “I’m on my way.”

Pier Six wasn’t busy in the middle of the afternoon, but as I walked up, I saw Wes and four other guys sitting around the bar. I didn’t let him know that I was there and my footsteps were light as I walked across the wooden floor in his direction. It was almost as if he sensed me. He slowly turned around in his seat just as I was almost to him. A smile crept across his lips and he rose from his stool and closed the distance between us.

He reached for me, his hand sliding around the back of my neck as his lips collided with mine. He swiftly stole the air from my lungs in a tender kiss before pulling away. The guys at the bar hooted and hollered and Wes smiled down at me sheepishly. “Oops.” He chuckled as his steel gray eyes

searched mine. “I couldn’t help myself. This is what you do to me, Charlotte. You make me throw any logical thought out the window.”

“Have you told any of them about me?” I asked him quietly.

“Nico knows of you, but nothing much. I wasn’t sure if I was allowed to tell anyone about us.”

I stared at him for a moment. Us. I hated the way that word had my heart pounding in my chest. We hadn’t really talked about what this was and I couldn’t help but focus on that single fucking word.

I smiled at him. “Well, I suppose they know now.”

“Come,” he said as he slid his hand down to mine and turned back to face the bar. “They’ve been dying to meet you since Nico told everyone you were coming here.”

Wes led me over to the bar and pulled out the empty chair next to him for me. I sat down and turned to look at the four other guys with him. Wes lazily rested his arm around the back of my chair, almost in a possessive, territorial manner. “Guys, this is Charlotte.” He paused and motioned to the four guys. “This is Nico, Mac, Lincoln and Adrian, our team doctor.”

Nico was the one right next to Wes with dark hair and bright blue eyes. He smiled and nodded. “Nice to finally meet the girl who has Wes fifty shades of fucked up.”

“Hi, Charlotte,” Mac said with a bright smile on his lips. Gauging by the look on his face, this was a pleasant surprise for him.

The guy next to him was Lincoln, who simply nodded. Adrian, the doctor, smile brightly. He had sandy-colored hair and the clearest blue eyes.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Charlotte,” he said with a warmth as he smiled. “I’ll be honest, Wes has done an excellent job of keeping quiet about you. He didn’t want to tell us anything about you before you got here.”

I laughed and looked at Wes before I glanced back at Adrian. “There’s not much to tell. I’m not from here. I’m actually from Idyll Cove, North Carolina. I’ve been here for the past few weeks working on a book while staying with my grandmother.”

“Oh, an author?” Mac’s face lit up. “That’s awesome. Will you be going back to Idyll Cove now that you’ve finished?”

I swallowed. “That’s the plan.”

Wes’s body went rigid beside me but he didn’t comment on it. I hated that I said it. I wanted to take the words back instantly.

“Is that what we’re celebrating?” Lincoln chimed in. “I overheard Nico and Wes.”

Wes glared at all of them and it was a stark contrast from his normal playfulness. “Yes, that’s what we’re celebrating. Can you guys stop grilling her with a million questions?”

I reached out and grabbed his arm. “It’s fine, Wes.”

He looked over at me, his expression softening as soon as his gaze met mine. “Sorry,” he said quietly. “I thought some of us had manners and wouldn’t be bombarding you with questions.”

Mac scoffed. “Well, considering the fact that we are just now learning of Charlotte, I think it’s natural we would all be curious about her.”

The bartender walked over to me and took my order. Wes was studying me as the guys shifted into a conversation that surrounded hockey while Adrian was watching the bartender. I turned to look at him, my gaze meeting his as he smiled at me.

“I’m so glad you’re here.”

I smiled back at him as I realized there wasn’t anywhere else I would rather be.

“Me too.”

We only hung out at the bar with them for about an hour before it was time to go leave to meet with Grams and Phyllis.

She had picked a restaurant that was only a ten-minute walk from where we were, so Wes suggested we travel on foot instead of driving separately. His fingers were laced in mine and we walked along the sidewalk as we headed down the street. He had fallen silent, almost as if he were lost in thought. I couldn't help but look over at him periodically, wanting to peer inside his mind.

Abruptly he stopped and pulled me to a stop with him. I slowly turned around to face him. "What's wrong?" I questioned him with a hint of panic in my voice.

He stared down at me and took a step forward. His palm was soft against mine and he lifted his other hand to cup the side of my face. "I haven't been completely honest with you, Charlotte."

My stomach sank. "Okay..."

"I'm in love with you."

The ground felt like it was falling out from underneath my feet. I stared back at him, my lips parting slightly as a ragged breath escaped me. "Wes," I breathed his name. His words warmed my soul, but I couldn't... I couldn't say it out loud.

"You don't have to say anything. I know how you feel about love, I just needed you to know how I felt about you." He paused and reached into his pocket and pulled out a ticket before handing it to me. "I know you have to get back to Idyll Cove, but I'm asking you to reconsider. Stay here... with me."

I looked down at the ticket he gave me. "What is this?"

"I got you a ticket to the next home game. It's in three days." He slowly stroked the side of my face with the pad of his thumb. "I don't need an answer from you tonight. I have always been forthcoming that I would take whatever you were willing to give me. I'm just simply asking for you to give me a chance. Give me a chance to change your mind about love. If you show up at the game, then that will be my answer."

I swallowed roughly. "And if I don't show up?"

He gave me a sad smile. "Then I know I don't get that chance."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

WES

I sat on the bench staring down at my hands. My stomach was in fucking knots. It had been three days since I last saw Charlotte. After I gave her the ticket for the game tonight, we went to meet our grandmothers for dinner and didn't speak of it again. My truth hung heavily in the air around us. It was suffocating. I knew when I told her I was in love with her that she wasn't going to say it back. This was Charlotte Wells. She guarded her heart with the thickest steel. She wasn't going to show her cards when she felt like she could end up hurt.

