



# GUARDED

A SOLDIER'S HEART BOOK 3

KIMBER DELANEY

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Kimber Delaney

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## *Content Advisory*

Character death—off page, non-descriptive.

Explosion—on page, non-descriptive.

*For Keira*

# CHAPTER ONE

The blue and golden hours in the high desert just hit different for Tadhg. While he preferred the evening hours, the brilliance of the sunrise on Fort Huachuca suited his purposes just fine.

The storm clouds rolling in gave him a spectacular show. He pulled his small field pack out of his haversack and opened it. Working quickly, he spun the caps off of the water containers, and placed drops of water on all the colors to let them activate while he finished his ritual.

He set his small block of watercolor paper in the holder he'd fashioned on the lid of this pack and brushed a coat of clear water over it. While he waited for it to soak in, he looked over the landscape. He'd wanted to paint in this area for a while, ever since he'd come in to work early one morning and saw how the light bounced off of the mountains and down toward the town.

He grabbed his favorite brush, a medium-sized springy sable, and swirled it in the cup of water to his right and began mixing colors on the small ceramic palette that rested inside of a drawer. He spread yellows, then reds, then blues across the top and bottom, then ochres and umbers off to one side. He dropped a final puddle of Payne's Grey in the middle and was ready.

With a deep breath, Tadhg unfocused and let his eyes take in the entire scene, picking out a starting point.

Ten minutes later, he looked at his progress. The sky had turned out well—the deep blue-grey of the clouds contrasted with the burning reds and yellows that normally burned out in the light. He rinsed his brush and set it aside for a flat brush to

lay out the base for the ground details. As he swished it around in the water, he looked out at the landscape. And frowned.

He wasn't alone. Off in the distance, a figure crept along, stopping, stooping, and then taking a few more steps before stopping again. He couldn't tell much about the person from what had to be well over a hundred yards, but they were small when compared to the surrounding vegetation. They also had bright, coppery hair.

Normally, seeing people out here wouldn't draw his attention. Troops were often out in the training areas, setting up equipment and conducting whatever they needed to for their courses. This person was wearing civilian clothes, though, so whatever they were doing, it sure wasn't military related.

Tadhg laid down some more paint on his canvas, sketching out some focal points of plants that caught his eye. On a whim, he added the person as well—a snapshot of strange life that happened when only one person knew what was really going on.

A few minutes later, he finished the initial layout. He tightened the caps back on the water containers and put the protective sheet over the paper block to keep the wet canvas from getting messed up. Once set, he slid the pack into the haversack.

The shriek made him jump. He looked up just in time to see the person in the distance tumble to the ground. It was too cold for snakes to be active, but he couldn't chance it and leave them. He took off running.

She sat on the ground, rubbing her ankle and muttering to herself. At his approaching footsteps, she looked up.

Tadhg stopped a safe distance away so as not to startle her. "Saw you go down. Did something bite you?"

"No. Sunk my foot into a hole." She pointed beside her.

"I see." He peered over into it. "Yep. That's a good one, too. What are you even doing out here? Did you lose something?"

That earned him a glare. "That's not your—"

She scrutinized his face. Whether it was because she liked what she saw, or she wanted to be able to pick him out of a lineup later, he wasn't sure. He brushed an errant curl out of his face and quickly pulled the whole mass back, tying it off at the back of his neck with a band from his wrist.

He watched as she shook her hands out and quickly brushed her legs off. "Not my what?" he asked.

"Not your business. Just give me a second and I'll get up and be on my way." When he reached out a hand to her, she frowned at him. "I'm fine."

Tadhg scrubbed his hand over his face. "I'm certain you are a very capable person and can manage all on your own under most circumstances, however," he paused and peered down at her feet. "Your ankle is already swelling, and if you get up and pitch backwards, you are going to land in the middle of a large cactus."

She turned and blanched. "I can't believe I didn't see that."

"Right. So, unless you want me to get up close and personal with picking prickly pear spines out of your arse, you might want to let me help you. Your choice. I can go either way."

She glared at him, and he closed his eyes and took a deep breath before meeting her gaze and holding out his hand.

"Come on, then. Let's get you up and out of the way."

She took his hand and stood up on her good ankle. She pulled her hand away and brushed her rear off.

Tadhg admired the flex of her muscles. She'd make a wonderful study. More so if she were lying on rumpled sheets, arching her back—nope. He stood on those mental breaks. Not going there.

"Thanks," she said. "I should be fine from here."

"Mmhmm. I'll walk you to your—" He looked around. "Where is your car?"

"I jogged out here. Besides, I told you I'm fine. You can go back to what you were doing. What were *you* doing out here, by the way?"



“Painting.”

She eyed him up and down, taking in his worn boots, low-slung cargo pants, and t-shirt. “Painting.”

“Yes.” He patted his haversack. “Watercolor.”

“Huh. Anyway, you don’t have to stick around. I’ll be fine. I live right down the way.”

Tadhg crossed his arms. “Look. I’m not leaving you out here until you prove to me that you can actually walk on that balloon you’re calling an ankle. We can stand out here all damned day if you like, or you can admit that you need help, and I will get you help. Is there someone you can call?”

“I don’t need your help, thanks.” She took one step and crumpled. “Motherfucker!”

Tadhg caught her and swung her up in his arms. “Easy, there. I got you.”

Faint freckles scattered across her nose and her cheeks. Damn. She was made of attitude and snark, all packaged up in messy reddish curls and flashing brown eyes—his kryptonite. He could sink into those brown eyes. That is, if they weren’t trying to burn him alive with anger. The fire she gave him brought up just the kinds of thoughts he didn’t need to have at that moment, especially with her wrapped up in his arms like that.

“You can put me down now,” she said.

“What’s your name?” He asked and started walking toward the road.

“What?”

“Your name? What is it? Simple question.” He glanced at her and then back up.

She shoved against his chest. “I told you to put me down.”

Tadhg breathed in through his nose and out through his mouth. “Fine. We can do this your way one more time.” He dropped her legs and set her on the ground. “Go on, then.” He held out his arm, gesturing toward the road.

“I just need a moment. You don’t need to stick around. I can handle myself.”

He pulled his phone out of his pocket. “I’ll just call the MPs and they can deal with your stubborn—”

“Don’t fucking call them.”

He held the phone and stared at her. “Then start walking, ma’am.”

“Ma’am? Do I look like a ma’am?”

“Give me a name to call you, then. I can make up one up, if you like. Plenty of options I can think of right now.”

She flexed her hands into fists like she was going to punch him. “Charlie.”

He looked her up and down. “Charlie. Is that short for anything?”

“Charlotte, why? What does that matter?”

“Just curious. I’m Tadhg.”

“Tadhg. Is that short for tiger?”

He winked at her. “Only if you’re offering to play with my tail.” Her mouth fell open, and he grinned. Before she could reply, he nodded at her feet. “Now, let’s go.”

Charlie put her foot on the ground and barely leaned forward before she winced. “Fine. It’s fucked up. Can I borrow your phone?”

Tadhg unlocked it and handed it over without comment. He waited until she gave it back before scooping her up into his arms again.

“Hey! The hell are you doing?”

“Don’t get all twisty, Charlotte. I’m taking you to the road. No one else needs to be tromping around out here in the brush trying to get to you.”

“You could just give me an arm.”

“Could. Faster this way. Less of a chance of you putting that foot down, too.”

## CHAPTER TWO

Charlie didn't know what was worse, that she'd been picked up like she weighed nothing by a strange man, or that she didn't mind it that much.

She started off the morning by going for a run. The plan was to stop off at an area she thought she'd seen some Desert Daisy growing to verify, and then head home to get ready for work. The recent rain had covered over the hole she stepped in, and once the pain lanced through her leg, she knew beyond a doubt that she'd fucked it up.

And then, out of nowhere, this man comes sprinting up. Black hair blowing everywhere in the breeze, intense blue-grey gaze, and good Lord, between the snug t-shirt and the cargo pants, well, under any other circumstance, she might have reacted differently.

Tadhg set her down on the tailgate of his Durango just as a white Trans Am roared up. He turned and grinned at the man walking up to them.

Antony raised his eyebrows. "Tadhg! Long time."

Charlie's mouth fell open, and she immediately closed it. Of course, this would happen.

Tadhg took his outstretched hand, and they engaged in the whole shake/hug/two shoulder slap routine. "Good to see you. We're just waiting for whoever Charlotte here called to show."

"That'd be me."

Charlie pinched the bridge of her nose. This already shit day was officially worse. "You really do know everyone, don't you, Ramos?"

“The hell were you doing, Madden?” Antony asked, frowning at her ankle. “That’s gonna sideline you for a good while, you know.”

Charlie winced. “I know. I was supposed to head out in a couple weeks. There goes that TDY to Stewart. Darn.” She didn’t have any love for that installation, and Antony knew it.

*Charlotte Madden.* Tadhg nodded toward Antony. “You two work together, then?”

Ignoring Charlie’s patented glare, Antony answered, “Yes. Though she teaches combatives when work is slow.”

Tadhg leaned against the tailgate. “So, I guess I should be thankful it was your ankle; otherwise, you may have kicked my arse.”

“Still could,” she said. It came out more as a pout, and she crossed her arms when Tadhg chuckled.

“I’m sure you could. I’d rather not find out, if you don’t mind. Anyway,” he gestured toward her ankle, “I hope you heal quickly. You didn’t drop anything out there, did you?”

Charlie felt for her key and her ID and shook her head. “Nope. I’m good. Thanks.”

Antony stepped toward her. “Let’s get going. They’re expecting you at the hospital, and that foot’s looking ugly.” He held out his hand to Charlie, and when she took it, he reached down and slung her over his shoulder.

She yelped and started beating on his back. “I’m going to kick your fucking ass, Ramos!”

Tadhg bit his lips to keep from laughing too loudly. “Alrighty then. Good seeing you, Ramos. Er, be well, Charlotte.”

“I cannot believe you fucking did that, you oaf.” Charlie fumed in the passenger seat. She watched Tadhg close the back of his SUV and give one last wave before jumping in and driving off.

Antony laughed. “It was easier than watching you limp.”

“Fucking manhandled by two assholes in one day. I’m the luckiest gal ever. Whatever. Let’s go. This shit is throbbing.” Charlie looked out the window. Her ankle throbbed in time to the pounding in her head.

“I bet it is.” Antony spun a U-turn and headed off toward the hospital. “What do you mean, manhandled?”

“Nothing, really. He picked me up and carried me to the road.”

“I don’t blame him. That looks like a nasty injury.”

“Not helping,” Charlie ground out. “You have any water in here?”

Antony reached behind her seat and pulled out a bottle of water.

“Thanks.” She twisted the top off and drained half of it in one go.

“So, you know that guy?” Charlie asked a few minutes later.

“Yeah. Tadhg O’Brien. He works out at the flight line.”

“How do you know him?”

Antony glanced at her. “Why do you ask?”

“Just curious,” she said, just a tick too fast.

The corner of Antony’s mouth turned up. “He’s a geography guy—geographic information systems. Works with the unmanned aircraft. We had some weird shit come up right before you got here, and he helped us find some remains out in the field. Since then, we meet up every month or so and have a few beers.”

“Contractor?”

“Nope. Government civilian. Pretty high up there. Don’t know what grade, but he knows his shit. Did it on active duty for a few years.” Antony turned in to the hospital parking lot and drove to the front door. A nurse was waiting with a wheelchair.

“Are you coming in?”

“I have to go check in at the office. I’ll be back in after a while—half hour-ish. You won’t be out before then.”

He got out of the car, trotted to her side, and helped her to the chair. “If something changes, and you have to go somewhere else before I get back, call.”

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Two hours and half a dozen X-rays later, and the nurse wheeled Charlie out to the waiting area. “Finally done, Ramos,” she called.

Antony closed the book he’d been reading and looked her over. “No dancing for you.”

“Nope. Or walking for a couple weeks.” She gestured to the boot they’d put on her.

Once they got to the door, the nurse handed Charlie her crutches, and she and Antony walked to his car. He helped her get situated and jumped into the driver’s seat.

“Do you still have that knee walker scooter thing?” Charlie asked. Antony lost the lower part of his leg in Afghanistan and had several useful crutches and devices stashed away.

“Yeah, you good to use that?”

Charlie nodded. “Doc said it would be fine. I’m on desk duty for at least two months. Getting up the stairs to my apartment should be fun, but I can butt scoot that if need be.”

He took off out of the parking lot and headed off post. “You could stay at my place, if you want.”

Charlie snorted. “Where are we going? And no. No. Thank you, but no. I love you and Lesley, but I am not getting in the middle of your new-love-screwing-all-over-everything phase.”

Antony laughed. “I figured. We got nowhere to be, so I’m taking you out to the house so I can pick up the scooter for you. You want this sooner than later.”

A few minutes later, he pulled into the drive and put the car in park. “I’ll be back in a sec.”

A couple minutes later, he popped the trunk and put some items in, closed it, and got into the car. I also brought you a spare set of forearm crutches.” He nodded toward the back seat. “A couple days of using those torture devices and your armpits will be bruised to shit. Listening to you bitch about desk duty will be bad enough. I don’t wanna hear you whine about that, too.”

“I can always count on you to keep shit real, asshole.” Charlie fought back the sting of tears and made a swipe across her eyes. The adrenaline from the fall had worn off, and the painkillers they’d given her hadn’t kicked in. She wanted a good cry and a nap and couldn’t have either.

“Oh, come on.” Antony nudged her arm with his and squeezed her hand. “I’m glad you’re okay. What the hell were you thinking, going out there without your phone?”

“I wasn’t, obviously. It was just a stupid accident.”

“You’re lucky Tadhg was out there.”

Charlie grumbled. “I suppose that was lucky. He’s kind of an ass, though.” An ass that looked damned fine with all that tuggable hair and biceps she could swing off of. She looked out the window.

“Tadhg? He knows his shit, but an ass? What did you say to him?”

“Me? He assaulted me!”

Antony glanced over at her, eyebrows raised. “Assaulted? You need to define that right now, because that’s a serious word.”

“Dick. No. He just picked me up without permission and carried me to the road!” She fidgeted with the hem of her shorts.

He narrowed his eyes at her, and the corner of his mouth quirked up. “Okay, Charlie. I get it.”

She whipped her head toward him. “Oh, you do?”

“Sure. Tossed you around like a sack of potatoes, and you’re butthurt it was for noble reasons. He’s also a good-

looking guy, and I know that look on your face.”

“Not even.” She let out an exasperated sigh. “And you’re not supposed to fucking profile friends.”

Antony chuckled and pulled the car into the parking lot of the office. “You want me to help you get up to your apartment?”

“Nah. I’ll be fine.”

Antony set to adjusting the scooter for Charlie’s height when Audrey and the First Sergeant came out.

“I’ve called over and let them know the situation, Madden,” First Sergeant Randall said. “Glad I get to have you around more, not so much that it’s like this.”

Audrey frowned. “Want me to help you with the stairs?”

Charlie nodded. “Please. Ramos will just pick me up and carry me if I let him.”

“Madden, we have that full bathroom in the office. Bring some of your shit down here and use that. It’s got a shower seat and plenty of room to maneuver, unlike those apartments,” Randall said.

“That’s not a bad idea. Thanks, Top.”

“Hell, I’d offer to let you move in there, but you’d bring all those plants.”

“Only a few.”

Randall chuckled. “Glad you’re okay, Madden. I need to get to a meeting over at Battalion. Fucking meetings. Take it easy today, everyone. Let’s enjoy the downtime while we have some.”

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Tadhg walked to his office after the morning meeting. Yet another chunk of time that could have been summed up in an email. At least it gave him the opportunity to think about his morning.



He pulled out his phone and tapped out a message. *How's Charlotte?*

Antony: *Charlotte, huh? She's fine. Nothing broken. They'll know more when her ankle's not as big as her thigh.*

Great. Tadhg needed the reminder of her thighs in his head. *Glad to read it. Send her my regards, would you?*

Antony: *She said you were an ass to her.*

Tadhg cracked a grin. *I may have been a little short. Might have carried her to the road against her will.*

Antony: *She mentioned as much. I gave her some grief about it. Can I give you one bit of advice?*

Tadhg raised an eyebrow. *Yes ...*

Antony: *Take exactly zero percent of her bullshit.*

Huh. Tadhg stared at his phone for a minute. *Noted. Beers next weekend?*

Antony: *Yeah. Les has some girl's night going on next Friday. That sounds good.*

Tadhg put his phone on the desk and leaned back in his seat. He knew where she worked now, sure, but nothing in that encounter encouraged further contact, no matter how enticing he found her. Ramos was an odd one. Great man, but odd sometimes. Still, his instincts about people were seldom wrong.

Except Tadhg had no reason to contact her. His part in her story was over—a chance meeting, some snappy conversation, and she was on with her own life. He'd take zero percent of her bullshit because he had no reason to be around her, which was a shame. And he still wanted to know what the hell she'd been doing creeping around the desert.

He sat forward and tapped on his keyboard, bringing his computer to life. If he ever ran into her again, well, that'd be great. If not, well. Just another day.

## CHAPTER THREE

Lesley pulled open the door and gave an exaggerated bow as the rest of the women entered the building. Their laughter rang through the room, which had dark walls, bright lights, and random pieces of artwork stacked along the floor. Long, plastic tables ringed the area, and sturdy easels rested on them, two per table. At the front of the room was a single wooden table with an easel and computer resting on it.

“What kind of place is this?” Stina asked. “I thought we were going to a gallery with booze.”

“Well, in a manner of speaking, you are,” a deep voice sounded from around the corner. “Only difference here is your party will create the gallery. While drinking the booze. I’ll be right out, just gathering a few more items.”

The hairs on the back of Charlie’s neck pricked up, and with narrowed eyes, she looked in the direction of the voice. Audrey waved a hand in front of her face.

“What’s up?” she asked.

“That’s him,” Charlie whispered.

“Him who?”

“The guy who carried me!” Charlie pointed to her boot.

“Are you sure? He hasn’t come out here,” Lesley asked.

“That accent. And his voice is deep. Yes, I’m sure.” A thrill ran through her, and she shivered as it ran up her spine.

“Well, that’s a reaction, Charlie.” Audrey raised an eyebrow. “What’s going on?”

Tadhg came around the corner with a stack of canvases in his arms. Piled on top were cups of brushes and some aprons.

“Sorry for the disorganization. Marianna went into labor this afternoon and called me. I just got here about half an hour ago.” He set the items on the end of a table and looked at each of the women, stopping when he got to Charlie. “Charlotte,” he said with a grin, “How’s the ankle?”

Charlie flushed. “Finally off crutches, but I still have a few more weeks in this blasted boot.”

“Not broken, then?” Tadhg quickly placed the items at each station.

“No. Just torqued the shit out of it.”

Tadhg stopped next to her. “Well, all things considered, that’s the best outcome.” He looked down at her ankle and slowly back up. “At least you’re not in a full cast, or worse, healing an ankle and an arse full of cactus spines.”

“That’s the second time you’ve mentioned my arse, Tadhg. Was it that memorable for you?”

He winked at her. “I didn’t get a good enough look. Damn shame.” He walked back to the corner. “I need to get some pitchers of water and your drink cart. If you all want to get your aprons on, I’ll be back out in a few.”

As soon as he was around the corner, Stina cocked her head and stared at Charlie. “Well, if I needed rescuing, I sure as fuck wouldn’t mind it being someone like him,” she said. “Charlie, get you some of that.”

“Fuck’s sake, Stina, you need to go spend a weekend in Tucson or something. Find you some Air Force dude to play with or something,” Lesley said, shaking her head.

“Oh, tell me I’m horrible, Ms. I-Get-Some-from-Agent-Hotstuff-Every-Day. Some of us don’t have dick on demand.” Stina made a jacking-off gesture and stuck her tongue out at Lesley.

“Jesus, I don’t need to hear that about Ramos,” Charlie said, pressing her fingertips to her temples.

Audrey chimed in. “Me either.”

Charlie turned on her. “Oh no. Don’t you start, Aud. Don’t you think for one second those walls are completely soundproof.”

Audrey laughed and shrugged, hands out, palms up. “Sorry for the trauma.”

“No, you’re fucking not. And that’s fine. At least only a couple of us are miserable.”

“Do you need to stop at the store for some more batteries on the way home, Stina?” Lesley grinned at her.

“No, I need Charlie there to find out if the arse-man there has a brother.”

Laughter from the back room grew louder as Tadhg came back around the corner. “I have a brother, but he’s happily off the market, I’m afraid.” He looked around the room. “You’re a lively bunch. I might have to rethink what you’re going to paint tonight.”

Charlie looked at the crinkles in the corners of his eyes, and the lopsided grin, and felt a strange little flip in her gut.

Stina jerked her head toward the back room. “Got a flock of models back there or something?”

“What, you want to paint figures?” Tadhg looked confused.

“On them, or just likenesses?” Stina wiggled her eyebrows and twirled a paintbrush between her fingers.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake, Stina!” Lesley cried. “Do not harass the man.”

He took a short bow. “Alas, I am unavailable as a model *or* as a canvas, and I do not have a flock of models waiting in the wings. Had I known that Marianna was going to give birth today, and that she was leaving me with a crew of thirsty women, I might have gone recruiting this afternoon. You’ll have to be content with images projected on the screen.”

Charlie shifted her weight and reached for the paints and cups across the table. She liked he gave as good as he got with the chatter. His wit was clear the day they met, though she was still a little put out that he called her out so easily. Still, it was

a good thing he'd been there. It also didn't hurt that he knew his strength and how to use it. He'd picked her up gently, but not like she was made of glass—he knew exactly where to grab her without causing damage—a simple thing, but one she'd spent years teaching others. Then there was the rest of the package. The hair and the eyes and how she wanted to flip the switch on that smartass glint he had in them and see how well she could make them fog over in pleasure. Damn it. She needed to tread lightly.

“What up, Charlie?” Audrey murmured.

“Nothing. I'm fine.” She lied, not that it would do any good with Audrey.

“Liar. He's a good-looking man. He also keeps staring at you.”

“Bullshit.”

Audrey laughed. “Whatever you say, my friend. Whatever you say.”

Charlie bit her lips together and focused on her brushes.

Audrey touched her arm. “Hey, you.”

“Hey, yourself.” Charlie refused to look up.

“You're allowed to enjoy the view. I know you know that. You're also allowed to touch, and I know you know that, too.”

“He's a shit.” A shit that was intriguing enough to be more than an idle distraction, but that was a thought for future Charlie.

Audrey laughed. “Yes. You've said that a few times. And that is exactly what you need in your life. Good gods, you need someone who gives you hell. How long has it been since —”

“We're not going to discuss that, thank you very much.” Charlie stopped short of sticking her tongue out at Audrey and scrunched up her face.

“I was going to ask how long it'd been since you had talked to anyone as snarky as yourself.” Audrey glanced up at the

man who was messing with the projector. “It’s been a while. Have some fun. He just looked at you again.”

Charlie glanced up at him and caught his gaze. He didn’t flinch or look away, but held her eyes for a moment. The corner of his mouth quirked up, and he looked down at the monitor in front of him. She heaved a big breath. “We’ll see.”

“Atta girl.”

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Tadhg had been in Sierra Vista for a few years. From what Ant had told him, Charlotte had been there for almost three. How they’d never run into each other was beyond him, but now that they had two chance meetings in such a short time, he wondered if the universe wasn’t telling him something.

He’d never admit it, but he heard her whispering about him, and had to hold in a laugh when she called him an ass. The sound of her voice tickled around his spine and he wanted to hear her talk some more, even if she was disparaging his character. It sounded to him like she was protesting a bit too much—that was exactly the kind of challenge he enjoyed.

The look on her face when he came around the corner almost did him in. They both knew that he’d heard everything before making his presence known.

He looked up from the computer. Her friend leaned in close, darting her eyes back and forth between the two of them. He smiled, remembering the fire she had shot at him. He wanted to dance close to her flame.

After a beat, he broke eye contact and looked back down at the computer. He had no idea what to have them paint. These women were not the usual group he was expecting. He’d been covering for Marianna every week or two during these last months of her pregnancy, and the usual groups of women were much more staid. Colonel’s wives, if the stereotypes held true. Or the Sierra Vista Gardening Club—he knew those women came in at least once a month to paint their prized flowers. Charming women, and they doted on him, but they were utterly proper.

“Okay, ladies.” The woman next to Charlotte snorted, and Tadhg took a breath and smiled. “I thought there would be a different group of people in here tonight—Marianna’s regular group. I was wrong. Or misled.” He shrugged. “I’m going to flip through a few of these images, and you stop me if there’s one you want to try. If none of these are to your liking, give me a direction to go.” The redhead snickered next, and Tadhg leveled a look at her. “I will not model. If you really want to paint nudes, however, I can suggest a few.”

“Oh! What about that guy from that devil show?”

The brunette to her left elbowed her in the side. “Fucking hell, Stina.”

“What?”

“You can’t even draw a stick figure!”

“Oh, she’ll draw whatever. She just wants to look at nudes while she’s doing it,” Charlie quipped.

Tadhg almost choked on the sip of water he’d taken and coughed loudly.

“Y’know, Charlie, we haven’t known each other long, but you get me. You really do!” Stina made a heart out of her hands and blew Charlie a kiss.

Tadhg watched as Charlie winked at Stina. Well. For the first time in a long while, he was a little out of his element. Bonkers since he was in an art studio. He shook his head and pressed the button on the projector. Soon, he was flipping through images.

“Oooh, that one!”

“No. The one before!”

“Ugh. Y’all. Man candy. No offense to the resident man.”

“None taken. I see we have some widely varied tastes here,” he said dryly. “How about this?” He tapped a couple of keys and brought four images up on the screen at once. “Free for all. Use one, use all. Run with it. I imagine trying to guide all of you would be like herding cats.”

“I like him. He knows the deal,” Audrey said. She nudged Charlie, who smacked her arm.

Tadhg pretended not to notice. “I’m going to wander around, give some pointers, answer questions.” He looked at the bar cart. “You have a designated driver, right?”

Charlotte spoke up. “That’d be me. Not recommended to be drinking and walking at this point.” She gestured down at her boot.

Tadhg looked down. She was wearing long shorts and a light sweater. It was spring in Sierra Vista, but the nights were still a little chilly. He tried not to linger too long and failed miserably. By the time he dragged his eyes back up to hers, she had an eyebrow raised. Fortunately, the corners of her mouth were turned up as well. She said nothing, just shook her head, twisted her lips to hide the smile, and picked up a paintbrush.

The tall redhead, Stina, got drinks for everyone before she settled down as well. She looked up at him. “There any background music in this place?”

“Sure. What do you like?”

“Noise. Anything, really, just something low. Upbeat.”

Tadhg connected his phone to the studio Bluetooth and tapped on one of his playlists. Instrumental rock drifted through the hidden speakers, and he adjusted it for a comfortable talking level.

Over the next two hours, he wandered around, answer questions, giving suggestions, making comments. The women were a raucous group, even Charlotte. Bawdy, loud, snarky. So much more fun than the officer wives.

So was seeing Charlotte. Painting didn’t seem to be her thing, but she was enthusiastic and took direction well. Every time he leaned over her shoulder, her breathing hitched, just a little, and the little gasp of it echoed inside Tadhg’s head. The last time she called him over, he’d about come undone when the tip of her tongue darted out as she concentrated on what he was showing her. It was a sweet kind of torture, and it took



everything in him to not see if her curls were as soft as they looked.

Her body language told him she was interested. How to get her number was the question. He considered asking her before they left, but wasn't sure if she would appreciate that. Getting shot down wasn't an issue—he didn't think she would, and even if she did, his ego could take it. He just didn't want to put her on the spot.

The timer in the back room beeped, and he looked down at his watch. “Oh damn. Time flew. We've got about fifteen minutes before I have to kick you all out of here.”

“All good,” the woman he now knew as Lesley said. “I think we were mostly done. Just waiting for Stina to drink the rest of the cart.”

“Bitch, please. You've had as much as I have. Not much.”

“Anyone barfs in my car, and we're gonna have problems,” Charlie said. “Hey, these aren't dry yet. Do we have to take them right now?”

“No. They'll be here whenever you want to come back. Just jot your name down on the back of the frame. Someone should be here—there are a few of us covering while Marianna is out.”

The women helped clean up and started talking about their next stop as they walked out the door. As Charlie passed by him, she smiled. “You are a patient man, Tadhg, to deal with us tonight.”

“Patience is easy when the company is worth it,” he murmured. “I enjoyed seeing you again, Charlotte.” She shivered a little, and he chuckled. “Enjoy the rest of your evening.”

She stopped as though she was going to turn back, then shook her head and got into her car. Before she pulled out of the lot with her friends, she made eye contact with him through the windshield. She licked her lips, flashed him a wicked grin, and took off.

## CHAPTER FOUR

Half an hour later, Tadhg was at the Warehouse with Antony and his friend Simon. Tadhg knew of the man, but hadn't worked with him.

"So what made you late?" Antony asked.

"Filled in at the studio. Owner went into labor."

"Studio? Ant said you worked out at the flight line." Simon said.

Tadhg took a swig of his beer. "I do. I'm also an artist of sorts. Trained, anyway. Sometimes I help out around Canvas and Cocktails."

"Hey, that's where Aud and them went tonight. Audrey and I are a thing."

That explained everything. Tadhg turned to Ant. "And Lesley is your Lesley. I thought I heard your name in the chaos."

"Yes, she is." Ant grinned at him.

"They didn't give you too much hell, did they?" Simon asked.

Tadhg racked the balls on the table. "Nah. They were a lot of fun. Mouthy bunch. Gave as good as they got. Hell, if more people like them showed up, I'd consider opening up my own studio."

"Sounds about right. I thought Aud and Charlie were bad enough—the four of them are a special kind of trouble."

"You get Charlie's number yet?" Antony asked.

"Didn't ask."

“Why not?”

“Not the time or the place, Ramos. I’m not about to shoot my shot in an art studio with a bunch of women who could have me flayed and strung up in under two minutes. Slow, not stupid.” He walked to the side table and grabbed his beer bottle. “You two, go ahead.”

He leaned against the wall, propping his foot up on the barstool next to him, and watched as the men played. He probably should have asked when he had the chance. He wasn’t a monk by any stretch, and he also wasn’t desperate enough to ask Ant—not that Ramos would give her number to him anyway—but Charlotte had taken up more brain space than anyone else had in a long while.

None of it made any sense—

“Oh hell, they showed up here. Carwell, I thought you told them this was our place tonight?” Antony pointed his cue toward the door.

“It’s funny how you think I can tell Aud to do anything, Ramos. Haven’t you met her?” Simon lined up another shot. “Besides, how’s wrangling Lesley going for you? Especially with Stina there?”

Antony gave Simon a nod. “Fair point. Fine.” He smiled as Lesley blew him a kiss.

Tadhg watched as the women went to the bar across the way, got drinks, and found a table between them and the dance floor. Stina dragged Lesley out to the dance floor, and eventually, Charlotte and Audrey joined them.

“Hey, you’re up.” Antony’s voice sounded in his ear.

