

*The*  
**BEST LAID**  
*Plans*

KARLA SORENSEN

## PRAISE FOR KARLA SORENSEN

“A sexy, heartwarming read. If Karla writes it . . . I’m reading it.”

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*The*  
**BEST LAID**  
*Plans*

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SORENSEN

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*Baking Me Crazy*  
*Batter of Wits*  
*Steal My Magnolia*  
*Worth the Wait*

*The*  
**BEST LAID**  
*Plans*

The Best Men, Book 1

KARLA SORENSEN



This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, organizations, places, events, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Otherwise, any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

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*To Kathryn, Kandi, and Brittainy:  
the three of you dragged me to the finish line by sheer force of  
will, and I am eternally grateful.*



# CONTENTS

<a href="#"><u>Chapter One BURKE</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>Chapter Two CHARLOTTE</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>Chapter Three BURKE</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>Chapter Four CHARLOTTE</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>Chapter Five BURKE</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>Chapter Six CHARLOTTE</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>Chapter Seven BURKE</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>Chapter Eight BURKE</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>Chapter Nine CHARLOTTE</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>Chapter Ten BURKE</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>Chapter Eleven CHARLOTTE</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>Chapter Twelve BURKE</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>Chapter Thirteen BURKE</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>Chapter Fourteen CHARLOTTE</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>Chapter Fifteen CHARLOTTE</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>Chapter Sixteen CHARLOTTE</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>Chapter Seventeen BURKE</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>Chapter Eighteen BURKE</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>Chapter Nineteen BURKE</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>Chapter Twenty CHARLOTTE</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>Chapter Twenty-One CHARLOTTE</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>Chapter Twenty-Two BURKE</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>Chapter Twenty-Three CHARLOTTE</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>Chapter Twenty-Four BURKE</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>Chapter Twenty-Five BURKE</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>Chapter Twenty-Six CHARLOTTE</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>Chapter Twenty-Seven BURKE</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>Chapter Twenty-Eight CHARLOTTE</u></a>

[Chapter Twenty-Nine BURKE](#)  
[Chapter Thirty BURKE](#)  
[Chapter Thirty-One BURKE](#)  
[Chapter Thirty-Two CHARLOTTE](#)  
[Chapter Thirty-Three CHARLOTTE](#)  
[Chapter Thirty-Four BURKE](#)  
[Chapter Thirty-Five CHARLOTTE](#)  
[Chapter Thirty-Six BURKE](#)  
[Epilogue BURKE](#)  
[ACKNOWLEDGMENTS](#)  
[ABOUT THE AUTHOR](#)  
[CONNECT WITH KARLA ONLINE](#)

# Chapter One

## BURKE

“It doesn’t matter if you don’t want to do it, Burke,” my dad told me once. One of the many times growing up when I bitched about practice being too hard, or not wanting to go back out onto the field. “Doing the hard stuff when you don’t want to is going to make you the best version of yourself.”

What a horrible fucking moment to remember this piece of advice.

Recalling it at that particular time didn’t cause anger, or even annoyance. It induced the kind of dread that had my blood running in icy-cold chunks through my veins, because there was nothing I could do to prepare for what was coming next. Something I’d learned all too well the last three months of my life.

I didn’t want to do this.

And I had no choice.

As I watched the lawyer fumble with a massive binder, shuffling through page after page before he delivered one of those life-exploding bombs, worry settled like an iron weight in my stomach.

It was a feeling rooted in loss, the kind that you couldn’t ignore and could hardly breathe through.

I had a feeling that whatever was coming out of this wrinkle-faced lawyer’s mouth would shift the road in front of me irrevocably.

He skimmed through another page. “My apologies. We had a hard time finding the trust documents when your friend and his wife passed.”

That dread curdled dangerously under my skin at his words. What a sanitized term.

It was clean and clinical and didn’t cause any damage.

They didn’t *pass*.

Their car wrapped around a tree trunk because a drunk driver crossed

into their lane, and in a crush of metal and glass, they left behind a two-year-old daughter and a stack of legal documents that were still being sorted through in the wake of their funerals.

The last two weeks had been the longest of my life—the last two months, really.

Too much change.

Too many plans cut short, with a few bursts of time that couldn't be reversed.

"Ahh, here it is." He dragged his thumb across one more page, tracing his finger along another paragraph before he looked back at the camera in his laptop. "Chris and Amie were new to our firm, and because their last lawyer retired just before their accident . . ." He paused. "Usually we're a bit more organized than this in executing the terms of someone's will."

My jaw clenched, and underneath the table where I sat facing my computer, my knee bounced furiously. He couldn't see it, but based on the look on his face, he could see the tight, unsure expression I undoubtedly wore.

"Under normal circumstances, we'd do this around the time of the funeral," he continued.

I nodded. When I trusted my voice to work steadily, I asked him the question I'd been dreading. "Who's getting custody of the girl?"

His face softened. "Not you. She's with Amie's best friend right now." After a meaningful pause, he said, "My next meeting is with the parties given guardianship of Mira."

My shoulders relaxed. I loved Chris—one of my best friends since we'd met fifteen years earlier at the University of Michigan—but I wasn't ready to take on any sort of parenting role to a little girl.

As I waited for the lawyer to deliver whatever news was coming next, I closed my eyes and took a slow, deep breath. Maybe in another week, the tight ball of discomfort would unspool in my chest. Maybe I'd learn how to relax into this new reality.

Forcibly retired from the game I'd spent my entire life playing, thanks to a ruptured patellar tendon, and grieving one of my best friends, thanks to a drunk driver who couldn't stay in his own lane.

No. I'd never relax into either of those truths. All I could do now was brace myself for whatever might come next.

"Well," he said, "Mr. Barrett, it looks like you're the proud new owner

of the Campbell House.”

My eyes snapped open. “What?”

He smiled at my brusque tone. “It’s a late-1800s property they recently purchased, someplace that meant a great deal to Chris, if I’m understanding correctly. His grandparents owned it when he was younger, and it’s been somewhat neglected the last dozen years or more.”

I blinked. “I remember it. Sort of,” I managed. Hazy memories flitted in and out of my racing brain. A long drive from school so he didn’t have to go to a funeral alone. A big house with a lot of windows. “I saw it from the outside once, right after his grandma died.”

The lawyer ran his finger along the page in front of him. “Well . . . now it’s yours.”

“What were they going to do with it? They lived in Colorado.”

Chris had never mentioned anything about it to me. Not that we talked weekly or anything, especially during the season.

He’d called me after the news of my injury broke. And like an asshole, all he said was, “Do we get to use one of those parking passes for the close spots now that your knee is fucked up?”

My response had been quick. Told him he was a dick and we’d talk in a couple of weeks, when I started PT.

Busy.

Too busy.

Something that seemed like a cheap excuse now that he was gone.

The lawyer sat back in his chair. “We had one conversation about it, and that’s the extent of what I know. They had plans to completely restore it—with the help of a local expert they hired to manage the project. I don’t believe they intended to live there, at least not full time. It was something of an investment, could be used in any number of ways to generate income. A rental property, an inn, a couple of other options. To the best of my recollection, it was something of a dream of Amie’s, to turn it into a business as a way to honor his grandparents. Her primary goal was to restore it so they could get the historic landmark certification from the state of Michigan.”

Why couldn’t I remember where the house was? I tried to pull in another deep breath, but the oxygen was too thick, too heavy to clear through my stuttering lungs. I’d been there once—put my arm around his shoulder while he pretended like he wasn’t crying when he stared up at their house and tried to make peace with the fact that he couldn’t buy it.

I'd met Chris at the University of Michigan, the same place where he'd met Amie, but I couldn't recall most of what he'd told me about the house. Once Chris started his professional football career in Colorado and I moved to Dallas, neither of us went back for any significant amount of time—unless it was for a regular-season game in Detroit.

But apparently, my friend had bought the house that he hadn't been able to afford as a first-year college athlete.

"Where is it again?"

The lawyer consulted his binder. "Grand Traverse County. The northwest part of the state. Right by the water, it looks like." His eyebrows furrowed as he read. "Pretty impressive property. A few acres. It was locked up in a messy divorce for years with the people who bought it from Chris's grandparents."

A steady, crushing pressure built behind my sternum. Was I having a heart attack? I rubbed at my chest bone. "I'm sorry," I managed. "I don't . . . I don't understand."

"Can I call you Burke?" he asked.

It was on the tip of my tongue to tell him to fuck off, but I swallowed the impulse. None of this was his fault. Just like it wasn't my fault either. Somehow, I managed a short nod.

"I know this is a lot to take in, Burke." An incredulous snort was the best I had for a polite response. He ignored it. "But you're not alone in this. You won't have to take on anything by yourself." He tilted his head. "I think Chris and Amie had a lot of faith in this project manager."

"Can't I just . . . sell it?"

The look on his face was contemplative, and a little sad. "They didn't leave clear directives about future plans for the house. All I know is that it meant a lot to them to see it restored. She was excited about the plans."

I pinched the bridge of my nose. "Does the project manager know about this yet?"

"We tried to get in touch with them," he said. "C. Cunningham is listed as the restoration expert, but we haven't been able to get further than mailing a letter and leaving a few unanswered messages with a generic recording on a voice-mail box." With my eyes closed again, I heard the shuffling of papers and his thoughtful hum. "But they've set aside money from their trust to start the necessary renovations, and Cunningham should have no problem facilitating the process of getting the house certified as a historical landmark,

which is a significant tax advantage.” He paused. “If that’s what you want.”

Inside my head, a bright, angry mess of feelings fought for top spot.

Frustration and annoyance. Bone-deep sadness and anger that my friend wasn’t here anymore.

I didn’t want an old house.

I didn’t want to deal with project managers or renovation budgets or bureaucracy.

I didn’t want *any* of this.

And once those immediate, petulant thoughts were out in the open, that dread returned. Because the dread was rooted in the fact that I’d never be able to ignore Chris’s wishes.

“Why?” I asked quietly. “He never mentioned this.”

The lawyer shrugged. “Most people in their early thirties don’t anticipate that something like this will happen,” he answered. It was done gently; there was a respectful amount of tact in his answer. But still, I hated it. “I’m sure he thought he had time.”

Behind me was a line of suitcases, filled with my clothes. My home in Dallas had already sold, and my belongings were on a moving truck headed for Florida, where I planned to park my ass in a chair on the beach and read and stare at the ocean and relax. Three decades (plus a few years) and I’d never done that.

Waiting for me there were my newly divorced little sister and her two kids—I’d just bought them a house and was ready to spend quality time with my family for the first time in a decade.

With an aching knee and a bruised ego over not being able to leave the NFL on my own terms, I’d claimed my retirement as something of a second chance. No more working myself to the bone. No more chasing someone else’s elusive idea of winning and being the best. No more punishing my body on the field. Just finally facing the fact that I’d sacrificed my marriage and the possibility of starting a family—an idea that couldn’t survive what I’d been chasing for the last decade.

A relationship that couldn’t survive the truth that my job always seemed more important than her dreams.

This second phase of my life was supposed to be calm and peaceful. Taking care of the people I loved by being present for them.

Not a wreck of a house that I wanted nothing to do with.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a picture on my kitchen counter. The

one thing I couldn't bring myself to pack just yet.

It was the last regular-season game of our senior year, our faces streaked with eye black and sweat and enormous grins. Me and Chris, standing at the fifty-yard line in the Big House. We'd just beaten Ohio State on a last-minute interception by Chris, and life had never felt sweeter.

The future was one wide-open road. Nothing blocking the things we wanted.

We got the careers playing football after college.

Chris found the love of his life and mother of his child—something that had eluded me so far.

And the absolute fucking unfairness of the fact that he was the one gone made me want to split the side of my house in half, just for a place to release some of that anger.