After I walked her back to her car and kissed her against the side of it, I left her alone. I didn't reach out to her once and I couldn't help but feel guilty for it. She had texted me a few times, but I was on the road for hockey and I told her I was busy. It wasn't a total lie, but it also wasn't completely transparent. I needed to give her space so she could weigh her options. I wasn't asking her to give her life up, I was just asking for her to let me be a part of it.

I wanted her to stay in Orchid City, but I felt like asking her to do that was unfair. I should have clarified. If she wanted to go back to Idyll Cove, that was her decision. She didn't have to choose between there and here. She could go back and forth. Hell, I would go back and forth. I didn't give a shit, as long as it meant she was still in my life.

"What's going on with you?" Nico asked me as he sat down next to me. He was completely dressed and ready to go. I was sitting there, still staring at my hands with my skates untied.

I looked up at him. “Huh?”

“Enough of this secretive bullshit. You’ve been acting weird for days now. What the fuck is going on?”

I stared at him and finally let out a breath. My shoulders sagged as my lungs deflated. “Charlotte is going back to North Carolina.”

“Okay... and what does that mean?”

“I told her that I was in love with her and gave her a ticket to the game tonight. And I told her that if she didn’t show up, then I understood.”

Nico blinked and his face sank. “Fuck,” he muttered and ran his hand down his face. “Have you talked to her since then?”

I shrugged. “Not much. I’ve been trying to give her space. I didn’t want her to feel pressured or influenced.”

“So, you have no idea if she’s going to be here or not tonight?”

I shook my head. “Nope.” My lips popped the P sound at the end. “I told her I didn’t expect her to say it back. She’d been hurt in the past and was guarded. All I asked for was a chance.”

“And she didn’t say yes or no?” he questioned me with hesitation in his voice.

“I told her to think about it and either come tonight or don’t.”

Our coach pounded his hand on the wall, gaining our attention. “Cirone, Cole. Quit gossiping and get out here.”

Nico rose to his feet as I bent down to finally tie my skates. I didn’t want to go out there but I had no fucking choice. I didn’t want to go out there and see the seat along the glass empty. “She’ll be here,” Nico told me with assurance in his tone. “I saw the way she looked at you. She’ll show up.”

I didn’t look up at him but saw him leave from the corner of my eye. Another defeated sigh escaped me as I stood

upright and headed out of the locker room and down the tunnel. We all headed onto the ice for warm-ups. I couldn't help myself as I glanced over at the seat I had reserved for her. It was empty. Shaking my head to myself, I tried to clear my mind and stretch, but I couldn't fight the way my heart felt like it was cracking.

I fucked up.

I should have never said anything to her.

I felt like I was in a daze as we went back to the locker room to wait and then headed back out to the bench. The national anthem had no effect on me. I wasn't fully present and I knew I needed to pull myself out of this funk, but it was a goddamn struggle. I had hoped she would show up but that seat was still empty.

"Get your head out of your ass, Wes," Nico said to me as we headed out to the ice.

I didn't even look at him. "She's not here."

"So what? Since when do you just throw in the towel and give up?" He shouldered me before turning to skate backward. "If she doesn't show up, then you go to her after the game. This isn't the Wes I know. The Wes I know wouldn't stop until he knew for sure that he had no chance. He's annoying and persistent as hell."

"What if she doesn't want me?"

Nico stared at me through the shield of his helmet. "Then you worry about that if that is what it comes to, but it won't. Don't let us down and don't be like this. I won't let you give up when you have no idea what she's really thinking or what she really wants."

I let out the breath I was holding and nodded. He was right. I couldn't let the team down. They needed me and I would deal with this thing with Charlotte later. I couldn't let it affect me. Even if she didn't show up, I couldn't just give up like that and I wasn't going to. "Okay."

We got into position and the game started. I tried my hardest to focus, but it wasn't working. I blocked Charlotte from my mind but she kept infiltrating my thoughts. The first period ended up flying past and her seat was still empty. I tried to not let it get to me. The other team was playing aggressively and I had to keep moving. I had to show up for the guys, if not for myself. I wasn't worried about myself. I just wanted this game to be over so I could go see her and talk. I needed to at least have one last conversation with her before solidifying our future.

As we headed out during the second period, I didn't even bother looking back over at the seat. I already knew it was empty and I wasn't going to let it consume me anymore. Nico and I were back out for our first shift and we got into position as the puck dropped. Nico battled for it and slapped it in my direction. The other player hit his stick at the last second which caused the trajectory of the puck to go wide of me. Spinning around on my skates, I powered through, racing to chase after it. I snagged it with the blade of my stick and lifted my head as I went to circle around. I was facing the direction of that damn empty seat and I allowed myself one moment to look at it.

My heart pounded against my rib cage and my breath caught in my throat.

There she was.

Charlotte came.

I couldn't help but smile as I passed the puck to Mac and then stared over at her for a second. Her eyes caught mine and she nodded with a soft smile. She was here. It had to have been a dream. The play moved down the ice and I had to follow. My legs worked harder and I moved faster, skating with more of a purpose. My love for her was written in the ice, carved into it with the blades of my skates.

If she was here, that meant she wanted to give me a chance to change her mind on love. I needed to hear her confirmation. I needed to hear the words from her perfect lips.

My shift was over and I headed back to the bench, dropping down next to Nico. He looked over at me as he squirted some water into his mouth.

“I told you she would come.”

I couldn't fight the smile on my lips and shook my head at him. “I know you did. And for the first time, I'm actually glad you were right.”

The game continued to shift effortlessly and it was time for us to head back onto the ice. I couldn't help myself as I glanced over to where she was. It still didn't feel real. My heart was soaring and my skates slid smoothly across the ice. The puck ended up in our zone and Mac got it away from one of the offensive players and passed it to me. I managed to receive the puck without an issue and skated around the back of the net before sending it along the boards. Just as I went to look back at Charlotte, things went from good to bad in a fraction of a second.