“Right.” Tadhg looked at the table. Simon had broken. Nothing dropped. Tadhg took his time, working in circles around the table and almost had it run, but that glance he caught of Charlotte wiggling in his periphery caused him to skip the cue ball right by his target.

“Little distracted?” Simon asked.

“Not a bad view.” Tadhg smiled and moved back to his spot at the wall. A minute later, Simon missed his shot, and Tadhg moved around the table, surveying his next moves. He put the chalk down and lined up his shots, one after the other.

“You’re good, man. Glad there’s no cash on the table for this shit.” Simon shook his hand after he dropped the last ball.

“I don’t do that anymore. Just for fun now.” Tadhg turned to grab his drink and listened as the music changed. A moment later, the women showed up.

Audrey wrapped her arms around Simon from behind. Lesley kissed Antony. Stina rolled her eyes, but waved as she stalked over to the bar to refill her drink. And Charlotte walked around to Tadhg’s side, placing two quarters on the edge of the table.

Stina came back and set her drink on the table. “I’m not done dancing with your women,” she said, dragging Lesley and Audrey away.

“And what about you, Charlotte? No more dancing?” Tadhg asked.

“I’m sitting the next few out. Dancing in a boot isn’t all that. Besides, this is more my speed.” She gestured toward the table. “Who’s up?”

Antony grinned. “Tadhg’s got this.”

She looked Tadhg up and down. “Okay. Let me grab a stick,” she said, trying to suppress a small grin and failing.

He looked at Antony and raised an eyebrow. Antony laughed. “This will be fun to watch.”

“How so?”

“She’s good. Damn good. She doesn’t know you, though.”

Charlie came back over with two cues and rolled each on the table. “Well, both of these suck.”

Antony handed her his. “This one’s not shabby.”

She tested it. “Cool.” She turned to Tadhg. “You want to break?”

He took a long drink from his bottle and looked at her. “How about a wager?”

Charlie squinted at him. “I don’t play for cash.”

“Neither do I.”

“What, then?”

“When I win, I get your number.”

They both ignored Antony, cackling off to the side.

She raised her eyebrows. “When you win? Hardly. What if I do?”

“You won’t, but you can name your price.”

Charlie narrowed her eyes at him. “Cocky.”

“Your break, Charlotte.” He smiled at her and leaned back against the wall.

Ten minutes later, and Charlie stood at one end of the table with her mouth open. She looked up at Tadhg and shut it, running her tongue over her teeth under her lips like she was chewing on all manner of things she wanted to say, but wouldn’t.

“Best two out of three?” she asked.

“Anything for you,” Tadhg said. He winked at her. “Rack them up.”

Charlie took a deep breath. She shoved Ant as she walked by and scowled at him when he started laughing.

“What’s the matter, Madden? Didn’t get to run the table like usual?”

“Asshole.” Charlie shuffled the balls around the rack. “Go away.”

Ant laughed and dragged Simon over to the bar, leaving them alone.

“You’re up,” she said, stepping back.

Tadhg stepped up to the end of the table and picked up the chalk. “Antony suggested that you’d test my skill here. He was

right.”

“I’m not bad.”

“I know that. Not half bad at pool, either.” He broke and sunk three balls.

“Fuck.”

He laughed. The break was a good one, but didn’t leave him with shit for another shot. He walked around the table.

Charlie watched him. His focus was impressive, though he was searching for something that wasn’t there. She stood a decent chance of winning this game, unless he pulled a jerk move and left her with a garbage position.

He tilted his head one way, and then the other, before nodding and stepping around the side of the table. Charlie watched as he leaned over and splayed his fingers on the felt. He’d rolled his sleeves up during the last game, because he was apparently conducting some sort of psychological torture, and the muscles in his forearms bunched and rolled as he maneuvered the cue to aim his shot.

The overhead light shone down on him, reflecting off of the blue pool felt, which turned his eyes a ridiculous shade. He looked up at her, raised an eyebrow, and winked before looking back down at the table.

He missed. As he straightened up, one of those curls fell over his eye and he swiped it back carelessly.

Charlie grabbed her water bottle and took a long swig. This man was damaging her calm.

He walked over to her. “It was a long shot. Now you can run the table on me.”

She looked up at him and then at the table. Not a bad spot to be in. Not the greatest, but he hadn’t been an ass and intentionally set her up for failure. She walked around the table, studying and trying to ignore his presence. He’d leaned back up against the wall, well out of the way. But she was far too aware of him for her own good.

Tadhg watched Charlotte move around the table. Just like any other game of strategy, people had tells. Rather, he could tell a lot about people by the way they played. And if he wasn't interested before, which he absolutely was, he wanted to know even more now.

She was cunning. He watched her trace out her shots from each angle and smiled when she pursed her lips and tilted her head. Finally, she gave one short nod and walked to the other side of the table. As she lined up her shot, she raised her chin a little and Tadhg got a nice look straight down her shirt. He choked on his drink and coughed.

“You okay?” she asked.

He nodded and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “Wrong pipe, sorry.”

She held his gaze for a long second, and the corners of her mouth lifted in a knowing smile. That wench. Antony's advice came back to him and he understood. She'd caught on to him. He'd take her bullshit, though, and escalate as far as she was willing to go.

Three shots later, and Tadhg saw she would probably sweep the table. Good. He wasn't ready to be done playing, and he really wanted to get her number. Watching her play didn't hurt, either.

She stopped in front of him. “Watch out. I need this space,” she said, smiling. “Corner.” She jerked the cue to the opposite side.

Tadhg nodded and moved out of the way, but remained behind her. She sunk the shot and did a little wiggle in celebration and Tadhg felt his blood pressure spike. He cleared his throat.

“Well done, Charlotte. I'll rack.”

She beamed up at him. “I'm gonna go get another water. You want a beer?”

He shook his head. “Water for me too, please.”

Charlie walked up to the bar by Antony and Simon and ordered.

“How’s it going over there?” Antony asked.

“He’s good.”

“You won the last one?”

“Yes. This round takes it.”

Antony looked at her. “Takes what?”

“A wager. My phone number if he wins.”

“And if you win?”

“I haven’t decided.”

Antony leaned in. “You like him,” he teased.

Charlie threw an elbow at him, which he promptly deflected.

“Hey now. I’m on to your tricks, woman.” He wrapped an arm over her shoulder and tugged her in for a quick hug. “Give him a chance. He can handle you.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Charlie grabbed the bottles and turned to walk away. “And yes, I do kinda like him,” she said over her shoulder.

Charlie set the bottles on the table and grabbed her cue and the chalk. She had no clue what she’d ask for her wager if she won. Regardless, she’d give him her number if he asked. Hell, even if he didn’t.

She blew the excess chalk off of her hand and lined up to break.

It was a good break. For Tadhg. She didn’t sink a damn thing, and the balls were so nicely spread around the table, it was basically an open invitation to kick her ass. She stood at the end of the table, looked up toward the ceiling, took a deep breath, and closed her eyes. When she opened them and looked down, Tadhg was standing at the other end of the table.

She took a bow. “You’re welcome.”



He laughed and moved around the side. “You could always concede.”

“Oh, fuck no. Earn this.”

Charlie looked up at him, and her eyes widened at the heat in his gaze.

He licked his lips. “Oh, I will.” He held her gaze for a long moment before grinning. “Besides, I could always screw this up.”

He didn’t.

Charlie sat on the stool and watched him work the table. She wasn’t even mad about losing the game at this point. The man had some skills. She also enjoyed the view. Long fingers, taut forearms, and a grippable ass went a long way toward soothing the sting of losing. Especially when the stakes were something she wanted as well.

“Side,” Tadhg said, pointing.

She nodded and watched him sink the 8-Ball cleanly in.

He walked over to her and leaned in, placing the cue in the wall mount over her shoulder. “Thank you for the games. I’d like to play again sometime.”

“Thank you for not gloating,” she said. She looked at the phone on the table. “This yours?”

Tadhg nodded.

Charlie picked it up and held it out, eyebrows raised in question. He held her gaze as he pressed his finger against the screen and it flashed open. Charlie entered her information and handed the phone to him.

He cupped her hand and held it as he took the phone from her and stuffed it in his back pocket.

“Not going to make sure I gave you the right number?”

“Why would I doubt you?” Tadhg shrugged. “If you gave me a fake number, I’d take the hint. And if you didn’t want to give me your number to begin with, you wouldn’t have taken

the wager. We never shook.” He squeezed her hand and let go. “Aside from all that, I know where to find you.”

“Good points, all. Now, what is your goal of having my number, Tadhg?” Charlie asked. Her fingers tingled from where he squeezed them, and she was having a hard time looking away.

“To woo you, of course.” He looked at her curiously. “To know you. I’d like to take you out sometime.”

“I—”

“Get your ass handed to you, Madden?” Antony interrupted. He walked over to the table and started racking the balls.

She answered with one finger and an eye roll, not breaking eye contact with Tadhg. “I’d like that.”

“You up, O’Brien?” Antony asked.

“Nah. You two take it. I’m going to head out. Need to drop off the key to the studio before I go home.” He reached up like he was going to touch Charlie’s face, paused, and trailed his fingertip down her forearm. “I’ll text you soon.” He turned, shook Antony’s hand, waved to Simon, and left.

Charlie watched him walk away. Nice view, and best of all, he tickled her brain. He also didn’t give her any leeway, both in their initial encounter or in their games. He wore that confidence well—it wasn’t grating—which made it harder for her to maintain any distance.

“You break, Carwell,” Antony said. He took up a spot next to Charlie. “Well?”

“With as often as we hang out, how did I never meet him before?”

“You got your own thing going on, with the running and all that. I guess shit just never lined up.” Lesley wandered by, stopping to kiss Antony on the cheek as she made her way to the bar. “I haven’t even seen him in a couple months, with as nuts as everything was for a while.”

“True. I haven’t really gone out much since then.” The last time she’d been out was just a few weeks after someone had

drugged her. That same night, Lesley had been targeted as well. It had taken them all a bit to finish and move past the investigation. Having a gal's night out—hell, having a few women to hang out with, period—was worth celebrating. She'd been solo for so long, though always with Audrey a phone call away. Antony and Lesley had found each other, and Charlie adored the woman. And Stina. Stina was her own force of nature. It was like Charlie and Audrey had found mirrors of themselves. It worked.

Life was good. And now she was comfortable enough to turn her attentions elsewhere. He'd picked her up and carried her so easily . . . what else could he—

“Earth to Madden. Do I need to call Tadhg back here?” Antony nudged her.

Charlie glared. “No. You do not.”

“But you're interested.”

She took a drink of her water and looked up at him. “Yes. I am interested, damnit. Better?”

Antony leaned down and kissed her on the forehead. “He's a good match for you. I'd have never thought it until I saw him with you the other day.” He left her on the seat to go finish his game with Simon.

His gut was rarely wrong, but did that really matter in this case? Charlie wasn't looking for anything serious. They'd text, maybe go on a date or two. Perhaps a tumble. Or two. Easy.

“I'm shocked they didn't leave sooner,” Charlie said, draining her glass of water and setting it on the bar.

“Same. Was a good night, either way.” Stina looked out over the dance floor. “Nothing intriguing here. For me, anyway. Shall we?”

Charlie hopped off of the barstool and stuffed the rest of the bills in the tip jar for the bartender. He gave her a wave and a smile. “Yeah, I'm wiped.”

As they walked, Stina looked down. “You okay to drive with that foot?”

“Yes, and I’m sober.”

Stina laughed. “I had one drink at the painting place and switched to soda. Shitfaced in public is so not my scene anymore.”

Charlie unlocked her car. “I hear you. Sorry you didn’t find what you were looking for.”

“Oh, I’m not really looking much. You’ve figured out by now I’m just talking a lot of shit.”

Charlie grinned. “Yeah, well, I know nothing about shit-talking. Or know anyone else who does it. Have you met these people I work with?”

“But you had a good night,” Stina said. “That one had his eye on you all night. At the studio, what were you telling Audrey when he walked in?”

Charlie relayed her first meeting with Tadhg.

Stina whistled. “Damn. Lost in the desert—”

“I was not lost.”

“—injured, and the dashing man with the shoulders to gnaw on and hair to pull, came to your rescue, and then carried you to safety. Let me guess, he picked you up like you were nothing and just hauled you out of there.”

“Yes. Fucker. Didn’t even break a fucking sweat.”

Stina laughed. “Climb him like a tree, Charlie. Swing offa those highest branches. And the lower one.”

“You know, Lesley’s right. You need some action in your life.”

“So easy for her to talk that kind of shit from her little Antony throne, isn’t it?”

Charlie cracked up. “Truth.”

“Anyway, most of this is me trash talking anyway, and I’m pretty sure you know it. Companionship? Yeah, I’d love it. Dick on the regular? Abso-fucking-lutely. But compromising myself to get it? Nah. Hard no. You get it.”

Charlie pulled into the parking spot and turned off the car. “I understand. I really do. I also keep a lot of that shit to myself.” She considered the evening. Tadhg was a nice distraction. Good looking, smart. “Yeah, I might just take ‘climbing him like a tree’ under advisement. It’s been a bit.”

Half an hour later, Charlie was getting into bed when her phone dinged.

Tadhg: *Please let me know you made it home okay, Charlotte.*

She smiled. *I did. Worried about me?*

Tadhg: *Thank you. Not worried about you. Concerned with the rest of the idiots out there.*

Charlie reclined against her headboard. *No need. I enjoyed our games. Not often I get my ass handed to me.*

Tadhg: *You’re a formidable opponent. Also, making me think of your arse right before sleep isn’t nice.*

She grinned. *You stopped thinking about it?*

Tadhg: *Not for a second. Careful, Charlotte, or I’ll tell you all about my dreams tomorrow.*

To push or not to push her luck? *More cactus spine picking daydreams?*

Tadhg: *Oh, no. The only things I want to imagine marring your flesh are my teeth.*

Oh fuck. Charlie’s skin flushed, and she bit her lip. She started to reply—

Tadhg: *Just putting that out there, in case there was a question about my attraction to you. Of course, I’m not a complete animal and would love to prove that with a proper date.*

—and ended up erasing everything and starting over. *Nice cover. Yes, for the date. The biting will be another discussion.*

Tadhg: *I look forward to it. Sleep well, Charlotte.*

## CHAPTER FIVE

“We won the bid on the house!” Audrey said. She and Simon were beaming.

Charlie grinned. Audrey and Simon had been looking for a place for a while, and the gods had been looking down on them when Lesley’s brother came down on assignment to Germany and had a short deadline to get over there. The timing couldn’t have been better.

“Looked for a bit like we were going to lose the bid to one of those corporations,” Simon said. He was sitting back in his seat next to Audrey, arm slung over the back of her chair.

“Oliver and Melanie were determined to not let that happen,” Lesley said. “Once they found out the two of you wanted to buy, they told their agent to make it happen. I’m glad it all worked out”

“Have they gotten settled in over there yet? And where did they end up?” Simon asked.

“Grafenwöhr. They’re settling in fine. Mel’s getting involved in local stuff, and Maggie’s even having fun. She was iffy about leaving in the middle of high school, but once they got over there, she changed her tune.” Lesley said. She leaned against Antony. “We’re planning on taking a vacation over there next year.”

Charlie flipped through her phone. “I think I’ve got a training course set up for next year over there. Might be Vilseck.”

Lesley grinned. “Just down the road. We’ll have to check the timing. Hell, we should all go.”

“What could possibly go wrong with that?” Antony nudged her. “It would be fun, though.”

Charlie’s phone dinged softly, and she picked it up and smiled.

Antony leaned over. “Who’s put a smile on your face, Madden?” He dodged the elbow she threw his way. “Getting slow, there. You might need some more practice.”

“Asshole. Wait until I’m released for duty.”

“How’s Tadhg?”

Charlie sighed. “He’s fine. You have any messages to pass along?”

“Nope. When’s the big date?”

“Haven’t talked about it yet. Doing that get-to-know-you shit over text.” Which had been frustratingly slow, not that Charlie would let Antony know that. Tadhg didn’t seem to be much for deep conversations via text—at least not right now. Maybe it was her impatience talking, but on a deeper level, Charlie understood. There was a lot to be said about face-to-face conversation and body language. And she enjoyed looking at him.

Charlie saw Audrey nod at Simon out of the corner of her eye. They chatted about Tadhg—neither she nor Simon knew him—but Audrey had made her opinion crystal clear. She was to, as Audrey put it, get some.

“So, Charlie. You wanna move into that guest house?” Audrey asked. “We’d love to have you out there. You could even put in a greenhouse.”

Not what she was expecting to hear. She put her phone down and looked up. “You sure you want me in your backyard?”

“You haven’t been out there yet. The property is huge, Charlie.” Audrey looked at Lesley. “How far would you say it is between homes?”

Lesley swallowed her drink and looked over the rim of her glass. “The entire property is two acres. Each house is set

almost smack in the middle of each acre. Oli put in a side drive from the back road when he was getting it prepped for sale, which was an amazing idea. And,” she grinned, “both houses are made of adobe and have more south-facing windows than on any other side. You will not be getting up in each other’s business at all.”

“Okay, freaks,” Charlie said, laughing. She looked at Simon and Audrey. “I’d love to get the hell off post. With y’all gone, things’ll suck even more than they do now. And if you’ll put up with me gardening, I’d be a fool to not. We need a proper agreement, though, for housing and all that.”

“Of course. We can talk about all that shit later.” Simon said. “I’ll ask Dad about all that stuff. I’m sure he knows a real estate lawyer.”

“When do you sign?” Lesley asked.

“It’s going to be a couple of weeks with the paperwork and inspections. They also have to plan for Oliver and Melanie to do the paperwork on their end, and give time to get it in the mail before we can go in and sign our copies. Before the end of the month is what we’re aiming for. Realtor is hooking things up for the 28th.”

“Plenty of time to pack and make plans,” Charlie said. “That’s cool.”

“And plenty of time for you to get to know your future loverboy,” Antony said, flinching in preparation for the swing. “He can come help you get settled in.”

Charlie didn’t give him the satisfaction. “I hate you sometimes.”

“Do not.”

“Fine. I don’t. You’re still an ass. And I like Lesley better.”

“Who could blame you? She’s perfect.”

Lesley stood up and shook her head at Antony. “Okay, children. I hate to cut this short, but I have to get back to work.” She stepped around the table and hugged Audrey. “I’m so happy you two got the house. You’re going to love it there.”



Turning toward Charlie, she said, “You will, too. That guest house is perfect, and the land right by it is perfect for whatever garden you’d like. Good soil.”

Charlie accepted her hug from Lesley with a smile, and the group walked out to their cars. She pulled her phone back out.

Tadhg: *I was about to text you to meet for lunch, but some dumbshit lieutenant pulled a dumbshit move.*

Charlie typed: *Sorry I didn’t text back sooner. Was out to lunch with the crew. Antony sends his regards.*

Tadhg: *He giving you grief?*

Charlie: *Nothing I can’t handle. He thinks highly of you.*

Tadhg: *He better. I’ve been thinking highly of your arse.*

Charlie barked out a laugh. A woman in the car next to her looked over. *Back to my ass again?*

Tadhg: *Never left my mind. What’s on your agenda?*

Charlie: *Paperwork. Neverending paperwork. Which I need to get back to.*

Tadhg: *Fine. I’ll just go to my meeting this afternoon and contemplate your rear end.*

Charlie: *I’m starting to feel like one body part here, Tadhg.*

Tadhg: *Not my intention at all, Charlotte, and for that, I’m sorry. That just seems like the easiest part to grab a hold of to get to the rest of you.*

Charlie: *You’re off the hook. For now. Enjoy your meeting.*

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Charlie sat down that evening with a notepad and a beer. She took a swig and then spun her pen around her fingers before making a couple of columns on the paper. Before she could start writing, her phone buzzed.

Tadhg: *That meeting was only tolerable because I thought about you the entire time. How was the rest of your day and what are you doing now?*

Charlie felt the flush rush from her stomach, up her neck, and through her face. Damn, he was good for the ego. *Making a packing list. Audrey and Simon are buying Lesley's brother's old property, and they've offered the second house to me.*

Tadhg: *Nice! I didn't know him well, but talked to Oliver once. That's down near Hereford, right?*

Of course he'd know him. *You're like Ant. You know everyone.*

Tadhg: *I've been here a long time, Charlotte. This town isn't that large, especially when you've got control of assets that different government agencies like to use.*

Charlie made a couple of notes in her "buy" column before answering. *True. We get tasked with some odd shit sometimes, too, so I get it.*

Tadhg: *So, anything fun on your list for the new place?*

Charlie chuckled. *Yes. Cleaning supplies. A shower squeegee. Living the wild life here, Tadhg.*

Tadhg: *So, cuffs or floggers.*

Here we go. *No, Tadhg. I already have a perfectly functional set of cuffs. Also, I'd have to go to Tucson for anything else.*

Tadhg: *I'm up for a road trip, especially if we can get some nice, soft cuffs.*

Charlie took a long drink and pressed her beer bottle to her forehead. This man. *You're incorrigible. We haven't even had a date yet. What makes you think we'll get to the road trip part?*

Tadhg: *I always like to be prepared for the future, Charlotte. So, when's the big move?*

Charlie put down her pen. *Not sure. End of the month, maybe? There's a bit that needs to happen, and since Oliver and his family are already gone, it adds an extra layer of stuff. I'm just planning because it's nice to think I'll be out of these apartments soon.*

Tadhg: *Nothing wrong with that. Is it that bad on post?*

Charlie: *Nah. It's pretty quiet. I know that even if I had an apartment off post, I'd be surrounded by military, but it's just different being here. Hard to explain.*

Tadhg: *Shitting where you eat. Sort of. I understand. Watched a lot of sketchy shit go on in the barracks back in the day.*

Charlie: *Ugh. Do not get me started on the bullshit that goes on around here. Yeah, I'm ready to get out of here.*

Tadhg: *Why have you never bought a place?*

Charlie: *Never considered it, really. It's just me, and I'm so used to moving every few years, it just felt like it'd be a pain in the ass to buy and then have to sell, or worse, rent out to other people. Last thing I want is to be some sort of landlord anywhere. I take it you own your home?*

Tadhg: *I do now. I spent the first five years here renting—kind of the same boat you're in—but finally decided that I'd stick around here for a while.*

Charlie: *Maybe I'll grow up and do that someday. I'd like to stay here and retire, but I'm right at the cusp of where the Army might send me somewhere else.*

Charlie finished her list and set it off to the side. Tadhg hadn't responded, but she wasn't surprised. Getting involved with anyone on active duty came with some risks—and that's something he'd be aware of after his own time in.

## CHAPTER SIX

Tadhg watched her walk up to the building. She was still wearing the boot but seemed to be walking just fine. He dragged his eyes up her body. That skirt was almost sinful—absolutely appropriate for office wear, but good Lord, it was just snug enough to show those thighs he desperately wanted wrapped around his head. If he was lucky, she'd go down the other hall so he could get a—oh, yes. That ass. Perfect size for gripping while he made those thighs shake.

He'd behaved himself over text well enough the last few days. It wasn't difficult—Charlotte was a hell of a lot of fun to talk to. She was well traveled, scary smart, and gave him hell like no one else had in a long, long time. Getting to know her that way had been low pressure. Seeing her here, in his domain, however, brought all those other thoughts screaming back up to the forefront.

She stopped one of the new Lieutenants and gestured. He nodded and pointed to the conference door behind her. Tadhg watched him open the door and speak with her for a moment, before closing her in and leaving. He looked at his calendar. Nothing to do with him, which was a shame. Sitting across from her in a meeting would be a fun kind of torture. He clicked on the main calendar—she was half an hour early for some meeting about common training. Half an hour . . . he smiled and walked out of his office.

As he approached, he saw Joe, a new civilian, pop his head in the room.

“Excuse me, Agent Madden. They asked me to let you know that they're wrapping up training. Morning got off to a late start.”

“No problem. Things happen, and that stuff comes first.” A pause. “I’m also a lot early.”

He grinned at her. “Ten minutes early—”

“—is five minutes too late. We’re good.” Her professional voice was warm, but no-nonsense.

“Can I get you anything?” he asked.

“No thanks. I’ve got plenty of paperwork to keep me occupied.”

Joe nodded and paused as though he wanted to keep talking to her, but the silence started to grow awkward. Finally, he closed the door and walked away. Tadhg was glad he didn’t have to step in. Something about that man rubbed him the wrong way. He stopped at the water fountain before turning back to the conference room door. He opened it, stepped in, and closed it softly behind him.

She didn’t look up. She had two stacks of papers on the desk, one she was reading, and the other, face down. Every so often she’d make a note, usually with an accompanying head shake. When she bit her lower lip and ran the tip of her tongue over it, Tadhg almost groaned.

“Are you just going to stare at me, or are you going to say hello, Tadhg?”

He threw his head back and laughed. “Not as quiet as I thought, then.”

“Oh, you were,” she said, looking up. Her eyes lit up with laughter. “I saw the shadows on the floor move. And your scent.”

“I smell?” Tadhg frowned.

She put her pen down and folded her hands. “Everyone smells. I didn’t say it was bad. You smell like whatever soap you use, or cologne, or whatever it is. Also, I saw you checking me out when I came up the stairs, and figured you’d come find me.”

He came around the table and took the chair closest to her, spinning it out from the table and around to face her. “And you

didn't even wave. I'm disappointed, Charlotte." He sat down and leaned back.

"I didn't want to encourage whatever you had going on in your head."

Tadhg raised an eyebrow. "Was my face talking?"

Charlie grinned. "A little, yeah."

"And what was it telling you?"

She leaned back in her seat and tilted her head. "It told me it was probably a good thing you were in your office, alone. Seated."

Tadhg ran his tongue over his teeth and grinned. "Not a bad assessment. Except the seated part. I have a little more control than that."

Charlie swung her leg up and crossed it over her other leg. "That's good to know. I'd expect people in positions like yours to have control over themselves."

Time to up the ante. He dragged his eyes slowly up her leg and body until he met her gaze. "I like control over a lot of things, Charlotte."

She narrowed her eyes at him. "Oh? I'm not sure I like the sound of that."

"You will."

Charlie pursed her lips. "Not convinced. You aren't going to hold me captive in some dungeon, are you?"

Tadhg leaned forward, elbows on his knees. He steepled his fingers and looked directly into her eyes. "No, but I'd be happy to put one together for you." He smiled as she sucked in a breath. He let his voice drop a little. "Charlotte, if you want to be held captive, it will be with your consent. Your clearly stated, freely given, always revocable consent. As will anything that will happen between us." He dropped a hand and traced the curve of her knee with his index finger. "Unless I've read you completely wrong, this chemistry is mutual, and I intend to see where it leads. Tell me right now if I'm incorrect. Tell me to back the fuck off and I will, no harm, no foul."

She blew out a long breath. “You’re not wrong. I’m also not used to people being this direct.”

The corners of his eyes crinkled as he smiled at her. “You’re used to calling all the shots, all the time.”

“Yes.”

“And you still do. Only difference is that I won’t always capitulate. And sometimes, I’ll expect you to.”

A knock sounded at the door. Tadhg stood. “There’s my cue. I would like for you to join me for lunch.”

Charlie looked at her watch. “It might not be until later.”

“That suits me fine. We can go when the lunch rush is over. You know where my office is.”

She nodded at him. “Yes. I’ll be there.”

He smiled. “I’ll be waiting.”

Charlie had no fucking idea what went on in the meeting. Tadhg’s voice, his little speech about consent and chemistry, played on repeat in her head. The timbre of his voice, the molten look he gave her, that one fucking finger leaving a trail of sparks over her skin. Hell. She was in hell for this meeting.

“Agent Madden?”

She blinked. “Sorry, I missed that. Say again?”

“When will you be available? I saw your boot.”

“Oh. Yes. It’s going to be awhile before I’m back in the ring, but I can be here for the training to supervise the other instructors. They are all certified and exceptional at their jobs.” She opened her planner to the dates on the slide. “We can accommodate any, or all, of these dates if you need extra. I will have to know ASAP, though, as other commands are working on their schedules right now as well.”

The group finalized the training schedule, and the meeting ended. Charlie stood up and stretched while she gathered her papers. Fortunately, no one wanted to speak with her, so she was free to walk down the hall to Tadhg’s office.

She rapped her fingers on the door and swung it open. He sat at the desk, phone up to his ear. He looked up, smiled and raised his eyebrows, and waved her in, motioning for her to close the door. She did and took a good look at him while he was occupied.

His suit was such a dark blue, it was almost black. It made his blue eyes deeper, and made his black hair somehow darker, even pulled tightly back at the base of his skull. She flexed her fingers and couldn't decide if she'd start by grabbing the ponytail or his tie.

Tadhg looked up and raised both eyebrows at her in question, then grinned when she flushed at being caught. A moment later, he hung up the phone.

“And what was going through your head just now, Charlotte?”

“Just thinking about where we're going for lunch,” she said. “I'm starving.”

“Liar.” Tadhg unlocked a drawer on his desk and pulled out his keys. “A bad one, at that.”

“Maybe it's intentional.”

They walked to his Durango, and he leaned in to open the door for her. “You want to pull on the tie, don't you?”

As she scooted onto the seat, she turned and smiled sweetly at him. “If I'm going to choke you, it'll be with my hands, Tadhg.”

She watched as he strode around the front of the SUV, grinning, and slid into the driver's seat.

“Red,” he said. He grasped the headrest behind Charlie and looked over his shoulder to back out of his spot.

“I don't like that nickname.” She watched him, eyes narrowed. He was barely holding in a laugh.

“I wasn't calling you that. That'll be our safeword. Though if you're choking me, I won't be able to talk, so how about two taps to your shoulder or thigh?” He glanced over at her



and couldn't hold in the laughter anymore. Her mouth was open, eyes wide. She snapped it closed.

"I'll keep that in mind. And if your hands aren't available?"

Oh hell. She wasn't backing down. "We can come up with a noise, either nonverbal, or maybe you can hold a bell."

"Me? Why would I be holding anything?"

"Because I might not play fair in some things, Charlotte, but I always play fair when it comes to turnabout. You can have your way with me, as long as you know I will have my way with you." He stopped at the red light and looked at her. Her face was flushed, and he could see her pulse in her neck. He wanted to bite her there, feel it beat against his lips. Wanted to bite her elsewhere, too. He dragged his eyes back up to hers and gave her a lopsided smile.

"It's green, Tadhg."

"Mmm. Good to know." Tadhg dropped his eyes down to her lips and licked his own before looking back up at her.

"I mean, the light. The light is green." And so was everything else, as far as she was concerned at this point.

He licked his lips and turned his attention back to the road. "I probably should have asked if you like sushi. Do you?"

"Love the stuff. Been awhile since I've had any."

"Excellent."

They walked in to the restaurant and the staff greeted both of them by name.

"So, we're both regulars here," Charlie said, taking a seat at their corner table. "And still have never run into each other."

"We may have. I'd like to think that I'd remember meeting you, or you me, but timing and the universe and all of that other strange shit."

The server came over and asked, "Your usual? Both of you?" He smiled as they both nodded and left them.