The lawyer remained quiet while I sat at the table in my kitchen and stared dazedly at the picture he couldn't see.

“Now what?” I ground out. I met his eyes through the monitor. “Now what do I do?”

He took a deep breath. “I'll be emailing you everything you need, and it will be a lot of information. There will be papers that need to be signed, once we can get in touch with the project manager.”

I sighed. “Okay.”

“Maybe,” he started, “you could head to Traverse City and take a look at the property.”

I laughed. It was a dull, unamused sound. A tension headache bloomed almost instantly, and instead of rubbing at my chest, my fingers pressed over my forehead. If I tried hard enough, I could imagine the iron band squeezing—tighter and tighter and tighter. Vaguely, I wondered if it would eventually burst something that couldn't be stitched closed.

“The property,” I repeated. “What can you tell me? I don't remember much about it.”

He hummed. “It's impressive. Or was,” he corrected. “The main house is pretty wrecked, from what I can tell. But there's a carriage house where the project manager is meant to live during the renovations. Sits on four acres, has about eighty feet of private waterfront. Everything fell into disrepair when Chris's grandparents passed away. It sounds like there were various reasons for that.” He paused. “You know as well as I do that most professional football players don't have multimillion-dollar sponsorship



deals. Chris and Amie were smart with their money; they didn't invest unwisely. This was a risk but one they believed in strongly enough for their future."

Every word hit a different point of impact in my body, causing strange tremors that echoed in my head and my neck, my stomach and my heart.

"Fucking hell," I muttered. "Why me?" It wasn't a question for anyone to answer, certainly not this buttoned-up lawyer whom I didn't know. I couldn't even remember his name. But I gave him a searching look anyway. "He didn't leave a letter? No explanation why he chose me?"

The lawyer sighed. "I wish there was more that I could give you. Something I could do to help."

"I know. I'm just . . . trying to wrap my head around it."

"These conversations are never easy. Because they're always tied to something horrible and tragic." He attempted a smile. "I only met with Chris and Amie once, but they struck me as people who didn't do anything without thinking through the why."

My throat went tight and ached when I caught a glimpse of Chris's face in the photo. That wide, easy smile that he never quite seemed to lose.

I missed my friend.

And in the same moment, I could've punched him in the balls for doing something this big without having a single conversation with me about it.

I braced my elbows on the table. "Traverse City, huh?"

He nodded. "I've heard it's beautiful. I'm sure you'll love it."

I didn't want to love it.

I didn't want to see it.

All I wanted was peace and quiet.

Chris's face flashed through my head—a vivid, and painful, reminder.

The fact that I didn't want to do any of this didn't really matter.

But as I disconnected the video call with the lawyer and scrolled through flight options that would get me to the small airport in Traverse City, with one short stop in Chicago, I knew that peace and quiet just might have to wait.

The email from the lawyer included the phone number for C. Cunningham—the project manager whom I was, for all intents and purposes, hitched to in this insanity for the time being. I called the number and held my breath while it rang. And rang. And rang.

A disembodied voice told me that the number I was trying to reach was

unavailable, and I hung up instead of leaving a message.

“Shit.” I tossed my phone onto the table.

The flight options—including one leaving the next day—triggered a jittery sort of panic. Something I wasn’t used to feeling.

Since the day I knew I was meant to play football, something my dad had always drilled into me, my path was extraordinarily easy to follow. The thing I was working toward was clear. Everything else came second.

Everything in my life had been sacrificed at that altar, for good or for bad.

Now I had two options: the path I wanted to take and the path that fucking Chris and his unknown intentions had seemingly picked for me.

For the first time in my life, I felt uneasy about what to do.

But when I tore my gaze away from the boxes and it landed on his face in that picture, I knew there was only one option.

“Chris, you asshole,” I said. “You better have had a good reason for this.”

I sent my sister a text telling her that I’d be late arriving in Florida.

And I clicked “Book” on the first flight out the next day.

# Chapter Two

## CHARLOTTE

“Charlotte Marie Cunningham, I know you’re up there.”

I buried my head in my hands. “No, I’m not.”

Aunt Daphne snorted, the sound dwarfed by the monumental creak of the first step that led to my favorite spot in the house. “Someone needs to fix this damn step,” she muttered. “I feel like I’m going to fall through these stairs every time I walk on them.”

“Keep your weight to the side of the treads; the middle is rotting out.”

“Oh goody.”

I smiled, but it was sad.

I loved those rotting steps. I loved the creaks. The soft spots and the crumbling plaster. From the window seat in the upstairs back bedroom, I could stare through the wavy glass over the property. It faced the bay, and it was my favorite view in the entire world.

My fingers traced the window’s imperfections while Daphne made her way up the stairs, cursing the entire time.

“There she is,” she said. “When the carriage house was empty, I figured you’d be up here hiding.”

“I’m not hiding.”

One of her eyebrows rose slowly.

“Fine. I’m hiding a little.”

“From what, Charlie Brown?”

At the use of my childhood nickname—a teasing moniker my mom coined when I tried, quite unsuccessfully, to dye my hair brown—I finally smiled a little.

“Everything,” I admitted. “I don’t want to say goodbye to this place, but I don’t think I’ll have a choice.” I glanced around the room. “I thought I’d

hear from someone by now—an estate lawyer, or whoever is in charge of their trust—but I can't find my damn phone, and I don't even know who I'd call if I could."

"If you can't find your phone, how do you know they haven't called?"

I shot her a look.

She held up her hands. "Sorry."

The sun broke through the gray clouds that had dominated the sky all week, and like a cat, I tilted my face into its warmth. When winter finally released its grip on Michigan, the warmth and green of spring always felt like the most glorious of gifts. The last few weeks, though, the weather had matched my mood. Ever since I'd heard the news about Amie and Chris, a slate-colored sky and cool winds had cast a heavy, oppressive weight over the entire property.

I'd met him only once—a kind, adoring husband who was trying to honor his grandparents—but it was Amie's bright, sunny excitement about the Campbell House that was electrifying. While Chris was busy playing football, earning the paycheck that allowed them to attempt this in the first place, Amie and I pushed up our metaphorical sleeves and got to work.

We had agonized over the plans, now neatly rolled up and tucked away in my bedroom at the carriage house. Now I was agonizing for an entirely new reason: I had no idea what was going to happen next. My heart broke every time I stepped through the front door and tried to make peace with the house staying like it was.

Broken into pieces. Fading away with each change of seasons.

"What about your contractor?"

"Gone." I cleared my throat when my voice came out a little whispery and a lot pathetic. "He heard about the accident and immediately started asking about how he'd get paid. Wanted to know if we'd be able to start on time. I think he took one more look at this place and didn't want the risk." I swallowed. "I can't blame him."

Aunt Daphne's gaze was wary, taking in the general disarray of the upstairs bedroom. The ceiling had water damage—our first sign that the house needed a new roof. There was termite damage around the windows and stretching along the west wall, where we'd opened things up to assess the destruction. My long-gone builder had suspected major structural issues too, though he hadn't been around long enough to determine if he was right. The list, it seemed, was endless.

“So why are you sitting up here in the dark?” she asked. The bangles on her wrist tinkled when she waved her hand into the space. “How’s that going to help you?”

Settling my head against the wall behind me, I fixed her with a tired look. “I’m just doing that thing again where I think about how amazing it would be if we could’ve finished. And then I want to cry because I don’t have anywhere near the money to be able to buy it if it goes on the market, and then I get mad because they were nice, and sweet, and I hate that they died, and I’m probably selfish for being so sad about not being able to restore this house that I love when two young people died and left their daughter behind.” My voice got thick with tears. “It’s a whole cycle, and it’s stupid.”

Daphne’s face softened, but only briefly. Determination set behind her blue eyes, and something about it felt a little worrying.

“Would it be easier if someone swooped in here to rescue you?” The question was heavy with subtext.

“I don’t need a rescuer. I mean, I’ll need another job, because I assumed I’d be here for the next eight to ten months. But I have no idea what plans they had in place. Maybe there weren’t any. I don’t know if they had a mortgage or if it was paid off. If the house goes on the market, there’s no telling who will buy it and what they’ll want to do with it.” I swallowed. “What if it’s some mustache-twirling developer or some slick lawyer in a pencil skirt who wants to bulldoze it and add condos?”

Daphne’s eyes did that gleaming thing again.

“Oh Gawd, what?”

“What would you say to someone if they showed up here and told you that was their plan?”

My first thought was, *You can shove your shiny condos up your greedy ass.* She must have read the sentiment on my face because she grinned. I’d seen that grin my whole life. It meant trouble with a capital *T*.

Slowly, I sat up. “Daphne, what do you know?”

“Aren’t you going to ask where I just came from?”

“I honestly don’t know if I dare. You go to some really shady places.”

She ignored that. “I was having a late lunch at the café with my man friend.”

“You’ve been sleeping with Richard for over a decade and living with him for the last eight years; can’t we call him your boyfriend by now?”

“I detest those kinds of labels, but that is beside the point. Richard and I

were sitting at the counter when this tall, dark, *handsome* stranger walks in.” She leaned forward, clearly caught up in story time. “He sits down next to Richard and starts asking all these questions about the area, and if we’d heard of Campbell House, because he couldn’t find much information online.”

I wasn’t sure what tall, dark, and handsome had to do with anything, but boy was I not going to ask her.

“Okay. What else?”

“Naturally, I start asking him questions, because why on earth would a total stranger pop into town wanting to know about the specific house where my darling goddaughter lives and works?”

“Did you tell him that?”

“Hell no! He could be a serial killer or working for the government.”

My hippie aunt, who’d never quite lost her ’60s sensibilities, would somehow equate those two things. I hid my smile. “And then what?”

She leaned forward again. “He inherited the house when Chris and Amie died. He wanted to come here to take a look at it because, apparently, he has no desire to own it.”

“What?” I breathed. I gripped her hands. “He’s gonna sell it? To who?”

Daphne shook her head. “No idea. I don’t think he knows yet.”

“Holy shit.” I stood from the bench and paced the room, careful to avoid the weak spots in the floor. “What’s his name?”

“Burke something,” she said. “I missed the last name because, honestly”—she laid a hand on her chest and closed her eyes—“I got distracted by his shoulders and mouth and hands. Big hands too.”

“Daphne.”

“He could toss a woman around so easily.”

I sighed. “Does this feel helpful?”

“Depends on what you need help with.” She batted her eyelashes. “I may be in my seventies, but I can appreciate a fine human specimen when I see one.” She grinned. “Richard told me to stop gawking when we left the café, but it wasn’t easy, let me tell you.”

“Were these thoughts before or after the serial killer thing?”

Daphne paused. “After.”

I gave her a look.

She gave me one right back. “You’ve got a plan, right?”

“For what? I just found out about him thirty-two seconds ago.”

“Charlotte, you have a plan for everything.”

“Okay, fine.” I blew out a hard breath. “I may have prepared a PowerPoint just in case someone showed up and wasn’t sure if they wanted to keep the house.”

Her mouth puckered like she’d just sucked on a lemon. “A PowerPoint.”

My aunt detested computers and regularly reminded me that cell phones were a blight on humanity. Half the time when Richard and I lost our phones, it was because Daphne had “accidentally” tossed them behind the couch.

“PowerPoint is incredibly effective when done right.” I shoved a hand through my messy ponytail. “I’ll go get my laptop, have everything ready. Because, honestly, the most important part is seeing the before-and-after renderings from the architect. If I can show him those—and the proposed budget—maybe I’ll sway him.”

“Stop.”

“What?”

“It won’t work.”

I gave her an incredulous stare. “How do you know?”

“Burke with the mouth and the shoulders is a man who wants nothing to do with before-and-afters. He wants this house off his plate.” She punched her fist in the air. “You need to show him passion and dedication, not a PowerPoint presentation.”