The puck left the blade of my stick right when a player from the other team barreled into me.

I never saw him coming and I didn't have a chance to brace myself for the hit. Even though I no longer had possession of the puck, that didn't deter the other team's aggression. They were already down 4-0 and the tension was so thick, it was palpable.

He slammed me into the boards and my head hit the glass at a weird angle that sent me spiraling into a dark abyss.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

CHARLOTTE

I watched in absolute horror as Wes collapsed onto the ice. I couldn't stop myself as I rose to my feet and covered my mouth with my hands. The other player hit him so hard, it echoed around the arena, even over all the other sounds throughout the building. As the other player moved away from him, Wes instantly dropped. I was frozen in place, watching as Nico started a fight with the player who hit Wes. There were a few people moving quickly across the ice to him as the play stopped and the fight was broken up.

He didn't move. He didn't get up. He just laid there on the ice and there was nothing I could do.

I couldn't get to him, even though I wanted to scale the boards and the Plexiglas and rush over to him. I watched as someone held something underneath his nose. It felt like time was stretching, like it had slowed down and was barely even moving. The air left my lungs in a rush as Wes finally stirred on the ice. It took a few minutes for his teammates to get him on his feet. You could tell something was wrong with the way he moved. He couldn't skate by himself and everyone clapped in the arena as the guys helped him off the ice and they disappeared down the tunnel.

There was no way for me to find him; there was no way for me to go see him. I was completely helpless.

Play began to resume and Nico and the other guy ended up getting penalties. I slowly sat back in my seat and stared blankly out at the game. I wasn't paying attention, I had no

fucking clue what was even going on. None of it mattered. All that mattered was Wes. Something was terribly wrong with him and I needed to make sure he was okay after being knocked unconscious like that.

Guilt flooded me that I wasn't here sooner. If I had shown up earlier, maybe this would have never happened.

I wasn't sure how many minutes passed, but suddenly Nico was in front of me on the other side of the glass. I looked up at him and he yelled through the glass.

“They're taking him to the hospital to run some tests.”

Abruptly, I was on my feet, nodding a thank-you to him before sprinting up the steps that led back to the concourse. I had no idea whether that was a bad sign or if that was something that was routine. If someone had a bad enough hit like that to their head, it was apparent they were most likely concussed. Even though they had a doctor on-site, they didn't have the equipment to rule out any other injuries that could potentially be bad. I was hoping they were taking him there as a precaution. It was probably their protocol. I couldn't help but hear the negative thoughts that entered my mind and told me it was actually a bad sign.

If he was going to the hospital, that had to mean it was something really bad.

My feet quickly carried me out into the parking lot and I raced to my car. There was a hospital that was only five minutes away, so that had to be where they were taking him. It was a trauma center and I was sure with how close it was to the arena, that was most likely where the athletes ended up. I had no idea if they were going to let me see him, but I was ready to fight anyone who wasn't going to let me back there. I had to see him. I had to make sure with my own two eyes he was okay.

He had to be okay.

He had to.

It felt like I was moving on autopilot as I hopped into my car and sped to the hospital. I wasn't sure how I actually got

there. The entire drive was a blur. I found a spot in the parking garage and almost left my car running before I realized I needed to turn it off. After doing so, I made my way down to the emergency department and headed straight for the reception desk. There was a younger girl, who couldn't be more than twenty, working at the desk.

“Good evening, how can I help you?”

“My—” Shit. I didn't even know what he was to me. My friend? No, that just felt wrong and inaccurate at this point. “My boyfriend was brought in after he got knocked out during a hockey game. I need to see him.”

She looked at me for a minute and nodded. “What is his name? Let me call and see if I'm allowed to send you back there.”

I bit my tongue. I wanted to argue with her and force my way back there, but I also knew there was a security guard by the door who probably wouldn't hesitate to throw me out the front door. “Weston Cole,” I told her quietly. “Thank you.”

“Just hang tight here for a minute.” She lifted the phone up to her ear and pressed a few buttons. “Hi. Do you guys have a Weston Cole back there? His girlfriend is out front looking to come and see him.” She looked back at me. “What's your name?”

“Charlotte Wells.”

She repeated my name to whomever she was speaking with before falling silent for a moment, nodding to herself. “Yes, of course, I understand. Just let me know as soon as you have an update.”

The girl hung the phone up and looked up at me. “The nurse is going to go check and make sure we are able to let you see him.”

“Thank you,” I repeated before I stood off to the side of the desk. I understood why they needed me to wait. He was a professional athlete back there. They wouldn't just let anyone in who claimed to know Wes without doing a thorough check to make sure he knew who I was. As I waited, I picked at the

skin around my thumbnail. It felt like an eternity before the girl at the desk called my name.

I turned around to face her and saw a nurse standing beside her. The nurse moved around the desk and stepped up to me.

“Are you Charlotte Wells?”

I nodded. “Yes.”

“Come with me.” She motioned for me to follow her. My heart was beating erratically as she unlocked the main doors and I followed her through. “They just took him back to do a CT scan, but you can wait in his room until he gets back.”

She led me to one of the rooms that appeared to be more of a private room that was tucked away in a different wing. It was relatively quiet for being in the emergency department and I took a seat on one of the cushioned chairs along the wall. The nurse unlocked the computer and tapped on the keyboard as I watched her for a moment.

“Is he going to be okay?”

She looked over at me. “He should be. He has a concussion and seems to be doing better than he was when he first arrived. The CT scan is just a precaution to make sure there isn’t anything else going on.”

I breathed a sigh of relief and fought the urge to break down and cry. Tucking my chin to my chest, I closed my eyes and sucked the air into my nose before breathing out through my mouth.

“He should be back any minute,” the nurse assured me. I nodded, not trusting myself to look at her as I felt the tears in the corners of my eyes. “He’s going to be okay.”

As she disappeared from the room, I let the tears fall. Tears of relief. Tears of fear.