"So, Charlotte," Tadhg said.

“Why don’t you call me Charlie?”

“Because everyone else does. And I see how your eyes flash just a little when I say your name.”

“Are you so cocksure about everything?” Charlie felt transparent, and didn’t know how to process the sensation.

“Am I being presumptuous?”

She shrugged. “You are answering my questions with other questions. But no, you’re not being presumptuous.”

“And I am a cocky man. Not without cause, but,” He leaned forward and dragged a finger across the top of her hand. “I don’t take certain things for granted, and I don’t like to assume.”

Charlie looked up at him, her eyelids low. “What certain things?”

Tadhg watched as she bit her lip when he traced his finger lightly between hers. “I don’t take this—” he gestured between them, “—for granted, for one. And while I think you’re feeling the same, I don’t want to assume as much.” He picked her hand up and brought it to his lips, smiling when she let out a sigh. “Am I making the wrong assumption, Charlotte?”

Charlie looked from his lips to his eyes. “No, Tadhg. You’re not. I think you know this.”

“I need to hear the words, Charlotte. I like communication. And consent. I know that I can be a bit much sometimes, and if you need me to dial it down, I expect you to let me know.”

“What do you mean by ‘a bit much,’ Tadhg?” Charlie asked. She curled her fingers around his. “If we’re using our words, I’d like to know what I’m getting myself into.”

He grinned at her. “Nothing you don’t want, Charlotte. I mean that, all jokes about safewords aside.” He kissed her fingers again and brought her hand down to the table, where he covered it with his other. “I simply mean that I don’t have a lot of boundaries when it comes to some pursuits. I’ve also got a bit of a potty mouth.”

Charlie laughed. “I hadn’t noticed. And I’ll leave the boundaries conversation alone for now.” She grabbed her water and took a long drink to try and cool off. This man heated her blood something fierce.

Their server arrived, placed their dishes, and quickly left. They ate in silence for a few minutes, comfortable in it, but not so much that the thrum of heat that ricocheted between them diminished.

Tadhg finished chewing, swallowed, and placed his hands on the table. “When are you getting out of that boot?”

Charlie held up a finger and finished her bite. “Today, hopefully. I have an appointment this afternoon. It should be today. Feels better. Doctor’s been allowing me to walk on it when I’m not on duty, and it’s been fine. I’ll still have to take it easy.”

“I’d like to take you out this weekend. There’s an area I like to go to. No hiking, though there are some super easy walking trails at this part.”

“You want to take me out to the middle of nowhere in the desert?”

“I absolutely do. I’ll even bring you back in one piece.” He crossed his fingers over his heart. “Promise.”

Charlie shook her head. “As long as you’re not taking out life insurance policies on me or anything.” She grinned. “Sounds good.”

Tadhg held her hand as he drove them back out to his office. He released it only long enough to open her door, and then he walked her to her car.

“Thank you for joining me, Charlotte,” he said, looking down at her. His gaze was still hot, but his smile was gentle.

“Thank you for lunch, Tadhg. And the conversation. I’ve got some things to think about.”

“As do I, Charlotte. As do I.” He leaned down and brushed his lips across her cheek. “You need to get to your appointment. And unfortunately, they seem to want me to do

things around here.” He stepped back and let her get into her car. “I’ll message you about Saturday.”

Charlie floated back into the office after her appointment.

“How’s Tadhg?”

“I still hate you. He’s fine.” She sat down at her desk.

Antony leaned back in his chair, locked his fingers behind his head, and grinned at her. “Good to see you without the boot. How long til you’re back in action for training?”

She waved her hand. “A couple months, probably. It’s healed well, but they want me to do some physical therapy and stay off it.” Her shoulders sagged. “It’s going to set me back a lot.”

“Nah. You have a lot of things you can do to keep everything up, and you know it. I can help you with some moves that will keep your leg in shape until you can work that ankle again.”

Charlie nodded. “You know, I didn’t even think of that. Yeah, I’d like some help, because right now, it seems like it’s the end of the road for training for me.”

Antony sat up and frowned at her. “No. It’s not. You are the best trainer we have, and probably one of the best out there. Don’t even. We’ll keep you in shape.” He sat back. “Nice deflection from why you’re so late getting back to the office, though.”

Charlie wadded up a ball of paper and threw it at him. “The meeting went a little long. Tadhg saw me come in, we talked before the meeting and then went to lunch. That’s all.”

Antony shook his head. “If you say so. When are you going on a date?”

“This weekend.”

“Good. About damn time.”

“What is it with you and this guy? You’ve never given a damn about anyone else I’ve seen.”

Antony folded his hands across his belly. “I’ve never known any of your previous relationships. They’ve been on the uh, transient side.” He lowered his chin and looked at her. “You know I am not throwing any stones from my glass house, so don’t even go there. But no one’s been anyone you’ve wanted to stick around. You see, you conquer, you move on. All good. I just think that Tadhg is a different sort.”

Charlie sighed. Antony knew her better than she ever let on, and they both somehow knew it. “It pains me to say this, but you’re not wrong.”

“Will wonders never cease?” Antony raised his hands to the ceiling. “Now, if only there were more of an audience.”

“I swear to—one of these days, Ramos.” Charlie threw a stress ball at him and laughed when it bounced off his forehead.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Tadhg pulled up in front of the apartments on post and was about to pull into a spot when Charlie came into view. She bounced over to the passenger side and hopped in when he unlocked the door.

“Hi,” she said, her voice a little breathless.

“Hi, yourself. Couldn’t let me be a gentleman, could you?” He reached over and squeezed her hand.

She shrugged. “I got tired of sitting upstairs. Where are we going?”

Tadhg navigated through the lot and toward the main gate. “Carr Canyon.” He nodded to a basket in the back seat. “I was going to take you up to the waterfall overlook, but the road is still closed for the winter.”

“So, you’re really taking me out to the middle of nowhere for a picnic?”

“I hope that’s okay. Have you been up there?”

Charlie shook her head. “No. I’ve been up to Miller Peak, but not anywhere else.”

“Maybe we can go to the waterfall in a few weeks when they open things back up. It’s stunning up that way, more so after a good rain or when the snow’s melted. That is, if your foot’s up to it.”

He pulled up toward one of the back picnic areas and backed the Durango, using it to block the view from the road. Once parked, Tadhg grabbed the basket out of the back and set it on the table. As he unpacked everything, he watched Charlie wander around, kicking rocks over and bending down to look

at them. She touched the plants as she went, sometimes stopping to take pictures of different ones.

“This is the second time I’ve seen you staring at plants in the desert,” he said as she walked back up.

“Plants are a hobby of mine,” she said. “I was looking for some Desert Daisy the day we met.” She looked at the spread on the table. “Damn. This looks amazing. Did you make all of this?”

Tadhg smiled. “Mostly, yes.” He sat down across from her and handed her a plate. “I brought soda, water, and a couple beers. Wasn’t sure what you’d want.”

“Beer, please.” He popped the tops on two of them and handed her one.

“Help yourself,” he said, pointing toward the food.

They ate in silence for a few minutes. Charlie took a swig from her bottle and pointed it at Tadhg. “Okay. You were out there painting when I took that header. And you teach at the studio. What’s your story?”

“I have a BFA in painting,” he said. He speared an olive with his fork and popped it into his mouth. When he swallowed, he continued. “My focus back then was oil, but watercolor is where it’s at for me now.”

“Where did you study?”

“Cal Arts.” He watched as her eyebrows raised.

“When did you decide you wanted to be an artist?”

“I don’t know that I made a conscious decision like that. Painting and sketching have always been part of me. My mother also paints, so that’s probably where it came from. She’d take me out to different places around Galway, and we’d spend the day drawing and painting.”

“So that’s where the accent is from.”

Tadhg smiled. “I figured the name would be a clue as well. Yes. I grew up there. Dad’s American, and when I was sixteen, we moved to the US.”

“And after school? How’d you end up here?”

“Army. I was a geospatial engineer. Did six, got some certs and a Master’s, got out, and I’ve been here ever since.”

“And that explains where you work.”

He nodded. “Pretty straightforward. Fairly boring. Now, what about you?”

“Nothing about that is boring.” She took another drink of her beer. “I grew up in Bandon, Oregon. Two older brothers. Parents still together. They have a nursery there—plant type, not people type. Now you know where the plant thing comes from.”

“And how did you wind up in CID?” Tadhg was familiar enough to know that a lot of agents came from the military police, but some came from other specialties.

“I’m the only agent here who was a direct accession. Got a degree in accounting and ended up getting a couple of high profile forensic internships. Here I am.”

“What about the combatives part?”

Charlie laughed. “As I’m sure you’ve noticed,” she said, gesturing at her body and shaking her head when Tadhg raised his eyebrows, “I’m fairly petite. People underestimate me. My brothers and I started taekwondo when we were kids. I think I was five. Anyway, when I enlisted, I had the chance to go through combatives. Kicked ass, got certified. Later, we had some training with IDF forces, and I learned Krav Maga.”

Tadhg reached into the basket and pulled out a covered plate. “So, you let people underestimate you and then kick the dogshit out of them.” He uncovered the plate and set it between them. Chocolate chunk cookies.

Charlie looked at the cookies and up at Tadhg. “Pretty much. Did Ramos tell you?”

“Tell me what?”

“My favorite thing.” She gestured at the plate.



“No. These are the only cookie I know how to make. That’s why I asked if you had any allergies.”

Charlie raised her eyebrows. He wasn’t lying. Huh. She grabbed a cookie and bit into it. “Oh my god,” she mumbled around the bite. “These are so good. You made them?”

A warm flush rushed through Tadhg’s chest at Charlotte’s enjoyment, and he couldn’t keep the silly grin off of his face. “I did. I’m glad you like them.”

“Like them? I might take the whole plate.”

Now he did blush a little. “You’re welcome to them, if you want.”

Once they’d had their fill, they both packed everything away and stowed it in the Durango before going back to the table to watch the sunset.

“Maybe another time, when you’re fully healed, we can catch one of the trails. There are some easy ones around this area, with some spectacular views.” Tadhg sat down on the picnic bench, facing out over the vista.

Charlie studied him. He was so perfectly at home out here, it was hard to believe he was from anywhere else. This date had been so relaxed compared to all of their other conversations, which had been full of snap and fire. She took a deep breath and looked out at the views. “I’d like that. Fingers crossed I can get released for regular duty soon.”

“Oh, but you’ll still have to watch it for a while. We’ve got time.” He grinned at her and patted the bench next to him. “Come sit next to me.”

Instead of taking that seat, Charlie grabbed his shoulder, stepped on the bench, and sat on the tabletop, straddling his shoulders. She had to scoot back a little because of the breadth of him. While he wasn’t super tall, maybe 5’9” to her 5’1”, his shoulders were broad, which caused a nice little flip in her belly. She adjusted to make room for him and hugged his hips with her ankles on either side of him.

He leaned back and threw his arms over her knees. “What’s this?”

“I’ve been wanting to do this since the day I met you,” she said, and buried her fingers in his hair.

She did not expect his reaction. The low groan that erupted from him reverberated through her legs. His fingers, which had trailed casually up and down the sides of her shins, gripped the flesh of her calves. He flung his head back, nudging just under her breasts.

*Oh my.* Her nails were short, but not down to the quick short, and so she raked them over his scalp. He shivered in her arms and made a strangled sound. She wanted to hear it again, along with the uptick in his breathing.

If she looked over his shoulder, Tadhg thought, she would find out exactly what she was doing to him. Of all the things, playing with his hair was *it*. The one thing that got his motor going above anything else. Every nerve in his body was on fire. The skin on her calves was soft and smooth. The gentle swell of her breasts when he leaned against her. The rise and fall of her chest as she breathed. And then her hands. Those nails scraped his scalp, and he purred. He fucking purred under her hands.

Every inch of his body was tuned to her fingers on his scalp. His cock was rock hard and fast approaching painful. She needed to stop, but he couldn’t bring himself to make her. It had been so fucking long since he’d been touched like this, and he didn’t want it to end.

She tugged her fingers through his curls, doing that little motion that wasn’t quite pulling, but more like jerking the tangles free, and he just about melted. She started at the front of his head, near the top, and started working her way back, scratching, tugging, and detangling his hair. When she finally reached the back of his head, she dug her fingers in and gave him a firmer tug, jolting his head back just a little.

He froze. If she did that again—

She did.

“Charlotte,” he groaned. He grabbed her fingers and loosened her grip.

“What’s the matter, Tadhg?”

That tone was a touch too innocent. He stood and turned toward her, not caring if she saw how she affected him. He knelt on the bench and leaned in.

“What we are not going to do here is play coy, Charlotte,” he said, his voice low and deep. “Let’s see how you like this.”

Her eyes glittered up at him as he took his hands and ran them up the sides of her neck and skated his fingers across her scalp at her nape. They fluttered closed as he lightly tugged.

“Oh yes, *a stór*, you know exactly what that does.” He rubbed her scalp, lightly scratching, until she moaned and opened her eyes. In this golden hour that was magical to Tadhg, she looked to be made of shimmering dust and desire. She looked from his eyes to his mouth and he watched as her tongue darted out and swept across her lower lip, and her breath caught.

“Charlotte,” he murmured. “I need to kiss you.”

She reached up and placed her hands on his forearms. “Oh fuck yes, you do.”

Tadhg leaned forward and brushed his lips over hers before tracing his tongue along the seam of her mouth. She opened to him immediately, and he moved in. His thumbs stroked her jaw as his tongue slicked against hers. He felt her hands move to his shoulders, and her nails dig into his skin, and they lost themselves.

Her breath hitched, and she clawed at him. He needed her closer. He ran his hands down her sides, over her hips, and under her ass, picking her up. Charlie immediately clenched his hips with her knees and pressed herself against him, taking advantage of the slight height difference.

Tadhg spun around and sat down on the bench, gripping her hip with one hand and holding the back of her head with the other. She bit down on his tongue, hard enough to sting, and he groaned into her mouth.

Suddenly, she relaxed her thighs and settled right onto his cock. He broke the kiss threw his head back. “Fuck.

Charlotte.” He straightened back up and looked at her. “You’re going to kill me. That’s your end game, isn’t it? Me, dead, out here in the desert, cock straight up like a sundial.”

Charlie looked at him for a second and lost it. She collapsed against him, head tucked into his neck, and laughed until tears came out of her eyes. Finally, she looked at him. “Good recovery, Tadhg.”

“It was either that, or risk putting on a grand show for whomever might be around.” He moved her against him, and her eyes grew wide. “You know what you’re doing here, and I am all for it. Whatever it might be.”

She leaned toward him, pressing her breasts against his chest and winding her fingers back in his hair. “If you think that I’m unaffected by this, you’re so wrong.” She pressed a kiss just under his ear and ground against him, huffing out a laugh as he hissed and gripped her to him.

“You are difficult.”

She laughed harder and tried to move, but he’d wrapped his arms around her.

“Charlotte.” He pressed his hand against the back of her head and stood up. He turned around and patted one of her legs until she dropped both feet to the bench. Once she was steady, he released her head and ran both of his hands to her hips, which were in line with his waist. He looked into her eyes. “I want you. And I am so very tempted to have you, right here, on this table.” He winked, and she grinned at him. “But I don’t want you once.” He looked at her, all over face. She’d gotten a little sun across her nose, and her lips were red and swollen from their kissing. He imagined her like this, but splayed out on his bed. “Once won’t be enough. Twice won’t be enough.” He gripped her hips and pulled her toward him, nipping at her chin. “And I certainly don’t want any firsts outside of kissing to happen out here. That will be in private. Just you and me. Preferably with softer surfaces. I’m not as young as all that anymore.”

Charlie pressed her forehead against Tadhg’s. He was right. But good lord, she was on fire. She nodded. “I know. You’re

right. It's also starting to get chilly."

Tadhg kissed her nose. "We could go make out in the car for a little while."

"Because that's safer than being here on the picnic table." Charlie ran her fingers into Tadhg's hair again and tugged his head back. He moaned and dug his fingers into her thighs. "Wasn't expecting that to set you off."

"*You* set me off, Charlotte. But yes, that move works every time."

She gave him a cheeky grin. "Noted."

Tadhg swatted her ass. "Knock it off before I stop being a gentleman."

Charlie leaned down and lightly bit his ear. "I can't wait for you to stop."

He nuzzled her cheek. "You. Are. Killing. Me." He grabbed her and swung her over his shoulder, laughing as she shrieked. He set her in the Durango and leaned in and kissed her hard. "I want you so bad I cannot stand it, Charlotte. But I am taking you home. The wait will be worth it."

Charlie's breath caught, and she nodded. "I know."

The drive back to Charlie's apartment was quiet. Tadhg held her hand and enjoyed the feel of her other hand trailing up and down his forearm. As he turned into the parking lot, he gave it a squeeze and let go to deal with parking.

"You don't have to walk me up," she said as he turned off the vehicle.

He turned toward her. "I know. I know you're perfectly safe and capable. I'd also appreciate it if you'd let me attempt to be a gentleman."

"You've been one today. Mostly."

He leaned toward her, gripped her chin, and kissed her, dipping his tongue into her mouth and rendering her breathless. "Not in my head, I haven't. Also, I'll take any opportunity to walk behind you and watch that ass."

Halfway up the stairs, he ran his finger up the back of Charlie's thigh, causing her to squeak.

"Hey now!" she yelled. "Trying to make me stumble here?"

"I'd catch you. Sorry, was just thinking about sinking my teeth into—"

Charlie spun around on the top level. "Do not get started again."

They stopped in front of her door, and she looked up at him. "I was going to ask you. You said something earlier, called me something. What was that?"

Tadhg shrugged one shoulder. "*A stór*. It's just a term of endearment. Literally, 'my treasure.'"

"Huh. Well, that's not so bad, I guess. Better than calling me Red."

Tadhg looked down at her and bit his lip. "Oh, Charlotte." He grabbed her and kissed her forehead. "You are such a temptation. And I must resist, so I'm going to go." He stepped back and watched as she unlocked her door.

"Thank you for the wonderful day, Tadhg." Charlie raised up on her toes and kissed him quickly before ducking into her apartment and shutting the door.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

“That Realtor was amazing,” Simon said, lifting his bottle of beer. “To the Realtor!”

Everyone raised their glasses and toasted. Tadhg sat to Charlie’s right, his hand resting easily on her thigh. She leaned into him, her arm across the back of his chair, and had been toying with his curls. Every time she tugged at one, he squeezed her leg.

“So the big move is this weekend, yes?” Lesley asked.

“Well, technically. We were allowed to move big stuff in last night, but didn’t officially take control of the keys until today.” Simon nodded to Charlie. “You got some stuff in last night, right?”

“Mmhmm. I also set up delivery for furniture for the morning. They’re scheduled for nine o’clock.”

“I saw the movers heading out of the apartments this morning. They weren’t taking off with your stuff, were they?”

“Yeah. That was the only time they could get it. I’ve got everything else in boxes and an air mattress to crash on tonight.”

Tadhg leaned in and murmured, “You should have told me. I have plenty of room at my place.”

She tugged his hair in response.

He scooted his hand a couple inches higher on her thigh and squeezed.

Across the table, Antony kicked back in his seat and grinned. Lesley flicked his ear, and he jumped, scowling at her

before he wrapped his arm around her shoulder and pulled her close to him.

“What time are you wanting to get going?” Charlie asked, giving Tadhg another tug. She jumped a little when his hand skated higher. This was a game of chicken she was now sure she’d lose. Or win, depending.

Audrey gave her a funny look. “First thing in the morning. Or whenever you show up.” She tilted her head and looked from Charlie to Tadhg and back.

“I’ll be there. Seven okay?” She crossed her legs as Tadhg’s fingers skated under her skirt and toward the crease of her leg. He chuckled softly and squeezed her thigh. She’d lost that game.

“That’ll be fine. I imagine we’ll be passing each other back and forth most of the day. Don’t wait for us to get back if we’re not there. Maybe we can break for lunch or something.”

Antony clapped his hands together. “Talk about that tomorrow. Warehouse? It’s about the right time to get those tables.”

Tadhg walked around to the passenger side and opened the door for Charlie. Instead of closing it, he scooted in close to her and propped his leg up on the running board, wedging his toe against the dome light to keep it off. “You’re being a bit of a tease this evening, Charlotte.” He murmured against her cheek. “Wanting to see how far you can push me?” He reached one hand to her nape and buried his fingers in her hair. “Do you want to play?”

“Figured I already lost that game of chicken,” Charlie said. She tugged against the grip he had on her head and smiled when he gripped tighter.

Tadhg ran his other hand up her leg and between her thighs. She clamped her legs closed around his hand. “Uh uh. Open them,” he said.

“Tadhg.”

He dropped his voice. “Charlotte, you wanted to play. We are going to play.”



“We’re in the parking lot!”

“We’re at the back of the parking lot. My windows are tinted. There’s a wall behind me. Open your legs.” Tadhg moved his hand until he made contact with her panties. “Oh, Charlotte,” he breathed. “Fuck, you’re soaked.” He stroked over the fabric until he reached the hard bud of her clit and focused on it for a few minutes. “Look at you,” he said, tugging her head back and gazing down into her face. “So beautiful. So wanton.” He leaned in and put his lips right next to her ear. “Toying with me at dinner was a little cruel, don’t you think?” He set his teeth on her neck, light enough to not leave a mark, but sharp enough to make her whimper.

“Tadhg,” she said, breathless.

“Yes, Charlotte?”

Charlie squirmed against his fingers. “You’re killing me.”

“I told you that turnabout is fair play.” He chuckled low in her ear and moved his fingers under the edge of her panties. “You have no idea what this is doing to me.” He slid one finger inside of her, then another, and hooked them upward. “I want you so bad, it’s painful.” He rubbed until he found that spot inside of her that caused her to groan and shudder. “I have jerked myself off every goddamn night thinking about you and all the ways I want to have you.” He pressed his thumb to the hood of her clit and rubbed her inside and out.

“Oh fuck, Tadhg.” Charlie’s legs shook, and she thrust her hips against his hand.

“You like that idea, Charlotte? Are you imagining me naked, stroking my cock? Do you like knowing it’s your name on my lips as I come all over my chest and belly while I imagine sinking into your wet heat?”

“Yes!” Charlie froze and Tadhg kissed her, swallowing her cries as she spasmed around his fingers. He worked her until she came down and pulled away from the kiss. She looked up at him, eyes wide, as she gasped. “Fucking hell.” She shuddered as he pulled his fingers from her and brought them up to his mouth, licking them.

He moaned as he sucked on them. “I really want to drag you into the back seat and lick you until you come again. But I’m afraid they’ll send out a search party for us.”

“They wouldn’t. They knew something was going on at dinner.”

Tadhg kissed her lightly. “True, but we have some celebrating to do this evening.” He settled her skirt back down around her thighs and set his foot down. They both blinked as the dome light came on.

“So, you just did *that* to me, and now we’re going to go play pool?” Charlie looked at him incredulously.

“Yes. Yes we are.” He kissed her again and stepped back. “I’ve got about five blocks to calm down so I can walk without a tent in my pants.” He made sure she was safely in and shut the door.

Charlie watched as he passed in front of the Durango. She was tempted, so tempted, to tell him to take her home. When he got into the driver’s seat, she stayed quiet. This was their first night out with all of her friends, and she was certain he’d refuse. Instead, she held his hand across the center console and watched him as he drove to the club.

“What?” he asked, glancing over at her. “What’s in that pretty head?”

“Tempted to get you to take me home.”

“Oh no. We have to go out tonight.”

Charlie laughed. “I knew you’d say that.”

Tadhg grabbed her hand and brought her fingers up to his lips. “Charlotte, I’d love to take you home, but for what I want to do with you, one night isn’t going to cut it.” He lightly bit a fingertip. “Tonight was just a taste, and I’m so ready for more, but it is worth waiting for.”

Tadhg squeezed her fingers and swung into the club. “You’re worth waiting for.” He lifted his chin toward the front of the club. Everyone was waiting for them.

“Kinda thought you might bail on us,” Antony said as they walked up.

“Thought about it.” Charlie said.

“Still thinking about it,” Tadhg said under his breath.

Antony turned away, shoulders shaking with laughter as he sidled back up to Lesley and kissed her on the temple.

The group took up two pool tables. As Charlie racked at one, Tadhg leaned against the table next to her. “So, what are we betting on tonight?”

“We’re betting?” She spun the balls in place and settled them before removing the triangle.

“Why not?”

Charlie bit her lip. “Anything I can think of are bets that we’ll both win, regardless.”

“How about which house we spend tomorrow night at?”

She raised an eyebrow. “We’re going to be staying at my place, since we’ll be there, anyway. You wouldn’t pull me away from the first night in my new place.”

Tadhg nodded his head once. “True.”

Charlie grinned at him. “I’ve got a better idea.”

“What’s that?”

“How about we wager on who gets to call the shots tomorrow?”

“Call the shots? What do you mean, Charlotte?” Tadhg licked his lips and gave her a slow, wicked smile.

“You know exactly what I mean, Tadhg O’Brien.” She stepped forward until she was chest to chest with him. “You, me, my place, and you doing my bidding all weekend when I beat you tonight.”

“Talking a big game for someone who lost last time we played,” Tadhg said. This was going to be a fun night, whether or not he won.

“That was last time. Here we are now. And it’s your break.”

Hours later, when the club closed, and the group went their separate ways, Charlie said, “Well. Tomorrow will be fun.”

“You didn’t play fair. I haven’t lost like that in years.”

“You didn’t lay down any rules.”

“Ass shaking isn’t normally part of pool playing, Charlotte. Neither is letting me stare right down your shirt.”

“Maybe not, but they are good tactics. Besides, licking your fingers wasn’t exactly playing nice, either.”

Tadhg leaned over the console and kissed her. “Excellent tactics. And you’re right. Between you being a tease and me smelling you on my hand all night, I was set up for utter failure.”

He pulled out of the parking lot and started tapping his fingers on the steering wheel. Other than the low noise from the stereo and his fingers lightly drumming on the wheel, the ride was quiet until they cleared the gate onto the installation.

“I do have one thing I’d like to talk about with you, but I don’t want to freak you out.”

“That sounds ominous.”

“Not really, but there’s one thing you should know.” Tadhg pulled into the parking lot and turned off the Durango. “I should have brought this up before now.”

Charlie turned toward him and frowned. “What’s up?”

He took a deep breath. “We haven’t had the whole physical and birth control talk yet.”

“Ah yes.” She took a deep breath. “It’s been a long time for me. Long enough to where I’ve had a physical since. And as far as birth control, I’ve had that covered for a long time.”

“As have I,” Tadhg said.

Charlie paused and pursed her lips. “How do you mean?”

“I’ve had a vasectomy, Charlotte. I don’t want kids. Never have.”

Charlie blew out a long breath. “Oh, you just got even fucking hotter.”

Tadhg’s eyes grew wide. “Are you being sarcastic?”

“No. I had a bisalp a few years ago. This factory does not function.”

“Bisalp? I haven’t heard of that one.”

“Bilateral salpingectomy. No tubes. Removed. Gone.”

“Huh. Who’d’ve thought. Both of us, childfree.”

“Yep. Now you just get to tell me you’ve had a physical recently.”

Tadhg smiled. “I have. All good.”

“Hedging your bets?”

“Honestly, I was due for one. Had it shortly before meeting you. Turns out, the timing was excellent.”

Charlie grinned. “You thought this chat was going to go differently.”

Tadhg shrugged. “It usually does when I break that news. Lot of women don’t enjoy finding out that kids are not on the menu. It’s caused more than one breakup.”

“You told them beforehand, right?”

“Oh, sure. I don’t keep it a secret. That’s an asshole move. One figured she could talk me into a reversal. Another got pregnant and tried to claim it was mine anyway. That was fun.”

“Yikes. I’m glad I haven’t had to deal with that.”

“No Joe’s ever wanted to knock you up?”

Charlie bit her upper lip. “Nope. Wouldn’t matter. If that ever became an issue, it just shows an incompatibility that’s not good for a relationship.”

“Well, you won’t hear me complaining. Ever.” He reached for the door handle. “I should walk you up to your place.”

They stopped in front of her door, and Tadhg pulled her in for a hug. “Yes, I want to come in, more than anything I’ve wanted in a very, very long time. I’m not going to. Tomorrow will be a busy day.”

Charlie laughed against his chest and held him tighter. “I know.”

“I’ll be here before seven so we can start loading your stuff into the Durango. How many trips do you think it’ll take?”

“Between your ride and mine? One. I don’t have a lot of stuff.”

Tadhg ran his hands up and down Charlie’s back. “What about Simon and Audrey?”

“They had furniture moved in last night. They don’t have a lot either, so it won’t take them long. Simon’s got a big TV. I’ve got a decent sized trunk. That’s really it for the large stuff.”

“So what I’m hearing is that we’ll be done by lunch.”

“Probably.” Charlie yawned loudly. “Sorry.”

Tadhg tipped her head up and kissed her softly. “Go get some sleep. I’ll see you in the morning.”

Ten minutes later, as he pulled into his driveway, his phone dinged.

Charlie: *Don’t forget to bring an overnight bag.*

He smiled. *Already packed.*

## CHAPTER NINE

Charlie opened up her door the next morning and was immediately picked up and spun around to the wall.

Tadhg nuzzled into her neck and growled in her ear. “That text last night gave me some incredible dreams, Charlotte.”

“It was just a suggestion, Tadhg,” she said, grinning against his cheek.

He leaned back and raised his eyebrows. “I should spank you for lying.”

Charlie laughed. “Gonna be that kind of day?”

He kissed her, sweeping his tongue into her mouth and biting the tip of hers. He backed off and sucked her bottom lip between his teeth before soothing it with his tongue. “Yes. Yes, it is.” He let her slide down his body until her feet hit the floor and stepped back. “Now, what first?” He snapped his fingers. “Wait.”

Charlie tried to catch her breath and watched as he stepped outside the door and back in. He handed her a cup of coffee and held up his own, as well as a small bag.

“Bagels, for strength.”

“Yes!”

They sat down on the floor. Tadhg took a bite out of his bagel and looked around. He chewed and leaned over to look past Charlie toward the bedroom, then swallowed. “You weren’t lying about not having a lot of shit.”

“Nope. The bedroom’s cleaned out.” She gestured around. “What you see is all there is.”

“We’ll have plenty of time before your furniture delivery.”

“That’s what I’m hoping. I’ve already got my bed set up there—the mattress and frame were mine, not the government’s, because ew.” Charlie grimaced. “Everything else is new, and none of it needs to be put together.” She raised the bagel to her lips and stopped. “Well, except for the dishes, and I moved those yesterday.”

“Bonus for not having to deal with that.” Tadhg wiped his mouth with a napkin and balled it up. “Point me in a direction, and I’ll get started loading while you’re finishing the details.”

“Suitcases are already loaded up in my car. The rest of this is plant stuff. Just grab and tetris how you see fit in the Durango.”

Tadhg stacked two boxes and walked out. “Done.”

It took them less than an hour to pack up the Durango and another twenty minutes to get to the new place. They pulled up in front of the guesthouse and saw Simon and Audrey messing around with some boxes near the back door.