“The presentation *is* showing him my passion. With smooth transitions and clear, readable font.”

She mumbled something under her breath, and I was pretty sure I caught the words *dry spell* and *no wonder she hasn’t gotten laid in forever*. I ignored both.

“I have an idea,” she said.

“Twenty bucks says I won’t like it.”

Daphne stood. “Come with me.”

Begrudgingly, I followed, tiptoeing down the sides of the stair treads on the massive staircase in the middle of the house. When we reached the last step, I ran my thumb over the newel post at the bottom. It would be so beautiful once it was restored.

Daphne waved her hands, gesturing to the staircase. “This is your battleground.”

“My what?”

Then—quite inexplicably—she pulled a pair of handcuffs from her

purse.

My eyebrows shot up my forehead. “Why do you have those with you?”

“A sit-in.” She tugged one of my wrists toward her. “We used to do this all the time. Chain ourselves to trees they were going to bulldoze in the name of progress, or the front of buildings they wanted to demolish. This is how we got shit done back in my day.”

I sighed. “This isn’t even logical.”

“Logic has nothing to do with it. You want to show him just how much this place matters to you, right?”

“Not with handcuffs!” I tugged on my arm. She loosened her grip. “He’ll think I’ve lost my mind, because I definitely think you’ve lost yours.”

“No way. He’ll find your passion contagious, and he’ll be blown away by how far you’re willing to go to save this glorious piece of Michigan’s history so that future generations can understand where we came from and how that past shapes our future.”

I paused. “That’s good.”

“Just one little sit-in.”

“He’s not rolling up with a bulldozer and a wrecking ball, Daphne.” The sound of a vehicle punctuated the silence after I said her name. “There’s a reason *no one* does these anymore,” I continued.

“It’s a lost art, if you ask me.”

“I really, really didn’t ask you.”

Fear coiled dangerously through my stomach. I wasn’t ready for this. I didn’t have time to prepare. All the time I’d spent thinking about this exact moment—what I’d say, what I’d do—and every helpful thought fled my jumbled brain.

And it was jumbled with all the things she’d told me. Not that it helped me much to remember them. Tall and dark and handsome, big hands and nice shoulders, someone who wanted nothing to do with this place I loved so much. This rotting, falling-over house that I adored with every fiber of my being.

It was so much more than a job. It always had been.

It was the place I dreamed about when I spent six months to a year living and breathing other properties.

The hard truth was that if there was one building I’d be willing to handcuff myself to, it was this one.

“Oh shit, shit, shitshitshit,” I muttered.



She pinned me with a look. "Trust me."

"That would be so much easier if you weren't trying to handcuff me to the house," I hissed.

Daphne took that moment of pause, and the clear indecision on my face, to snap a handcuff around one wrist. "Sit on the step."

I listened. Why did I listen? "Wait, these spindles are hand milled. They're original to the house!"

"So you've told me." She pulled one of my hands between them. "Come on, let's get moving so I can sneak out the back."

"This is nuts," I told her. "He's going to call the cops. I'm going to get arrested."

"Nah." She hooked my other arm through the post and, with a decisive click, closed the second handcuff over my wrist. "Just smile that pretty smile and give him the whole spiel about what this place could be, and he'll be eating out of your hands."

"That would be awkward, since you handcuffed me sitting down."

Daphne conceded that with raised hands. "Not my best move."

I glared up at her.

"Your hair is a mess."

"Thanks," I bit out.

She tried to tuck some of the stray pieces behind my ears. "Sorry, Charlie Brown, I think I need to make my exit."

"I will never forgive you for this," I told her.

She blew me a kiss. "Good luck!"

When she disappeared out the back of the house, I laid my head on my arms and moaned.

For a few moments, the only sounds I could hear were the erratic thud of my heart in my ears and the creak of the house in the wind.

Then . . . the heavy slam of a car door from the front of the house.

I closed my eyes. "This was a very, very bad idea," I whispered.

# Chapter Three

BURKE

It was worse than I thought.

And I'd prepared myself for bad.

All I remembered from my brief visit with Chris was *big*. Big with windows and a lot of land.

The house was set back off the road and had a picturesque driveway lined with towering oaks that encased the blacktop in a green, leafy tunnel. Spring growth was still new on the trees, so if there'd been sunlight in the sky, it would've filtered through. And as much as I hated the fact that I was there, I immediately found myself imagining what it would look like in the fall—fiery colors covering you as you drove through.

Unfortunately for the house, the driveway was the high point. The carriage house, small and neat and covered in what looked like a fresh coat of white paint, was empty when I knocked. It was set away from the house, tucked back behind a grove of spruce trees. With a quick peek in one of the windows, I saw a small kitchen with cabinets stained in a warm brown color, a plush couch in dark red, and a braided rug covering wide-plank wood floors. On the counter were a coffee cup, a stack of books, and a half-eaten muffin, so I knew someone was there.

The driveway and the carriage house weren't so bad, but when I stood facing the main house, that's when all the good stopped. There was no ignoring the giant, falling-apart box in front of me.

It looked haunted. Or one bad storm away from falling over.

I couldn't decide which was worse.

The structure itself was one of those big, boxy, flat-fronted designs. Six sizable arched windows stretched along the second story, and four windows on the main floor flanked the door, which was anchored right in the middle of

the box. When I peered up, hands settled on my hips, I saw missing shingles. Broken glass. Rotting wood around just about every single one of those windows and the curved woodwork framing the front door. The siding had faded into a sad brownish gray, with no hint as to what it might have been before.

The entire thing needed a can of gasoline and a lit match.

My jaw clenched, and a useless pulse of frustrated energy had my hands tightening into fists.

I'd stood in that exact spot with Chris fifteen years earlier, both of us in dress shirts and ties, after he buried his grandma. I'd known him for only a few months, but even then, I hadn't been able to stomach the idea that he'd do this alone.

It was the first time I saw him cry. The first time we hugged.

*A few more years and I could take care of this place, he'd said. I'd have my money from a contract, and I could keep it the way they wanted it. Give it to my kids someday or something. They'd want family to have it, and now I can't do that for them.*

At nineteen, I hadn't really known what to say. As it turned out, that was okay. Sometimes a hug was the best thing you could offer to someone who was hurting.

I rubbed at my chest while I stared up at that house.

"Anyone here?" I called out. There was a brief moment of quiet in which the only things I could hear were the shifting and settling of the trees, a slight creak coming from inside the house.

"I'm . . . yes, I'm in here," a feminine voice called back. "Come on in."

"Do I have to?" I muttered.

It didn't look like the house could bear much in the way of weight, so I tested the steps leading up to the wooden stoop outside the front door. There was an ominous groan when I stopped to push open the faded red door, but nothing cracked or fell.

Inside, the house was dark, and even with how cloudy and gray it was outside, it took a moment for my eyes to adjust. The entryway was two stories high, and my eyes were immediately drawn up to a grimy tin-paneled ceiling. A banister stretched along the second-story landing, the start of what must have been a pretty fucking impressive staircase.

And it was when my eyes tracked down those stairs that I saw her sitting on the bottom step. My head reared back. My eyes narrowed. "Are

you . . . ?”

She raised her hands in a helpless gesture, and they didn't fall very far when she dropped them. “Hi.” I wasn't sure if the expression on her face was a smile or a grimace. “Welcome to the Campbell House.”

My mouth fell open. “Are you in handcuffs?”

She swallowed. “It's . . . symbolic. I think.”

I pinched the bridge of my nose.

“I heard you're the new owner.” Her voice came out in a nervous rush. “And I really hope you don't plan to demolish the house, because it will be incredible once it's finished. The plans are amazing, and I'd love to show them to you. It's . . . it's one of the best examples of true Federal architecture in this area, and if we can get the historical landmark certification, there are major tax benefits and multiple streams of income.”

My hand fell slowly from my face, and I studied her with fresh eyes. Because of how she was sitting, it was hard to tell how tall she was, but in the dim light of the house, she looked like she was in her late twenties. Her hair was dark red, and the angles of her face reminded me of a statue my dad used to have in his office.

Whenever we moved—and we moved quite a lot after my mom died—it was always the first thing he unpacked. A woman sitting on a garden bench. He always said it looked like Mom.

I used to think that no one ever really looked like those old-fashioned carvings—the straight, proud nose, the high cheekbones and big, guileless eyes. But this woman did. Like she was plucked from the past.

If she weren't handcuffed to the fucking stairs, I'd wonder if she were a ghost trapped inside the house.

I pulled in a breath through my nose before I asked her my next question. “What's your name?”

Before she answered, I had the same feeling of dread that had come on during my meeting with the lawyer.

“Ch-Charlotte,” she said.

Charlotte.

C. Cunningham.

Fuck.

I nodded, trying to ignore that giant leap to the worst possible scenario, in which I owned a home that came with a redhead who was willing to handcuff herself to the stairs.

“And you’re . . . ?”

“Burke Barrett.”

She nodded. “I’d shake your hand, but—” She shrugged.

If it was supposed to make me laugh, she failed spectacularly.  
“Charlotte. No last name?”

“Cunningham.” Her brow was furrowed, and she said it slowly.

The laugh that came out on an exhale was ripped straight through my gut. “Of course it is,” I said.

She shifted on the stairs. “Okay. Maybe . . . maybe we should start over. I’m Charlotte Cunningham, and I was hired as the project manager and to help the owners renovate the house with historical accuracy.” Her chin lifted, her voice stronger than it had been. “I have a bachelor’s and a master’s in history and a certification from Cornell in sustainable preservation. The late 1800s are my specialty, and I am completely dedicated to making sure this happens the way Amie and Chris wanted it to.”

*Wanted.*

My chest clenched at the use of past tense.

Charlotte must have seen something in my face, an expression I hadn’t been able to hide, because those big eyes of hers softened. “You were close to them.”

I held her gaze. “Yeah. I played football with Chris in college.”

She eyed me, head to toe, lingering just a touch on my hands. “That explains a lot.”

“Does it now?” My voice was dangerous.

Her fingers curled in toward her palms, and the clink of the handcuffs against the wood snapped us out of the moment. Whatever it had been.

“Where are the keys?”

Her face did that smile-grimace thing again. “I don’t exactly know. My aunt—the mastermind of this—didn’t leave them behind.”

A muscle twitched in my jaw while she eyed me warily.

“How do you propose I get you out of that, then? Do you have a phone that I can use to call her?”

“I seem to have misplaced my phone,” she answered carefully.

I slicked my tongue over my teeth, deciding to toss her words back at her. “That explains a lot.”

She didn’t appreciate my tone.

“Did you try to call me? Am I about to get fired? Because I swear this

wasn't my idea, and I'm normally very big on not breaking the law."

Instead of answering her, I crouched at the base of the staircase and eyed the railing between her arms. The wood looked like it could hardly hold the weight of the stairs, let alone a full-grown woman. I could've told her that she wasn't breaking any laws or that she wasn't getting fired. But I didn't.

Crouched the way I was, we were closer than was polite, and Charlotte held herself very, very still as I sat in front of her.

"I know this is a strange way to meet, but I'm very glad you're here," she said. "The past few weeks, I've been waiting to hear that the house would go into foreclosure, that I'd have to leave it in this state, and this is so much better. It's a huge relief."

"Is it?" I muttered.

She took it as a literal question. "Yes. I mean, I hope I'm not about to lose my job."

Her leading statement was met by stubborn silence. I didn't want to make anything easier on her right now. She'd locked herself to the fucking staircase, and that didn't seem like a wise choice when meeting your new boss.

"I haven't . . . I haven't actually had a paycheck over the last month, and the builder we hired quit, but it's fine. We'll get it figured out."