If something bad had happened to him, I didn’t know what I would have done.

I didn’t just love Weston Cole... I was in love with him.

And it was time for me to tell him the truth.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

WES

My head was fucking killing me. The whirring of the machine circling around my head wasn't helping at all. I closed my eyes and tried to block out the sound but all I could do was focus on the pounding feeling inside. As soon as I was cleared from this scan, I would be allowed to take something to help with the pain. Even if it was some generic over-the-counter medication, I didn't care. I needed some relief.

I took a hit that was harder than any I'd ever experienced before. As I scoured my memory, I realized there was only one other time I was knocked out and that was during a fight in college. I hadn't been knocked unconscious from a hit like that. My memory was shit from it. I remembered sending the puck along the boards and then it was just blackness. I could picture myself waking up on the ice, but now that I was in the hospital, everything was in little fragments. I didn't remember going back to the locker room or getting driven here. It was almost as if I was watching different things happening as an outsider.

But there was one thing I did remember.

Charlotte showed up to the game.

"All right, Wes. We're all done here and going to get you back to your room," the tech said as the machine turned off and she stepped out into the room. She held the bed as I moved from the table back onto it. Even though my head felt like someone was hammering against my brain, I felt better than I did when it first happened. I didn't feel nauseous

anymore. I wasn't shaky. I could move of my own accord without any issues. The only problem was the pain and I felt exhausted. My eyes wanted to close and I wanted to sleep.

The lights were bright in the hall as she wheeled my bed past the other rooms until we reached mine. She turned us around in the hallway and began to maneuver through the door until the bed was in its place by the wall. "Your nurse will be back soon and they should have the results within half an hour." As she stepped away, I saw someone standing behind her. Charlotte.

She came.

"Charlotte?" I said quietly as I tried to sit up in bed. A sharp pain erupted through my skull and I winced. "What are you doing here?"

It was like she had magically drifted to the bed. Her hands were on my shoulders, pushing me back against the bed. "Wes, stop. Just lay down and rest."

"You're here."

A smile moved across her lips as she looked down at me. Her hands were still on my shoulders and I resisted the urge to reach out and pull her down on top of me. It didn't matter that my head was still killing me. I just wanted her to be close to me. "You gave me quite the scare out there. Do you think that maybe we can *not* do that again?"

I scooted to the side and patted on the bed for her to sit down with me. "I'll try not to."

Charlotte sat down beside me and I wrapped my arm around her back, lightly tracing invisible patterns on her skin that was showing beneath the hem of her shirt. She was careful as she lifted her hands to cup the sides of my face. She acted like I was fragile. Like I could possibly break. If there was one thing that had the power to break me, it was her.

She leaned forward and gently pressed her lips to my forehead. I watched a crease form in her own as her eyes met mine again. "How are you feeling?"

“Much better now,” I said with a grin. “It hurts, but it’s tolerable. I’m hoping my scans come back soon and they can give me something to help with the pain.”

She nodded as she chewed on her bottom lip. I resisted the urge to reach up and release it from her teeth. She stared at me with an unreadable look in her eyes. They desperately searched mine before burning holes directly into my soul. “I love you, Wes.”

My heart skipped a beat and my breath caught in my throat.

“You’re only saying that because you know I’m naked underneath this gown.”

She shook her head. “I’m being serious. I should have told you sooner. I should have told you the same night, but I couldn’t bring myself to admit it out loud. Saying it makes it true and that scares the shit out of me.” She paused and I watched her slender throat bob as she swallowed hard. “When I was in college, I thought I was in love with a man. He filled me with promises and lies and broke my heart when I found out that he was married and was living a double life.”

“Charlotte...” I said softly as I cupped the sides of her face. “It’s only you and no one else.”

Her eyes pierced mine, hitting me directly in my soul. “After feeling what I feel with you, I know that I didn’t love him. Nothing ever felt quite like this and I don’t want to get hurt by you, Weston Cole.” She paused again, a soft breath escaping her. “Please don’t make me regret this.”

“I will never hurt you,” I promised her as I stroked her cheeks with the pads of my thumbs. “You’ve worked your way into my soul and you’re there, Charlotte. My heart belongs to you and I promise you can trust me. I don’t hurt the ones I love.”

“You say that like it’s so simple.”

I shrugged as I pulled my hands away from her face. “Because it is. I love you and you love me. It doesn’t have to be complicated.”

“So what does that make us?”

I couldn't help but smile at the way she said it. She was so fucking cute with how innocent she appeared. I knew differently. She was nowhere near innocent. “That makes us together, Charlotte. I heard you referred to me as your boyfriend, so we might as well make it official then.” I paused for a second as I reached up to lay my hand over her chest. “Does this belong to me?”

She nodded. “Yes.”

“I'm yours and you're mine.”

“Yes.”

I dragged my thumb over her bottom lip before snaking my hand around the back of her neck. I pulled her face down to mine and her lips crashed against my own. She was soft and tentative and I wanted more. I wanted all of her. She made sure to keep her weight off me as she kissed me with a sweetness that had my toes curling. My tongue slid along the seam of her mouth and she sighed as she parted her lips, letting me in.

There was a soft knock on the door and someone cleared their throat. I groaned as Charlotte quickly pulled away from me. Her absence was immediately felt, even though she was still sitting right beside me. I practically glared at the nurse and the doctor who had entered the room. A pink tint drifted across Charlotte's cheeks and she ducked her head to conceal it. I smiled, knowing the color was there because of me. She went to move from the bed and my arm tightened around her, holding her in place beside me.

“Sorry to interrupt,” the doctor said with a sheepish grin as she looked between the two of us. “I promise this will be quick and we can get you out of here.”

“I'm assuming that means it's good news if I get to leave soon?” I asked her as she began to type on the keyboard.

The nurse walked over to remove the blood pressure cuff from my arm and the pulse ox monitor on my finger. “You've assumed correctly.”