“You need help with this stuff?” Tadhg asked, walking over. He turned back. “Will the plants be okay in the rig for a bit?”

Charlie nodded. “They’ll be just fine in there until we get them settled. Besides, I need the movers here first before we offload them.”

Between the four of them, they got everything moved into Simon and Audrey’s house. They ripped open boxes, and Charlie’s phone rang. She answered and quickly hung up.

“They’re here. We’ll be back soon.”

An hour later, and the movers were gone.

“Holy shit, I love the efficiency here.” Tadhg said as he collapsed on the couch. “Also digging this couch. It’s a napping kind of sofa.”

“These guys have loads of practice, I imagine.” Charlie sat next to him and curled under his arm. “And I got this couch just for the nap possibilities.”

Tadhg crossed his arm over her chest and grasped her shoulder. “Nap before finishing?”



Charlie sunk into his embrace and sighed. “A few minutes of relaxing, at least.”

“Works for me.” He tugged her tighter to him and slung one leg up onto the couch before leaning back. “Do we need to set an alarm?”

Charlie laughed. “No. I’m still very much awake. Sitting is great, though.” She patted the couch. “Best purchase ever.”

Tadhg ran his hand down Charlie’s arm and up the sleeve of her t-shirt, stroking her shoulder. He nuzzled into her hair, and the faint scent of her shampoo, clean, unfrilly, with an undercurrent of what made her *her* invaded his senses. She was warm and pliant, and so right in his arms. He reached over with his other arm and played with her curls, smiling as she purred.

“Don’t stop doing that,” she murmured.

“Didn’t plan to. But we need to get finished before the sun goes down.”

“That’s hours from now.”

Tadhg chuckled into her hair. “Do you want to be unpacking hours from now?”

Charlie sat up and turned toward him. She rolled her eyes and sighed dramatically. “Fine.” She shoved away from him and stood up, dragging her feet toward the door.

He laughed. “You musta been in theatre as a kid. That acting.”

“Don’t make me kick your ass.”

Tadhg moved toward her and backed her up to the wall. “You keep threatening this and not making good on it, Charlotte.” He leaned down and kissed her under her ear. “I’m waiting for that ass kicking.”

She huffed out a breath and pushed against his chest. “Throwing my words back at me, Tadhg. Damn you.” She grinned at him. “Let’s get this shit done.”

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“What’s your favorite flower?” Tadhg asked. He set the last box of succulents on the table.

“Dandelions.”

“Dandelions.” He raised an eyebrow. “Like the weeds?”

Charlie nodded. “They’re technically not a native species, but still useful. They’re one of the first flowers to come up in a lot of places every spring, so the bees are happy. They’re edible. Medicinal.” She set the last pot on the shelf and surveyed the scene, swapping a couple of the plants. “And they grow anywhere.” She looked at Tadhg and shrugged. “Like, anywhere. They’re the ultimate ‘fuck you’ plant. Middle of a cracked sidewalk in New York City? Dandelion’ll grow there. I respect that.”

Tadhg nodded. “I’ll never think of them the same way again.”

She grinned. “I also like roses. People say they’re hard to grow, but they love the desert here. So much sun, sandy soil. I’ve planted them and ignored them, and they grow despite all that.” She set the last pot on the shelf and turned it just so before she stepped back.

“You like spiteful plants, then.”

Charlie laughed. “I guess I do. I used to have more exotics,” she said, gesturing to a pile of empty pots on the floor. “But when I got doped and ended up in the hospital, they didn’t make it.”

“How long were you in?”

“Only a few days, but the heat went out, and so much shit was going on that Aud couldn’t get in to take care of them. They were also more tropical. And then I went home for a week, so,” she shrugged. “Sucked, but I think for now, I just want to focus on hearty plants.” She moved back to the shelves and adjusted the angles on a few of the plants before nodding to herself.

“Spiteful ones.” Tadhg stepped up beside her.

“I’d rather think of them as survivors.”

Tadhg ran his fingers under her chin and tipped her head up. “Fitting. On both counts.” Before she could say anything, he captured her lips with his and moved his hand to the back of her neck. She sighed and wound her arms around his waist, leaning in and opening up to him.

He broke the kiss slowly and looked down at her dreamy eyes. “Are we done moving you in here?” he asked.

Charlie nodded.

“Should we go check on Simon and Audrey to see if they need any help?”

Charlie reached down and pulled her phone out of her pocket. She unlocked it and looked at her messages before tossing it on the couch. “Nope.”

Tadhg raised an eyebrow. “She texted you?”

“Awhile ago, yeah. Sent me a DND message.”

“Do Not Disturb?” He traced a finger down the side of her neck and around the collar of her t-shirt, dipping slightly below the fabric.

“Mmhmm.” Charlie tilted her head back to give him a little more room.

“Charlotte,” he said, leaning forward and brushing his lips over hers. “Should I get my go bag out of the Durango?” He watched as her eyes fluttered open and her smile brightened her entire face.

“Yes, Tadhg, you should.”

## CHAPTER TEN

Tadhg dropped his bag just inside the front door. The echo of the deadbolt slipping into place sounded loud in the room.

“I wanted to ask you about something you said the other day,” Charlie said. “About boundaries.”

Tadhg smiled and walked around to the couch. He sat and patted the seat next to him. “Good question. Good timing, too.” He watched as she sat down and crossed her legs as she faced him. He reached out and ran his hand up her calf.

“What exactly did you mean?” Charlie asked.

“If I recall, I said that I don’t have many boundaries.” He waited until she looked at him and nodded. “I’d like to know what yours are before we go any further. Hard limits, soft limits. Things like that.”

Charlie raised her eyebrows. “You don’t have any limits?”

Tadhg shook his head. “Oh, no. I have limits. I have some distinct hard limits.” At her confused look, he continued. “I don’t care much for degradation. That’s a soft limit, so if you want me to call you my good little slut—”

“Not if you want to remain intact.”

Tadhg barked out a laugh. “Fair. Spitting? Hard no. Bodily waste? Fuck that. Hard pain isn’t my thing either, though I like some teeth and nails. Maybe some spanking.”

“Giving or receiving?”

Tadhg lifted one shoulder. “I’m game for some exploration.”

“Are you into BDSM?”

“Eh, not really. I’m a dominant personality, just like you are. But I’m not into it as a lifestyle thing. No dungeons or anything—I’ve never been to one, but I’m curious to see what it’s like. You know I’m rabid about consent, and that community does things right in that regard.” He trailed his fingers down and back up her leg. “Bottom line, Charlotte, if it’s something we both like, I’m here for it. I’m open to new experiences, barring what I said earlier. Now, I’d like to hear what you want.”

Charlie pursed her lips. “I don’t really know where to start. I agree with those hard limits.”

“Hmmm.” Tadhg let his voice drop a little. “You like things a little rough?”

Charlie nodded.

“Words, Charlotte.”

She stuck out her tongue at him. “You’re bossy.”

“We’ve established this.”

“Two dominant people. Go figure.” She bit her lip and looked up at the ceiling. “Yes. I like rough. I like to play. Light pain, spanking, restraining.” She tilted her head and smiled. “Toys?”

“Oh yes. All the toys,” Tadhg said. His voice was a little rough. “For you, for me. I’m open.”

Charlie raised an eyebrow. “For you?”

He grinned. “Well, yes, Charlotte.” He watched as she squirmed in her seat. Her eyes were bright and her neck flushed. He took her hand and wound her fingers through his. “If you think I don’t benefit from the use of toys,” he said as he brought her hand to his lips, “you’d be mistaken.” He kissed her fingertips and lightly nibbled one before running the tip of his tongue over it.

Charlie huffed out a breath. “I thought you were talking about pegging.” She watched as Tadhg’s eyes widened slightly and he smiled.

“What makes you think I’m not, Charlotte?” He bit his lips together to keep from laughing as her eyebrows shot up and her mouth made a small ‘o.’

“I’ll keep that in mind next time I go to the toy store,” she said, standing up. “I need a drink. Want anything?”

“Water, please.” Tadhg watched as she walked to the kitchen and grabbed two glasses. She filled both with ice and water from a pitcher in the fridge and came back.

“I wasn’t expecting this deep of a talk,” she said, handing him one of the glasses. “It’s a little . . .”

“Disconcerting? Arousing?”

“Both?” Charlie laughed.

“Both works.” Tadhg waited until Charlie took a drink and set her glass down on the table. He pulled her toward him, grasping her waist and bringing her to sit on his lap. She wound her arms around his neck and buried her fingers in his hair. “I love it when you do that,” he murmured, setting his lips against her neck and sucking lightly.

“I noticed.” Charlie moved her head to give him more room.

“It does all sorts of things to me.” He nibbled on the skin just below her ear and listened to her breathing hitch. “I know talking about this stuff can be a bit much, but I want all the information I can get before we let go on each other, Charlotte. I want to know that touching you in certain ways won’t cause you any problems.” He sucked lightly on her earlobe. “I want everything we do together—to each other and with each other—to work for both of us, and if anything I do takes away from your pleasure, I expect you to let me know. I’ll do the same.”

“Sounds almost contractual.” Charlie shivered as his low timbre and breath washed over her skin. His hands remained chaste on her waist, but his lips and teeth and tongue worked some kind of strange magic over her neck.

“Don’t think of it in such serious terms, Charlotte. All of this is to make sure this is fun.” He stroked his fingers along her neck before wrapping his fingers lightly around it.

Charlie gasped.

“Like that. Is this okay, Charlotte?” He leaned back and looked at her eyes, glazed and half-lidded. She nodded. “Tell me.”

“Yes,” she breathed.

He squeezed a little and hummed in approval when her eyelids fluttered closed. “Good. Remember this when I take you.”

Charlie ran her nails down the back of his scalp and gripped the hair at his nape. “When who takes who? Seems to me I get to call the shots this time.”

Tadhg groaned and tugged against her grip. “When we take each other.” He leaned in and nibbled on her jaw. As she melted against him, he moved one of his hands under the hem of her shirt and began stroking her sides. “What do you want, Charlotte?”

“A shower.” She straightened up and looked down at him. “I don’t mind a little sweat, but we’ve—”

“We’ve been working all damned day.” Tadhg stood, picking her up easily as he did. “You find your towels?”

“Damn, you’re a strong one,” Charlie breathed. “Yes. They’re in there already.”

Tadhg chuckled and walked down the hall to the bathroom, cradling her in his arms.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

Tadhg set Charlie on the floor of the bathroom and ran his hands up the side of her face, kissing her lightly. “You’re sure, Charlotte?”

Charlie grabbed his wrists and nodded. “More sure than I’ve been about anything in a long time.” She stepped back and grabbed the hem of her t-shirt, lifting it up and over her head in one motion. She flung it into a basket and looked back at Tadhg. His eyes roamed up and down her body as he did the same thing with his own shirt.

Charlie stared at him for a moment before stepping forward. She ran her hands up his chest and over his pectoral muscles, splaying her fingers through the hair there. When she gave a tug, he groaned his approval. He reached forward, and with a snap of his fingers, undid the clasp of her bra. It sprung open, and he gently smoothed it off of her shoulders and onto the floor.

“Perfect,” he said, and ran his hands up her sides and over her breasts. She shivered under his light touch, and her nipples pebbled underneath his palms.

With a shudder, she reached forward to his shorts and undid the button and zipper. He shifted with her motion as she dropped them and his boxers to pool around his ankles. Her eyes widened as he stood before her, naked and very erect. She reached for him, and he caught her wrist.

“Not yet, Charlotte,” he said, holding her steady. “I’m a little spun up, and your hand on me will make for a fast mess.” He nodded toward her legs. “Lose the shorts.”

He turned and fiddled with the shower controls until the temperature was good. When he turned back around, Charlie



had placed two towels on the shelf and stood there, naked. He dragged his eyes up and down her body. She was petite but solidly built. Her thighs were thick and strong, and all he could think about was how they'd feel clamped around his head—or his waist. Her hips were lush, with just the right about of give to grab on to. All the better to nuzzle the trimmed curls at the juncture of her legs. And her belly. Tadhg wanted to bite that bit of softness there. Apparently he'd spent too much time gawking at her because she folded her arms across her chest, displaying her breasts nicely. He wanted to bite those, too. By the time he looked into her eyes, she was giving him a good natured smirk.

“Meet with your approval, Tadhg?”

Tadhg held the shower door open and followed her in. She turned her head up into the stream of water and let it cascade down her body. Tadhg gripped her hips and pulled her toward him. “Everything about you is beyond reproach. I don't even know where to start, Charlotte. I want to touch you everywhere, all at once. Worship at the altar of you.” His voice was rough. He ran his hands up to her face, pushing the wet curls out of her eyes and smoothing them over her shoulders.

She slid her arms around his waist and trailed her fingers up his back. “Didn't you say we have all weekend?” she asked, smiling against his chest. His laughter rumbled against her cheek, and she turned, pressing her lips against his muscles. A soft sigh escaped him, and she added a light bite to her kiss.

Tadhg's hands flew to her head, tipping it back into the water. He reached over her shoulder and grabbed the soap. “Testing my patience, aren't you?” He kissed her hard and stepped back.

She watched as he lathered up his body and moaned when he palmed his cock. He stroked it a few times and chuckled at her stare. “Do you like this?”

Charlie licked her lips. “Very much.”

He leaned toward her and braced himself with one hand against the wall, over her head. “Do you want to watch?”

“Yes.” She grabbed the soap from him and worked up a lather. She then ran her hands over her breasts and under them, lifting them. Tadhg watched, transfixed, as she lathered her hands up some more and ran them down her torso and in between her legs.

“How wet are you?” he asked. She stepped under the spray to rinse off and leaned back against the wall, spreading her legs.

“Very,” she whispered. She hadn’t taken her eyes off of his hand. “Fuck, that is hot.”

She watched as Tadhg moved his hand from the base to the tip, stroking just the head a few times before moving back down. A clear drop formed at the opening, and she reached out and swiped at it with a fingertip. His abdominal muscles clenched, and he sucked air sharply through his teeth as she licked her fingertip.

“Charlotte ...” His eyes shone in the dim light.

“Keep going.”

Tadhg grabbed one of her hands and wrapped it around him, showing her how he liked to be stroked. She was a quick study, and within minutes, he was shaking. “I’m so close,” he whispered.

Charlie leaned toward him and ran her tongue up his chest and neck before tipping her head back to catch his lips with hers. As he thrust his tongue into her mouth, she reached down with her free hand, cupped him, and gently tugged.

He made a choking sound and broke the kiss, thrusting into her hand. “Charlotte!”

Charlie felt his cock spasm, and the first rush of warmth hit her stomach. His eyes closed, wet curls plastered across his forehead, and his mouth was open. His expression, passionate and unguarded, stoked her own desire. He gasped with each thrust of his hips until finally he slowed, spent. She stroked him a few more times until he grabbed her hand and shimmied away.

“Knock that off,” he said.

“Aww, what’s the matter?”

Tadhg pinned her hand above her head and pressed her against the shower wall. “Nothing. Nothing is the matter. Well, one thing, but I’ll be fixing that soon enough.”

“What’s that one thing?”

With his other hand, Tadhg stroked down Charlie’s body. “Seeing your face when you come for me.” He took a step back, spun her around, and held her back to his chest. “But first, you need some of this. For being such a tease,” he whispered in her ear. He reached for the shower nozzle and spun the dial, testing each until he found the one he wanted.

“What are yo—Oh shit!” Charlie’s knees buckled as he ran the stream down her body and in between her legs.

“I love these showerheads,” Tadhg said. He held her upright, banding his arm across her chest. He flicked his wrist, adding extra motion to the stream of water so as not to desensitize her. “How does that feel, Charlotte?” He chuckled as she stammered and flung her head back against his chest. As soon as her legs started trembling, and her nails dug into his thighs, he moved the water away and quickly finished rinsing the both of them.

She spun away from him, eyes flashing, and shoved him against the wall of the shower. “That was cruel!” She tried to grab him, but he twisted away, laughing at her. Finally, she grabbed his face and pulled him down, kissing him.

They stayed locked together for a few moments, Tadhg running his hands up and down Charlie’s sides and to her ass, and her, pulling and tugging on his hair to keep him close as she assaulted his mouth. Finally, she pulled away and opened the shower door. She tossed him a towel and made quick work of drying herself off.

“Impatient?” Tadhg asked, his lips quirked in a smile.

“I don’t trust myself to not shove both of us down on the floor right here,” she said. She hung up the towel and raised her eyebrows at him.

“Ooh. No. Wet tile and bodies are a horrible idea. Let’s not begin the weekend with a trip to the ER.” He laughed. “Try explaining that one to command.”

“Never hear the end of it. Ever.” She grinned. “Might be worth it.”

Tadhg hung up his towel and moved toward her. “Nope. We just got you healed up. Not going to risk it for a romp in the bathroom when you’ve got a comfortable looking bed just steps away.”

Charlie pointed at the bed. “I need you to get there right now.”

“You want to be bossy, huh?”

“Tadhg.”

“Charlotte.”

She tilted her head and stared at him. “Who won the bet last night?”

“That’s how this is gonna be?” He stepped forward and smiled down at her. He traced a finger over her cheek and down her neck, watching as her eyelashes fluttered at the sensation. “And here I wanted to get into that toy drawer and play with you.”

“I’m not saying you can’t. I just want you to get your ass over there.”

“Nightstand?”

She yelped as Tadhg picked her up and flung her to the middle of the bed. “Brute. Yes.” She rolled over onto her side and watched as he opened her nightstand and started rifling through it.

Tadhg kept an eye on Charlie’s face as he pulled out each toy. First was a decent sized blue model. Nothing special from her reaction. He dug some more, tossing a suction toy, a small lipstick-sized vibrator, and a bottle of lube onto the bed. Finally, he plucked a purple device out of the drawer. Charlie’s eyebrows went up just a little. *Good*. “I haven’t seen one of these before,” he said. He reached back into the drawer and

pulled out a small remote. Charlie held out her hand, and he shook his head.

“Oh, I think I’ll be holding on to this.” He sat down on the edge of the bed and turned toward her. “Open your legs wider, Charlotte. Let me see you.”

She rolled to her back and spread her legs, bending one leg up.

Tadhg trailed his fingers up Charlie’s leg, across her belly, and down her pelvic bone. He skirted them toward the bend in her leg and down the inside, then back up. He made the briefest contact with her lips and smiled as she bucked against him. “So sensitive.”

“Tease.”

“Just you wait for that,” he said, smiling. He traced one finger up her slit and dipped it inside of her. Her hips jerked, seeking more contact. He pulled away and brought his finger to his mouth and sucked on it. His eyelids fluttered closed, and he sighed deeply. “I want to dive face first into you.”

“What’s stopping you?”

Tadhg grinned. “We have all weekend.” He held up the toy. “And I have this.” He reached over and grabbed the bottle of lube, flipped the cap, and drizzled a bit over the longer, bulbous end of the U-shaped device. “I really want to see what it does.”

As she watched, he slowly smoothed the lubricant over the silicone with one finger. “Is this enough?” he asked.

Charlie licked her lips and nodded. “I’m sure it is.”

With his other hand, Tadhg reached between her legs and stroked her. “I should make sure.” He pressed a finger into her, then two, and had to lean forward to press down on her pelvis with his forearm when she bucked against him. “Do we need to restrain you?” he asked.

Charlie gripped the sheets and strained against him. “You could try, but I don’t think you want that.”

“Mmm. You’re right. I’d rather see how wild this makes you.” He pressed the end of the toy against her and slowly inched it inside of her body. Once it seated inside of her, he ran his hands up and down her body until she relaxed into his touch. He cupped one of her breasts and leaned down to flick his tongue over her nipple. “All I want, Charlotte, is to give you pleasure. With my mouth,” he said, sucking the side of her breast. “My fingers.” He trailed them down to her pubic bone. “My tongue.” He kissed her, sweeping his tongue into her mouth and sucking on hers until they were breathless. “My cock.” He moved his hand and grasped himself.

Charlie licked her lips and stared. “Again?”

“You inspire me.” He picked up the remote and looked down at it. “Now, what does this do?” He pressed a button.

She groaned. “You know what that does.”

“Tell me.” He pressed the button again.

“It’s—*fuck*—it’s the internal rotation.” Charlie reached down, but Tadhg grabbed her hand and moved it back to her side.

“Uh-uh. None of that.” He shifted on the bed and positioned her legs on either side of his hips, then placed his free hand over the device, holding it in place.

Charlie rolled her hips. “This is torture.”

“Is it?” Tadhg pressed the other button. “I figured this would be.”

She groaned and rocked her hips against his hand. “More.”

He tapped the button again. “Like this?”

“*Fuck.*”

“Oh, I love seeing you like this, Charlotte.” She had her head pressed into the pillow. One hand was on her breast, fingers pinching her nipple. Her other hand wound in the sheets, gripping them as she writhed against Tadhg’s hand.

“I’m not ready—I don’t—I’m not ready to be done yet,” she panted.

Tadhg grabbed her hip and turned the vibrations off with the remote. “We can slow down,” he said. “As far as being done goes, once is not *done*, Charlotte. Done is when you can’t remember your name.”

She sat up and reached for him, pulling herself until she was in his lap. She locked her legs around his waist and buried her fingers in his hair. “Big promises there, Tadhg.” She nipped at his chin.

Tadhg grabbed her hips and pulled her to him, grinding her and the toy against him. “I know. I’m feeling up to the challenge.”

She responded by running the tip of her tongue along the seam of his mouth. He answered by sucking on it and deepening the kiss. When she started raking her nails across his scalp, he moaned into her mouth and tapped the button on the remote. Charlie jerked her hips against him and moved in time to the rotation. A second later, he added the vibration.

Both of them sucked in a breath.

“You can feel that, too?” she asked.

“Yes.” He ground against her. “I like this toy. More?”

She nodded, and he pressed both buttons at once. And then he held on.

Charlie interlaced her fingers around the back of his neck and rolled her hips against him. He watched as she threw her head back. Watched as the blush crept up her chest and neck and as her breasts rose and fell with every gasp and moan. He skated one hand up her chest and wrapped it around the back of her neck, pulling her forward to press her forehead to his.

“Let me see your face, beautiful. Let me see you fly.”

She whispered his name and her movements became erratic as the waves rocked through her. Tadhg held her, watching her eyelids flutter. Her eyes were unfocused and glazed with lust. A moment later, she moved back and reached down, removing the toy and tossing it to the side of the bed. With a grin, she gripped him in her hand, lifted herself, and then lowered onto him.

“Jesus fuck, Charlotte!” Tadhg shuddered as she sank down on him, all heat and liquid. “Fuck. *Fuck*. You are molten.”

Charlie lifted herself a little and sank down further, taking him all the way inside of her. Her eyes rolled back in her head. “Your fault, really,” she gasped.

“Well, this’ll be my fault, too, then.” Tadhg placed his hand in the middle of her chest and pushed her back until she was lying on the bed. “Loosen your legs, darling, so I can move.” He pulled out and thrust back into her, and gave her a wicked smile when her hands flew to her head. “Good spot?”

“So good. Do that some more.”

Tadhg set up a rhythm that soon had her legs shaking. “Stop fighting for it, Charlotte.” He placed his thumb on her clit, and the rest of his hand on her lower abdomen, and pressed down.

“What the—oh. Oh!”

“That’s right. Let it happen.” He applied some more pressure. “You are so ridiculously hot around me. I can’t take much more of this,” he ground out.

Charlie reached down and put her fingers over his thumb and started moving it in circles.

Tadhg felt her muscles flutter around him, and he was done. “Fucking hell,” he groaned, and fell forward onto one hand. Halfway through his orgasm, Charlie cried out and clamped down on him. “Oh, there you are,” he breathed, taking in her face.

Their movements finally slowed, and Tadhg tried to pull away. Charlie tugged on his arms. “No. Come here,” she whispered.

Tadhg slid forward onto his forearms and placed his hands on either side of her face, stroking her hair off her forehead. She ran her hands up and down his sides and over his shoulders.

“My name is Charlie,” she whispered against his cheek.

Tadhg laughed and buried his face in her neck and nibbled on it before continuing downward. “I keep my promises,



Charlotte.”

## CHAPTER TWELVE

“How was your weekend?” Audrey asked as Charlie breezed into the office.

“Oh, so good.” Charlie flopped in her chair and leaned back, propping her feet on the desk. “Have you been to Prescott?” She looked at Audrey. “You and Simon need to go. It’s gorgeous up there. Cooler.”

“What all did you do?”

“Did a lot of hiking. There are some great trails up there. Tadhg took pictures of scenic views that he wants to do studies on.” One memorable photo shoot started as a nature study with a nude Charlie, and ended with Tadhg on his knees, licking her until she came on his tongue. She idly scratched at one of the scrapes on her shoulder from the rock he’d pressed her against.

“Sounds like a good time. Good restaurants and all that?”

“Oh yeah. Lots of bars. Good nightlife. Well, what little we saw.” Charlie looked around. “Where are the guys?”

“Training. Just you and me today.”

“Sucks to be them. But yeah, you two need to take a couple days and head over there. Nice break from here. Hell, maybe we can all go up there for a long weekend sometime.”

“You’ve had a lot of nice breaks from here lately, haven’t you?”

It’d been almost two months since they moved. In that time, Charlie and Tadhg had spent about half of their weekends traveling to other parts of the state. They’d started planning a trip to Utah and another to Colorado for ski season.

“Yeah,” she said with a small smile. “Everything about this feels right. It’s been . . . pretty wonderful, actually.”

“I like him.”

“That means a lot. You don’t like anyone.”

Audrey laughed. “That’s not true. I’ve mellowed in my old age.” She tilted her head and lifted her chin. “He’s good for you. You should keep him around.”

Charlie looked down and shuffled the papers on her desk. “I want to see where things go. Not quite ready to put names to feelings and all of that. Just enjoying the ride, you know?”

Audrey leaned back in her chair and pursed her lips. “It’s funny seeing you in the same position I was not long ago.”

“Hey. I’m not being an asshole about it.” Audrey’s first few months with the unit had been hellish for Simon. She wanted to get out of Arizona as soon as she could, and her attitude about it had been problematic for all of them, Charlie included.

“Nah. Just jumpy. And it worked out for Simon and me. Just like it will for you. Tadhg’s your person, I just know it.” Audrey got up. “I need to go grab some reports from the gate. You wanna go for a ride?”

Charlie shook her head. “I need to get over to the gym and check on training. They’re picking up a new class this morning. I can’t throw down, but I need to observe.”

“Cool. Lunch?”

“Yes. Swing by when you’re ready, and we’ll go.”

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*He’s your person.*

*Everything feels right.*

Charlie sat on a side table in front of the class and listened to the instructors. She could give the introduction in her sleep, so as they talked, she tuned them out. Audrey’s comment rang through her head. She wasn’t wrong. For the last decade, every relationship she’d had, if you could call them that, fizzled

before they ever went anywhere. It was her fault, and she knew it. She chose safe. Nice. Docile. And that translated into calm dates and mostly pleasant sex.

Not the toe-curling, hair pulling, dirty-mean fuckfests she'd been having with Tadhg every weekend. And there was the dichotomy of it all. They had those calm dates and long, intellectual chats. She respected the hell out of him, and he did her. But there was always that undercurrent of heat that threatened to engulf them.

She had tried lying to herself in the beginning, that she'd roll around with him a few times and it'd be good. Work him out of her system, because that's how it always worked in the novels, right?

Charlie took a deep breath and shook her head.

“Did you want to add something, Agent Madden?”

She shook her head and looked up. The instructor was looking at her, his eyebrows up in anticipation. The students were also staring. Shit.

“Nope. Sorry. Had my mind on an upcoming meeting. Carry on.”

This man had worked his way so far under her skin and into her head that he was coming out of her pores. Not the worst distraction, by far, but one she needed to get a handle on.

Her phone buzzed in her pocket.

Tadhg: *We have a long weekend, don't we?*

*Yes.*

Tadhg: *Thursday night. Be ready with a weekend bag. Good shoes, casual clothes. Something a little nicer for an evening.*

*Where are we going?*

Tadhg: *Exploring.*

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“Okay, so what is it about GIS that drew you in?” Charlie asked. A light breeze wafted through the room, cooling her body as she and Tadhg lay on her bed. “I guess I can kind of see it with art, but it doesn’t seem like you get to do that much of it.”

Tadhg turned toward her and rested his head on his arm. “Yes. There is a lot of science behind it, and all the math and programming that goes with the software that the birds run on, but I don’t do a huge amount with that. I can, but it’s not my focus—I have programmers for that shit.” He smoothed a curl behind her ear. “It’s more of me dealing with topography. That was one of the classes I took at university, and it helped with landscapes and nature.”

Charlie tipped her head toward him. “Like map reading and land nav.”

“Exactly like map reading and land nav. Same terminology since it was essentially a cartography class. Turns out, knowing that kind of stuff helped in GIS, but also in just learning basic forms. Nature comes up with some amazing stuff.”

“So, you can program, but you don’t. Your job is to read the land itself and take measurements and all that shit?”

“Pretty much,” Tadhg said. “Land nav has its uses elsewhere, too. You remember the thing you’d do with your fists to learn the terrain features?”

“Yeah, hilltops being the knuckles with the saddles in between. Draws and canyons down the fingers.”

“All topography.” He ran his finger down her breastbone. “I could create a map of your body, contour lines and all.” He circled the area between her breasts. “Saddle, right here. Gentle slope,” he said, running his hand up the inner side of her breast. “And finally, the hilltop.” He traced the edge of his fingernail around her nipple.

“Small hill,” Charlie huffed out.

“Perfect hill.” Tadhg continued his journey. “And here,” he said, circling her bellybutton, “is a lovely little depression.” He leaned forward and kissed her belly just below. “Moving on,” he continued, tracing the outline of her hipbone, “we have a ridgeline.” He smoothed his hand down her leg. “Outside here would be a cliff I think, but the inside,” he paused, drawing his hand up between her legs. “The inside here would be a valley.”

Charlie’s breathing sped up, and she twisted restlessly against Tadhg’s fingers.

He paused, gripping her inner thigh. “Oh, but I’m not done,” he said. “Here, we have a draw.” His index finger dipped lightly between her legs. “We can tell this by the gathered moisture. It’s not quite a stream, but we’ll see how things go.” He laughed as she rolled her eyes. “And then,” he said, bringing his finger toward her clit, “we have a spur.” He ran his fingertip around the hood, and she gasped. “So, as you can see, Charlotte, that good ol’ Army training has come in handy, both in my profession and right here.” He pressed down and rubbed against her, watching her face. “There’s one feature they don’t really cover.”

“What’s that?” Charlie said, breathing hard.

Tadhg dipped his fingers and thrust two of them inside of her with no warning, causing her to cry out and buck against him. “They don’t really cover caverns.” He curled his fingers upward, rubbing against her.

“Tadhg!” she cried and gripped the sheets on the bed, twisting them.