She smelled like lemons. And clean soap. Her fingers were long and graceful, and I did my very best not to touch a single inch of her skin when I tested the strength of the handcuffs.

"So . . . these are real, then."

"Not mine," she said firmly. "I've never . . ."

At her pregnant pause, I lifted an eyebrow.

Color bloomed over those high cheekbones, but she didn't finish the sentence.

If I were nicer, I would've told her that I'd never used handcuffs either. I would've done something to make her feel at ease. But I was feeling cranky. And tired. And wanted to be anywhere but in this dark entryway with a pretty red-haired woman whom I was stuck with for the duration of a long renovation.

I wanted to be on a beach. Wanted sun on my face and a cold beer in my hand. A book on my lap that I'd read if I felt like it. I wanted to play with my niece and nephew.

My knee ached the longer I crouched there, cataloging the way she

smelled and the color of her hair.

It was the ache in my knee that had me gripping the post of the railing just underneath the banister. There was a slight give to the wood that was encouraging. Her gaze snapped between my hands around the post, back to my face. Then her eyebrows bent in a V.

“Close your eyes,” I warned her.

She didn’t. They narrowed in on where I tightened my hands around the wood. “Don’t you dare—”

I snapped the post away from the banister, and right along with the satisfying crack of wood breaking, Charlotte gasped. “That’s original woodwork!”

“And now you’re not chained to the steps.” I stood. “Maybe you should’ve thought about the original woodwork before you did that.”

Her eyes flashed. “It was hand milled by Mr. Campbell. You can’t find spindles like this anywhere.”

My jaw ticked. “I don’t give a shit if it was carved by tree fairies using their gold-coated wings,” I told her. “You didn’t have a key, and I’m not having this conversation with you while you’re locked to the fucking staircase.”

The boom of my voice echoed through the entryway. Not because I was yelling, but it was loud enough that I dropped my gaze and swore under my breath.

Charlotte watched me carefully, cradling her still-cuffed hands to her chest now that she was free of the railing.

“Thank you for getting me loose,” she said quietly.

I nodded.

She sighed, steadying herself on the railing as she stood.

I backed up as she did.

Charlotte Cunningham was tall, all legs and hair, and when she was at her full height, the top of her head was above my chin.

“You’re tall,” I said. Like an asshole.

Her smile was tight. “And you’re very observant.”

If I made it out of this first meeting without grinding my molars to dust, it would be nothing short of a miracle. “Can we continue this outside?”

She nodded.

I gestured for her to go first, and it was amazing how she managed a regal lift of her chin and a gliding walk out, like she wasn’t wearing

handcuffs. When she kept her weight to the left side of the front steps, I followed her lead.

In front of the carriage house was a small patio set, and she took one of the chairs. Her hands settled into her lap, and she pinned me with a direct gaze once I'd sat down.

"Why were you handcuffed to the stairs?" I asked.

She licked her lips. When she rolled them together, I caught a glimpse of a dimple in her right cheek.

I hated that I noticed any of it.

"My aunt was at the café earlier when you stopped for lunch," she said. "And she's . . . well, she's a bit of a hippie who loves to relive her war-protesting days. She thought it was better than showing you a PowerPoint."

I swiped across my mouth before I trusted myself to answer without yelling. "Long gray hair? Wears a shit ton of bracelets and asks a lot of intrusive questions?"

"That would be Daphne."

Instead of asking anything else, I held her stare until she fidgeted uncomfortably. "I wish you hadn't lost your phone. It would make this a lot easier."

Charlotte's brow wrinkled. "Make what easier?"

"Maybe you wouldn't have staged a protest if you knew I was coming and why."

"Oh." She cleared her throat. "That."

"When you're finally able to find your phone, you'll probably find about four voice mails from the lawyer in charge of Chris and Amie's estate."

A pale pink flush tinged the tops of her cheeks. "What's on the voice mails?"

"You may find that the handcuffs were overkill, because I'm not here to sell the Campbell House. They wanted it finished, so it'll get finished. But I'll have help."

The pulse at the base of her throat fluttered wildly. "You're not selling?"

I shook my head slowly.

"Who's coming to help you?"

I set my jaw and refused to blink. "No one new is coming, because she's already here. And is willing to lock herself to the premises in order to stay that way."



Her mouth fell open. “Really? I’m not losing my job?”

I looked pointedly at the handcuffs. “Much to my dismay.”

Charlotte remained shockingly unruffled. “Then why did you tell my aunt and Richard you wanted to sell?”

“Blind optimism.”

“Are you always this friendly with strangers?”

“The sarcasm isn’t appreciated, especially considering I’m the one who’s supposed to pay you until the house is finished.”

She nodded, seemingly finding some nugget of information in my answer that was important.

“What?”

Charlotte sighed, settling back in her seat to study me. “I’d offer to give you a tour of the house. Tell you about how I knew Chris and Amie, why we love this house so much. But I don’t think I’ll waste my breath.”

“You’re not gonna bring out your PowerPoint?”

I wasn’t sure where this snappish, sarcastic version of me was coming from. I’d never spoken to a woman like this in my entire life, not one I’d immediately found attractive and certainly not one who was supposed to make this endeavor easier on me. But I couldn’t stop the words. Charlotte Cunningham, it seemed, was very skilled at igniting my temper. Probably *because* I found her attractive. Like Murphy’s Law.

“No way. Only nice people get to see that. Maybe the longer you’re here, you’ll earn the right.”

I whistled. “You’re getting feistier now that you’re unlocked.”

She held up her hands and jangled the metal. “Not exactly.”

“My path to PowerPoint redemption will have to wait,” I said. “I’m leaving first thing in the morning.”

At the abrupt change of subject, she dropped her hands. “What?”

“I have to be in Florida tomorrow. All I planned to do was sign paperwork at the bank, meet you, and make sure you weren’t doing anything too illegal . . .” My eyebrows rose slowly. “Jury’s still out on that one.”

Unfortunately, Charlotte didn’t rise to the bait. “You just got here. We have to talk about the budget and a timeline. We have to find a new contractor.”

“You’re the project manager. I assume that’s well within your job description.”

“You just told me you wish you could fire me, and now you refuse to be

involved at all?”

It was almost amusing how the color of her hazel eyes changed when she was clearly frustrated. Unfortunately for both of us, nothing about this was amusing at all. Just being there, with the house staring down at me and Charlotte, had me feeling edgy and uncomfortable. Each gaping, empty window looked out over the carriage house like some creepy, judgmental eye watching my every move.

If the house had a brain, it probably wondered what the fuck Chris had been thinking too. And if Charlotte’s thoughts ran along the same line, I had to admire her restraint in not verbalizing them.

“I’m not refusing to be involved,” I told her. “But I can’t stay either. I have other responsibilities, and I need to be back in Florida.” I pulled out my phone and sent a text to her cell number. “Whenever you manage to find your phone, you should have a text waiting from me. Let me know when you’ve found a builder.”

She made a strangled, disbelieving sort of noise. “There are a million decisions that have to be made. You can’t just leave.”

“I can, actually. But if you want my vote,” I said, leaning closer to her, “instead of making a million decisions, I think it would be easier to level the whole place and start from scratch.”

“No.” Her answer was sharp. “Easy has nothing to do with their plans for the Campbell House. If they wanted easy, they would’ve bought land and put up another stack of soulless cookie-cutter condos that they could turn around on a weekly basis.”

I thought about what Chris had said when we stood in the yard, then swallowed down the memory, banishing it somewhere far away, where it wouldn’t haunt me on a loop.

I sat back in my chair and studied her. “Catchy. Is that on your PowerPoint?”

“Is it easy to play football?” she asked. “Professionally, I mean.”

I gave her a look. “No. You a football watcher?”

“I find it barbaric and highly overrated, if you want my honest answer.”

“I’m not sure I do, actually.”

She smiled. “Then you shouldn’t have asked.”

My jaw hurt from the force of keeping it shut.

“You still playing?” Charlotte lifted one eyebrow.

Slowly, I stretched out my leg, letting the sore muscles around my knee

groan in protest. “Recently retired, actually.”

“Teams ever go through a rebuilding season?”

“Occasionally.”

She set her shackled hands on top of the table and folded them together. “And did they gut the team? Cut everyone?”

I inhaled slowly, refusing to answer. I’d liked it better when she was locked to the staircase and at a disadvantage.

“Level the roster and start from scratch with all new shiny players and coaches and coordinators?” she continued. “Wouldn’t that have been easier?”

“I think we can move on from this analogy.”

“I would love to, if you think I’ve made my point.”

I gave her a grim smile. “Abundantly. I still don’t want anything to do with rebuilding a house that’s about to fall over.”

“Well . . . it sounds like you don’t have much of a choice. Not if you want to respect your friend’s wishes.” She didn’t say it cruelly, and somehow that made it worse.

“I just want to know that there’s a way for me to respect his wishes and not have this take over my life.” I settled my hands on the table, mimicking her posture. Our fingers were inches apart, and I caught her staring at mine before her gaze moved back up to my face. “I want easy at this point in my life. I’ve had it hard. I’m tired. I have a family that I want to spend time with. And this”—I gestured to the house behind her—“is only going to make it worse.”

“Probably.”

“Finally, we agree on something.”

Charlotte glanced behind her, her shoulders dropping with a sigh. “So now what?”

“I’d sell it to you right now.” I held her gaze. “Then you could fulfill their dreams, since you’re the one holding the plans.”

“If I could afford it, I’d take you up on that,” she said with a wry smile.

Right. No paycheck for a month. I’d need to have a chat with the estate attorney, because something like that shouldn’t have slipped through the cracks.

I reached for my wallet and quickly counted out some of the cash I had with me. “I don’t know exactly how much you’re owed at this point,” I said. “But this is a start. I’ll go to the bank from here and figure out how to pay you from the estate.”

When I tossed the small stack of hundreds on the table, I expected her to grab it immediately. Instead, Charlotte was studying my face.

I met her gaze unflinchingly. And even though I didn't want to, I wondered what she saw staring back at her. If she hated me, I wouldn't be surprised.

More than that, I probably deserved it.

My chin rose a notch. "You gonna conduct all our business in handcuffs?"

"I sincerely hope not."

I eyed her mass of hair. "Do you have a bobby pin?"

"Oh! Yes." She reached up, digging into the root of her ponytail.

Our fingers brushed when she handed me the small piece of metal, and I ignored the quick pulse of electricity from that tiny touch. Charlotte watched quietly as I plucked the plastic cap off the end and twisted the pin into the correct angle.

"May I?" I asked, holding my hand open.

Her throat worked on a swallow before she placed her upturned hand in mine.

Charlotte's hand was so much smaller than my own, her skin cool and smooth under my calloused palm.

Neither of us spoke while I pushed the bent pin into the keyholes on the handcuffs. It felt far too intimate for something that should've been funny. Something that should've been ridiculous. Especially after how we'd faced off across the table for the last thirty minutes.

Instead, I couldn't help but think about what she'd said. It was symbolic.

I was stuck with her, and she with me, at least for a while.

On the fair skin of her arm, there were red marks from the handcuffs, and I did my best to ignore them. Just like I ignored the delicate map of blue veins along her wrist.

Charlotte sucked in a breath when I turned the pin into the correct position, on the first and then the second, and the telltale click when she was free had our eyes locking together. The handcuffs opened, and she breathed a sigh of relief as she pulled her hands closer, rubbing at the skin of her wrists.

"That's a very handy skill," she said.

I dangled the cuffs off my fingertip. "Want these back?"

Delicately, she cleared her throat. "I suppose."

Once I'd dropped them into her waiting hands, we lapsed into silence again.

I could tell by the look on her face that she was going to offer the tour, even though she damn well knew I wasn't going to say yes. Because she was nicer than me. And she was going to try harder to make this work. So I stood from the table with my teeth locked tight together. My knee was screaming at me.