The doctor turned to face me with a smile. “We found nothing wrong in your scans. It seems like you just have a pretty decent concussion. You’ll need to rest for twenty-four to forty-eight hours and then can resume light activity as your body recovers. I will forward everything to Dr. Parks and he will be able to evaluate and determine when you’re able to play again. You shouldn’t be alone for the first day or so, just in case your symptoms are troublesome. You’re able to take Tylenol for the pain as well.” She turned back to the computer and I watched the screen as she logged out. “Do you have someone who is able to drive you home and stay with you for the night?”

I looked over to Charlotte who smiled at me and nodded. “I do,” I said without looking at the doctor. “My girlfriend will be staying with me.”

“Perfect. We will get the discharge paperwork printed. You can go ahead and get changed into your clothing and we’ll get you out of here shortly.”

I thanked the doctor and the nurse before they left the room, finding Charlotte staring at me as I climbed out of the hospital bed. She was still sitting on the thin mattress and I slowly removed the gown, leaving myself in nothing but my underwear in front of her. I cracked a smile as I felt my erection growing. It wasn’t my fault my body reacted like this to her. Concussion or not, I still wanted her.

“Did that feel weird for you?”

My eyebrows pulled together as I began to put my clothing on. “What? My boner? No... it happens quite often when you’re nearby or my thoughts drift to you.”

She rolled her eyes. “You’re impossible. I meant calling me your girlfriend.”

I walked over to her and parted her knees as I stepped between them. My hands rested against her collarbones as she tilted her head back to look at me. “No. It felt natural. It felt exactly like what I’ve been wanting to call you.”

“I liked the way it sounded.”

I smiled down at her. “So did I.”

CHAPTER THIRTY

CHARLOTTE

I was so relieved he was okay. He seriously scared the shit out of me and I wasn't sure what I was going to be walking in on when I arrived at the hospital. A concussion was easily dealt with. He was relatively quiet as we drove back to his apartment. His eyes were filled with a dazed, sleepy look. As the car moved, his head began to loll and I reached out to grab his hand. Wes looked over at me with a smile as he threaded his fingers with mine. I gave him a gentle squeeze every time it looked like he was going to fall asleep. My brother had a concussion when we were kids and I couldn't help but remember how my parents were adamant that he had to be woken up every few hours. I didn't want Wes to sleep until we were back at his place and he was comfortable in bed.

It wasn't a long drive to his place and I found a spot out front. He was already out of the car when I reached his door and didn't appear to be off-balance or dizzy at all. His gait was a little slower than normal, but he walked inside on his own. He wrapped his arm around my back and pulled my body flush against his. Not for the support but just for the closeness. His body was warm and his scent invaded my nostrils as I rested my cheek against his chest in the elevator.

When we reached his floor, he removed his arm and grabbed my hand, leading me down the hall to his apartment. As we stepped inside, he turned to look at me. "Why were you late to my game?"

"Huh?"

Shit. I was hoping he wasn't going to ask this.

"You didn't get there until the second period," he said quietly as he locked the door. "I thought you weren't going to come when I didn't see you there."

I let out a deep breath. "I was afraid to come. I was afraid to admit my feelings, but I knew I needed to. It just took me a minute to work up the courage."

He nodded. "I'm glad you came."

"Me too... except for watching you get knocked unconscious."

He smiled but he didn't say anything as he led me through the apartment. We stopped by the bathroom and he grabbed some medicine before taking me back to his bedroom. He stripped down to his boxer briefs and climbed under the covers. I stood there stupidly for a second before he motioned for me to join him. I took off my pants, feeling uncomfortable in jeans, and got under the blankets with him. We rolled onto his back and pulled my body flush against his side.

"Does this mean you're staying in Orchid City?"

"I don't know," I told him with nothing but honesty. "I have a house and everything in Idyll Cove. I need to figure everything out."

He was silent for a moment. "I'm not asking you to give everything up for me, sweetheart. We can figure it out together. All I'm asking for is a chance and to be a part of your life. If you want to go back there, I don't mind traveling back and forth."

His words snaked themselves around my soul. "Really?"

He pressed his lips to my head. "Really. Whatever you want to do, we will figure it out. You're mine and that's more than enough for me right now."

I tightened my arm around his waist and I tilted my head back to look up at him. "I love you, Weston Cole."

"Fuck," he murmured as he lifted a hand and rested it around my neck. "I love you. I love the way those words

sound falling from your lips.”

In one swift movement, he pulled me on top of him until I was straddling his lap. My face hovered just above his and his grip tightened around my neck as he pulled my face down to his. His lips were urgent and relentless as his tongue slid into my mouth, tangling with my own. He drained the air from my lungs, kissing me senseless until my head was spinning. In such a short amount of time, he had become so important to me. I was completely captivated by him. I wanted every piece of his heart and would give him mine in return.

His hands traveled down my torso and he lifted the hem of my shirt as he began to push it up my body. I broke away from his kiss, breathing heavily as he pulled the fabric over my head and dropped it down onto the bed.

“What are you doing, Wes? You need to rest.”

A grin pulled on his lips and he shook his head. “I am resting. Plus, if I fall asleep, it will be harder to monitor my symptoms. I need something to keep me awake right now.”

Laughter escaped me. “How is this resting?”

“You’re on top of me,” he said with simplicity. He unhooked my bra and pulled it from my body. Feather-like fingertips drifted down to my waist and he hooked his fingers under the waistband of my panties. “Take these off and ride my cock to keep me awake.”

I mulled over his logic. Lifting my body from his, I pulled them off and tossed them onto the floor while he did the same with his boxers. “So, if I’m the one doing the work, then it’s okay?”

He grabbed my hip with one hand and held his cock up with the other. “Precisely.”

Planting my hands on his chest, I straddled his waist again and began to lower myself down the length of his cock. I was already wet and ready for him. He impaled me with one swift thrust, filling me to the hilt as I sat down on him. A moan escaped me and he groaned as his eyelids fluttered shut.