“I love to see you like this, Charlotte. To watch you lose yourself.” He moved his hand slightly and placed his thumb on the hood of her clit, rubbing her inside and out. Before long, he felt her muscles tense and her legs shake, and she raised up off of the bed. He slipped his leg over her thighs to hold her down. “Let go, Charlotte,” he whispered in her ear. “You’re soaking my fingers. Let me feel you grip them.”

She froze and cried out. Tadhg kept working at her, meeting her thrusts until she settled down.

Before he could do anything else, Charlie flung her hands up to his shoulders and kicked off with one leg, shoving him to his back. She straddled his hips and slid against him, holding his hands to the bed next to his head. “I’m damn good at land nav, but if I had you as an instructor, I’d have failed spectacularly and loved every second.”

Tadhg laughed and tried to move his hands, but Charlie held him fast. He bucked against her as she clenched her thighs onto his hips. “Not going to work, Tadhg. I know you could get out of this, but not without a fight—and I don’t think you really want to fight.”

He grinned up at her. “Not with you on top of me like this, no. But it is kinda fun.”

“Mmmhmm. It is. It’s also fun—” Charlie slid forward and shoved back, taking him inside of her with one thrust. “It’s also fun to do that.”

Tadhg’s chest came off of the bed as he pressed his head back against the pillow. “Fuck, Charlotte. Fuck.”

She let go of his wrists and settled on top of him, rolling her hips against him. “Yes, Tadhg. I’m getting there.” She settled her hands on his chest, threw her head back, and rode him hard.

It didn’t take him long to grab her hips and hold on, moaning and muttering unintelligible words. She looked down at him, his hair framing his face and sticking to the sweat across his brow. “Is this what you wanted, Tadhg? This work for you?”

He gripped her wrists and tugged, moving her hands to his neck. Charlie leaned forward, gripping his throat firmly and propping herself up on her other hand. She nuzzled his ear before biting his earlobe.

“I need you to get there with me, Charlotte,” he grunted in her ear.

“Don’t you worry about me.”

“I’m not worried about you.” Tadhg grabbed her ass and ground her against him with each thrust. “I want you to come on my cock. I need to feel those sweet muscles grip me.”

Charlie buried her free hand in his hair and held on, until finally, she saw stars and clenched around him. She felt him swell within her and groan through his own orgasm, pulsing inside of her.

He wrapped his arms around her, holding her still against him, and she relaxed in his arms.

“You’re going to be the death of me,” he murmured in her hair.

“What a fucking way to go.”

Tadhg mumbled something unintelligible into her skin, and Charlie rolled off of him.

“When you said exploring this weekend, I didn’t think you meant staying in. Also, never expected land nav to show up in bed.”

Tadhg stretched his arms over his head and yawned. “My bad. I didn’t tell you I wanted to explore you.”

Charlie laughed and ran her fingers down his side. “So, the plan is to stay in all weekend?”

He rolled over and skimmed his hand up her torso. “All weekend. Naked. Proper mapping takes time, and I mean to know every inch of this body.”



## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

“This better be good, Charlotte, to be up at the asscrack of dawn on a Saturday.” Tadhg tied his shoes and looked around at the group of people stretching and chatting around them.

“I still can’t believe you don’t know what a hash is,” Charlie said. “It’s fun.”

“Running is not fun. This might be one of those hobbies that we agree to not share.”

Charlie leaned closer. “I took up hiking because of you.”

Tadhg gave her a cocky smile. “Yeah, and being fucked up against a tree or eaten out against the rocks hurt your feelings a lot, didn’t it?”

Charlie flushed. “It certainly didn’t. We could try to sneak away, but I don’t think we’ll be able to.”

He shook his head. “No. What I want is for you to stay with me tonight. My place.”

Until that moment, Charlie had never questioned why he’d never asked her to stay at his place. Every weekend, they either went out of town or stayed out at her little house. “Took you long enough to ask,” she said.

Tadhg shrugged. “You never mentioned it. I also enjoy going to your place, out there in the sticks, with the thick walls no one can hear through.”

“And here I thought you were spending your precious little free time building the dungeon for me.”

Tadhg stood up and took a step toward her. As she backed up, he caught her arm and tugged her into his chest. “If you want to stay here and do this hashing thing, I suggest you stop

taunting me, Charlotte. I will throw you over my shoulder and carry you off right now.”

Charlie looked up at him. He raised an eyebrow as if to dare her. The look in his eyes let her know he'd make good on his threat. She raised up on her toes and kissed him on the chin, then spun out of his arms, grinning.

“So, what do I need to do if we get separated?” he asked.

“We won't. The hare—the person marking the trail—will mark the trail to keep people together. This isn't a win/lose thing, it's a social thing, and we go at the speed of the slowest so we can all have a good time.”

Despite all of his bitching, Tadhg had fun. He accepted a bottle of beer from someone and took a long swig.

“Hey, Killer!” A person, who Charlie had explained was the hare, came wandering up. “This your virgin? I can see why we haven't seen you in a couple months.”

Charlie looked at Tadhg and laughed at his expression. “Sure is, Vibe.” She turned to him. “Tadhg, this is Vibe.”

Vibe stuck a hand out. “Good to meet you, Just Tadhg.”

“You're going to have to explain all of this, Charlotte,” he said, taking Vibe's hand.

Vibe grinned. “Simple stuff. We all have hash names, usually given after a few hashes. Unless you do something spectacularly noteworthy. If you don't have a name, you're a Just. As in Just Tadhg.”

Tadhg nodded. “Killer?”

“Pint-Sized Killer, PSK. One of our members went through her class a few years back and got his ass handed to him.”

Tadhg chuckled. “I can see that. And your name?”

Charlie cackled. “Vibe here likes to hare. Does it more than anyone. Also buzzes all over the place. So, rabbit vibrator got shortened to Vibe.”

“Let me guess. You don't get to choose your name.”

“What fun would that be?” Vibe said, smiling. “Anyway, good to meet you, Just Tadhg. Hope to see you again. Killer, good run!”

“What’s on your agenda for the rest of the day?” Charlie asked.

“Getting ready for you to come over this evening,” Tadhg said. “Bring an overnight bag.”

She smiled. “You need all day to get ready for me to come over?”

“Not all day, but I need to go shopping. Don’t need you thinking the only things I keep in my fridge are beer and condiments.”

They came to a stop by her car.

“It’s cute that you think I plan on looking in your fridge, Tadhg.”

“It’s cute that you think you’re only coming over for a booty call, Charlotte.”

“Hey now. I expect that you’ll feed me.” She gave him a lopsided grin. “Even some food.”

Tadhg exhaled and blew the hair off of his forehead. “You need to get going before I change our plans.”

Charlie considered pushing. It’d be easy thing to get him to change his mind, but she didn’t want to ruin whatever he had planned. This was the first time she would be going to his house, and it was a big deal, at least to her. Given his reaction, it was a big step for him as well.

“Fine. I’ll behave,” she said, giving him an exaggerated pout.

He ran his thumb over her bottom lip. “You don’t have to behave, Charlotte,” he said. “You just have to let me make this happen for a few hours.” He opened the door to her car and helped her in. “Go. Text me. Do your worst. And I’ll see you later this evening.”

Charlie fastened her belt. “What time?”

“Six.” He gave her a kiss that left her squirming in her seat and then closed the door. He tapped the roof of the car twice, winked at her, and then walked away.

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Two hours later, Tadhg’s phone chimed. He put down the knife, wiped his hands, grabbed it, and gawked.

*Don’t you have dirt to dig in, Charlotte?*

Charlie: *Nope. Done with that already.*

Tadhg grinned. *So this is your plan for the next few hours?*

Another picture popped up, and so did his eyebrows.

*Charlotte.*

Charlie: *Hmmm? ;)*

He blew out a long breath. *Turnabout, remember?*

Another pic. *Oh, I remember.*

He’d make sure of that. *Fine. We can play. You don’t come. Tease yourself. Tease me all you’d like, but don’t you cross that line.*

Charlie: *And how will you know?*

He held the camera down low, fisted his cock through his shorts, and snapped a shot before sending it to her. *If you want this, you’ll do as I say. If not, you get to watch, and I’ll leave you achy and needy. Your choice, Charlotte.*

Charlie: *Why the fuck do I like it when you get all demanding?*

*Because you know I’ll make good on it.*

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Charlie half expected to be thrown up against the wall as soon as she crossed the threshold. Instead, Tadhg gathered her up in his arms, kissed her sweetly, and let her go. He took her hand and led her to the kitchen, handing her a glass of beer.

“It’s almost ready,” he said. “Just let me plate everything up.” He nodded toward the table. “Have a seat.”

Charlie sat down and sipped her beer. As with everything, Tadhg always did the opposite of what she’d expect. At this point, any expectations she had were on her. She couldn’t even be disappointed that he didn’t attack her as soon as she came in, either. She shivered a little. It meant that she was in for it whenever he decided to pounce.

“You cold, Charlotte?” he asked.

“No. Just—no, I’m fine,” she said, taking another drink. That look was there in his eyes. That glimmer. He was absolutely holding himself back.

He brought two plates over to the table and set one down in front of her. Charlie looked at it. Scallops and something she didn’t recognize. “What is this?” she asked, pointing at the dish.

“Brown butter polenta. Different take on shrimp and grits.”

Charlie took a bite and hummed her approval. “Never had this stuff before. You need to show me how to make it.”

They ate the rest of their dinner quietly, the tension in the air thrumming between them. When she finished, she sat back in her chair and sighed happily. Tadhg whisked the plates away and came back with fresh drinks, handing her one as he sat back down.

“You’ve been teasing me all damn day,” Tadhg said softly, stroking the back of Charlie’s hand with his thumb. He smiled as he saw the pulse in her neck flutter and felt his own heartbeat pound in his ears. “That seems to be one of your favorite things to do, Charlotte.” He tugged her hand, and she stood. He scooted his chair back and pulled her forward until she was standing between his thighs. “Is it? Does it get you going, seeing how quickly you can make me lose control?”

Tadhg trailed his free hand down her hip until he reached the end of her skirt, then lightly ran his fingers over the soft skin behind her knee. She jumped, and her breathing quickened.

“Didn’t you say something about dessert?” Charlie said. Her voice was shaky and breathy, and she gasped when his fingertips trailed upward.

Tadhg gave a quiet chuckle. “I did,” he said, standing. He crowded her against the edge of the table. The hand that had been on her leg was now on her ass, fingers curled, gripping, holding her in place as he pressed against her. “Problems, Charlotte?” he murmured.

Charlie put her free hand on his chest and flexed her fingers. “I just don’t want it to burn.”

“Only one thing is going to burn, Charlotte.” He shifted his fingers, moving them in between her legs, and she exhaled sharply. “And that’s us.” He paused. “Unless you really want me to stop.”

Charlie looked into his eyes. His pupils were blown, and only a rim of color showed around the edge. His eyes darted around her face, lingering on her lips, mimicking her movements as she bit her bottom lip. “If you stop,” she whispered, “I don’t think I could stand it.”

“Did you get yourself off today, Charlotte?”

She shook her head. “No. I thought about it.” She chuckled. “A lot. But I didn’t.”

“Did you keep playing with yourself?” He nuzzled against her neck, running his teeth over her skin. “Edging yourself?”

She released a shaky breath. “Yes. I thought about you doing that to me.”

“How many times?”

“Two. Three. I had to stop.”

Tadhg groaned and caught her lips with his own, not wasting any time sweeping across them with his tongue until she parted under him. She clutched at his shirt, pulling him closer as he stroked her tongue with his own. He released her hand and reached down, skimming his hand under her skirt. In one motion, he lifted her and set her on the table.

“Tadhg!” she squealed. “What—”

“Shh. You’re clever. You know what.” His voice was rough. He placed his hand on her chest, between her breasts, and slowly moved it down, flicking the buttons open as he moved. When he reached her waist, he tugged the shirt out and flipped it open.

His other hand rested easily on her thigh, tracing light circles back and forth from the top inward. He moved his thumb back and forth, edging closer to the bend in her leg, and she trembled under his touch.

Her nails pricked his shoulders as his thumb made contact with her underwear. He groaned against her lips. “Already so wet.” He rubbed up and down, circling around her clit until she was shaking against him.

“Take me to bed, Tadhg,” she whimpered in his ear.

“Not yet, darling. A civilized gentleman eats his sweets at the table, and I am starving.” With a snap of his fingers, he popped the front clasp on Charlie’s bra and slid it and her shirt off one shoulder. She shrugged the other side off and arched her back toward him. Before he could dip his head to kiss her skin, she grabbed his shirt and started tugging it.

Tadhg grinned and helped her pull off his shirt, chuckling when she threw it over her shoulders. She turned back toward him and tried to scoot off the table.

“Oh, no. No.” He grabbed her hips and pulled her toward him, and then ran his hands up her body, over her breasts, and sunk his fingers into her hair. He pulled her head back and kissed her again, then dragged his lips down her throat, flicking his tongue along her skin, stopping to nibble and suck at the tender flesh. She moaned when he sucked the side of her neck near her shoulder, and shuddered when he bit the inside of her breast. Her entire body was trembling against him, and when she dug her fingernails into his shoulders, he continued on his path.

As he kissed downward, he pulled her down toward the table. It happened so slowly; she didn't notice at first until her shoulder blades hit the cool of the wood. Tadhg loosened his fingers from her hair and trailed them over her shoulders and down alongside her breasts, whispering over her skin and following the path his mouth had taken.

She shuddered as he flicked his tongue over her nipple and blew on it. His other hand was stroking up and down her side, then down her hip and leg to her knee. He dragged it back up under her skirt, which had ridden up in the back until her almost bare ass was on the table.

Tadhg whispered against her skin, words spoken so softly she didn't know what he was saying. His accent was more pronounced, voice low. His hand crept ever higher until his thumb was back over her slit, tracing lightly up and down.

Charlie let her head fall back against the table with a small thud and cried out when he applied firm pressure to her clit. A moment later, she noticed he'd stopped moving everywhere else and raised her head back up to look at him.

His hair was falling over one eye and he was staring intently at her, lips parted. He was breathing as heavily as she was.

“I have to taste you,” he said as he reached up and pulled her panties down. She shuffled a little to help him, and he dragged them down her legs and dropped them to the floor.

Tadhg stood up and swept her skirt up around her waist, laying her bare to him. His eyelids fluttered closed, and he



took a heaving breath. “Gods, you are beautiful,” he said, looking her up and down. He met her gaze and gave her a wicked smile. “Every time I look at you, Charlotte, every time I see you like this. Every time I taste you, it’s better than the last time. I want to be drunk on you all the time.”

He pulled the chair forward with his foot and sat down. Charlie sat up, but he grabbed her legs behind her knees and lifted them, throwing her off balance, and she flopped back. He put them over his shoulders and pulled her hips off the edge of the table.

“I’m going to fall off!” she yelled.

Tadhg chuckled against her inner thigh. “No, you aren’t. I’ve got you. Besides, you can grip with these luscious legs.” He bit her, causing her to gasp, and then swept his tongue up her slit.

Her reaction was more violent than he was expecting. She bowed her back, lifting her ass off the table, and gripped his head between her legs. Tadhg moaned against her and did it again, while pushing down on her abdomen to pin her to the table. She was strong, but he was stronger, and he held her against the onslaught.

She was tangy and sweet and the noises she was making made his head swim. If he never heard another thing in his life, he’d be fine with that. Better if her cries and moans were the only thing he could ever hear. He was painfully hard, and every time her thighs flexed against his head, pleasure rocked down his body. Once her legs started to quiver, he reached down with his free hand and slid a finger into her. Her hands flew to his head and gripped his hair with just enough pain to push him closer to the edge of sanity.

He added another finger and curved them upward. The effect was immediate. Her inner muscles clamped around his fingers and her thighs clamped around his head, and her nails set in his scalp as she held him in place. So Tadhg did the only thing he could. He sucked her clit into his mouth and ran his tongue around it.

Charlie's orgasm hit her everywhere, all at once. It rocked out from her core, pulsing her, and all she could do was take it, as Tadhg held her down and dragged it out of her with his fingers and mouth.

She started pushing his head away, so he gave her a gentle kisses around her hips and thighs and slid his fingers out of her. She was resting on her elbows and watched as he sucked his fingers into his mouth and licked them clean.

Tadhg smiled at her and raised his eyebrows. "Delicious. I'll be having seconds soon." He smoothed his hands over her torso and breasts.

"So that's what you call civilized, huh?" Charlie said once her breath slowed down. "Did you hold your pinky fingers out while you dined?"

Tadhg stood and lifted her easily off of the table. He shifted his hands underneath her until he was able to insert two fingers shallowly into her while stroking her clit with another. She shuddered against him.

"Well, yes. You can't take all of them in you at once."

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Halfway down the hall, Charlie's wiggling against Tadhg's fingers and her teeth nibbling along his neck between her gasps had him struggling for control. He stopped and pressed her back against the wall, leaning into her.

"Damnit, Charlotte. You don't let up, do you?" he growled into her ear, biting down on the lobe when her laugh washed over him.

"Just finding buttons to push," she said, tracing her fingernails over his shoulders and up his neck.

"Buttons, eh?" Tadhg adjusted his position slightly and pumped his fingers into her, rubbing hard against that spot just inside her. He pressed his thumb against her clit and moved it in circles.

"Fuck. Not fair," Charlie huffed out, straining against him.

“You want me to stop?” He moved his fingers faster. “I’ll stop if you really want me to.”

“Don’t you—” Charlie cried out and clenched around his fingers. Her nails raked over his shoulders.

Tadhg kissed her, thrusting his tongue into her mouth in time with the waves of her orgasm. She whimpered as she ground against his fingers until finally, she was spent.

He broke the kiss and rested his forehead against hers. “I need you to come all over me, Charlotte. I can’t get enough.”

“You need to take me to bed, Tadhg. Right now.” She ducked her head and ran her tongue up his chin to his mouth. When his tongue met hers, she sucked on it and he groaned, flexing his fingers inside of her again. “Now, Tadhg. I need you to fuck me.”

He pulled her away from the wall and nudged a door opened with his foot. Charlie had no time to look at her surroundings before he pulled his fingers from her and tossed her onto the bed.

“Get that damn skirt off,” he said, reaching for the buckle on his belt.

“Gonna spank me if I don’t?”

“Not tonight, darling.” He tossed the belt aside and worked the button and zipper of his slacks. “But I will rip that off of you if you don’t take care of it by the time I’m done undressing.” He looped his thumbs in his boxers and dropped them with his slacks.

Every time she saw him, she couldn’t stop staring. He was solid. Not cut, but defined with the strength that came from lifting and carrying heavy equipment at work. The ease with which he’d picked her up and carried her was testament to that. Her eyes drifted downward and grew wide. His low chuckle startled her.

“I love that you look at me like that,” he said, stepping out of his pants. He reached one hand down and pulled off a sock. “Your skirt, Charlotte?” He nodded toward her waist.

Charlie quickly unbuttoned and unzipped the side and skimmed the fabric off her hips. She had barely thrown it off the bed before Tadhg had pounced on her, shoving her onto the bed and covering her body with his. He kissed his way up her sides, stopping to suck hard on one of her nipples before reaching her mouth. She felt him, thick and hard against her and she moved her hips, rubbing on him.

“Fuck,” Tadhg gasped against her neck. He pushed up and away from her. “I have to slow down, darling, or this is going to be over much faster than I want it to be.”

Charlie grinned at him. “Little wound up?”

“A little,” he said, running his hands up and down her inner thighs. He moved upward and sat back on his knees. “Just a little. Like how I want to sink into your body and rail you until the bed breaks a little.”

She raised her eyebrows at him and smiled as she traced her hands down his chest, running her fingers through the hair and tugging slightly. Tadhg moaned low in his throat and kept himself still. She drifted lower, tickling at the trail of hair down to where his cock jutted out, hard. He watched as she grasped him, flexing his hands as they rested on his thighs. Her fingers just reached all the way around him, and he almost came undone when she brought her other hand to join the first.

“You’re going to ruin me,” he said. “I was trying to cool off.”

Charlie wiped her thumb across the head of him, catching the drop of pre-come that gathered there. She was watching his face intently as she brought her thumb to her mouth and sucked the drop off of it.

Tadhg’s control snapped. Seeing her eyelashes flutter closed as she tasted him was too much. He grabbed her wrists in one hand and fell forward, pinning them above her head. She could easily have broken his hold on her, but she didn’t, and that drove him even more wild.

He grabbed her chin with his free hand and lifted her face up to him. “Tell me again to fuck you, Charlotte.”

She nipped at his chin and lay back on the bed, spreading her legs on either side of his thighs. “I need you to fuck this ache away, Tadhg. It’s all I’ve wanted all day. Every damn day.”

He let go of her hands and grasped her thighs, shifting her up on his knees. “Still so wet,” he said, tracing her lips and smiling as she wiggled against him. He grabbed his cock and ran the head and down her slit before tapping the head of it on her clit. When she cried out, he placed himself at her opening and thrust forward, stopping halfway before withdrawing. He moved in her in shallow thrusts and circled his thumb around her clit until she was shaking.

Charlie wrapped her legs around his waist and pulled him toward her as he moved forward, seating him fully within her. They both shuddered at the full contact.

“You are so goddamned hot,” Tadhg ground out before withdrawing and pushing into her with one smooth thrust. He fell forward, catching himself on his forearms to not crush her, and looked her in the eye. “You feel amazing. Beyond amazing. Fuck, Charlotte, I can’t—”

“Then don’t. Don’t hold back.” Charlie grabbed his hair and pulled him down to her open mouth. She clenched him with her legs, meeting his thrusts. “So close, Tadhg.” She worked her hand between their bodies to touch herself.

“That’s it. Let me feel you come. Let me feel you—” He bit off a curse as she spasmed around him and wrapped his arms around her, chasing the sensation working down his spine.

Charlie came floating down and clutched herself around Tadhg as he lost control. He came with a groan and shuddered against her, face buried in her neck.

“Holy fuck, you are going to be the death of me,” he mumbled against her skin.

She laughed, causing him to twitch as her muscles clenched him. “Speaks the man who laid me out on the fucking table.”

Tadhg raised himself up and grinned down at her. “Oh yes. And I’ll be doing that again.” He kissed her. “Best dessert I’ve

ever had.”

Reluctantly, he pushed himself away and went into the bathroom to clean up. When he returned, Charlie walked by him, slapping his ass on the way.

She looked at herself in the mirror as she washed her hands. This was the first time she ever wanted to stay the night with someone. The thought should scare her, but she was calm. This was good.

When she opened the bathroom door, she saw Tadhg sprawled out on the bed. He smiled as she crawled in behind him and wrapped her arms around him. He mumbled something about “little spoon” and his breathing deepened as he drifted off.

Charlie pressed her face against his back, peppering his skin with lingering kisses. As she drifted into that space just before sleep, Audrey’s words floated back. She didn’t even fight against them. *He’s my person.*

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Charlie woke up to the not unpleasant feeling of an arm wrapped around her waist and a solid body pressed to her back. She smiled to herself and slowly moved Tadhg's arm so she could crawl out of bed. As she did, she snagged her skirt and gathered clothing up along the way.

The table was still laid out from dinner, so she grabbed a glass and padded her way to the kitchen for some water. As she drank, she wandered through the living room, looking at the photos scattered about the walls and turning out the lights. One set of pictures caught her eye, and she approached.

Tadhg in uniform. His hair was in a high and tight, with the top just long enough to show a hint of curl. The effect made his eyes stand out even more than they already did. There were pics of him with surveying equipment. Some places, she recognized, like the area near Camp Humphreys, in Korea.

She lifted the glass to take another drink and froze, moving closer. It was a group photo, with half a dozen men standing in a row. Some of them had their arms slung over each others shoulders. Tadhg was on one end.

Scott. Her Scott. Standing right next to him. The date on the bottom of the corner was three days before ...

Charlie managed to set the glass down before she dropped it and backed away, eyes wide, mouth in an 'o'. She had to leave.

She got dressed quietly, grabbed her bag, and left.

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Tadhg woke up the next morning and rolled over, smiling. He reached out and kept reaching. Confused, he sat up. Charlie

wasn't there. Her side of the bed was cold, too. He looked around the room and saw that her skirt was gone.

"Charlotte?" he called as he walked out into the living room. Nothing. Her clothes were gone, bag. He looked out the window. Car, gone.

As he turned back, he saw a glass on the table near his old Army pictures. He absently wiped drops of water off of the table and looked at the photos, puzzled. There was nothing there out of the ordinary. Hell, they'd even talked about Korea and some of the clubs in the Ville.

Tadhg took the glass into the kitchen and quickly cleaned up before tapping out a message to Charlie.

*Everything okay? I missed you this morning.*

An hour later, he got a response.

*Sorry. Everything is fine. I had some things to do.*

Despite the sinking feeling in his gut, he kept his reply light. *I'll call you later. Plan something where you don't have to run off.*

She didn't respond.

\*\*\*

Charlie sat on the floor in her living room. She'd barely moved since she stumbled home in the middle of the night.

She was an idiot.

Instead of the sensible thing—waking Tadhg up and talking to him—telling him that one thing she never thought would come up because she figured they'd not last longer than a couple of screws, she ran. Quietly, in the middle of the night, leaving him sleeping and warm and feeling like home in her arms.

*Fuck.* She fucked this one up, hard, and for the life of her, she had no idea at this point how she was going to back herself out of it. Or even how she could move forward and try to work through all of this.



He'd texted her, as she knew he would. She froze when it came through and typed the only thing she could at the time. Bless him; he let her make that lame-assed excuse without question.

But what now?

She wouldn't blame him at all for dumping her dumbass after all of this came out. Not that the story itself was a problem. No, the problem was her not bringing things up before now. She had no excuse for it.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Antony was staring at her. So was Audrey. She could almost feel it. Charlie tried to picture flipping a coin to see which one of them would talk to her first. Both of them were ridiculously good at reading people, and they both knew her better than just about anyone else. Despite her best efforts, they could tell something had happened, given the way they were silently observing her. The last thing she wanted was to have a chat with either of them about her colossal fuckup.

She had to get out of there.

“I’ve got to get my gear in order for tomorrow,” she said, standing. “I’m helping with the annual training lanes.” Before anyone could say anything, she headed to the door.

As she reached to push it, it opened, and she stumbled. Right into Tadhg.

Fuck. Her heart raced. He looked good, and the temptation to sink into his arms was almost overwhelming.

His face was carefully blank, lips thin and closed, brows slightly furrowed. He grabbed her arms and set her upright. “Are you okay?”

She nodded. “Yes, thanks.” Her voice shook.

He looked her over. “Good. You forgot some things at my place the other night. Since you’re not answering my messages, I figured I’d drop them by.” He held out a bag.

Charlie closed her eyes and took a deep breath. “Look—”

He held up a hand. “Not necessary. Just wanted to make sure you got your things.” He looked at his watch. “I’m running late for a meeting.”

She nodded and took the bag. “Thanks. I’m sorry.”

“I am, too, Charlotte.” He stared at her for a moment, and she saw the hurt flash through his eyes. Then he turned and walked to his Durango and left without a backward glance.

Charlie got in her car and closed her eyes. She breathed deeply, trying to keep the tears at bay. She fucked up and fucked up badly. And from the looks of it, she wouldn’t be able to fix it.

An hour later, she was sitting at her desk in the training facility. She’d gotten her gear ready. Well, it was always ready, since she used it once a year for training. She had her lane assignments, and all the paperwork, timers, clipboards, and pencils for the trainers ready to go.

Charlie looked around her small office in the gym. She was ahead of the game with all the training. There was nothing for her to do. Hell, there wasn’t anything to fake doing. She had a choice. She could go back to the office and face her friends, or she could go observe the latest class being run by her more-than-qualified trainers.

She pushed away from the desk and stood. Observation. Sitting with her thoughts while watching the troops fling each other all over the place wasn’t the something she wanted to do on the best of days—she could autopilot half of the training, and didn’t need to observe—but it was still better than Audrey staring at her with her new found empathy, or Antony staring at her and waiting to drop some sort of truth bomb on her.

She’d dropped enough of those on herself over the last few days.

Training was going well, she noted, as she took a seat on the bleachers. Harmon, one of the best trainers, came over.

“What’s up, Madden? Slumming?”

Charlie cracked a grin. “Nah. I think I’m ready for training tomorrow, but you know how that goes. Figured I’d sit and see if anything I’m forgetting filters to the top.”

He nodded. “I hear you.” He looked out toward the group. “They’re good. Hungry for it. Most of them are about to

deploy. Didn't have the heart to tell them they probably won't be tackling insurgents."

"Never know these days, but yes."

"Good for them to get it out of their system."

Charlie exhaled, blowing a strand of hair out of the way. "I understand that too well right now."

Harmon looked sideways at her. "It's been a bit, hasn't it?" He nodded toward her leg. "How much longer til you can get back out there?"

"Too fucking long. A month or so."

He grinned. "I'll take it easy on you, first time back in the ring."

Charlie put out her fist and waited for him to bump it. "I can always count on you to keep me in my lane, Harmon. And I appreciate that."

A yelp of pain across the room caught their attention, and Harmon grinned before trotting away.

Sometimes, it took someone well outside one's inner circle to knock something loose. This was her first real time in the relationship ring since Scott's death. She scrubbed her hands over her face. She should have told Tadhg about Scott well before she caught all these feelings, but shit, she also figured after this long, she was over it. She might have been—no—she wasn't. That was obvious, and she had to own it. This was new territory as far as she was concerned, and she didn't know how to navigate through it.

And from their interaction that morning, it was a moot point, anyway. That's what sucked the worst.

"Madden!"

Charlie blinked and looked toward the voice. The troops were getting themselves together and leaving.

Harmon jerked his head toward the door. "Lunch?"

Charlie shook her head. "I'm good, thanks. I'll see y'all after."

As they all left, her phone dinged.

Tadhg: *All I ever asked was for you to communicate with me, Charlotte. If you decide you want to talk, you know where to find me.*

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Tadhg set his phone down and pulled open his desk drawer. He rummaged around until he found his bottle of aspirin. Two pills and a few swigs of coffee later, and he leaned back in his chair.

He didn't expect a response right away, which was just as well. He was still equal parts pissed and hurt.

The night had started out so damned good and ended so fucking strangely. Whatever she'd seen in those pictures scared her off, but for the life of him, he couldn't figure it out. Maybe she recognized someone in one of them? He shook his head. Anything was possible, and he couldn't outright dismiss the idea, especially after seeing her. She looked like he felt, and it took all of his control to not grab her by the shoulders and either shake her or kiss her until she told him what was going on.

It was all up to her at this point. That text message would be the last time he contacted her first, until this was cleared up one way or the other. It wasn't what he wanted, and he hoped to all the powers that be she'd respond. Until then, he decided, standing up and moving to the door, he had work to do.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Thank the medical clinic for their generous supply of ibuprofen.

Between her ankle and the clusterfuck known as annual training, Charlie was over the bullshit, and it wasn't even 0900. There'd already been one stop to the exercise so some of the trainers could find lost troops. How they'd gotten lost was beyond anyone's imagination, given the mountain range to the south and the flight line to the north, but here they were.