Or maybe it was my conscience screaming because I was still acting like a dick.

Her eyes tracked my movements. "You're going, aren't you?"

"Try to find your phone," I instructed. "And text me if you need anything."

Charlotte stood as well, blowing out a slow breath. "You got it, boss."

I cocked an eyebrow, and she met my look evenly.

Instead of offering a polite goodbye or a promise of when I'd return, I strode past Charlotte Cunningham and left.

# Chapter Four

## CHARLOTTE

Well.

It took about thirty minutes of a blank-stare sort of processing to wrap my head around what had just happened.

In those thirty minutes, my jumbled brain didn't come up with anything of substance. I definitely didn't feel any better. Didn't feel any sort of shoulder-slumping relief now that the broad-shouldered, dark-haired storm cloud was gone.

What was his problem?

Stomping around with the eyes and the broody-man thing. Like I had anything to do with him ending up with Campbell House.

He didn't deserve it, from what I could tell. Though . . . at least he wasn't selling it for the land, I begrudgingly admitted.

With a shake of my head, I went back into the carriage house and took a sip of my room-temperature coffee. With a grimace, I poured the remainder down the drain.

I snatched my canvas bag, loaded down with paint samples and fabric swatches, and marched out of the carriage house. I took a quick detour through the main house and skirted out the back. Through a path in the wooded grove of trees by the bay, I could take a twenty-minute walk to Daphne's house, and given I had nothing else to do, I knew the walk would give me a bit of extra time to ponder.

Not that it helped.

I was still agitated when I pulled open the back door to her house.

"You here?" I called.

Richard was in the kitchen, elbow-deep in flour, kneading out some dough. "She's at the store."

With a heavy sigh, I sank into a chair at the small kitchen table.

He eyed me. "You look quite unhappy."

"Did she tell you about the handcuffs?"

Judging by the immediate avoidance of eye contact, I took that as a yes.

"They're in my bag, if you want them back." I tilted my head. "Though I should really destroy them so she doesn't have access to such things anymore."

He cleared his throat. "Don't think that would matter."

Of course she had extras. I shook my head, a reluctant smile tugging at my lips. Richard was so different from my aunt. Quiet and conscientious, he'd been such a grounding force in our ragtag little family unit for the last ten years.

"Whatcha making?" I asked.

"Focaccia with garlic and rosemary."

With a happy hum, I relaxed into the chair. "Yum."

The sound of Daphne's car punctuated the silence, and like I always did, I watched Richard's face transform into a peaceful smile when she walked through the door.

I couldn't wrap my head around it. They kissed, just a brief brush of lips, as she dumped the bags on the counter.

"My darling niece," she said. "I see you survived."

"No thanks to you." I reached into my bag and yanked out the broken spindle, which I'd grabbed on my way over to her house. "Here, I brought you something."

She took it, brow furrowed. "What is it?"

"The spindle he snapped off because you didn't leave me the key."

Daphne winced.

Richard whistled.

"You paying for the replacement if I can find someone to recreate it?" I spread my hands out. "Because big, tall Burke with the giant hands probably won't."

"Uh-oh." Daphne set the spindle down. "Was it bad?"

While Richard got the dough into a bowl to rest and Daphne grabbed some snacks from the pantry, I told them what had happened. Facial expressions varied, from horror to muted laughter to pity.

"I thought I recognized him," Richard said. "He was good. Never won a trophy, but he was always one of those solid players who everyone seemed to

respect. He set the sack record at Michigan, broke one that was probably thirty years old when he did. No one's touched it since."

I blinked. "I don't know what that means."

Richard grinned. "It means how many times he sacked the other quarterback in his college career. Thirty-six, I think."

"The quarterback is the main dude, right?"

Richard nodded patiently. "Yes."

Daphne snorted.

"Don't give me that look," I told her. "When would I watch football? By the time Mom and I moved here, she refused to watch anything Dad would've watched. I don't think we had sports on our TV for a solid five years before she finally caved and allowed baseball because she loved the Tigers."

"Do you know where on the field a pitcher stands?" Daphne patted my hand. It was only mildly condescending.

I rolled my eyes. "Knowing about sports does not make a person inherently more interesting."

"No, but your patent refusal to have even the slightest awareness of them probably does explain why you struggle going out on anything remotely like a date."

"Men should be able to hold conversations about something other than sports." I held up a finger. "It's also not why I'm single."

"Oh, honey, we know."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Daphne smiled. "I don't mean that as a bad thing. You've got a very particular idea in mind of what kind of man could possibly hold your interest more than your job does, and you don't seem to have met him yet. Nothing wrong with that."

My skin started to itch. It always did when she wanted to do a deep dive into why I was never in a relationship. I stood from the table. "Bread be ready later?"

Richard nodded. I ignored the knowing look in his eye. "I'll pop it in the oven in about an hour. I'll send you a text when it's done."

"I'll come back," I said. "Besides, I lost my phone."

"Again?"

We both looked at Daphne. "It wasn't me," she said, hands raised.

"I'm sure I'll find it soon." I waved as I left their house—a small ranch



set back off the road, just like the Campbell House. Instead of four acres and a long stretch of waterfront, Daphne and Richard had a small, rocky piece of beach just at the curve of the arm of the bay. And when they moved into the house, he installed a deck long enough that you could jump into the water.

It was where I spent all my summer days, once my mom and I moved here. Via the beaten-down path in the woods, I'd sneak over to the Campbell House during the few months my mom worked there before Chris's grandma died.

I could close my eyes and walk that path effortlessly. I knew where to avoid the root sticking out of the dirt. Knew where it veered off past the forsythia bush that always bloomed bright yellow in the spring.

Not all my jobs were like this; the four before it kept a little piece of me, but the Campbell House had my heart.

All of it.

And the thought of it remaining unchanged was worth handcuffs and protests, as much as Daphne had gone about it wrong.

With that thought in my head, I took the last hook on the dirt path with a spring in my step and a smile on my face.

And then froze.

Because he was back.

Burke was staring up at the house like he hadn't stormed out about an hour earlier. His hands were set on his hips—*big hands and narrow hips, damn your observations, Daphne*—and I could finally take a beat to study him objectively.

I didn't want to not like him or to feel any sort of intimidation from him. Not if I was going to trust him to see this through.

So I let out a slow breath, hitched my bag a bit higher on my shoulder, and walked around the side of the house.

Even though his facial expressions weren't clear from that distance, it was apparent when he saw me, because his entire frame went as still as a statue.

"Back so soon?" I asked.

From a solid twelve paces, I could see the annoyed pop of muscle on his stubble-covered jaw.

"Need your bank account information so that I can set up electronic pay."

"Ahh."

“If you had your phone, I wouldn’t have had to come back.”

I cleared my throat. “Fair enough.”

“Did you try retracing your steps?”

Briefly, I wondered if he could see my eye twitch. Had I retraced my steps? The condescension was as thick as a blanket. A blanket I was about to wrap around his neck and pull really, really tight.

“There were quite a few steps to be had the last couple of days.” I shrugged. “Pretty much all around Traverse City, and no one seems to have stumbled on it.”

“You don’t seem all that concerned.”

“I’ll find it eventually. I always do.”

We lapsed into silence, and his attention went back to the house.

“Are you sure you don’t want to look around while you’re here?” I asked.

Burke stared at the fixer-upper for a few moments longer. I wondered what he saw when he did. It was almost guaranteed that he picked at different things, saw flaws where I saw history—where I saw things to be fixed and put to rights.

The faded spots on the siding where they’d removed the original shutters and never put anything back in their place.

The holes in the plaster, exposing layers of wallpaper and paint that spoke to past choices made in the home.

Dings and scratches on the floor. They didn’t make it junk—something that needed to be torn out. They showed the life that had been lived there.

“Fine.”

My eyes snapped over to his at the terse answer. “Really?”

“Might as well know what I’m dealing with before I make any decisions.”

I swallowed roughly, thoughts racing. “Let me go grab the set of plans our first builder drew up.”

He held up a hand. “No. Just . . . show me the inside.”

“Okay.” I was still nodding furiously when I ascended the steps behind him. “Obviously you’re familiar with the entry. The two-story design is very common in these Colonial Revivals—”

“Stop.”

“Did you have a question?”

“No historical commentary,” he said.

“What?” I gasped.

His face was firm, dark eyes unyielding. For a moment, I could easily imagine him on a football field. Bearing down on a quarterback, hell-bent on knocking him over. Burke must have been a terrifying sight.

“If I have questions, I will ask,” he said. “But I don’t need to know whether that windowpane was made with a hand plow owned by George Washington.”

“I mean, Washington lived over a hundred years before this house was built, but sure . . . I can avoid making those types of comments.”

*Dick.*

Burke narrowed his eyes as if I’d said it out loud, but he did nothing more than sigh and redirect his attention to the soaring entryway. In the middle of the peeling paint on the ceiling, there was a sad length of exposed wire.

I had to chomp down on my tongue to keep from telling him about which rooms we were in, what they were used for when the house was built, and what they could be used for now.

When he briefly touched his fingertips to the carved fireplace in the first sitting room—originally set up as a library, where Mr. Campbell liked to greet guests—I wanted to tell him that there were six fireplaces in the house. The emerald-green tiles around it were chipped, and a few were missing, which meant the entire thing would need to be redone. There was no chance of finding anything that would match it.

His eyes tracked around the drawing room, settling on the massive holes in the plaster and the missing pieces of crown molding.

“What happened here?” he asked.

“Botched construction, unfortunately.” It still gutted me to see it. “The last owners started—and never continued—their plans. It was somewhat of a pet project to them, so they were slow at first. But then he left her, and the divorce stretched out for years. She refused to let him have it, so the work didn’t continue while they fought over . . . everything, really. That’s why you can see portions of a wall taken out by that butler’s pantry and into the dining room.”

“Wouldn’t it make more sense to open it up anyway? It sure would look better.”

*Don’t do it.*

*Don’t do it.*

I blew out a breath through puffed cheeks. He eyed me cautiously.

“Just say it,” he said.

The words came out on a rushed exhale. “It would never be historically appropriate to knock down walls. You could kiss the historical certification goodbye if you did. They structured the rooms like this because it was easier to keep them warm.”

He grunted.

His knuckle tapped on the edge of one of the holes. “So this just needs new drywall?”

“Plaster,” I corrected. “It’s much more expensive, unfortunately. But it’s the only real option if you’re going to fix the damage they did.”

I didn’t even get a grunt this time.

We wandered through the butler’s pantry, the small kitchen tucked at the back of the house, and he looked curiously at the smaller second staircase that led up to the bedrooms.

Honestly, I deserved an award for keeping my mouth shut.

“Bedrooms?”

“Six of them, three on each side of the staircase,” I told him. “Two bathrooms upstairs and one powder room down here.”

“Let me guess—more damage up there too?”

I attempted a smile. “Worse, actually.”

“Excellent.”

“Because they weren’t running heat or AC, the swing in temps throughout each year wreaked havoc on the interior of the house. Animals have gotten in over time. Some unruly kids who helped add to the mess.” I stared up at the second-floor landing. “They didn’t steal anything, which is a miracle, really.”

There were some mighty big thoughts going on in Burke Barrett’s head; it was written all over his face.

Gawd, I wanted to pluck them out with my bare hands—it was killing me not knowing what he was thinking, what he wanted to do.

His gaze swung back to me, and I felt very much like he’d just pinned me onto a corkboard for dissection. “And what do you do with your days, since nothing is happening here?”

“Oh, the usual. I trim my split ends and watch reality TV.”

He didn’t appreciate my sarcasm, but honestly, I didn’t appreciate a lot about his approach, so I fought the urge to shrink under his stare.