“Jesus Christ, you are so fucking perfect,” he murmured as I rocked my hips and began to move on top of him. His hands gripped my hips, guiding me as I began to move up and down. His fingers roamed over my skin before he dropped a hand between my legs. His thumb rolled over my clit and I grinded against him.

I stared down at him as I continued to work my hips. Wes’s eyes were filled with nothing but adoration and love as he watched me move. As he continued to work his thumb over me, I felt myself climbing closer and closer to the top. I loved how he felt when he was inside me. I loved the control I had while I was on top. It was amazing, staring down at him, watching him so close to losing his self-control as I fucked him senseless.

I was the one doing this.

I was his undoing.

“Fuck, Charlotte. I love how you feel around me,” he groaned as his grip tightened on me. “Fuck me until I’m filling you with my cum. I want to feel you fall apart around my cock.” He fell silent for a moment, his eyes still glued to mine. There was a glassiness to his eyes and his smile was lazy. “You’re close aren’t you?”

I pulled my lip in between my teeth and bit down as I nodded. “Don’t stop, Wes. Please, just don’t stop.”

“Stop biting that fucking lip,” he growled as he increased the pressure against my clit. “The only person who gets to bite that lip is me.”

I released it as a shaky breath escaped me. My hips began to work faster and I moved against him, taking every inch of him with every thrust. Even though I was still in control, he was right there with me as my guiding light. He guided me back home, to his heart where I belonged. I knew in my soul that where I belonged was with him. It took me a bit to come to the conclusion, but I didn’t want to be without him. I wanted Wes in every single part of my life for as long as he wanted.

He could break my heart and it wouldn't fucking matter.

As long as I got to spend a part of my life being loved by him.

“Come for me, Charlotte,” he murmured softly as he drove me closer to the edge. The pressure was building within and the warmth was spilling into my veins. I tightened around him, my pussy clenching his cock as he began to lift his hips to drive into me. “Come *with me*, Charlotte.”

As the last word left his lips, I came apart at the seams. My orgasm tore through my body with such force it had me crying out his name. It rolled off my tongue like a prayer and I shattered around him. My body was on fire and my legs were shaking as I continued to ride him into a state of ecstasy. Wes growled and murmured my name as he filled me with his warmth. We rode the waves of our orgasms together until we both collapsed in a tangled mess of limbs on the bed.

“I love you, Charlotte,” he whispered against my skin as he held me close. His words were a force, but he spoke them with such honesty, it sent a shiver down my spine. I felt every syllable in my soul. I fought this for so long and I couldn't anymore. I was completely lost in him and I never wanted to be found.

His lips pressed against my forehead as he branded his promise into every fiber of my being.

“I love you now and I'll love you forever.”

EPILOGUE

WES

One Year Later

Standing in the back of the crowd, I watched Charlotte as she stood behind the podium. She looked absolutely beautiful with her light brown hair in soft curls pulled away from her face. The long tendrils hung down the center of her back. Her makeup was soft and natural and she smiled at the crowd as they all began to clap. Her eyes traveled across the heads of the people here to see her until they landed on mine. Her irises shimmered beneath the lights and I couldn't help but smile back at her.

The crowd began to disperse as people began to peruse the bookstore and she ducked back into the back room. We were at one of the biggest bookstores in the country, which was just the first stop on her tour. I couldn't believe it had been a whole year since she finished the book she was writing when we first met. At the time, I told her to use me for inspiration. What I didn't know was she was writing a story that was loosely based on our relationship and how it blossomed and grew.

It wasn't until she had gone through the editing process and rewrites before she told me the truth about the book. There was a nervousness to her when she admitted that it was based on us, almost like she thought I was going to be upset. Instead, my reaction was the complete opposite. I was honored. She was reluctant to let me read it, but finally, she did. The similarities were there, but it didn't come close to touching the true beauty of our story.

I pushed through the people and walked into the back room in search of my girl. When her book was released two weeks ago, it shot straight to number one on multiple best-seller lists. We knew it was going to perform well because the number of preorders was astounding, but it had gone even further than either of us had ever imagined. Her publisher was over the moon with how it was doing and they set up an impromptu tour. Over the next month she would be traveling between the United States and Europe for a few signing events.

Each one was set up with a Q&A before the actual signing part and that was what Charlotte had just finished now. She had a twenty-minute break so she could take a breather before she had to go sit down to talk with her fans and sign their copies of the book. She wasn't in the main stockroom when I entered and I began to walk through the aisles of books, looking for her.

When I finally found Charlotte, she was sitting in the corner of the room, hidden behind shelves of books. She was sitting on the floor with her back against the bookcase. Her head was tilted back and her eyes were closed. I slowly approached her, my footsteps light, until I crouched down in front of her.

“Are you okay, sweetheart?” I asked her as I tilted my head to the side.

Charlotte straightened her head and opened her eyes as she looked at me. “I'm okay. I just needed to come back here and have a moment of silence. I'm not used to being in front of so many people talking about my books like that.”

I smiled at her and reached out to brush a stray hair away from her face. Charlotte was definitely more of a reserved person and we knew this was going to be a bit of an adjustment for her. She had confided in me about her struggles with ADHD, so I wanted to do anything I could to make things easier for her.

Thankfully, it worked out perfectly that I didn't have a game today so I was able to make this signing. Over the next

month, there were only a few I'd be able to attend because of my own schedule and I couldn't help but feel immense guilt that I couldn't be with her the whole time.

"I'm better now." She let out a soft sigh and reached for me. "Thank you for being here today, Wes. It means so much to me."

"I feel terrible that I can't be there with you for every signing."

She shook her head at me. "Don't you ever feel bad for that. I will be okay. You have your own commitments that you can't sacrifice and I would never ask you to do that."