The only thing that was good was the temperature. After having a dozen people fall out the summer before when they tried training in July, leadership finally pulled their heads out and changed things. Even still, it was warm, and it was sunny.

Charlie scratched her initials on a few sheets and sent that team of troops down to the next testing station. They were already behind, and her next group wouldn't be showing up for a bit. She sat down on the folding metal chair under the green pop-up and took her kevlar and dropped it on the ground. After a slug of water, she hung her head down and ran her hands through her hair.

She'd stopped herself from driving over to Tadhg's house the night before and flinging herself at him. Instead, she took the back roads home and killed the lights before pulling into her driveway. It was stupid, slinking in and hiding like she was, for all the good it would have done, since Audrey would beat down the door no matter what. But she didn't. She gave Charlie space, and she was both grateful and annoyed about it at once.

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Tadhg leaned back in his chair and stretched, feeling his back crack in a couple of places. In front of him, the path for the day's training flights took up the screen. He scrolled to the bottom and sent them off to be loaded into the software for use.

He turned his attention to the folder on the edge of the desk. It should be good news. Hell, it was still good news, but with the wreck of his relationship with Charlotte, he was having a hard time being excited about the promotion.

She was different, and what had been going on between them was different, too. He'd been cold when he gave her stuff back—he had to be, or he'd have grabbed her and not let go until she told him what was going on. The look on her face, the hurt, the shadows under her eyes, and the flash of hope he'd dashed—that's why he sent her the text after—to let her know the door was open.

“O'Brien! You ready?”

Tadhg closed his eyes and took a breath. He pushed away from the desk and headed out the door. “Let's do this.”

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“Listen up! We're breaking in place for a short lunch since we're so far behind. Drop your gear, grab a piece of ground, and eat. Drink your damn water. We've got about half an hour.”

The troops didn't waste any time scattering about for any sign of shade and tore into their MREs.

Charlie dropped back down onto her chair and pulled a small, black cooler out from underneath it. As she was about to take a bite of her sandwich, one troop stood up and faced her, slowly coming to parade rest.

“I—uh—can I ask you a question?” the young man asked.

“Only if you sit back down,” Charlie said, gesturing with her free hand. “I am too hot and annoyed by this day to deal with all of that other shit.”

He looked around awkwardly and sat back down, keeping his back ramrod straight as he picked his meal back up.

“What’s your question, Soldier?”

“Are you an instructor at the schoolhouse?”

Charlie swallowed before answering. “No. I do teach, but not in the schoolhouse. I train people in combatives.”

“Whoa. That’s cool. How could I get into that class?”

“After you get to your first assignment and get settled in, let your squad or team leader know that this is something you want to get into. If you’re doing everything else you should be, and you’re not a problem child, maybe they’ll find some money to send you through the training.”

“Would I come back here?”

Charlie shook her head. “Doubtful. There are trainers in a lot of places. They also travel a bit.” She paused and frowned. “Do you hear something?”

A few other troops were also looking around. One of them turned toward her. “I hear it. What is that?”

\*\*\*

Personal bullshit aside, Tadhg was pleased. Takeoff was smooth. The weather was perfect, blue skies, no wind, visibility for miles. The test flight for the upgraded software was going well.

He stood back and let the pilot do her job. She was steady on the controls, and the sensor operator worked quietly with her, talking only when necessary. They were a good team, and Tadhg was happy to have them leading.

His phone buzzed in his pocket, and he pulled it out. One of the contractors was finally getting back to him about some updates. He gestured the phone at one of his colleagues and walked away to answer.

“What the hell?” The pilot turned toward the sensor operator. “What’s going on?”



Tadhg stopped and turned, his phone still ringing. He muted it and walked back over. “What’s going on?”

“It’s stopped responding.”

The operator’s hands were flying over the controls. “Everything is fine here. There’s nothing wrong.”

“There’s nothing wrong on my screen either, but this is not—Oh, fuck!”

While the pilot frantically worked the controls, the rest of the team stood watching the unmanned aircraft veer widely off course and streak over the installation. Suddenly, it began to drop altitude and speed up, aiming toward the ground.

In his head, Tadhg ran over the calculations he’d triple checked that morning. This should not be happening. Chaos erupted around him as they all saw people in the direct line of the aircraft. Tadhg couldn’t tear his eyes away from the scene as the troops looked up in the direction of the plane. A shock of red hair flashed in the sun, and he froze. No.

The people on the ground grew bigger as the 27-foot long drone bore down on them, and they started running.

A few seconds later, the system went dark.

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“That’s a fucking drone!” One of the students shouted.

Charlie watched in horror as the unmanned vehicle bore down on them, all 50-feet of wingspan slicing through the sky. She estimated she had seconds to get them out of the way. All she could do was hope that no one was actively aiming for them.

“Run toward it, to the left and right!” she yelled. “Get underneath it!”

Thank fuck for trainees. They were fresh out of basic training and still obeyed commands without question. She watched as they sprinted. One young man fell, and two of his buddies hoisted his arms over their shoulders and kept moving. Once she was sure no one was left behind, she took off, wincing at the pain in her ankle.

She made it about fifty yards when the plane hit the ground and the shock flattened her on the ground.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

“She’s fine, but you cannot be out here, Tadhg.” Antony held onto his shoulders and kept him on the side of the road. “Hey,” he said, shaking him a little. “She’s fine.”

“I saw—” He looked over Ant’s shoulders, but didn’t see her anywhere. The panic rolled over in his stomach, roiling acid into his throat.

“Oh, we’ll get to what you saw. Beyond the obvious,” Antony said, waving his arm behind him at the debris and panicked troops. “She’s a little cut up from falling, and a lot shaken up from almost being mowed down by a rogue drone, but she is perfectly okay.”

Tadhg deflated, sinking to the ground in a rush. “I’ll leave. Just give me a minute. I won’t try to go out there.”

“The hell even happened?”

“We don’t know. Was just a test run for a minor software upgrade.”

“Navigation software?”

“Not even that.” Tadhg ran his hands through his hair. “Something for one of the sensors. Not flying related.”

Antony frowned at him. “Hold on. I’ll be right back.”

Tadhg watched as Ant walked over to a group of people, talked to an older man, and then came back.

“Come on. We’re going back to your area to get statements. Do this while things are fresh.”

Audrey came walking up. “Top said you might need a hand?”

Antony nodded. “Please.”

“Are you coming straightaway?” Tadhg asked.

“Right behind you.”

Ten minutes later, the two men sat down in Tadhg’s office.

“You mind if I record this?”

“Go ahead.”

Antony scrolled through his phone and tapped on an app. “Start at the beginning of your day here. Walk me through it.”

Tadhg leaned forward, elbows on the desk. He rested his chin on his interlocked fingers. “Came in. Joe, one of the other civilians—Joe Morris—let me know they had updated the software and everything was ready.” He sat back in his chair. “I came in here and rechecked the flight path data.”

“Everything was fine?”

“Of course. We were using one of our standard paths.” At Antony’s expression, he continued. “We have some markers set out—software side—so we can calibrate a bunch of different things on the aircraft. They also help the pilots keep track of where they are. It can be disconcerting for them to be sitting miles away from the craft they are flying, especially early in their careers, and this helps.”

“Has anyone been around the equipment since this happened?”

“No. As soon as the bird went down, we secured the area. Called the guard shack, got them to send people in and stand by the doors. I took the pilot and operator into an office and told them to stay there. They put the rest of the observers into the conference room. The equipment hasn’t been touched and is still powered on.”

“Good. So, sabotage or error?”

“You want me to speculate?”

“Sure. You said that this upgrade wasn’t part of the flying package, but could it have inadvertently caused problems?”

Tadhg pressed his fingers to his temples and rubbed. “I don’t see how. It was a simple imagery update.”

“Maybe it messed with the tracking?”

Tadhg shook his head. “No. Not that way. There was a minor problem with some optics on the camera. This was just a correction to that. Wasn’t even telemetry related.”

“Okay. So then it was with—”

“I’m going to have to look at the pathing packages.”

“Well, you’re not going to do anything.”

Tadhg narrowed his eyes.

Antony held up his hands. “You’re part of this. You’re not being accused of anything, but you did have a direct role in the operational part of this event. You can’t investigate anything.”

“I know. I know.” Tadhg looked up at the ceiling and twisted his head back and forth, trying to ease the tension. “Fuck.” He met Antony’s eyes. “No one was hurt?”

Antony shook his head. “Madden got them all dispersed before impact. Fast moving on her part.” He reached forward and shut off the recorder. “Now. What the fuck? She’s been walking around like a fucking ghoul and won’t open up to anyone. Not me, not Audrey.”

“Fuck if I know, Ramos. I brought her home—first time she’d been to my place. Everything was fine.” He swept some imaginary dust off the desk. “More than fine. Fell asleep. Woke up, and she was gone. No note, nothing.”

Antony raised an eyebrow. “That doesn’t sound like her.”

“I didn’t think so. She left a glass of water on a table near some of my pictures.”

“What pictures?”

“Ramos! Got a runner!” Audrey’s voice carried down the hall. Antony jumped up and ran out of the office, Tadhg close on his heels.

Tadhg skidded to a halt as he saw a flash round the corner and head toward the doors. He had no reason to be chasing anyone. He watched from the foyer as Antony and Audrey tackled someone and cuffed the person before hoisting them up between them and carried them off to a vehicle.

“Mr. O’Brien, you should probably go back to your office and wait for CID to come back.”

Tadhg nodded at the MP and returned to his desk.

Antony walked in and sat back down. “Tell me about Joe Morris.”

Tadhg spun in his chair, eyes wide. “He was the runner?”

“Yeah. Audrey went to bring him in for an interview and caught him messing with his computer. She stopped him, fortunately. We’re calling in a forensics team to secure the electronics and figure out what he was trying to hide.” Antony leaned back.

“I don’t know him well. He just got here what, two months ago? No military background, just contractor work. Got his shiny professional certificate, had a contact in the government, and got hired on. Seems a bit . . . boastful.”

“How do you mean?”

“Likes to brag to the women around here. Stupid shit. Nothing reportable, and the women have put him in his place at every turn, which is good. Anyway, he does what he’s told, and not much more.”

“We’ll see what his computers tell us. Now, from before the interruption. What pictures?”

“Oh. Army pics. Just a few of me in Korea and Iraq.”

“Just you?”

“Most, yeah. One with me and a few people I met right after I got to Iraq.” He looked at the shelf over his desk. “Here’s one of them.”

Antony took the frame, looked at it, and handed it back without a word. He shook his head. “I’m gonna go check on

Audrey and head over to the site to help there.” He stood. “I’m sure you know that training is canceled here until the investigation is over.”

Tadhg nodded and stood with him. “That’s going to be fun to deal with.”

“I’m pretty sure this one’s going to be closed pretty quick. We just have to find out the ‘why’ behind it. I’ll keep you informed.”

Tadhg shook Antony’s hand and watched the man leave and sat back down. He picked up the picture. Out of the four of them in that image, he was the only one still alive. Turner, Burns, and Mason had gone to clear a route and were taken out by an IED that they hadn’t known about. It was a horrible loss for that unit, and the subsequent investigation found that the leadership hadn’t followed protocol before the men went out.

He set the picture back up on the shelf. It was the only one he kept two copies of—one at home for his wall, and one in the office to remind him of his responsibilities.

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Charlie had just finished giving her statement and was clearing up what was left of her stuff when Antony rolled up. She watched him walk over to Audrey and pull her aside. Audrey’s eyebrows raised and Charlie could clearly see her say, “Oh, damn,” before shaking her head. A few minutes later, Antony broke away and came up to her.

“How are you holding up?” He asked, wrapping an arm around her shoulder and bringing her in for a hug.

Charlie shrugged. “I’m okay. Tired. Pissed. But I was pissed before this. What the fuck happened?”

“Not sure.” Antony told her the little they knew.

“Tadhg was there?”

Antony tilted his head and looked down at her. “He saw the whole thing happen. He came out here to check on you.”

“Oh.” Charlie hadn’t seen him. Of course, he was only minutes away and would have showed up in the middle of the

initial chaos. She felt a sharp pang at having missed him.

“I caught him before he could head out here. Turned him around and interviewed him back at the hangar.”

“Give me an hour to get showered and changed at the gym, and I’ll head back out to help.”

“Nah.” Antony looked around. “Audrey said this was about done. They’ll be sending a crew to clean up and collect all the parts. We’re done.”

“Okay, then the office.”

“Madden, there’s no need. It’s almost quitting time. Go home. Relax.”

Charlie looked around. “As if. But sure, I’ll go home.” The adrenaline rush had worn off, and she was heading for a crash. Home was the best place for her, even if it was the last place she wanted to be.



## CHAPTER TWENTY

Charlie sprawled out on the couch, her feet up on the ottoman. It was still a little chilly outside in the evening, so she lit a small fire and sat there, staring at the flames. The shot of whiskey she poured remained untouched in the glass she idly swirled.

Tadhg had come to the site. Was it to see her, or to check on the crash? Or both? The more time that went on without her contacting him, the ansier she felt. At some point, he'd just give up, and it wouldn't matter what she said. She didn't want him to give up on her.

She lifted the glass to her lips and took a sip. The burn raced down her throat, and she embraced the sting. A sharp rap at the door brought her back to Earth.

"It's open," she called.

Audrey came in and closed the door behind her. She looked over the couch and saw the glass. "How many are you up to?"

"One sip. Join me if you'd like." Charlie heard the cabinet open and the tinkle of one ice cube hit the glass. Finally, the cork and solid glug of liquid.

"You remember ripping me a new one about Simon?" Audrey asked as she flopped on the couch next to Charlie.

"That's about to come back to haunt me, isn't it?"

"Mmhmm." Audrey leaned back. "You're the asshole here."

"But—"

Audrey held up her hand. "Before you go off, you need to listen."

“So what, you finally settle down with the one man on the planet that makes you behave like a fully functional human, and you show up here to tell me I’m screwing up? Bitch, please. I *know* I fucked the hell up here, and now I’m paying the price for it.”

“That’s me, the Dick Whisperer.” Audrey said. “No. I’m talking about your communication issues. And before you interrupt me again, I know that you know you fucked up. Just like I knew I had back then.”

Charlie stared into the fireplace and remained silent.

“I don’t know why you didn’t tell Tadhg about Scott from the get-go. You probably figured it didn’t matter. It’s in the past, right?” At Charlie’s slight nod, Audrey continued. “But what you didn’t expect was to get slapped with it, especially in that post-coital glow.”

“No. I didn’t. And how the fuck did you know?”

“He’s got a pic of him and Scott in his office. Couple other guys, but yeah, Scott. He apparently found a glass near the same photos in his house? Told Antony, and showed him the picture. Ant didn’t tell him anything, by the way. So what happened? You freak?”

“I panicked. Like a fucking moron, I panicked.” Charlie closed her eyes and put pressed her fingers to her forehead, rubbing. “I saw the picture and just blanked. Seeing Scott in the same picture with Tadhg just fucked me up. All I know is I had to get out. And then when he texted me, I froze. I didn’t know what to do.” She pressed the heels of her hands to her eyes and took a few deep breaths. “He’s been gone so long, Aud.” She looked up.

Audrey nodded. “Over a decade now.”

“Right, longer than I ever knew him.” Charlie sat up and looked around the room, though through it. “It wasn’t—I was just shocked. I straight up blanked. What if they were friends? I don’t know how long Tadhg knew Scott. Did he ever hear about me? So yeah. I freaked.” She fell back against the cushions. “And I fucked up.”

“So. Now what?”

“What do you mean, ‘now what?’ It’s done. I fucked it all up. I ran. It’s over.”

Audrey bit her lips together and took a deep breath. “And you’re okay with this?”

“No! I’m not fucking . . . do I look fucking okay with this?” Charlie said, as she waved her hands around the mess in her living room. “I’m not fucking okay. I feel like shit. I probably look like a bag of scrambled assholes.” At Audrey’s nod, Charlie flung a pillow at her. “I just don’t know what the fuck I can do to come back from this.”

“You remember what happened with Simon, right?”

“Vaguely. You went to dinner and apologized, right?”

“We *talked*, Charlie. I opened my mouth and used my words and told him where I was coming from. You know me. You know what it takes for me to open up like that.”

“I do. You’re a bigger asshole than me.”

Audrey frowned and rolled her eyes. “Yes. I’m a bigger asshole. But you know, the shit you told me sunk in. Everything I knew about Simon sunk in. And in order for me to move beyond my stupidity, I had to take a chance. I had to step outside of my own . . . crap,” she said, waving her hand around, “and allow someone else to love me when I was still trying to love myself.”

Charlie sat still. Audrey’s words rushed through her head in time with the blood rushing through her veins.

Audrey reached out and grabbed Charlie’s hand, squeezing it. “You need to figure out how you feel. Well—I think you need to *acknowledge* how you feel. Give it some space. Figure out how you want to approach things.”

“And you know how I feel?”

Audrey tilted her head, her eyes soft. “I know how you are with him. I know that this is the longest you’ve spent with anyone in years. I know he spends a lot of time here with you,

and that you smile a lot at work when your phone buzzes. So yeah, I have a pretty good idea of where this is all going.”

“Was going.”

“*Is* going, idiot. Jesus, you’re dumber than I am sometimes.” Audrey smiled at Charlie. “It’s not over until one of you says that it’s over. You might, however, wanna figure out how you’re going to grovel. I imagine being on your knees might be a good start.”

Charlie threw another pillow at Audrey. She dodged it and laughed. “Now, go take a fucking shower because you reek. Brush your teeth. And come have dinner with Simon, Lesley, and me. We’ve got lasagna going.”

“Where’s Ant?”

“On the way to Seminole, remember? He left right after we cleared the site. Lesley made him promise to stop in Las Cruces so he doesn’t hit the mountains at night.” She stood and pointed to the back of the house. “Go. We’re just about ready.”

“I think I’m going to call it an early night, Aud. I’m tired, and sore, and not feeling at all social. Thanks for the kick in the ass, though.”

Audrey stepped forward and hugged her. “I understand. I’m glad you’re okay. Leave your door unlocked and I’ll bring you a corner piece.”

Tears threatened to spill over, but Charlie held them back. She nodded weakly and watched the door close behind her friend.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Tadhg ran his hand over the prepared canvas resting on the easel.

He turned to his table and grabbed a pencil and penknife. While he sharpened the pencil, he contemplated the small watercolor he'd affixed to an arm off the bottom of the easel. It was the image he'd been working on the day he met Charlotte.

He missed her. Everything about her. The way she shifted her weight from her right to her left foot before taking a shot at the pool table. How she ate sushi with her fingers, with no reservations and no hiding her enjoyment. Her kisses, and how they consumed him.

Time and again, he'd gone over that evening. Whatever scared her off was in those pictures, but he hadn't a clue what. Regardless, someone in those images spooked her. He was damned if he knew where to start unraveling that mystery.

He'd rather hear it directly from her. People, if left to their own devices, usually came up with the worst possible explanation for anything. Tadhg had done plenty of that over his life, and the urge to indulge in doomsaying was strong now, but it never ended well. The relief that came from working himself up only to find out that things weren't as bad as he'd made them in his head wasn't worth the long-term cost. Anger was an addictive thing, and while it might be satisfying in the immediate term, it wasn't healthy. A nice round of ulcer medication a few years back had taught him that lesson.

He picked up his pencil and sketched a loose framework of the scene, stopping often to check his perspective. Once

satisfied, he turned back to the table. Slowly and methodically, Tadhg spun the caps off of each tube of paint and placed dabs on the palette in the middle. Ochres and umbers down one side, cool and warm primary colors on the other. At the top, he dropped a bit of Payne's grey. A swish of the brush through the water; a blot on the towel next to the jar, and his ritual began.

He mixed quickly, decisively, and laid down broad strokes. He smudged with his fingers, sprayed some areas with a small bottle of water, blotted with paper towels. The tools were an extension of him, and he let his muscle memory take over, guided by that morning, not that long ago, where everything in his life changed.

Hours later, Tadhg stepped back from the canvas and sat down in the office chair. The painting needed detail work, but it was effectively done.

He leaned on one arm, chin on the palm of his hand, as he stared at the image. The sunrise coming up over the mountain bathed the area in that hazy in-between light. Tadhg smiled to himself as the memory of that morning turned over and over in his mind. He'd been such a shit once he found out she was okay and started spitting fire at him.

He'd captured the morning glow and remembered how it bounced off her hair and illuminated her skin. How she felt tucked against his chest as he carried her to the road. She would have crawled all the way back to her apartment if need be, and dared anyone to say anything to her about it. She probably would have kicked his ass all over the desert if she'd have been able to. He chuckled.

Every memory they'd shared flooded through him as he worked. The first time he kissed her. How her eyes dilated when he'd tell her all the things he wanted to do with her. Those noises she made under his hands and mouth.

He rubbed his eyes. They burned from his focus. It'd been a while since he lost himself in a canvas, and the ache in his shoulders and neck were going to be painful reminders for the next day or so.

He kicked off with his foot, rolling over to the desk on the other side of the room. No messages. It was well after midnight. He pushed himself out of the chair, and after one last glance at the painting, turned out the light.

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Four hours later and he was wide awake. His sleep had been fitful and his dreams like strobe lights in his head. This always happened when he got lost in a piece he was invested in. Only problem this time was the dreams revolved around Charlotte, leaving him angry and needy.

He rolled over and punched his pillow, trying to get comfortable. It didn't work.

Ten minutes later, Tadhg gave up and rolled out of bed. He padded to the kitchen, grabbed a water bottle and a cup of cold coffee, and went back to the studio. Only way for him to get past this was to work straight through it. He'd pay dearly, but he'd learned that trying to fight it often made the process worse.

Before he started working, he set a few alarms on his phone to force himself to take breaks. That trick had saved his ass a few times over the years. Once set, he dropped the phone on the table, avoiding the temptation of going through his conversation with Charlie. One of the last things she'd sent him was the set of racy photos. He absently rubbed at his chest, thinking about that day and evening and how fucked up everything had gone.

He took a few drinks of water as he surveyed his work, making mental notes on where he wanted to touch up and other places he wanted to highlight. He set the palette on the table and misted it with the spray bottle to reactivate the paints. To them, he added more and mixed up some new colors.

Finally, he grabbed his brush and started working.

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It was done. Tadhg was sore all over. He needed a shower and some food, but the piece was done.

It was one of the best paintings he'd created. It was an accurate representation of the events of that morning. Her, on the ground. Him, reaching out to her. But it was so much more. It was the one thing that was left for him to do, to reach out one last time and see if she'd reach back.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

“How long’s it been since you’ve had your ass beat, Madden?”

Charlie didn’t need to look up to know Antony was leaning on the doorjamb. She was not in the mood to deal with this.

“Longer than you.”

“Let’s go.”

“Not feeling it, Ramos.”

“Wasn’t asking.”

She looked up at him, eyes narrowed. “Giving me orders now?”

“You’ve been given the all clear. And I know you haven’t been teaching or fighting. So, let’s get at it. I’ve got some steam to blow off, and I figure you do, too.” Antony jerked his head toward the mat in the center of the room.

Charlie bit her lips together and took a deep breath. “Fine. Let’s fight.” She pushed away from her desk and shooed him out of her office. “I’ll meet you out there.”

Antony was sitting on the mat stretching when she came out. She flopped down a few feet away and ran through a few moves to loosen her muscles.

“You wanna talk about this shit?” Antony asked.

“Nope.”

They stood and started circling each other on the mat.

“Fine. You can listen.” He feinted and cracked a smile when Charlie rolled her eyes and stood still.

“You need to come up with new moves, Ramos. That one’s stale.”

Next thing Charlie knew, she was flat on her back. She rolled up toward her shoulders and kicked out to her feet. “Huh. Where’d you pick that one up?”

“Been practicing.”

She shook out her arms. “Well, thanks for not raking my shin with that blade,” she said, nodding toward the prosthetic Antony wore.

“I’ll save that brutality for the assholes. Now. We done playing?”

“Been waiting on you to stop fucking around, Ramos.” Charlie centered herself on her feet, settling into her center of gravity. Being shorter had many problems, but there were also many advantages, especially against someone like Antony, who had about a foot on her.

The disadvantage here was how well they knew each other. Antony had been through the training long before they’d ever met, and they’d also trained together a few times a week. Their sparring matches were more like well choreographed dances than all out brawling. That leg sweep was new, though. Antony wanted to play dirty, and that usually only happened when he was angry.

“Mad at me, or for me?” Charlie taunted, twisting away as he lunged at her.

“Neither. I do wanna know what the hell is wrong with you, though.”

“First Audrey, and now you. The fuck. You two put your heads together and decide I needed some tag team pep talk? You draw the straw to be the asshole?”

Antony tagged her in the shoulder, sending her back a couple of feet. She rubbed it idly, trying to get the tingling to go away. He wasn’t pulling as much as he usually did.

“Nah. I volunteered for asshole duty. It’s what you expect of me. Mostly. You need to figure out what you want.”

They circled each other a few more times, arms and legs flying and blocking. Antony finally got her in a lock, and she flipped him halfway over her shoulder before bouncing away.

“Scratch that. You need to decide what you want.” Antony stood up and cranked his head back and forth.

Charlie raised her eyebrows.

“You gonna keep hiding yourself away?”

“I’m not hiding—”

“Cut the shit, Madden. You’re just like the rest of us. You got hurt, bad. Not discounting that and not doubting it. You’ve built your little fortress around your heart—and you know I get it. You saw me.” He flinched, barely escaping a blow. “My shit wasn’t nearly as bad as yours—fucking hell, woman!” He countered a strike to his ribs. “Fine. I’m not telling you that you have to make a decision, Charlie. But you really do have to make one. It’s only fair to both you and Tadhg. And yes, I hope you choose to try—you’ve been a force of nature as long as I’ve known you. I’d love to see how you grow when you open up to someone like you were starting to with Tadhg.”

Charlie came at him with a flurry of moves that backed him up to the edge of the mat. She wasn’t seeing red—she was too well trained to lose control during a fight—but his words, so much like Audrey’s, set off a buzzing that settled in the back of her head. Her vision tunneled, and even as she backed away to let Antony move forward to a safe spot on the mat, all she could think to do was react, to strike away at those words, at the truth of what he was saying.

It was a combination of bad luck on Antony’s part, and a lucky move on Charlie’s that she made contact with his face. As soon as she registered the blow, she stopped. That was one line they tried not to cross, and she instantly deflated. “I’m sorry.”

Antony wiped the blood off his lip and gave a wry chuckle as he looked at it on his hand. “Pull your head out of your fucking ass, Madden. We all love you. If you gave him half a chance, I’m pretty sure he would, too. If he doesn’t already. Or

sit there on your little island and watch the rest of the world continue to move on around you.”

Charlie sunk to the mat, silent. Antony shook his head and walked away.

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*What the hell is going on?*

Tadhg froze in the gym’s doorway. He never came here, not when he had a membership to one close to home, but a broken water pipe at his usual place forced him on post. He’d been itching to get at some weights after spending the entire weekend in the studio. He was tense, both from working overtime to get the painting done, and the emotions that rolled through him during the long hours. Letting off some steam was his first order of business.

He’d come around the corner in time to hear Charlotte and Antony. Well, mostly Antony, giving her hell about him. Her expression shifted between hurt and anger and back again as Ant lit her up about her behaviour. Despite their height difference, they were well matched, and it was obvious they’d fought many, many times. He was pushing Charlotte’s buttons, though, trying to trip her up. Finally, she snapped, and after a blurring set of moves, she tagged him in the face.

Part of him wanted to go in there and put a stop to it, but this wasn’t his battle to fight. If Charlotte was going to contact him, she had to do it of her own will. Tadhg wouldn’t have it any other way. If she couldn’t trust him, or herself, enough to communicate with him, they had no chance at all.

There was also the last bit of what Antony said. *If he doesn’t already*. In the late hours, after finishing the painting and preparing it for framing, Tadhg had come to his own conclusion about that. Or at least admitted it to himself. Antony, as always, was a perceptive man.

He looked at his watch. No way he could go busting on in there, not with her sitting on the floor. Not after hearing the conversation.

*Fuck it*. He’d hit his gym on the way home.

As he moved to the door, he looked back one more time. Charlotte raised her head and looked in his direction. The light pouring through the windows was bright enough to back light him, so he was confident that she couldn't make out his features. He slipped through the door and out to the day.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

“I guess that’s that.” Charlie closed the folder and put it on the corner of her desk. “Evidence from the computers was overwhelming. When the lawyer read through it all, he recommended Morris cooperate fully in hopes of getting a milder sentence.”

“So, what was his deal?”

“He didn’t like Tadhg. Thought he should have gotten the job, even though he wasn’t remotely qualified for it. Stupid, really. I don’t understand how people think they’ll get away with shit like that.”

Antony shrugged one shoulder. “Agreed. There was no other way for this to end, really. The computer forensics people said that he didn’t even hide his tracks. Everything, all out in the open on his computer.”

“Book smarts and street smarts aren’t the same thing,” Charlie said. “Anyway, you want to send the email, or do you want me to?”

Antony smiled. “We need to go over there. Have to take the equipment back. It’s loaded in my car.” He stood and headed to the door. “You coming?”

“No.”

“Yes. Yes, you are. I’m not carrying all of this shit in on my own.”

“Get some Private to help you.” Charlie glared at Antony.

A voice from the back hall rang through, deep and loud. “Madden! Go with Ramos!”

Charlie grit her teeth. “Yes, Top.”

They walked out, and she headed to her car.

“Why don’t you just ride with me?”

“I’ve got shit to do after we’re done there.” She got into her car and drove off. She was being a shit, and frankly, she didn’t much care at the moment. Audrey’s words had been on a nonstop loop through her mind for the past few days, and she was about ready to snap. Antony piling the same shit on top pushed her over the edge. There was also her chagrin at losing control and popping Ant. It wasn’t a bad injury, but she split his lip and it was swollen. He may have deserved it, but really, he didn’t. No one deserved that kind of treatment. She owed him an apology, but that would be after this task.

She wanted to talk to Tadhg. Wanted it more than she had anything in a long time. And for whatever stupid reason, she couldn’t figure out how to do it. This wasn’t a conversation to be had over the phone. Text was way out of the question. It had to be face to face, and that was the problem. As soon as she looked into his eyes, all she wanted to do was sink into them and forget the world around her. It wasn’t fair to him, and it wasn’t fair to her. He deserved the truth—her life—and all the bad parts, along with the good.

Charlie flipped on her blinker and took the turn toward the training facility. She had about five minutes to figure this shit out before she’d be seeing him. Maybe he’d be in a meeting or something, and she could buy some time.

That thought was dashed when she pulled into a spot and saw him leaning against the handrail outside of the building, talking on the phone. She waited for Antony to pull in next to her before she got out of her car.

The two of them were stacking and sorting the parts when Tadhg strode up.

“Antony. Charlotte. What can I help carry?”

Charlie looked up at him. No suit today. He was in jeans and a soft blue t-shirt, and she had to refrain from running her hands up his chest. She couldn’t get a read on his expression;

his eyes were hidden behind his sunglasses. He wasn't tense, though, which gave her an odd relief.