“I keep busy, trust me,” I added. “A project of this magnitude requires a lot of decisions before a single thing happens to the house.”

“I don’t even know what my decision is yet,” he said, his voice soft and dangerous.

“I know.” I arched an eyebrow. “But I think you’ll do the right thing.”

He didn’t say anything.

There was no attempt to make me feel better.

No coddling or soothing.

I could’ve given him a million reasons why it was worth whatever disruption it would bring to his life, and I had opened my mouth to do just that when he broke the stalemate.

“Did the previous owners leave anything here?” he asked.

I nodded. “Most of the furniture is upstairs in the bedrooms. There’s some artwork in the carriage house.” I briefly locked eyes with him and gestured to one of the drawers in the built-in. “But I found this last week. I couldn’t believe they kept it all those years. You might want it,” I said slowly.

His brows furrowed, but he didn’t argue. Carefully, I opened the drawer and pulled out the small brass frame, covered in spots that desperately screamed for polish. Inside was a faded school photo. The boy’s face was split in a smile, his two front teeth missing. His sandy hair was cut in a bowl shape around his freckle-cheeked face. CHRIS was printed in gold ink on the bottom corner of the photo.

My eyes burned as I held it out to him.

Burke didn’t take it right away, his hands stuck by his sides like they were frozen. His eyes bored holes into the frame, his chest expanding on a massive inhale.

Then he snatched it out of my hand and tucked it into his back pocket without sparing it a single glance.

My heart dipped down by my stomach.

That’s how you knew pain was still so real and raw, because he couldn’t even begin to stare it in the face.

“I’m sorry about your friend,” I told him.

He stared down at the floor. Then he nodded.

“He seemed really nice.” I tucked a piece of hair behind my ear. “And obviously this place meant a lot to him if—”

“I don’t want to talk about him,” he said. His voice was low and quiet

and held an urgent edge that made the room feel a little bit colder than it had a moment earlier.

I managed a nod.

“I think I’ve seen enough.”

My stomach sank. It felt very much like the Campbell House was still frustratingly out of reach.

“Can we get your banking information? I’ll transfer the rest of what I owe you.”

I nodded. “You got it.”

He waited outside for me, face inscrutable, while I gave him my checking account numbers and he tapped them into his phone.

And just like before, he left with no promises, no decisions, and I felt just as unsettled as I had before he arrived.

# Chapter Five

BURKE

“It’s . . . big.”

My sister smacked me on the chest. “That’s your reaction?”

“Did I really agree to buy you something this huge?”

“Yes.”

I rubbed at the spot where she’d hit me and studied the house. It was right on the water, and from where we stood, I could hear the surf. Immediately my blood pressure dropped, the tension in my shoulders bleeding away.

The blue siding was bright and clean, with white trim and massive arched windows behind mature palm trees. The driveway was made from cobbled stone, curving around to a two-stall garage that I couldn’t see. The moving truck with my things would make it into town within the next day, and my little sister had done her best to get the guest room clean and ready.

What a starkly different arrival.

Instead of trepidation and annoyance, this place promised peace and quiet and relaxation. Even if I would be sharing a roof with my little sister and her nine-year-old twins.

They’d probably cause less fuss than one long-legged redhead.

“When do you want to start looking for a place for you?” she asked.

I rubbed the back of my neck. “Can I set my suitcase down in the room before you’re kicking me out?”

She laughed. “I just figured you’d be champing at the bit to settle into your own space.”

“Honestly, Tans, I’ve got enough expensive decisions on my plate right now . . . That seems like one that can wait a couple of weeks, if you don’t mind.”

She settled her hand on my arm, and the quiet understanding had me sighing in relief.

Tansy walked us through the arched front doors, made of heavy wood with wrought-iron handles. This was a house tour I wanted to go on, I thought. My sister—who'd quickly found a home in the place of her choosing—was an efficient tour guide too. She didn't even attempt to point out spindles or banisters or kitschy little details she knew I wouldn't care too much about.

The rooms were open and airy: white walls, white trim, and tall ceilings with slow, lazy fans.

But she did point out that it had four bedrooms and five bathrooms—plenty of room for a family.

“You sure it's okay if I stay until I find my own place?” I asked.

She nodded resolutely. “I'm not giving up my ocean-view bedroom, but yes, of course.” Tansy slung her arm around my shoulders. “It's a good place to start over, isn't it?”

“Seems like it.”

“Kids are excited. They already told me this is way better than our old house.”

I hoped so. Their old house came with a dickhead husband who my sister had finally decided shouldn't be in that particular role anymore.

Buying her the house was the easiest money I'd ever spent in my life, as it kept her away from someone I couldn't stand.

And, even better, it allowed her kids some breathing room from a dickhead father. I didn't know my niece and nephew very well—a byproduct of their dad hating me, of me playing professional football their entire lives, and of having a home across the country during the off-season. On top of that, because Tansy and our dad were the oil-and-water combination in our family, she'd kept her presence sparse during the holidays.

Everything was different now, though.

Two people in our family—the ex-husband and our dad—were the biggest reasons we'd hardly spent much time together the last ten years.

Our dad had passed about eighteen months earlier—too gruff of a man for either of us to get emotional about it—and Tansy's ex remained back in Utah. Neither of us felt much guilt about how relieved we were to be past that kind of influence.

The more she talked to me about how peaceful it was to live on the



beach, the more I wanted just a small slice of that. And I wanted time with my sister, something I hadn't had much of the last ten years.

"It's nice, Tans." I dropped a kiss on the top of her head. "Thanks for putting some clean sheets on the guest bed for me."

She snorted. "It's good to have you here." She hitched her purse over her shoulder, glancing at her watch as she did. "Shit, I need to go get the kids from school. Ford has soccer tonight, but tomorrow night there's nothing going on. Want to try that Chinese place I told you about?"

I nodded, waving from the door as she pulled out of the driveway.

Once she was gone and it was just me in the house, I felt a little bit like I'd been sucked into the vortex of a tornado and spat back out—and I was trying to get my bearings. The past few days were a blur, and the tension I was carrying in my shoulders betrayed just how much.

The unease from my trip north wasn't quite gone, even though I was trying my best to ignore the reality of what it all meant.

My phone stayed pretty quiet that day as I unpacked my clothes and found a grocery store so that I could help Tansy stock the fridge and pantry.

The movers arrived the next morning, two stone-faced drivers transferring my entire life, piece by piece, into a storage unit. It was a familiar pattern, something we'd done over and over growing up. My dad always thinking that if we tried one more state, one more school, one more football program, we could capture something of the happiness he'd lost when my mom died.

I hated moving. Hated trying to make an empty space feel different than it was.

My home in Dallas—purchased after my ex kept our first home—was so utilitarian that Tansy had walked around with a horrified look on her face when I told her I'd lived there for two years.

Tansy's house wasn't like that.

There was personality exploding from every square inch.

After the movers were done, I went back to the house and paused as I reached into the fridge for smoothie ingredients. My finger pulled at the edge of one of Felicia's sketches. Brandishing a sword and an axe, a winged goddess with flames in her eyes had her foot stamped over the body of a hapless man who bore a striking resemblance to the twins' father.

My grin came easily.

The smile, however, didn't last long. Because sitting next to the fridge

was a thick, daunting folder full of information from the lawyer.

The lawyer who did have a name, after all.

Byron Cogswell. It didn't even sound real, but at the thought of his bespectacled face, I couldn't deny that it fit.

Byron was the first person I needed to call now that the scope of the house's condition was clear. The amount left by the estate wasn't even half of what it would need.

Figuring out how to tell Charlotte that detail was just as unclear as which direction I was supposed to go in this entire thing.

I tapped in Byron's number and waited for him to pick up.

"Burke, I wondered if I'd hear from you this week."

"You'll probably wish you hadn't, once I give you an update."

He laughed.

I didn't.

And when I didn't, he stopped, clearing his throat. "What did you find out?"

"That my former roommate either had no idea what their construction budget looked like or had no intention of that money being used for that purpose."

Neither one of us needed to say it out loud—it was the latter.

Chris and Amie hadn't intended to die. Not anytime soon.

And now decisions had to be made, and it was Byron's job to make sure those decisions made sense.

He was quiet. "Tell me."

When I finished updating him on the damage, the way it had sat empty, and the things Charlotte had told me, he let out a slow exhale. "This is tricky, Burke."

"I had a feeling you'd say that."

He paused before answering. "Chris and Amie were thorough in how they distributed their money. I can't produce that type of overage from thin air right now, not without removing it from someplace else. It would have to come from what they set aside for their daughter's care."

"No," I said immediately. "They wouldn't want that."

Somewhere on my phone was the last picture Chris had sent me of Mira. She was wearing a tiny Dallas jersey I'd sent her for Christmas. He'd snapped a selfie of the two of them, him giving a thumbs-down and her flashing a massive grin that showed off her small, pearly-white teeth.

My heart clenched painfully.

I wondered if she missed them. If she cried at night because Amie wasn't there to tuck her in.

"How is she?" I asked. "I haven't . . . I haven't reached out to Amie's friend at all."

"Doing well, the last I heard," he answered gently. "She's young, you know. I don't think she's always aware that they're gone."

The weight of grief—which varied day to day—hit different places at different times. That's what made it so fucking horrible. Sometimes it was a light awareness pressing on your skin, something you couldn't brush away or totally forget. A niggling reminder that something was gone, something was wrong and you couldn't fix it.

And sometimes, like now, it felt an awful lot like a loose wrecking ball had crashed into my chest.

"So what are you going to do?" Byron asked.

I didn't have the energy to lie to him.

"I have no idea." I blew out a slow breath. "Is that bad?"

"I think it's very understandable," he responded. "I wish I could help you with the budget, but financially, their wishes were very clear. I can't deviate from that."

How nice for him, that those wishes were clear. I wished I could say the same. I put the phone on speaker and opened up my text thread from Chris. My thumb slowly trailed up over our messages until I found the picture from Christmas.

Behind Chris and his daughter, there was a decorated tree, with glowing white lights and a homemade ornament of Mira's handprint in red paint.

It was such a small hand.

"You still there?" Byron asked.

Mira's face was pressed tight up against her dad's, reflecting the kind of ease and affection I'd never experienced with my own father. Her smile sent a pang through my stomach. It was so deep that even if I tried, I couldn't breathe through it.

It felt like someone was ripping my guts out with a hook.

"Keep the money," I heard myself say.

"What?"

I pinched my eyes shut. "Whatever money they set aside for this, just . . ." I paused, forcing my eyes open so that I could stare at my friend's face.

“Give it to his kid.”

He was quiet. “Are you sure? No one is expecting this from you.”

Chris was frowning in the picture. My eyes burned, and my lungs squeezed tight.

“I’m sure.” The words sounded like someone had their hand around my throat.

“Okay. I’ll transfer that into the part of the trust set aside for Mira.”

I rubbed my forehead. “Thank you.”

We disconnected the call, and I promised him I’d check in. I set the folder back down and stared at it for a few seconds before opening the fridge.

After making my protein smoothie and leaving the folder right where it was, I ran a hand over my face and walked out through the big glass slider in the middle of the kitchen. I took a seat on a white Adirondack on the back deck.

The water in the backyard didn’t make for a quiet backdrop, not with the warm wind blowing.

But the crashing, ambient sound was pleasant. Soothing.

I closed my eyes and tried to remind myself that this was why I’d worked so hard for so many years.

For a moment like this, to just breathe it all in, even if I didn’t know what was coming next.

That’s when my phone buzzed.

It was still bright enough out that I had to squint to see the screen. On the heels of my call with the lawyer, the sight of Charlotte’s name hit my chest in a slightly different way than a wrecking ball.