I nodded. I knew she wouldn't. That was the kind of person Charlotte was. She never expected anything from anyone, except for kindness. Knowing her best friend Aurora was going along with her brought me a little bit of comfort. Either way, it still sucked.

Charlotte abruptly rose to her feet and held her hand out to me. I slid my palm against hers, our fingers lacing with one another as I stood up in front of her. Our height difference was noticeable and I tilted my head down to look at her as she closed the distance between us and wrapped her arms around the back of my neck. She lifted up onto her toes as her lips found mine with an urgent heat burning behind them.

"What are you doing, sweetheart?" I murmured against her lips as my hands found her hips. I slowly backed her up against the wall that was lined with books.

"I need a distraction and something to calm my nerves," she whispered as her hands dropped from my neck. She reached for the button of my pants and began to push it through the hole before reaching for my zipper. My cock was already hard in my pants. "I have a few minutes. Don't waste them."

A grin pulled on my lips. She had a thing for having sex in places where someone could potentially walk in on us and it drove me mad.

“Say no more,” I told her as she pulled my cock from my pants. Sliding my hands underneath her dress, I gripped her ass and lifted her into the air. I pressed her back against the bookshelf and reached between her legs as I pushed her panties to the side. My fingers slid through the dampness already growing between her pussy lips. She was fucking soaked already and I slowly slid my cock inside her.

Thankfully the bookshelf was industrial-grade and secured against the wall, or else we would have ended up breaking it. I rocked into her, not wasting any time as I began to stroke her insides with the length of my dick. She was tight and wet. The perfect fit for me.

“You were made for me, Charlotte,” I growled as I pounded into her. The force knocked a book onto the floor and she moaned, not caring about the sound that echoed throughout the room. I lifted a hand to her mouth and covered it as I stared down at her. “Unless you want someone to find us, you need to be quiet. Do you think you can do that, Charlotte?”

A fire burned in her eyes and she shook her head. Jesus Christ. She wanted my hand over her mouth. My balls instantly constricted against my body. Pressing my hand harder against her mouth, I slammed into her again and again. She bit down on my palm to keep herself quiet and I fucked her until both of our orgasms crashed over us like violent waves in the ocean. The sound of Charlotte crying out was muffled beneath my hand and I slowed my thrusts as I lost myself inside of her. I didn't stop until we were both completely satiated.

I slowly pulled out of her and lowered her feet back to the floor. She fixed her underwear and straightened her dress as she looked up at me with a smile.

“Thank you for that,” she said softly with a dazed look in her eyes. “I needed that.”

“Well, it conveniently worked out because I always need you.”

Charlotte attempted to fix her hair and I knew my cum was already dripping from her sweet pussy. “I should go to the bathroom and freshen up.”

I chuckled. “That’s probably a good idea.” I winked at her, giving her a knowing look. I loved the thought of her walking around all day with her pussy aching from where I had been deep inside her. “I’ll see you out there.”

A nervousness washed over her face and I reached for her hand as I stepped closer to her. Charlotte stared up at me as I lifted my hands to cup her cheeks. “You are the most amazing person I’ve ever had the pleasure of meeting, Charlotte. You got this. They all love you already and are so excited to meet you.”

She nodded and her gaze penetrated mine. “I love you, Wes.”

My mouth dipped down to hers. “I’ll always love you more,” I told her, sealing the promise against her lips.

Charlotte Wells was the most unexpected thing to ever happen to me, but she was by far the best thing to ever happen.

And I would spend the rest of my days loving her the way she deserved to be loved.

Want more of Charlotte and Wes?

[Click HERE to read the extended epilogue](#)

Continue reading for a look inside the final book from the
Orchid City Series!

Dirty Pucking Play is the fourth book in the Orchid City Series. It is a forbidden romance between Mac Sullivan and the coach’s daughter, who also used to play hockey... and she just so happens to hate hockey players.

Chapter one

Mac

“Are you coming to the family skate tonight?” Nico questioned me as we walked out into the parking lot after practice. Wes and Lincoln were following behind us, both of them listening in. The air was thick with humidity, wrapping itself around me. Even though we were in the middle of fall, it still felt like how summer felt in the Northern States.

I shrugged as we reached my car and I unlocked it. “None of my family is here, so it seems kind of pointless.”

“We’re all your family,” Wes said with a smile. “You should just come.”

Lincoln nodded as he leaned back against the side of my car. “Come on, Sullivan. Don’t be all sad and shit. You’re not the only one who doesn’t have family here. Just come hang out with the rest of us.”

I stared at him for a moment before looking at Nico and Wes, who both seemed to be waiting for an answer. A sigh of defeat escaped me and I shrugged with indifference. “Fine. But only because you guys are being so damn persistent.”

Nico smiled and Wes winked. “Good answer.”

Lincoln moved away from my car as I pulled open the door and the three of them said their goodbyes before disappearing to their own vehicles. I climbed inside, feeling a touch of disappointment, but I tried to ignore it. I hated the family skates the team did. They only did them twice a year—once as we got closer to the holidays and one toward the end of the season.

My immediate family lived in Canada, so I didn’t expect them to fly thousands of miles just to come skate for one night. I never actually asked them either. I was used to being so far away from them that it wasn’t really a thought anymore. They saw me when I was back in the country for games or if I went home for some time during the off-season. My ex lived in my hometown, so it wasn’t exactly my favorite place to visit.

Orchid City was my home now and I was just trying to make the best of being alone here.

My condo was just on the outskirts of the city. Since it was just me, I didn't need anything big, but the condo was definitely a decent size. The building was huge, with two condos on each floor. As I opened the door, there was a blue-gray body on the other side, wiggling back and forth as his tail was wagging.

"Hey, bud," I greeted Thor, my pit bull who looked like he was smiling up at me as I crouched down to pet him. He was always excited whenever I got home and he licked at my face, almost knocking me down as laughter spilled from my lips. He was only two years old and still acted like a puppy.