"Here," she said, passing him a box of notebooks. "Can you take this second one?"

"Yeah, I've got it." He crouched down to allow her room to place the second box in his arms. He turned and said, "We're offloading into the conference room off to the left. Charlotte knows the way."

Tadhg would give anything to erase the haunted look from Charlotte's eyes and the shadows from under them. He saw the flash of something in them when he walked up. She covered pretty quickly, though he caught her trying to see through the lenses of his shades. He was glad for that barrier that allowed him unfettered access to watch her for those few minutes.

He was sorting the notebooks out when they came in with the rest of the equipment. He nodded toward the other end of the table. "There will be fine. We'll figure out what to do with all of it later on."

"They removed and degaussed the drives," Antony told him. "I have a clean mirror copy for you, in case you wanted to look at the code he used."

"Yes. I do want that." Tadhg looked around. "Where is it?"

Antony patted his pockets. "I need to grab it from the car."

"I can do that," Charlotte said. She held out her hand for his key.

Antony leveled a bland look at her and walked out, leaving her there with Tadhg. In that moment, it was obvious Ant had set this up. Fucker.

"Congratulations on your promotion," Charlie said. She fussed with stacking papers that were in no danger of falling over.

"Thanks. How'd you know?"

"Came out during the investigation." Charlie stopped and put her hands on the table. "Look, I'm sorry I haven't texted. It just seems so," she waved a hand around, "impersonal. I don't



even know where to start, so I just haven't. And I didn't know if you wanted to hear from me, anyway."

"You've had your reasons, Charlotte, for bailing and for not contacting me. I'd have preferred you communicated with me before things got to this point, but that's not how you played it. These were choices you made on your own, and they effectively took mine away. I'm still waiting for you, and I will not push." Tadhg walked over to her and stopped a hair's breath away. He gripped her chin lightly and raised her face toward him. He brushed his lips over hers. "Much."

Antony rattled the door handle a second longer than necessary before coming back into the room. If he noticed Charlie stepping away from Tadhg and her wide-eyed stare, he didn't let on. Instead, he walked over to Tadhg and handed him a flash drive. "Here it is. Do with it what you will. The geeks said it was fairly rudimentary, which is probably why it worked."

"Did he ever say why he did it?"

"He wanted to make you look bad. That's all."

Tadhg's mouth fell open. "What."

"If there's one thing I've learned in this job, it's that people do weird shit, man. He wanted your job. Anyway," he stepped forward to shake Tadhg's hand, "I need to get back to the office." He turned toward Charlie. "I'll see you back there after your appointment?"

"I'll be there," she said.

Antony lightly tagged her on the shoulder as he left, closing the door behind him.

"Appointment? Is everything okay?" Tadhg asked.

"Follow-up for my ankle. They cleared me, but after the incident, they want to check it out again. Shouldn't be a big deal. Was sore for a day, but it's fine now." She looked at her watch. "In fact, I should get going. I don't want to be late."

She floundered for a moment, and Tadhg watched as all pretense of composure fell from her face. She recovered

quickly and looked at him with a wan smile. "I'll get in touch with you. Soon."

Tadhg watched Charlotte walk out the door. "I hope so."

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"All good?"

"All good." Charlie sat down at her desk. "I told them I was fine, but they had to get their poke and prod on. Fully cleared for duty. I can start teaching again."

Antony smiled at her. "I'm glad. Get you back on the mat where you belong, teaching those students to kick some ass."

Charlie took a deep breath. "Look, I'm—"

Antony held his hand up. "Nah. We don't have to do that. I know, and I am, too. I pushed." He tilted his head. "I hope everything works out how you want it."

"Thanks. Me, too." She looked at her phone. "I'm gonna go grab some paperwork from the gym and head home."

"If you wanna hang out this weekend ..."

"I know where to find you."

Charlie pulled into the drive by Simon and Audrey's place to check on things. They'd been out of town for a few days and would be gone for a few more. Once she was satisfied with everything, she unlocked her place and stepped inside.

Less than five minutes later, there was a knock at the door.

"I have a delivery for one Charlotte Madden. Is that you?" The driver held out a clipboard and a pen.

"I'm not expecting anything." She signed where he pointed and gave him back his pen.

"No clue, ma'am. Here you go." He lifted a box toward her. It was tall and wide, but thin.

"Thanks," she said, turning and closing the door. What the hell?

Flipping her knife open, she carefully ran it along the edges of the box, slicing through the tape. She shimmied it out of the

box onto the table in the kitchen and carefully pulled the paper off of it.

It took her a second to realize what she was looking at. When it hit her, she froze, her fist pressed against her mouth. Tears filled her eyes and spilled over.

He painted her. Them. That morning. She was sitting on the ground, looking up. And him. Tadhg. He stood facing her.

It was gorgeous. And heartbreaking. The vibrant sky shone down on her face. Tadhg's face was cloaked in shadow; his hand was the only part of his body that reflected the light.

She grabbed some tissues and ran them over her eyes and face, then dropped them in the trash on her way to the bedroom. The bottom drawer of her dresser squeaked a little as she pulled it out. In the back corner rested a plain blue photo box.

She grabbed it and went back to the living room, where she settled herself on the floor. It'd been a long time since she'd gone through the contents, and her hands shook a little when she untied the string holding the lid on and removed it.

Charlie didn't dwell on all the memories that lived in that bit of cardboard. She'd put them to rest a long time ago, and they'd aged into a bittersweet fondness. Instead, she dug through the top layers until she found a couple of pictures tucked in an envelope.

The last pictures of Scott. They were taken at the same time as the picture on Tadhg's wall. She ran her finger over his image and smiled. He was such a boy next door when they met. He was rougher in that picture. Older, with a hard glint in his eyes. He had a rough time on that deployment—didn't share much about it—but she could hear it in the silence between his words. Below that envelope was one other picture. She removed it and closed the box, setting it on the shelf under her coffee table. She would need these later.

She pulled the painting off of the kitchen table and set it up against the fireplace so she could look at it. It was one of the most perfect works she'd ever seen. Biased? Sure, but from a

technical standpoint, it was stunning. Tadhg's feelings showed through with every brush stroke, every nuance of color. The shadows on his face showed his pain and even the exasperation he felt that morning. His glowing hand, outstretched toward her, was a clear message that she needed to get her act together. That he was waiting for her to take a chance, even without him knowing why she'd flipped out on him.

Reluctantly, she put everything away and got ready for bed. Before she turned out the light, she tapped out a message: *Will you come over tomorrow after work?*

His response was almost immediate. *Of course. 1900 work? I'll be here. Good night, Tadhg.*

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Tadhg sat at the stop sign down the road from Charlotte's house. The front porch light shone, and he could see a glow around the edges of the curtains. He'd battled a lump in his gut most of the day. What he wanted was to fling open her door and scoop her up and tell her that nothing mattered. Except whatever she had to say did matter. It mattered enough that she had run scared in the middle of the night. For both of their sakes, they had to see this through.

He pulled into her drive. Before he could knock on the door, it opened.

"Thanks for coming," she said. "Would you like a drink?"

Tadhg grabbed her and pulled her into a hug. Her arms wound around his waist, and she sighed into his chest. His heart clenched as he held her.

She pulled away.

"I'll have a drink, yes. Thank you."

"Have a seat." He watched as she poured healthy slugs of whiskey into glasses and carried them over. After she handed the glass to him, she reached up and grabbed something from the mantle over the fireplace. "First. I'm sorry I ran out on you like I did."

"It's okay—"

She held up her hand. "No, it's not okay. It was stupid of me, and you didn't deserve it, and I don't deserve to get out of this that easily." She held out the items in her hand.

Pictures. Tadhg flipped them over. The first was Scott Turner. He looked at the second and his breath caught.

Charlotte and Scott. On their wedding day. He looked up at Charlie and back down to the pictures.

“We met in high school,” Charlie said. She sat cross-legged on the floor and stared down at her hands. “He moved to town halfway through my junior year and we just clicked. Inseparable. It took a long time for anything romantic to happen.”

Tadhg remained silent. He needed to hear her story just as much as she needed to tell it. Keeping things like this bottled up for too long, well, it showed in everything she did in her life. If they couldn’t get this settled—if she couldn’t find a place for him in her life—well, they’d find out at the end of this chat.

Charlie frowned, remembering. “He joined the Army and left two days after we graduated from high school. I’d been on an accelerated program with school—by the time we graduated from high school, I was a junior in college. It made sense that I stay and finish. He came home after AIT and we got married.” She took a drink. “And then I got the offer to join as an agent.”

Tadhg held up the picture of Turner in Iraq. “And of all the people you could meet and start seeing, you find one of the last ones who saw your husband alive.”

Charlie nodded. “I was getting a drink of water, and then I saw that picture on your wall. I couldn’t think.” Her eyes were glossy with unshed tears. “I wasn’t mad—this world is small, and the Army is smaller—but everything caved in. I wasn’t prepared.”

“And now?” Tadhg set the pictures on the table.

“Now I feel like an idiot for reacting the way I did.” Charlie looked at the pictures. “And for not telling you before.”

“Why didn’t you? Were you afraid of how I’d react?” Tadhg ran his fingers roughly through his hair. “I’m not him, Charlotte. I’m never going to be him, or to replace him, and I don’t want that, anyway. He’s a fixed point in the past in your life. I’m sorry to put it that way, because I’m sure it hurts you,

but that's the fact of it. I'm here, in the flesh, present, and you need to decide what you want to do. Are you going to stay focused on that point in the past and cling to that moment that you're never going to have again, or are you going to take a chance on your future?"

"You think I don't know that Tadhg? You think I haven't realized that he's been gone longer than he was ever part of my life?" She got up and paced around the small space. "None of that's really the point. Hell, I don't even know what the point is anymore. Maybe that's the problem. One minute things were fine, and the next, my world was upside down. I have moved past that part." She held up her hands. "I see your look, and I have. Lots of therapy. It's just left me unable to get serious about anyone."

"Unable or unwilling?"

"Used to be both." Charlie looked at him on the couch. "I'm willing—but I don't know how." She shook her head. "And for the record, I didn't tell you because it's not something I focus on. At least not consciously. He *is* a fixed point in my past, and I recognize that. I'm an entirely different person now, because of him and his death, because of my life since then and all the things I've done. And because of you, Tadhg."

He sat forward on the couch, elbows on his knees. He rubbed his fingertips over his forehead and paused, resting on them as he stared down at the table. At the photos. In the stillness of the room, Charlie was certain he could hear her heart pounding. She could, along with the rushing of her blood in her ears and the catch of her breath as she tried to hold herself back from a complete breakdown.

Charlie jumped when he moved. Tadhg set his hands on his knees and pushed himself off the couch. He stared up at the ceiling and finally nodded, as though he'd come to a decision.

*I fucked this one up.* Charlie set her jaw and took a swipe at her eyes.

Tadhg turned toward her, and seeing the look on her face, softened. He walked over to her and tugged her into his arms, squeezing her tight as she choked out a sob.

“I figured you’d leave.” Charlie hiccupped into his chest.

“What?” Tadhg grabbed her shoulders and pulled her away to look at her. He wiped the tears off of her cheeks with his thumbs. “Why the hell would you think that?”

“Because I kept this from you.”

Tadhg took a deep breath and closed his eyes. “I understand your reasons, and I believe it didn’t occur to you.” He cracked a smile. “Besides, we’ve talked about plenty of other things during our time together, and we’ve spent it all in the now. I like that. And I wish I could tell you about that time, to give you some peace, but fact is, I didn’t know Scott. I arrived two days before the incident.” He pressed his lips to her forehead before stepping back. “I will not say I’m happy, Charlotte. Quite the opposite. I’m not even angry; I’m hurt.” He tipped her face up to meet her gaze. “I also understand you better from this, so let me make things clear. If you think that I’m going to end things over this, you’re mistaken.”

Charlie blew out a shuddering breath and wiped her eyes.

“Now. I’m going to leave.” He held up a hand at her raised eyebrows. “I’ve got a long few days ahead. We’re still dealing with fallout from the crash, and I have an early flight to DC. I won’t be back until late Friday night. I’d love to talk with you while I’m away, but if you text and I don’t respond, it’s not that I’m ignoring you. I have to go play nice with a bunch of suits.” He grimaced. “And that’s going to include dinners and acting like I give a fuck about their pet projects.”

Charlie sniffled and gave a weak laugh. “I know how meetings and investigations can go. Will this be the last of that mess?”

Tadhg nodded, and he pulled her in again. “I don’t think you’ll ever understand how I felt seeing you in the footage and not knowing if you were okay.”

“Wait. You saw me? I knew you were there when it happened, but . . .”

“Yes. I saw your face. I saw you yell and everyone ran. You saved a lot of lives, Charlotte.”



“Antony told me you were there.”

“Mmhmm. And then he almost kicked my ass to get me to leave.” Tadhg sighed. “Speaking of, I need to go. I still haven’t packed.” He ran his hand up Charlie’s neck and gripped her chin. “I have missed you,” he said, and lowered his lips to hers. She opened for him immediately, and his head swam with need for her. Reluctantly, he pulled away until they were joined only by their hands. He gave hers a squeeze. “Text me. I’ll answer when I can.”

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Charlie watched the door close. She wavered between wanting to burst into tears and just stand there and blank out. Her gaze fell to the table and the pictures.

She sat on the couch and picked up the images. For the first time in a long while, she could smile at her wedding picture. They were so young. Too young, by most standards, but they’d made it work during the time they had. She often wondered what he’d be like if he’d survived—what they’d be like. Now, as she stared at the image, something clicked into place. This was a crossroads in her life. She’d ignored the rest of the paths she could have taken in favor of the safe routes. In this moment of honesty, none of the options she’d had until now were one she’d have seriously considered, anyway. And while there were no guarantees for anything in life, the decision point she currently stood at just felt right. Tadhg felt right.

Charlie blew out a long breath. “Well, hell.” She looked up at the ceiling, then closed her eyes. *In through the nose, out through the mouth.*

Yep. This was worth it. She was worth it, and Tadhg sure as hell was worth the chance.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Charlie sat on the swing on the front porch, her foot bouncing in anticipation. Tadhg had sent her a message when he got back to Sierra Vista and told her to be ready first thing in the morning. And yet, when he pulled into her driveway and got out of the Durango, she froze.

The sun had just come over the horizon and shone on him, leaving half of his face in shadow as he approached. That errant curl slipped down over his forehead, and he gave her a lopsided grin that made her belly flip. She walked over to him and right into his arms.

“Oh, I missed you,” he said, burying his face in her hair.

“Same. How was the trip back?”

“Horrid.” He released her and held out his hand toward the SUV. “But enough of that. I want to get going while before the sun is up too high.”

Charlie jumped in and waited until he settled into the driver’s seat. “Where are we going?”

Tadhg smiled. “Back to Carr Canyon. We won’t be doing anything strenuous. Your ankle good for a short walk?”

“You bet, but I don’t have a pack.” She reached for her seat belt. “Just let me go grab—”

Tadhg reached out. “You don’t need anything. We’re going light.” He ran his fingers over her arm to her hand and brought it up to his lips. “Just relax.”

“We’re not going to the waterfall?” Charlie asked as they drove by.

“Not today. There’s another area I thought we’d go kick around in. It’s at close to the base of that hill,” Tadhg said, pointing to a rise a short way away.

“The campground?”

He smiled. “Yep.” He pulled off and navigated down a path until they reached the end. Not another vehicle in sight. He backed in to the site at an angle, blocking the view from the road. “This should be good.” He shut off the engine and got out.

Charlie opened her door and looked out over the landscape.

Tadhg walked around to her side and stepped in between her legs, running his hands up her arms and to the back of her neck. He leaned in and ran his tongue over her bottom lip before sucking it in between his teeth. Charlie wrapped her arms around his waist and pulled herself closer, opening her mouth and stroking her tongue along his. A few heated minutes later, she started rocking against him. He groaned and broke the kiss, pressing his forehead to hers.

“I didn’t bring you out here just for this, Charlotte,” he said. “There are some neat things I wanted to share with you, some flowers that are coming up.”

She ran a finger down his chest. “I might have some neat things to share with you, too.”

Tadhg grabbed her by the waist and lifted her out of the seat. “I’m going to get set up here. Go wander for a few minutes.” He swatted her on the ass.

“Do that again, and we won’t be going anywhere.” She stuck out her tongue.

“Do *that* again, and I’ll put it to a much better use.” He pointed. “Go.”

Charlie grinned at him and wandered over to some flowers she’d seen.

While she walked around the area, Tadhg set up a sunshade off of the back of the SUV and set up a small table with a cooler on top. He unfolded the thin mattress he’d stored and

spread a couple of thin blankets over it. Finally, he grabbed the water system and slung it over his shoulder before walking over to her.

“Ready?”

Charlie stood. “Where are we going?”

“Just up the way. Maybe half a mile.” Tadhg grabbed her hand and led her to the path.

They walked in silence, stopping every so often so Charlie could kick over a rock or look at one of the shrubs and plants lining the path. When they reached the crest of the hill, they stopped. Tadhg leaned against a rock and pulled a small sketchpad and pencil out of his cargo pocket.

“I love the views here,” Charlie said, looking out over the vista. “On a clear day, you can see forever.” She pulled out her phone and took a few snaps of a plant. “What’s the story behind this place?”

“Same as a lot of places around here. Old mining town. I think Bisbee is older, which might be why this one didn’t stick.” He looked up from his sketchpad and pointed. “There are some ruins off that way about a mile or so in. Easy path, if you wanted to go.”

Charlie walked up to him. “No. I’m not feeling much like hiking today, Tadhg.” She reached up and twisted one of his curls around her finger.

“You want to go back down the hill, then?”

“Not just yet.” Charlie reached behind his head and pulled him down to kiss her. She raked her nails over his scalp and assaulted his mouth with her tongue until he awkwardly stuffed his sketchpad in his pocket and grabbed her. She pressed full against him, running her free hand down his chest, grazing him with her nails.

He pulled away from her. “What’re you playing at, Charlotte?”

Charlie trailed her fingers to the button on his shorts. “Oh, I’m not playing at anything, Tadhg.” She flipped the buttons

open and reached inside, grasping his erection.

“*Fuck,*” Tadhg’s breath stuttered out of him.

“Indeed.” Charlie pushed him against the rock until he was sitting and dragged his shorts down just enough to free him. She looked up at him through her lashes. “So, this is what’s going to happen, Tadhg.” She gripped him and stroked slowly, trailing her fingertips over the head of him before sliding her hand back down. “I am going to suck your cock.” She smiled as his head rolled back and he groaned. When he raised it again and looked at her, she licked her lips. “And I’m not going to stop until you come down my throat.” She ran her finger over the head of him and scooped up the small, clear drop that had seeped out of the tip. Tadhg grabbed her hand and brought her finger to his mouth, sucking it before pulling her to him and shoving his tongue in her mouth. He sucked in a harsh breath as she bit the tip of his tongue and soothed it with her own.

“How does that sound to you?” she asked, breaking away from him before he could derail her.

“You don’t—”

Charlie put her fingers on his mouth. “I *want*. And I don’t want you to play nice about it, either.”

His nostrils flared. “Charlotte ...”

She squeezed him and bent her head, licking up the length of him before settling her mouth over the head. She swirled her tongue and flicked it over the sensitive underside. After a minute of doing that, Tadhg buried his fingers in her hair.

“You’re killing me, Charlotte,” he groaned. “Suck.”

Charlie moaned against him and took him a few inches into her mouth, applying suction as she dragged her mouth back up to the tip and then back down. She kept an agonizingly slow pace, flexing her tongue over the underside of his shaft as she moved in both directions. Each time she went down, she moved just a little further, still slow, still teasing. He held her hair gently, taking care to not put any pressure on her head, and so she kept that pace until his thighs started shaking.

“Charlotte. I’m trying so hard to be calm here.”

Charlie popped him out of her mouth and stared at him. “Why? I told you not to.” With that, she lowered her head and took him in until he hit the back of her throat. She lightly dragged her teeth up him as she came back up and immediately took him in again.

That did it.

Tadhg clenched his fist in her hair, and when her nose brushed the hair at the base of his shaft, he held her in place and thrust shallowly. “Christ, woman. Do you know how badly I want to turn you around and plow into you right now?”

Charlie responded by raking her nails down his thighs, humming when he hissed and pulled her head back up to let her catch a breath.

“I’m too fucking close,” he grunted out. “Last chance.”

This time, her answer was to take him in. She reached below and scraped her fingernails over the area behind his balls before grasping him and squeezing him gently. She felt his body tense, his scrotum draw up, and pulled her head up for one quick breath before going back down.

His breath caught when he came, and the only sound in the world was the breeze blowing through the brush. Charlie swallowed him down, stroking him with her tongue and hand until he stopped pulsing and his hand relaxed in her hair. She let him slide out of her mouth and rested her head on his leg as he stroked her hair and gasped for breath.

A moment later, he gripped her by the shoulders and scooted off the rock. He turned her around, shoving her against the stone, and quickly buttoned up his shorts before wedging his leg between hers and pressing against her.

“I hope you’re happy,” he said, still breathing heavily.

Charlie grinned and wiped her thumb across her lower lip. “I am.”

Tadhg shook his head once. “Insufferable.” He kissed her, bending her over backward on the rock and grinding her

against his leg. She moaned, and he broke away. “You’re soaking, aren’t you? Did sucking me off get you going?”

“You know it did.”

“We’re going back to the site.” He took a step back and picked her up.

“Tadhg! I can walk!”

“Faster this way. No distractions.” He set off down the path. “I’m going to rip those shorts off of you and lick you until you scream. And then I’m going to keep going.”

Charlie shuddered in his arms. His brow was furrowed in concentration as he moved. His fingers dug into the soft flesh of her thigh and waist. She wrapped her arms around his neck and nuzzled below his ear. “If I’d have known that sucking you off on a hike would turn you into a caveman, I’d have done it a long time ago.”

“You have no idea, Charlotte.” His jaw was set and his eyes focused on the campsite.

Moments later, he all but tossed her into the back of the Durango and crawled in after her. She tried to scramble away, but he caught the waistband of her shorts and yanked, baring her to him. Before she could move again, he brought one hand down on her ass. Her answering yelp sounded loud in the small space. She flipped onto her back and stared at him, wide eyed.

“I warned you,” Tadhg said, and grabbed her ankles, hooking them over his shoulders. In one smooth motion, he slid between her legs, face first, and dragged his tongue over her before sucking her clit into his mouth.

Charlie shrieked and grabbed the headrests behind her, clinging to them as she rocked against his onslaught.

He backed away for a second and bit her inner thigh. “I should stop now. Make you wait until I get you home.”

Charlie rolled her hips. “Please ...”

He rubbed his lips against her and murmured, “Would that be too much, Charlotte? Too much of a tease? Leave you wet

and achy?”

“You’d do that, wouldn’t you?”

Tadhg slowly swirled his tongue around her clit. “If it kept you on edge until I could set you off properly? You bet your life.” He looked up at her. Her knuckles were white with the force of her grip on the headrests, veins in her arms standing out. Her chest was heaving, eyes wild and desperate. He slowly worked two fingers into her and curved them upwards, thrusting shallowly and pressing against her.

Charlie’s eyes rolled back and she let her head fall back. Tadhg hooked his arm around her leg and flattened his palm on her belly, pressing down as he pressed his lips against her. His pace was as excruciating as hers was out on the rock—he was giving her a taste of what she’d done to him, and she relished it. Using her heels, she pressed against his shoulder blades, thrusting against his face as best she could, but he had a better angle and kept her from moving too much.

In a flash, she stilled herself, breathing and just feeling. The more she fought against him, even though fighting him was a lot of fun, the more he’d tease. She gasped as he sucked her clit between his lips and swirled his tongue around it. His chuckle sent vibrations through her, and she gripped his head with her hands.

“You’re learning, Charlotte,” he mumbled against her and settled back in. He held her tight and concentrated his efforts.

It didn’t take long.

Tadhg pressed down on her stomach and twisted his wrist, and Charlie went from a slow burn to an inferno in seconds. The blaze rocked her from inside and undulated outward to her fingers and toes. When she finally came down, she opened her eyes and looked at Tadhg. He quirked one corner of his mouth up as he slowly removed his fingers from her and brought them to his mouth. Charlie let out a shuddering breath as she watched him suck on them. He then kissed her inner thigh and pushed away from her.

“Let me pack this shit up,” he said, tossing her shorts at her.



“Not staying for lunch?”

“Fuck no. We’re going back to my cave for the rest of the weekend.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

*Four months later.*

Charlie hung up the phone and pressed the heels of her hands to her eyes, trying to will away the tears that threatened to fall.

Fucking Korea.

She'd come to her office at the training center to pick up some files and check messages when she'd gotten a notification on her official account. She was on assignment. Her branch manager confirmed it. Even worse, her report date wasn't that far off—they'd lost a few agents over there to some sketchy black market shit over the last couple of months. Short of refusing orders and getting out, she was stuck and leaving in just over 45 days. The only bright spot was her guaranteed return assignment back to Arizona for her last tour before retirement. Not even that bright spot could help the ache in her chest. Relationships were hard enough with a single year deployment—she'd be gone for two years. She couldn't ask this of him.

Her tears won out and spilled down her face as she looked at the printout notification on her desk.

Before she could register what was going on, she was picked up and folded in strong arms. Tadhg. He sat down in her chair and held her on his lap, kissing her hair and holding her tightly to him. The dam broke loose.

The first thing Tadhg saw when he quietly opened the door were the tears streaming down Charlotte's face. He didn't think, just reacted. She clutched his shirt and sobbed. While he ran his hands over her back and tried to soothe her, he looked around. His eyes came to rest on the piece of tear-stained

paper, and he gently lifted it up. Fuck. No wonder she was in panic mode.

She sat up in his lap and ran her hands over her face before she looked at him. “You saw it,” she mumbled.

“Yes.”

“I’m sorry.”

Tadhg ran his thumbs over her cheeks, his brow furrowed in confusion. “Sorry for what, Charlotte? I know how the Army works.”

“I don’t want to lose you!”

“Who says that you will?”

Charlie grabbed some tissue from the box on her desk and wiped her nose. “Tadhg, this is a two-year tour. It wouldn’t be fair for me to ask you to wait two years.”

“And what about you?” He ran his hand up and down the outside of her leg.

“What about me? I’d wait for you.”

Tadhg grabbed her hand and twined his fingers with hers before pulling it up to his chest. “So, let me get this straight, Charlotte. You’d be willing to try this, but you’re freaking because you don’t think I should. Or would.”

Charlie shook her head. “I don’t know what I’m thinking right now, Tadhg. I’ve just seen too many relationships tank from that kind of time and distance.”

He nodded. “As have I. But I also have to travel a lot, and I’ll be spending some significant time over in Korea.”

Charlie looked up at him. “How much time?”

“Depends. Let’s not worry about that right now. Let’s not worry about any of this right now.” Tadhg looked around. “Are you done for the day?”

She nodded.

“I’m taking you home. If that’s okay with you,” he added.

“Mine or yours?” She sniffled and reached for the box of tissue on the shelf behind Tadhg.

“Your preference.”

“Mine. I need to let Aud know what’s going on.”

Tadhg stood and lowered Charlie to the floor. “I’ll meet you out there, then. I need to stop at home and get a few things.” He kissed her. “We’ll figure it out, Charlotte. You’re not going to get rid of me that easily.”

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Tadhg pulled up to the house to find the whole crew sitting around the firepit he’d helped Simon install in the backyard. He set his bag inside the door to the house and walked over to the group.

“Beer?” Antony asked, gesturing to the cooler next to him.

“We staying in tonight?” Tadhg dropped a kiss on Charlie’s cheek and pulled the camp chair up next to her, wrapping his arm around her.

“Tonight, yeah. We stopped off and grabbed some stuff to grill.” Simon looked up at the sky. “Looks like it’s going to be a good evening for beers and bullshitting.”

“Sounds good to me.” Tadhg took the beer from Ant and cracked it open.

“Warehouse tomorrow,” Ant said. “I think we all need it.”

Tadhg nodded. “No doubt. I can drive everyone.”

“I could do that,” Charlie said quietly.

“I know you could. But if we’re going to the club, we’ll be playing pool, and I need to stay sober enough to spank you.”

“We’re back to this again?” Charlie smiled and tucked herself under his arm.

Tadhg leaned in and murmured against her hair, “Of course. Maybe that’ll be my side of the bet. I win, and I get to turn that ass nice and red.” He flinched and chuckled when she jabbed him in the ribs, then pulled her tighter to him.

“Okay, so.” Audrey pointed her bottle at Charlie. “Do you have any idea where you’ll be going?”

“The Hump,” Charlie said, referring to Camp Humphreys, the largest Army installation on the Korean peninsula. “Between there and Osan, there are a lot of problems with shit. I’ll be busy.”

“I heard the bullshit about the group of agents that turned.” Antony said. “Dumb fucks.”

“Yeah, well, they’ve fucked over a lot of people with that shit. I get to be at the top of the list.”

Antony raised his eyebrows. “You’re going to be in charge?”

“If what they’re telling me holds, yes. I get to unfuck the entire outfit. Lucky me, yeah?” She relaxed into Tadhg’s arms. “I’ll figure it out. Always do.”

Antony shook his head. “Madden, don’t even try it. We all know you’ll have everything in order in a matter of weeks as soon as you land.” He smiled at her. “And you know your people are a phone call away, no matter the time difference.”

She smiled and took a sip of her drink.

“Have you been there before?” Lesley asked.

“Nope. Somehow avoided it until now.”

“It’s not bad there. I did my tour shortly after they closed Yongsan Garrison and move everything down. I’m sure Humphreys is huge now.”

“I don’t mind going,” Charlie said. “It’s the timing that sucks so much ass.” She looked up at Tadhg and back down. “I hear the net is ridiculous over there.”

Lesley nodded. “Stupid fast. Calling the US is cheap. It’s one of the most connected places around.” She laughed. “Just make sure your firewalls are good. Fast internet comes at the price of your security over there. And yes, the timing really sucks, but technology will go a long way.”

“Noted.”

“And maybe you can get some of those long-distance toys—Hey!” Antony glared at Lesley.

“I wonder about you sometimes,” she said, rolling her eyes.

“You’re the one who showed them to me, lover.” Antony rubbed his arm and laughed when Lesley blushed.

“At least you get to come back here,” Audrey said. She looked over at Simon, and he tipped his head at her. “If you want to leave your stuff here, do it. We aren’t going anywhere.”

Charlie felt tears prickle in her eyes. “You sure you don’t want to rent the place out while I’m gone?”

Simon snorted. “Yes, because I want some rando to be on our property doing who knows what. No. Leave your shit here.”

“Thanks, y’all. That’ll help a lot with this short notice.” Charlie turned her face into Tadhg’s shoulder and took a deep breath.

“Nope. None of that sobby shit.” Audrey put her hands on her knees and stood up. “Les, Charlie, let’s go inside and get the sides going while we talk shit about the boys.”

“Do you and Ant want to just crash here tonight?” Audrey asked. She finished dicing onions and tossed them into the large bowl.