**Charlotte:** Hey, it’s Charlotte.

**Me:** You found your phone, I see.

**Charlotte:** It was propped up on one of the wall sconces on the second floor from when I was checking the wiring.

**Me:** That sounds safe. Please don’t start an electrical fire before I can make sure the homeowner’s insurance is up to date.

**Charlotte:** You can't see me, but I'm rolling my eyes. I do know how to unhook a light fixture.

**Me:** Did you need something?

**Charlotte:** I've got two builders coming for interviews at the end of next week, if you'd like to be here when I meet with them. Assuming, of course, that we still need a builder.

With my head settled against the back of the chair, I stared out at the angry ocean for a solid minute. My gut and my head and my heart warred mightily against each other. My head was shouting numbers and budgets and all sorts of mind-numbing things that would have to be dealt with eventually.

My gut also told me that meeting with builders wouldn't hurt anything. That this path, longer and harder and capable of causing me an infinite number of gray hairs, was the one I was supposed to take. Whether I wanted to or not.

My heart, though . . . it was tired. And sad.

And I knew that it was not supposed to be in the driver's seat.

**Me:** Keep the appointments.

**Me:** They can't come sooner?

**Charlotte:** Unfortunately not. I've had to start reaching out to contractors from Grand Rapids and Detroit to try and find someone who can handle this level of work. It's different than a standard renovation.

I closed my eyes again and tried to recapture that warm, peaceful feeling from the moments before my phone buzzed. Just seeing her name elicited a reaction that was uncomfortable.

**Charlotte:** Did I lose you?

**Me:** Yes.

**Charlotte:** I really appreciate how easy you're making this, and how helpful you're being. I'm offering you the chance to be involved in deciding who's going to spearhead the single greatest challenge we have in getting this place to where it can generate income. I thought you'd be interested in that, but maybe I'm wrong.

**Me:** You're wrong. I'm interested in finding out exactly how much it's going to cost, how long it's going to take, and if we do this—I'm interested in getting started so that it's over sooner.

**Charlotte:** K

My jaw clenched again. In the history of digital messaging, no single letter screamed louder than that one. I could practically see the annoyance flash in her eyes.

Greenish-brown eyes.

"Fucking hell," I bit out.

It didn't matter what color her eyes were.

"Oooh, Uncle Burke said a really bad word."

"Yeah, he did. Just add it to the list of why he's never allowed to babysit," my sister said. Behind her kids' heads, Tansy shot me a dirty look.

My face felt hot. "What? I didn't know I had an audience."

My nephew, Ford, grinned, and his twin sister, Felicia, studied me with open curiosity.

"Sorry, guys," I told them. "I didn't know you were back."

Felicia hopped over to my chair and perched on the footstool. Her eyes were big and blue, just like my sister's. "When you move out and get your own house, can we have sleepovers?"

"I don't think your mom will trust me with a sleepover just yet."

"Not with that language, I won't," Tansy said. She took a seat next to me and sighed as she stretched her legs out. "This is nice. Kids, if you go now, you have enough time to swim before dinner."

They ran off, hooting and hollering in excitement.

I eyed them as they disappeared into the house. "Don't they swim every single day?"

"Yup." She pointed to my phone. "What made you so mad?"

I sighed. “Nothing.”

“The Michigan house?”

“Don’t want to talk about it, Tans.”

She shook her head. “Poor Burke. Someone hands you a gorgeous old house and a professional to run the project for you. Let me scrounge up all my sympathy.” She patted the front pockets of her shorts, then opened her purse. “Nope. Fresh out. Sorry.”

“You didn’t see it. Trust me, no one would call it gorgeous.”

She snatched my phone and tapped in the security code.

“How do you know that?” I asked.

Tansy ignored me and scrolled through the exchange with Charlotte. “You’re not going for these interviews?” Her jaw fell open. “Gawd, you are being such an ass to her!”

My face felt warm, and I chalked it up to the sun. “I don’t need to babysit what she’s doing there. She wouldn’t want me to.”

“She’s asking you to be part of this.” Tansy stared me down, that horrible, weighted sisterly stare that she’d perfected in middle school. “You’re the investor, for all intents and purposes, right? You’re the money. The one who directs the big picture. And you’re bailing on her.”

“She is more than capable of handling it on her own.”

“Were Chris and Amie not part of the renovation?”

I didn’t answer. I didn’t want to talk about whether they were or not.

“I know Chris was busy with football, but you can’t tell me his wife wouldn’t have been up to her armpits in this project, because she knew how important it was to him.”

When I closed my eyes, I got flashes of Amie playing pranks on Chris when he and I lived together. Jumping out and scaring him. Scaring me too, which made it a bit less funny.

The way she rubbed his shoulders after we’d had a hard practice.

The cookies she’d bake us on the weekends.

My jaw clenched. Even back then, they’d been such a good team. What was important to one was important to the other. Simple as that.

I’d been missing that in my marriage. But their support of each other—it never wavered.

“Tans, I am trying to relax. I’m finally here and can spend time with my baby sister and her kids. This is what retirement looks like for me, not demoing an old house and trying to make it pretty again. I want peace.

Haven't I earned that?"

My sister, normally the first to tease me into submission, was quiet. I risked a glance at her, but she was staring out at the water.

Finally, she spoke. "Yeah, you have."

"Thank you."

"But not like this," she added. "She didn't ask for this any more than you did. And it's not easy for me to say this, because I love having you here. Love spending time with you after all the hardships we've both been through." Her voice got choked up, so she waited until it was steady again. "I watched you chase someone else's dream for the last fifteen years—concussions and torn ligaments and sprained ribs and . . . Lord knows what else."

I kept my mouth shut because this was a common argument we'd had over the years—the crux of her issue with our dad.

"I'm not asking you to give up your dream for a peaceful retirement, if that's what you want," she continued, still facing the water. "But don't act like him. Like you can't possibly care about more than one thing at a time. That you don't have the capacity for it."

Her words hit true—an arrow slicing straight through my ribs.

"Don't ignore me," she said.

I glanced in her direction and tried to summon a defense. Angela used to say the same thing to me, in the middle of our arguments. When I was only focused on practice. Training. Watching film. Chasing, chasing, chasing.

It wasn't true. I'd always cared about other things, but it was hard for me to prioritize anything over the thing that allowed me to take care of my family. And she'd never seen it that way.

It was shame—hot and steady—that I felt first. Tansy and I rarely talked about Dad. He'd focused all his energy on me, the athletic son who had the talent he'd never possessed. The sole positive thing he felt like he could do for me as a single parent. Tansy had been all but ignored, and she still bore the scars of that.

"That's not what I'm doing," I managed.

Tansy's eyes locked on to mine. "You're also terrible with women."

My jaw set mulishly. "That is categorically false."

My sister ignored me. "There's a reason you've been single forever. Angela fucked you up bad. You get one look at a pretty face and you lose absolutely any ability to talk like a normal human being."



“I didn’t tell you she was pretty.”

“You didn’t have to.” Her smile grew, and it was obnoxious. “You always did lose your shit over redheads.”

“I never would’ve told you that if I thought you’d use it against me.”

She tapped her finger to her chin. “Remember that girl in college who came up to you at the bar and made you trip over your own feet?”

“Chris tripped me,” I snapped. “Can we change the subject back to Charlotte? I wasn’t a dick to her because she’s a redhead.”

“So you do admit you were being a jerk?”

“She was handcuffed. To the house,” I said. I spread my hands out like that explained everything. “The house I don’t want to own, and she comes with it. I don’t want either of them in my life. That doesn’t mean I’m acting like I’m incapable of caring about more than one thing at a time.”

“Yeah, you are. You learned from the best. You don’t have to be her best friend, but don’t be that asshole who ignores his responsibilities because they’re inconvenient.” She stood from her chair and planted a soft kiss on my temple. “I’m going to check on the kids.”

It was an ugly assessment from one of the people who knew me best. Alone again on the deck, I stared up into the swaying fronds of the palm tree directly above me.

I still didn’t want the house, despite what I’d just done with the lawyer.

And I still didn’t have it in me to sell it outright.

I had a feeling that if I did, Chris would come back from the dead, turn into the most annoying ghost in the world, and haunt the ever-loving shit out of me.

At the thought of selling now, I felt a cold, bone-deep exhaustion settling into my stomach, completely at odds with the warmth and peace of where I was sitting.

Just like the house and the weight of all this unspoken, unasked-for responsibility, I also didn’t want Charlotte. Or at least not in the way that my sister assumed.

She wasn’t wrong, though, either. I’d never really known how to be myself right off the bat when I felt that first unwelcome zing of attraction.

My problem was trying to keep those things separate. To keep them in tidy corners of my brain so they didn’t muddle up the big thing still sitting at the forefront of my mind.

I pulled out my phone and navigated to the airline site. I scrolled

through my options, muttering things that would undoubtedly scar my niece and nephew if they were to hear them. When I finished, I clicked back over to the message thread.

**Me:** I'll be there Wednesday. Please stow the handcuffs this time.

# Chapter Six

## CHARLOTTE

All in all, Burke's latest arrival to the Campbell House was far less dramatic than the first.

He wasn't outright scowling, and the grunt he gave me in greeting when he found me clearing some overgrown weeds around the front of the house was fairly mild.

There were no handcuffs and no broken spindles, though every time I walked past the gap in the stair railing, I aimed an annoyed look somewhere in the direction of Florida.

"Good flight?" I asked.

Another grunt.

"So glad to hear it." I leaned over, yanking out some leafy stalk that wasn't supposed to be there. The weight of his gaze was a heavy, strange thing. "My week was good too," I continued. "There's an excellent chance the roof needs to be replaced, which we didn't figure into the budget, but when it rained the other night, I managed to collect buckets of water that we could reuse in this beautiful garden here. And, bonus, we'll get pretty new floors where all the water damaged the original."

Burke sighed.

"All of this makes me very glad that the owner has decided to come back and help out." I gave him a sunny smile, and his eyes narrowed in suspicion. I decided not to tell him about my inkling that there were foundation issues that would need to be fixed too.

"What time are the interviews tomorrow?"

I brushed the back of my hand over my cheek, trying to clear a stray wisp of hair off my face. "Rob is supposed to be here at ten; he's coming from Grand Rapids. The builder from Detroit—Jordan—should be here

around one, as long as he doesn't have any traffic issues."

Burke nodded, staring at the pile of dead grass and shrubs at my feet. My hands were covered with the ratty gloves I'd found in the carriage house, and I'd slapped my mom's Tigers ball cap over my head.

"Okay. I've got errands to run this afternoon, but I'll be back in the morning," he said. "I need to find a hotel room."

My eyebrows shot up. "You didn't book one yet?"

"Didn't last time either."

I laughed under my breath. "Good luck."

He set his hands on his hips as he studied me.

Big hands. I hated that Daphne had made me think anything about the size of his hands. They were perfectly adequate, and it wasn't important at all that they were much larger than average.

"What's that supposed to mean?" he asked.

"Two Midwest soccer tournaments in town and a national conference at the Grand Traverse. Welcome to tourist season in Northern Michigan. If you can get a hotel room, it'll be with a stranger who has a soft heart for former football players with bad attitudes."

It was amazing how quickly someone's face could change. It was like watching a thunderstorm front roll across Lake Michigan.

"Excuse me?"

I tilted my head. "A rhetorical question, I presume?"

Burke slicked his tongue over his teeth.

"I'm not saying anything untrue," I said. "You did show up with a bad attitude. You snapped my hand-milled spindle by way of introduction. We're trying to fix the house. I am, at least. I'm still not entirely sure what *your* angle is."

His chest heaved on a deep breath. "Did I not apologize for breaking the already broken wood that probably couldn't have been saved anyway because it was so rotted through?"

"You didn't."

"Must have slipped my mind." He studied me, from the top of my head to the tips of my toes, then back up. "You were nicer the first time I was here."