After I moved to Orchid City and bought my condo, I realized how lonely it was living in this vast space by myself. I needed something to fill the emptiness, something to help with the loneliness, and I wasn't in the market for settling down with a woman.

So, one day I ended up at the local shelter and found myself leaving with a malnourished pit bull puppy that someone had found on the side of the road one day. Thor filled the void; he filled the empty space in my life. It wasn't the same as having another person around, but he offered companionship and that was more than enough for me. I didn't want the complications that came along with dating, so I kept everything superficial with anyone I ever showed interest in.

Relationships were fleeting. They never lasted. Love wasn't a tangible thing. It was more of a mirage than anything.

After giving Thor some attention, I headed through the house with him hot on my heels until I let him out back to go run around. He wasn't out there for long before he was whining at the door and I let him in. I didn't have to be back at the arena until after dinner, so I settled on the couch and fell into a dreamless sleep after the exhaustion from practice settled in my bones.

I was the last one to get on the ice, but no one seemed to notice. I glanced around as I slowly began to skate, watching everyone as they were grouped off with their own little

families. Nico and Harper were over by the goal line. I watched as his head tipped back and he laughed loudly as her feet almost went out from under her. I couldn't help but smile as I thought about how far they had come.

I may not have believed in love, but they had something special. Something I think everyone was looking for in life. A connection that is deep, that is filled with love... it almost seemed too good to be true.

Then there was Wes. Wes and Charlotte. It still blew my mind that he had actually settled down. Lucky for him, he had met his match in her. She was her own person and Wes was simply caught in her orbit.

Lincoln was single like me, but his twin sisters and one of their boyfriends had come to skate with him. They seemed like the safest bet because I wasn't about to insert myself into a third wheel situation. My feet moved, the muscles in my legs contracting and relaxing as I powered over to where the four of them were.

"There he is," Lincoln said with a grin as he hung back and watched his sisters for a moment. His youngest sister, Eva, was a figure skater, so she was effortlessly moving across the ice, ignoring everyone. His other sister, Darya was trying to help her boyfriend and it was quite comical to watch the two of them. Both of his sisters knew how to skate but it was clear that Darya's boyfriend had no idea what he was doing. "Don't mind him." Lincoln laughed as he waved at his sister's boyfriend. "I only brought him along for comic relief."

"Thank God, because I was beginning to feel like the one who was a joke here."

Lincoln rolled his eyes in a dramatic fashion. "Please. You're not the only person who is single here, so get over it."

"Trust me, I count that as a blessing."

"You and me both," he said with a laugh as he began to skate backward. I followed along with him and we both began to move around the rink. As we finished one lap around the arena, I saw Coach Anderson in the center and he was talking

to his wife who was standing unsteady on her skates. It wasn't often that the man smiled, but he looked happy and at ease with her beside him.

As we skated past him, a whirlwind of midnight-colored hair caught my eye. She was skating backward around the center of the rink, moving effortlessly. I was mesmerized, completely captivated, as my feet began to slow. Lincoln noticed I wasn't beside him and shortened his strides before skating up beside me.

"Who's that?" I questioned him as I continued to watch her with growing curiosity. Her strides were elongated and there was an elegance to the way she moved as she shifted away from the center of the arena. She wasn't a figure skater, that much was clear.

Lincoln clicked his tongue. "That's Anderson's daughter. From what I heard, she used to play hockey and got injured in college."

My eyes trailed after her and I momentarily lost my edge, but quickly recovered before falling flat on my face on the ice. "I didn't know he had a daughter."

"Because he doesn't talk about her much. Supposedly her brother refused to play hockey and Anderson had high hopes for her when she got into it instead."

I tore my gaze away from her and looked at Lincoln with an eyebrow raised. "How do you know all of this?"

He shrugged. "I overheard some of the guys talking one day when they saw her here with him. I don't know how they knew about her, I didn't ask questions. Do you really not pay that much attention?"

I didn't, but now I was.

"I'm not nosy like you and Wes."

He stared at me for a moment as our coach's daughter skated past, grabbing my attention once again. I allowed myself the opportunity to take her in. I couldn't help but wonder what had actually happened to her. It was clear that

this was exactly where she belonged. The ice was hers and no one else's.

I couldn't help myself and I couldn't look away. There was something about her—something ethereal. Something godly. She didn't seem to care about anyone else that was skating. She was in her own world, listening to the music of her blades cutting through the ice.

"I would suggest you stop wherever your thoughts are going now, Mac," Lincoln said with his voice low. "She's the coach's daughter. You know that automatically makes her off-limits."

I looked back at him with a scowl. "I don't know what you're even talking about. I was just watching her skate."

Lincoln pursed his lips. "I know that look, bro. She caught your attention."

"Is that a bad thing?"

He raised his eyebrows. "Uh, yeah. It is when her father is our coach."

Fuck, he was right. I couldn't get any ideas. She was untouchable. Even if I found myself sparked with curiosity, I couldn't let my mind wander. I couldn't explore any of that. Relationships weren't something I was interested in. I was merely looking for a good time with anyone who caught my attention. It would be a recipe for disaster. She was someone I couldn't pursue because I knew it would blow up in my face—and the last thing I needed was a scandal.

I didn't need to be on our coach's shit list for any reason.

Especially for his daughter catching my eye.

"I was just watching her, Linc. Nothing more than that."

He snorted. "Sure. Just remember that the next time your eyes start to wander in the wrong direction. Don't fuck your career up because your dick is curious."

I cut my eyes at him, stifling a laugh. "I'm not that stupid."

He didn't look convinced. "Let's hope so."

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Cali Melle is a USA Today Bestselling Author who writes sports romance that will pull at your heartstrings. You can always expect her stories to come fully equipped with heartthrobs and a happy ending, along with some steamy scenes.

In her free time, Cali can usually be found living in a magical, fantasy world with the newest book or fanfic she's reading or freezing at the ice rink while she watches her kid play hockey.

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