“I think that would be a good idea. He’s had a few. I’d like to have a few.” Lesley grinned.

“I’m not giving you your place back,” Charlie threw out.

“I’d never dream of invading your love nest,” Lesley said. “Besides, I’ve never stayed in the main house before.”

“How is that even possible?”

“Wasn’t necessary. Hey, where are you going to live there? Do you know?”

Charlie played with the label on the beer bottle. “No clue. I don’t even know what my options are or what’s available. I

know regular barracks will be out of the question. I know I don't want to drive if I can help it, but I'll deal if I have to."

"When I was there, there were a lot of apartments being built within walking and biking distance. There are also a lot of privately owned places you can rent. They should be able to send you to the good rental agents there, and they'll hook you up."

Charlie sighed. "I'll pick your brain about this closer to leaving time."

Lesley reached over and grabbed Charlie's hand. "I'm sorry this happened. I think things'll work out, though. Just a hunch."

"You get Ant's famous gut feeling?"

"Nah. Just how that man looks at you. I don't think there's much he wouldn't do for you, Charlie."

"Two years is a long time, though."

Audrey stopped chopping and pointed her knife at Charlie. "Don't sabotage this shit, Charlie. After all the hell you gave me, and all the pep talks, you do not get to walk away without giving him a chance. Or taking a chance yourself. The fuck you have to lose here?"

"Nothing." Charlie scrubbed her hand over her face. "This came out of nowhere. Last time I talked to the branch manager, what, six months ago? Yeah, he said that he didn't see a problem keeping me here. But then shit went down over there."

"Kerrigan's over there, right?"

"For now. He dropped his retirement paperwork two months ago. So did someone else I don't know. The biggest problem was a couple of new agents got together and started a nice equipment racket. Some of our high end shit. I guess they branched out to other things with the general public. And now they're all going to be serving their time there before the Army even gets to them."

“So you’re on cleanup duty.” Audrey shoved the cutting board, a knife, and some potatoes toward Charlie. “Cube, please.”

“Yeah. Dumbshits were caught before they did too much damage, but it’ll take a bit to get things back on track.”

Simon appeared around the corner, stopping to drop a kiss on Audrey’s cheek before grabbing the covered tray from the fridge. “You gonna have everything ready in time?” He nodded toward the prep area.

“Yeah. How long will all that take?” Audrey pointed her spoon at the tray.

“It’ll be a few more minutes until the grill’s ready. We’ve got time.”

After Simon left, Audrey walked around the kitchen island and wrapped her arms around Charlie. “I know you. I know what you’re going through, and I know I can tell you all day long to stop worrying. It ain’t gonna happen. Just let things rest for a while and see how it goes, okay?”

Charlie sunk into her friend’s embrace and closed her eyes. “I don’t have much of a choice here, Aud.”

“You love him.”

“Maybe? I think so?” Charlie puffed out her cheeks and exhaled slowly. “I don’t want this to be over with him, but you know I’m a realist. It’s not sabotage either, Aud. I’ll see this through until it ends.” She gripped Audrey’s forearms and squeezed. “Even though it’ll hurt like a motherfucker.”

Audrey pressed a kiss to Charlie’s temple. “You know we’ll be here. No matter what.”

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Later that night, after the eating and bullshitting and fire watching, Charlie lay awake. Next to her, Tadhg slept soundly, one hand thrown possessively over her belly. Every so often, he’d twitch and his fingers would dig into her hip.

Their lovemaking had been quiet, but frantic, and as she’d cried out his name, he’d kissed her, swallowing her passion,



and had continued to drive into her, pitching her over the edge one more time before joining her.

She rolled over to watch him sleep and reached out to gently stroke that curl over his ear. His eyes opened, and he gave her a sleepy smile, barely visible in the almost moonless night. He rolled onto his back, pulling her on top of him, ready for her. And there, in the dark, she tried to show him with her body how she felt and hoped he understood.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

“So, have you decided on what your bet is?” Charlie asked. She spun the triangle around and jerked it back into position, double checking the balls before carefully lifting it off of the green felt.

“Aside from that spanking I mentioned last night?” Tadhg winked as he took a sip of his water.

“Still on that. Well, we could just bet on who wields the paddle.”

“You have a paddle? And you’ve never told me?”

Charlie laughed. “No. You’ve seen all the toys I have.”

Tadhg leaned in close. “Yes, I most certainly have. And will again. Soon.” He straightened up and looked down at her, his gaze heated. “Maybe that’ll be mine.”

“What’s what?”

“I win, and I get to see how many times I can make you come before you can’t take it anymore.”

Heat exploded all over Charlie’s body at once. Her cheeks burned, and she shuddered as she shifted from one foot to the other. She licked her lips as she leaned in close. “I forfeit. You win.”

Tadhg chuckled and pulled her in, wrapping his arms around her. “Oh hell no, it’s not that easy. Now you get to spend the evening playing me and thinking about that.”

Charlie turned her head and bit him right on the pectoral muscle. His hands flew to her head and held her there, and the rumble that burst out of him vibrated along her lips. “Like that thought doesn’t get you going.”

“I’m up for this challenge, Charlotte. You know I am.”

“Go break, you tease.”

“Ain’t teasing if I back it up.” He kissed her and walked to the end of the table.

Charlie walked over to the side and hopped up on the barstool. Tadhg almost always sunk at least one ball and ran another couple when he’d break, and this was no exception. She loved watching him work the table. That errant curl always dropped over his forehead. Those fingers, and the focus of his eyes on the cue ball. Even better when he had to come over to where she was sitting to make a shot.

She thought about throwing the games to get out of there faster, but that wouldn’t be very sporting of her. Knowing him, he’d just make her pay in other ways. Tempting, but she’d behave. A little.

Tadhg realized the scope of his fuck up the first time Charlotte bent over in front of him to line up a shot. That skirt was shorter than he thought. And she was wearing less under it than he expected. After she sunk two balls with one shot, he pushed off the wall and walked up behind her. “I can see, plain as the cheeks on that gorgeous ass of yours, that you are conducting some sort of psychological warfare tonight, Charlotte.”

“You’re just now noticing?”

“Mhmm. Please don’t bend over and let everyone else notice. I don’t want to fight anyone.”

She ran one finger over his jaw. “Don’t worry. There won’t be any fighting tonight. We’ve got better things to do later.”

“Hey, Aud! How long do you think it’ll be before they bail?” Antony whisper-shouted from the other table.

Audrey stopped chalking her cue and looked over, grinning. “They’ll be good for a two out of three set, just to see who wins.” She looked back at Ant. “And then they’ll just bail. We might get a wave. Might.”

Charlie flipped them both off before lining up her next shot, which she promptly missed. “Fuck.”

Half an hour later, she’d lost her two out of three. “Best of five?” she asked, smiling up at Tadhg.

He shook his head. “Not after you’ve been teasing me for the last bit, Charlotte.” He pulled her to him and leaned down to her ear. “I’m going to take you home and collect on my bet. Grab that bottle of water and chug it on the way.”

She clutched at his chest. “You’re a bad, bad man, Tadhg.”

“Go say bye to your friends, Charlotte.” His eyes were crinkled at the corners, and he was trying not to laugh.

Charlie grabbed his hand. “Nah. Let’s go.” Over her shoulder, she called, “See y’all!”

They heard laughter follow them out of the club.

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Tadhg sprawled out on the loveseat, one leg stretched out. His arms lay across the back of the small couch.

He looked so damned delicious. And it pissed her off.

Charlie walked over to him and climbed over him, knees on either side of his hips. She ran her hands up the back of his neck, buried her fingers in his hair, and pulled his head back.

“You are so fucking infuriatingly smug.”

“If you’re going to pull my hair, Charlotte, mean it.”

His eyes were half closed and his pupils fully dilated. She wanted to bite down on the column of his neck and taste him, and the way he played on her desire both irritated and inflamed her at once. She scraped her nails on his scalp and gripped his hair and tugged harder.

Tadhg sucked in a ragged breath. “That’s my girl.”

His voice was as gravelly as she’d ever heard it, and it rumbled through her chest. Her cheeks flushed at his words. Where the hell did this praise kink come from again?

“Now, what’re you going to do?” His eyes glinted below his lashes, and a smile teased at the corners of his mouth.

Fuck. She had no plan other than trying to wipe that shit-eating grin off of his face and made things worse. So much worse. And better. She tugged harder.

Mistake.

Tadhg purred and slid his hands off the back of the couch, up her legs and sides, and then back down again to settle under her skirt, at her hips. He gripped her hard and dragged her down against him, rocking her center against his cock.

“Harder,” he said, rolling his hips against her.

“Smug fucking bastard,” she whispered before setting her teeth against his neck and dragging them down to his shoulder. She wrenched his head to the side and bit him hard, right where his neck met his shoulder.

He grabbed her hair and wound it around his hand as he pulled her head back. He kept his other gripped on her hip, grinding her against him.

Charlie wrapped her hands around his neck and looked him in the eye.

“We’ve established that I’m a smug bastard, Charlotte,” he said, licking his lips as he stared at her mouth. “I’d like to think we’ve also established that I’ve earned a certain degree of ego.”

Charlie shivered as his words slid down her spine. Yes, yes, he had. He just didn’t need to be so good at it.

“Aside from that,” he continued. “You’re not without fault here, you know.”

“Wait, what?”

Tadhg pulled her closer to him until their foreheads touched. “We both know how perfectly you destroy me every fucking time you get anywhere near me.”

Her eyes widened. “Yeah, right.” His eyes blazed at her, *through* her, like he was pulling words from her brain.

He stopped moving and looked at her, eyebrows raised. “Every time you put your mouth on me, every time I sink my cock into that perfect cunt of yours.” He punctuated that with a hard grind that wrenched a moan from her. “Every time you put me in my place with that brain and those smart words. You destroy me. In all the best ways, every time, Charlotte.”

Charlie pressed a kiss against his neck. “Your filthy mouth shouldn’t turn me on like it does.”

“I know. But you love all the filthy things this mouth can do.”

“Almost as much as I love the man who does them.” There was that blood rushing through her ears sound. He had to feel her heart pounding against him. It felt like it was breaking through her chest.

Tadhg went still. Charlie tried to move, but he held her in place. He gently pulled her head away from his neck and ran his fingers to her chin, tilting it up so he could see her eyes.

“Destroyed,” he whispered. He leaned forward and pressed a light kiss to her lips. “In the best way.” Tadhg stood, picking Charlie up with him. “Now, if it’s okay with you, I’d like to go show you how much I love you, Charlotte.”

Charlie’s breath stuttered out of her on a sigh, and she looked up to see him smiling at her. “I think that’d be more than okay.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

*Four months later.*

Charlie stuffed her phone in her pocket and grinned. The time difference between Arizona and Korea was a pain in the ass, but there were a few golden hours of communication a couple of times a day. End of her day was her favorite. Waking Tadhg up with text messages and quick video chats kept her going.

She walked into the building and down the hall to her office, waving at one of her colleagues on the way by. Another half an hour, and she could go home and call him.

As she walked around her desk, a flash caught her eye. Something on her keyboard.

A dandelion.

She looked around. Nothing else was out of place. She tried a couple of drawers. Locked. The hair raised on the back of her neck.

“Hey, Barney, you see anyone lurking around?” she called, heading toward the door.

She looked out, and there he was. Tadhg, leaning against the wall, with one leg bent at the knee and his thumbs hooked in his pockets.

Her colleague peeked his head out the door and grinned. “Nope, why?”

“I—I uh—”

Barney nodded at Tadhg and ducked back into his office. “Have a great weekend, Madden! I’ll lock up.”

Charlie opened and closed her mouth a few times and choked out, “How?”

And she promptly burst into tears.

Tadhg swept her up in his arms and stepped around the corner into her office, where he nudged the door closed with his foot. She clung to him like he was going to vanish. He stroked her hair and pressed kisses to her forehead until she quieted down and waited.

Her fists bunched up in his shirt, and she pounded on his chest a few times. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

He chuckled. “And ruin this surprise?” He caught her hand and held it up to his lips, kissing her knuckles.

“You’re a jerk.”

“I won’t argue with that. What’s this jerk got to do to get you to take him home?”

Charlie looked up at him and pushed away. “Give me one second to shut this shit down and we can go.” She tapped out a password on her computer, cursed, and tried it again. “Fucking shit,” she muttered. She shook out her hands and held them out. She was shaking.

Tadhg grabbed them and pulled her back up. “I didn’t think you’d get this rattled,” he said, rubbing her fingers and palms.

Charlie closed her eyes and took a deep breath. “Me either. I just—I’m good at reading people, and you caught me completely off guard.” She looked up at him and pulled his knuckles to her cheeks. “I have so many questions.”

“Get logged out and let’s get out of here.”

Charlie finally managed to log out. After she hit the power button and turned off the monitor, grabbed a small bag from a locked drawer and the umbrella that leaned against the filing cabinet. Finally, she opened the office door and gestured. He waited until she locked her office and turned toward him.

“I have a car,” he said.

“Rental?”



“Sort of. Let’s go, and I’ll explain on the way.”

Once they settled in the car, she started to speak. Tadhg held up his hand for a second before reaching out and stroking his fingers down her cheek. “First things first,” he whispered, leaning toward her. He brushed his lips over hers before tracing her bottom one with his tongue. Charlie sighed and leaned into him, opening her mouth and seeking access to his. Sparks of pleasure zinged around Tadhg’s brain, and he indulged before he remembered where they were. Reluctantly, he pulled back and ran his thumb over her bottom lip. “Much better. Now, I need some directions.”

“You need to tell me what the hell is going on.”

“I will. Directions first.”

Charlie lived only a couple of blocks away from the gate. She got out of the car and watched as Tadhg popped the trunk. Inside were two large suitcases. She looked from them to his face and back down, eyes narrowed.

“This is a lot of stuff. How long are you staying, Tadhg?”

The corner of his mouth twitched, and his eyes sparkled. “About eighteen months or so.”

“What? How?” A fresh round of tears spilled over and down her cheeks. He was staying. She felt like if she moved, if she blinked, he’d be gone. All of this was just some strange lapse in her sanity and she couldn’t handle it not being real.

“Charlotte,” he said, waiting until she met his gaze. “It’s real. I’m here, and I’m here for a long while. I’ll explain, but I’d really rather be in your place when I do. It’s been a long trip, and I’m about beat.”

Charlie snapped to. That flight over was a special kind of hell, and as she looked at him, she could see the fatigue in his eyes. Of course, he wanted to be contained and comfortable. She grabbed one of his bags and jerked her head toward the door. She kicked her shoes off in the foyer and dropped his bag in the living room. He did the same and reached for her.

“Spill,” she said, settling into his arms.

“Colleague of mine—an old friend—has spent most of his career here. And he plans to retire here, but something came up—family emergency, and he needed an extended stay in the US. So, he messaged me, and we made some calls and worked out all the details. Basically, we’ve traded places for the next year and a half or so. When his shit’s taken care of, he’ll come back, and I’ll go back to Huachuca. Army’s framing it as some sort of temporary change of station.”

“How long have you known about this?” Charlie started working at the buttons on his shirt.

“About a month after you left. I’d been looking for ways to get over here at least a couple times, but Martin dropped this in my lap and it was perfect.” He shrugged off his shirt and reached out for hers, tugging it off over her head.

“The car?”

“His. He’s also staying at my place in Arizona.”

“Are you supposed to stay at his place here?”

“I hope not. One of his kids is living there. It’s also close to Osan, and I have no desire to make that drive every day.” Tadhg dipped his head and ran his cheek over Charlie’s neck. She shivered as the stubble rasped across her skin. “I was hoping to be a little closer to you.”

“So what you’re saying is you wanna shack up with me here?” Charlie reached into his pants and grasped his cock.

“Fuck.” Tadhg shuddered. “Yes. Especially with greetings like this.”

Charlie started walking him backwards toward the couch, stroking him slowly with every step. When the back of his legs hit the edge, she shoved his pants down to his knees. “Sit.”

“Mmm. Bossy.”

“Complaining?” Charlie stepped out of her pants and underwear and kicked them off to the side.

“No, I most certainly am not,” Tadhg said, staring. He sat, spreading his legs and leaning against the back of the couch.

Charlie straddled his lap and untied the leather thong he used to keep his hair back. Then she ran her fingernails over his scalp and leaned in to his ear. "This won't take long," she said, and ground herself against him.

He gripped her hips and moaned. "Oh, it's not going to take long at all, Charlotte. In fact, I suggest you get there quick." A breath stuttered out of him as she worked her hips against him.

"I know you better than that." She shifted and guided him to her entrance, then sank down on him in one slow stroke. They both groaned at the contact.

Charlie pressed her forehead against Tadhg's. "I love you," she whispered. "Hold on." She tilted her hips forward and rocked against him, fast and hard.

"Fuck yes, Charlotte. Ride me. Fuck, I've missed you." Tadhg flexed as she ground against him, holding her close to him. He caught her nipple in his mouth as she bowed her back and sucked it hard into his mouth, swirling his tongue around the hardened peak. She clawed at his scalp and pulled his head away. The muscles of her legs trembled, her head thrown back, mouth open. "Gorgeous. Come for me, Charlotte."

She came with a full body shudder and a gasp, rocking jerkily against him. She collapsed against his chest, clinging to his neck.

Tadhg grabbed her by the hips and held her as he thrust up into her. Her moans and the aftershocks rocking through her threw him over the edge. With a final thrust, he came, pulsing into her as he buried his head and groaned into the curve of her shoulder.

Charlie straightened up and spread her hands across Tadhg's chest. "Fine. I guess you can live here with me."

Tadhg bit his lips together and shook his head. He grabbed her by the neck and pulled her to him. "I love you too, Charlotte."

## CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

“You still haven’t told me where we’re going,” Charlie said. She trailed her fingers through the hair on Tadhg’s chest. The AC kicked on and she watched as goosebumps rose on his skin.

“Nowhere if you don’t stop distracting me when we should be packing.” Tadhg grabbed her wrist and pulled her onto his chest. He ran his hands down her spine and cupped her ass.

“Who’s distracting who here?” Charlie kissed his chin and pushed away. “Fine. Packing. When are we leaving?”

Tadhg glanced at the clock on the nightstand. “We’ve got a few hours. Need to be at Incheon by around 1900 tonight. Taxi will be here at 1630.”

“No hints on what to pack?”

Tadhg grinned. “Temperate. Light jacket. Maybe a light sweater, too. No real need for anything fancy or formal. Maybe a dress if we go out on the town.”

“Whatever town that might be.” Charlie narrowed her eyes. “It’s hot as Satan’s taint here right now, and you’re taking me somewhere cooler. I can live with not knowing for a while longer.”

Tadhg handed over the passports and hoisted the suitcase onto the scale. The agent quickly printed and folded their ticketing info and boarding passes and handed the entire packet back with a smile.

“Now, do I get to know where we’re going?” Charlie asked as they walked toward the gate.

Tadhg smiled and handed her the packet and laughed as she stopped dead in the path to open it.

“Australia?” Charlie breathed. She looked up at him, eyes wide.

“I knew you wanted to go. So, we’ll spend a week or two on the mainland and then head down to Tasmania for the rest of it.”

Charlie threw her arms around him and dragged his head down for a kiss. “How the fuck did I get so lucky?” she mumbled against his lips.

“Oh, Charlotte. I think we both got lucky here.”

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Tadhg watched Charlotte crouch down and poke at some sort of greenery that spouted between the rocks. His pencil flew over the sketchpad as he watched; these chronicles of the last month together would give him artistic fodder for years to come.

“This place is heavenly. Do we have to leave?” Charlie asked, smiling at him over her shoulder.

“Unfortunately, yes. But we can come back sometime.”

“Maybe a retirement trip.”

It might have been the way the sun lit up her face. Or how she somehow stopped at every point that Tadhg found interesting enough to sketch. More likely, though, it was because through everything, the one certainty that Tadhg had was that Charlotte was perfect for him. His heart threatened to pound out of his chest as he approached her, stuffing his sketchpad in his cargo pocket. He held out his hand, and she took it, standing.

Her brow furrowed, though her smile didn’t dim. “Are you okay?”

“I was thinking,” he said, reaching out and stroking his finger along her jaw. He took a breath. “Maybe we could come back here for our honeymoon.”

“Oh, Tadhg.” Charlie pressed the knuckles of her free hand to her mouth. “Yes!”

Tadhg stopped mid-kneel. “But I haven’t even asked! I had a whole speech planned out. How you inspire me. How much I love your curiosity and love of nature. How much more I love getting you naked and licking you until you scream.”

Charlie threw back her head and laughed. “By all means, lover, continue.”

Tadhg reached into his pocket and pulled out a slim box. He gripped it tightly to cover how badly his hands shook, and finally gave up. “Charlotte, that was about as far as I got into the speech planning. I love you. You’re my person, and I want to spend the rest of my days exploring this world with you.” He cracked a grin. “And exploring you.” He opened the box to reveal a yellow sapphire flanked by two blue sapphires.

Charlie reached out, her own hands shaking. “It’s perfect. This is perfect.” She looked up at him, eyes full of tears. “Oh, Tadhg.”

“It reminded me of you.” Tadhg pulled it out of the box and grasped her hand. “Charlotte, will you marry me?” He slid the ring onto her finger and pulled her close as she wrapped her arms around his neck.

“Of course I will.”

## EPILOGUE

*Two years later.*

A knock sounded at the door. Charlie rose, smiling, and opened it. Tadhg stood there, leaning against the doorframe. His hair was a lot longer now, and even curlier, and he had it tied back loosely from his face. That one curl threatened to spring free. He wore her favorite shade of blue on him, a darker cobalt that reflected off his eyes and hair.

She stood still as his eyes traveled up and down her frame. Her dress, a lighter shade of blue, draped over her shoulders gracefully, before nipping in at her waist and flaring out around her knees.

“My beautiful Charlotte,” he murmured, and took her hand. “Are you ready for this?”

Charlie closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and opened them again. She beamed up at Tadhg. “I’ve been ready. Let’s go make this official.”

Tadhg grasped her chin between his forefinger and thumb and gave her a soft, lingering kiss. He took her hand, and together, they walked down to the beach where their families and friends waited.

“Wedding and retirement celebration, all in one. Hell of a party, Madden.” Antony said. “Oops. O’Brien.” He raised his beer in a salute.

After the ceremony, the group had a small reception and meal in the lodge. The entire affair was casual, by design. They wanted to share this part of their lives with the people who meant the most to both of them, without fuss and without pretense. After the meal and some dancing, their parents and siblings had retired early since they had early flights out.

Charlie grinned at him over the firepit and snuggled closer to Tadhg. “Out with the old and in with the new. Or something like that. Really, it was all about timing.”

“We wouldn’t have missed this for anything, Charlie. You know that.” Audrey reached over and squeezed her friend’s arm.

“No. You wouldn’t have. Especially with how much wrangling we had to do to get all of us here at the same time.”

Lesley smiled and held up her phone. “Stina wishes she could have been here. She sends her congratulations.”

“Where is Stina these days?” Charlie asked.

“Washington state for the next three months, and then she’ll be meeting Shane in England to live for a couple years.”

“Send her our love,” Charlie said. “We forgive her for not dropping everything to come here.”

Lesley chuckled and tapped out a message.

Tadhg nudged her. “Maybe we can take a trip to Ireland and meet up with them next year.”

“She’d love that,” Lesley said. “We’ve been talking about doing the same thing.”

Antony nodded. “Belated honeymoon.”

“Y’all went on a honeymoon.” Charlie said, tilting her head at him.

“Fine. Annual honeymoon.”

Charlie looked up at Tadhg. “Y’know. That sounds like a fun tradition.”

Tadhg pressed a kiss to her temple. “Then we’ll make it happen. Ireland, next year.”

“Maybe we’ll join you,” Audrey said, grinning. Next to her, Simon smiled and raised her left hand up to his mouth, kissing her fingers. The ruby engagement ring glittered in the firelight.

As she looked around the fire, Charlie was surrounded by love. There was nowhere else she wanted to be.

Tadhg stood up. “If you all don’t mind, I’m going to take my *wife* to our cabin and have my way with her.” He grabbed Charlie out of her chair, lifted her into his arms like he’d done



the day they met, and to the catcalls and whistles of their friends, carried her away.

Her laughter echoed down the beach. Okay. There was one place she'd rather be, and one person she wanted to be with.

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## About The Author

### **Kimber Delaney**

Kimber currently lives in Alabama with her husband and three feline overlords.

When she's not writing romance, she works as a non-fiction editor. She also dabbles in historical reenactment, finds weird places to visit, and collects crafting materials (some of which she actually uses).

She's also an Army veteran.

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A prickle of awareness crept up the back of Nate's neck seconds before he heard the words.

"Hey, professor. Wanna go make out in the reference section?"

The din of the room softened to white noise as he turned to the voice, grinning. "You know there are cameras on every floor of the library now, right?" He laid down a small box of pamphlets on the chair next to the table he was behind.

"Well, damn." Eric swept his hand through his hair, smoothing back the shaggy black locks that promptly fell back in place. "There goes my collegiate fantasy." He smiled, and the hint of that dimple Nate adored showed on his cheek.

"Sorry to burst your bubble. Couple students last semester accidentally tipped over one of the shelves, which took out another three." Nate nodded at Eric's raised eyebrows. "Yeah. Can't even imagine what kind of freaky shit they were up to. Anyway, took a couple weeks to fix. Damaged some really expensive books. Admin decided to beef up security." He pointed at the corners of the conference room where the cameras rested behind smoke-colored bubbles. He looked back at Eric and gave him a teasing smile. "I'm also surprised that you never fulfilled that fantasy."

"I hadn't reached my prime," Eric said, shrugging his shoulders. "It took a few years for me to grow into the sex god you know and violate."

Nate laughed. "And here I thought you were a player from puberty." He watched Eric walk back over to his corner, looking at the cameras and trying to gauge their angles before turning and waggling his eyebrows once more at him. That man was something else.

Not long before the convention was due to start, Nate set the final box of swag on the floor and wiped the back of his hand across his brow as he looked around the conference room at the chaos. He saw one of the university's starting basketball stars bend over to pick up a box full of books and called, "Lift with your knees! Future you will appreciate it."

The basketball player spun around and waved. "Doc, did you always think of future you?"

"No, Deven, past me was a straight up idiot. Now, when I creak and groan my way out of bed, I curse past me for being stupid. Don't be me, Deven."

The young man laughed. "Nah, Doc, you're straight. I've seen you out there on the soccer pitch. But yeah, I hear you. I'll do better."

Nate smiled as the young man did as he was told and wandered off with the box. His eyes drifted over to Eric. As if on queue, the man looked right at him and smiled broadly. Nate moved around the table to walk over—

"Nathan! Help here, please!"

He cringed inwardly and turned toward the voice. It was the Dean of Student Affairs. Why the woman thought he was in charge was beyond him. She'd been emailing him about this for weeks, and he'd been good about dodging her until now. "Hello, Antonia, how are—"

"Nate darling, I really must get in touch with IT because I haven't gotten any emails from you about where I'm to set up," she said, her drawl thick with a contrived Southern accent. It went well with her over-processed blonde hair and flowery perfume.

"Well, Antonia, that's because I haven't any idea about that," Nate drawled back. "This is not my circus. You might want to see yourself to Joe." He pointed over the short woman's shoulder. "He's right over there, and I'm sure he'll be able to tell you where to go."

A choked snicker from Eric's table told him he'd overheard.

Antonia shot him a shrewd look but said nothing as she followed the path of his hand to the man in charge. “Very well, Nate. Thanks ever so for the assistance. Will we be seeing you at the alumni outreach meeting?” She lightly touched his forearm with red lacquered nails that were ridiculously long and pointed.

Nate shook his head and drew his arm away. “Afraid not. I left that committee a few months ago.” He turned back to his table before she had the chance to continue. He knew she’d left by the waft of her perfume as she floated away.

“Well, isn’t she special? That must have been Antonia.” Eric wrinkled his nose at the scent she’d left behind and fanned the air with his hand.

Nate smiled. “The one and only. You set up over there?”

Eric nodded. “Just about. Waiting on one of the boxes I forgot, and then I’ll be done.” He grabbed a tablecloth off the corner of the plastic folding table and began to shake it out. “Ready for this madness?”

“Yeah, thanks.” Nate lowered his voice, “We still on for this weekend?”

Eric finished smoothing the cloth and tugging it gently into place before looking over. “You’re kidding, right?” He stepped closer to Nate. “I was thinking. There’s gotta be a corner somewhere out of sight of the cameras.”

Nate laughed loud enough to cause Antonia to turn and look at the men. “Yes. And I know where it is.”

“Gonna show me? We’ve got an hour.”

“No.”

“Tease.”

Nate bit his bottom lip and winked. “Maybe later, but only if you’ve gotten all of your homework done, young man.”

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Across the hall, two women and a man were setting up a small table. One of the women sat on a chair, untangling

lanyards from a box while the other clipped a table apron to the front of the display. Next to her, the older man unrolled a sign declaring them to be representatives of the state government IT department.

Morgan looked up from her lanyard collection to see a bunch of young men staring at the other woman. The woman, a petite blonde, was oblivious. “Psst,” she hissed through her teeth. “Lia, ever feel like you’re being watched?”

Liadan looked over at her, eyebrows raised. “What?” She looked around, catching the onlookers, all of whom, save one, looked away. The brazen one winked at her. Lia blinked and shook her head, turning back. “He could be my child!”

“Not like he knows that,” Morgan said. Lia was in her 30s, but looked young enough to be a freshman.

Lia rolled her eyes. “Yeah. Bet you lunch he’s gonna offer to teach me code or something.”

Morgan laughed and turned back toward the lanyards. As she did, a rush of warmth spread over her from head to toe and butterflies settled in her stomach. She shook her head, frowning. The sensation passed, but her discomfort didn’t. She hadn’t felt butterflies like that since—well, not ever. It was like being on an old elevator that made that little bounce before every stop, and she’d stopped at every floor. Disconcerting.

Two hours later and the conference area was packed with undergrads and graduates alike, all searching for jobs and information about their respective industries. It was the largest job fair in the region, and corporations and agencies from neighboring cities sent representatives. It was also a chance for the representatives to do a bit of networking. Morgan had already met up with a couple people from her university cohort and made social plans with a few of them.

“Yes,” Morgan said to the student, “we are always looking for programmers with the major security certifications. It’s the standard across all government agencies.” She handed the young woman a stack of information and watched as she wandered away.

“I like how you relate to the young women here,” Rob said.

“It’s important they know they have a place in the industry.” Morgan continued to watch as the young woman made her way over to a table hosted by the English Department at the university. A man with brown hair looked up at the same moment and made eye contact with her. His mouth went slack, and the man next to him gripped his arm and turned to see where he was looking.

Morgan gasped and gripped the table as a wave of *something* rocketed through her. She clutched her chest with one hand and stared at the men as her world lurched sideways. She watched in shock as the air between her and the men shimmered and moved as though it were a tangible thing. A million little jolts of electricity whizzed up and down her spine and through her head, and the last thing she saw before her world went dark were their eyes go wide.