I crouched down into the overgrown planting bed, yanking on another weed. "I made a decision after you left."

"I can't wait to hear it."

“I’m nice to everyone when I meet them,” I explained. Another weed into the pile. I wasn’t even sure why I was weeding this particular bed other than it gave me something to do while we waited to hire a new builder. “And I was at a disadvantage when you arrived. Not by my choosing, mind you, and I’ve had words with my aunt about that.”

“Probably a good choice.” His voice was flat. I hid my grin at how very annoyed he sounded.

“Despite the fact that I was at a disadvantage, and obviously worried about the fate of this house that I love so much, you chose to start our business relationship off with intimidation and a horrible attitude and destruction of property.”

He made a sound, something between a growl and a groan, and I ignored it. My hands were shaking as I tugged at the next plant—it may not have been a weed, but it was too late to turn back once the roots cleared the dirt.

I never talked like this to anyone. I couldn’t decide if it was exciting or terrifying.

“You can’t fire me because you’re not legally allowed to. Or I don’t think you are, but I wouldn’t know because you don’t tell me anything about the stipulations of the trust.” *Yank. Toss.* “And my aunt told me I’m always a little too nice, especially to guys who think they can be assholes just because they don’t know how to use their words about the things they’re feeling. You lost your friend, and that’s hard and awful, but neither of us asked for this situation.”

Burke looked like he was about to explode. His cheeks were tinged with pink, either from embarrassment or bottled-up rage, and I wasn’t sure which I wanted it to be.

If he was embarrassed, I might have to retract my newly found sass, and I wasn’t ready to do that just yet.

I’d met enough people in my life to know which ones responded to kindness and which ones responded to strength. There’d be people who didn’t agree with my light-bulb moment to meet Burke Barrett with exactly the kind of demeanor he came to me with.

But those people weren’t facing down a yearlong project with this dude and his big hands and his even bigger attitude.

He didn’t want this house?

Too friggin’ bad. It was his.

He didn't want the hassle of handling the renovation?

I was not going to be his verbal punching bag.

He was the guy in charge of how this entire project went, no matter whether I was the expert. And after the fact that he bolted without a single shred of direction or attempt at human decency, I wasn't feeling like welcoming him with open arms and the Charlotte Cunningham everyone else knew.

I was nice. People liked me. And I was damn good at my job. If he expected me to be nice to him after the way we'd started? He had to earn that shit, and so far, my grumptastic boss wasn't even close.

I yanked again, then whispered a curse under my breath when I realized there was a tulip bulb underneath.

Burke sighed. "I'm not . . ." He paused. "I'm not trying to be a dick."

I glanced up at him incredulously.

"Not everyone finds it easy to be friendly with strangers," he managed.

"Right," I answered slowly. "Were you like this with all your new teammates and coaches?"

"Worse, actually."

My eyebrows climbed, disappearing somewhere underneath my Tigers hat.

He looked away, the hot man muscle in his jaw bunching up like that was its job. "No one needed me to be nice. They needed me to sack the guy throwing the ball and stop the guy running with it."

"Well, like I said, if you can find someone to share their hotel room, I'm sure they'll know that you were very good at that."

Burke's jaw tightened before he shifted his gaze over to the carriage house.

*My carriage house.*

"How many bedrooms you got in there?" he asked.

My mouth fell open, then snapped shut. "Two," I said warily.

His eyes flashed, and then, somehow, his hard mouth softened into a wicked-looking smile. "Perfect."

"You are joking."

Burke spread his arms out. "You wanted me here, right? As the owner of this fine, lovely property with all its . . . quirks and charms."

I set my hands on my hips, my mind racing. Arguments sprang to the tip of my tongue, but they all shriveled to ash because he did own it. And he

wouldn't be able to find a hotel room easily for the next week, and . . . I did want him to be a part of this.

Damn it.

"Rendered speechless," he mused. "I'm stunned by how quickly we've managed to come to a peaceful agreement."

With a snort, I turned my attention back to the soft dirt in front of me. The unearthed tulip bulb sat there, right on top of the pile, and I decided that maybe I should stop until I wasn't so . . . annoyed out of my mind. I snatched the gardening gloves off my hands and tossed them onto the front stoop.

"There's only one bathroom," I told him.

"I think I can manage, if you're up to it."

"And I'm pretty sure the hot water heater needs to be replaced," I continued. "My last shower was ice cold, and I knew my eager, intrepid property owner would love to take care of that when he showed up this week."

He licked his lower lip, and something quivered in my stomach. I glanced away.

"New roof. New water heater. No builder. Anything else?" His eyes were burning as he bit out the words.

Internally, I was screaming at the top of my lungs. It took so much more energy to maintain witty, sarcastic banter, and I found that I missed simple niceties something fierce.

But I straightened, crossing my arms over my chest.

"The price of lumber is up twenty-five percent since Amie and I figured the renovation budget, so you'll have to talk to the estate lawyer about how we should cover the cost of that."

His eyes were unreadable and unwavering. "That it?"

"It's all I can think of for now," I answered seriously.

"Excellent." He snatched up a duffel bag from the back seat of his rental car. "I'm assuming I'll know which room is already taken?"

I nodded. "The blue one is mine. You can have the yellow bedroom down the hall."

He eyed the house like it might bite him upon entry. "Does it have a bed?"

I smiled. It probably would've looked like a sweet smile too, if I hadn't been gleefully imagining the impossible size of him crammed onto the piece of furniture in that room. "Of sorts."

His face did that thundercloud-darkening thing again.

I wasn't even sure it could be considered a twin bed, and there was no way his long-ass legs would fit. But that was not my problem.

Before he walked into the house, he pointed to the pile at my feet. "I'm not shelling out for new tulips, so you might want to pay closer attention."

I narrowed my eyes and imagined what he'd do if I threw a tulip bulb at his head while he was sleeping.

My facial expression made him smile. A real smile too.

His teeth were white and straight. Beneath the stubble on his jaw, there was a crease in the skin.

That also did quivery things to my stomach, and I was glad when he turned toward the house, whistling a jaunty tune as he walked through the door.

When he was out of sight, I picked up the tulip bulb and chucked it in his direction. It fell with an ineffectual thud onto the ground about four feet shy of the front of the house.

The door opened back up, and his head popped out. "I saw that, Cunningham."

My cheeks were flaming. "I meant for you to, Barrett."

The door slammed. I stifled a frustrated scream and wondered just how long we could go without murdering each other while we were sharing a roof.



# Chapter Seven

## BURKE

Since I couldn't sit on a deck in Florida and let the ocean lower my blood pressure, I felt fortunate that Traverse City was situated along a beautiful—albeit colder—body of water. At the back of the property was the thing that would make the house a destination someday: eighty feet of frontage along the west arm of Grand Traverse Bay.

The fact that it had been overlooked for so long by the people who'd purchased it from Chris's grandparents was insane, because they could've sold it for a fortune.

A single Adirondack chair sat on the patchy stretch of grass that overlooked the rocky-edged water.

It needed a dock. Someplace to sit where you could watch the sun go down over the water with a glass of wine or a pint of beer. It was worth the walk from the house for that too, because sitting there after two wasted interviews and an impossibly long night without sleep, I felt like I was miles away from the world.

Despite the temperature difference here, it did something inside me that I hadn't experienced sitting in Tansy's backyard. The tension in my muscles unraveled at a different speed, something calmer and slower.

And for now, at least, it was the only place on the property where I got that feeling.

The change in Charlotte upon my arrival had all my good intentions flying out the fucking window.

That woman was hell-bent on driving me insane.

Maybe my sister was right, and I was just truly inept when faced with a pretty woman who tied my tongue a bit, or maybe Charlotte's newfound attitude made her incredibly skilled at bringing out the worst in me.

I'd hardly seen her last night; she had slipped in while I was taking a frigid shower (the plumber was due out to the carriage house any minute, thank goodness), and when I returned from getting a bite to eat in town, her bedroom door was closed.

Throughout the night, I could hear the occasional murmur of her voice, like she was making a couple of different phone calls, but she stayed firmly out of sight.

It was for the best, I told myself.

The snarky, snappy interplay in front of the house had a strange undertone to it, something I couldn't pinpoint, and even though I'd been fully prepared to show up and apologize for the way I'd acted the week before, all those gestures had fled when I saw the spark in her eyes.

So instead of thinking about sparking eyes and a Tigers hat over a messy red braid, I stared out at the water and tried to filter through the absolute disaster of our interviews with the builders.

I'd let her take the lead because both men were there at her invitation.

The first guy never should've made the drive. After I gave him a tour through the property and listened to him ooh and aah over things like wainscoting and stamped ceilings and eighteen-inch-wide plank floors, Rob informed us that he would love to take on the project.

In a year. Which was the earliest he had an opening in his schedule.

There was no spark in Charlotte's eyes after that one.

The second guy was just as disappointing. He'd lost half his crew over the last couple of months, something he had failed to tell Charlotte, and the projected timeline he gave—after the same tour, the same oohing and aahing—was far longer than we were okay with. Closer to eighteen months than ten.

It's why I found myself on the quiet bay with a binder of all the paperwork from the lawyer and about a dozen more pages of information that I'd been able to get from Charlotte during my weeklong absence.

This wasn't going to be easy. And it wasn't going to be cheap. Not only that, but if this was something I was going to do, I could no longer justify any sort of prolonged absence from the property.

There was no way I'd be able to off-load all the responsibility onto Charlotte.

I had too many choices ahead of me, and I didn't feel like I could settle my feet into any of them.

My peace and quiet were being kicked out from underneath me, and I

couldn't help but imagine Charlotte's tightfisted grip on them as she yanked them away.

I stood from the chair and slid the binder underneath my arm as I walked back toward the house.

After two tours, listening to her show off bits and pieces that she loved about the house to the builders, listening to their gushing in return, I could begrudgingly admit that when it was finished, it would be incredible.

But the process to get there was unlike anything I'd ever attempted. Even though the responsibility of someone else's dream was a familiar weight on my shoulders, this one didn't necessarily sit any easier than the last one had. At least with my dad's dream, I'd had an undeniable talent for playing football. That had made it easy to pursue. My talent had also enabled me to support my family.

This was different. I was the extra weight. The guy who needed all the details spelled out for him, the obvious issues broken down in layman's terms.

I didn't like it.

In fact, I fucking hated it.

And that unsure footing had my mood in a precarious position when I saw a glimpse of Charlotte through the upstairs windows.

I let myself in through the back door and called her name.

"Up here," she yelled. "In the primary bedroom."

I made my way up the stairs, keeping to the left of the treads, and studied the peeling, faded wallpaper on the walls as I walked down the second-floor landing. Now all I could see in those holes in the plaster was dollar signs. So many dollar signs.

The furniture that remained was gathered into the bedrooms in the west wing of the house, ghostly shapes covered in sheets until Charlotte knew what would happen with them.

And as I picked my way past each open doorway, I started tallying up in my head how many large items there were.

A bed frame stood in the middle of each bedroom I passed—tall and heavy, each with four posters that had somehow withstood the abuse done to the house in the last handful of years. It was a miracle, really, that no one had bashed in windows to clean the entire place out.

By the time I got to the primary bedroom, I'd lost count of how much furniture still remained.

“Why don’t you sell all this shit?” I asked.

Charlotte’s head snapped in my direction, her pen frozen over the notebook she was writing in. “Sell all what shit?” Her nose wrinkled at the last word, as if it were beneath her to say it.

I gestured into the room. It was a big room, with two massive windows overlooking the back of the property. Beyond the line of the trees, you could see the water. There was another towering four-poster bed without a mattress. A rolled-arm couch in a truly hideous shade of green. Another settee by the foot of the bed with a flower pattern that made my eyes water. A dozen end tables and gilded mirrors and another chair-couch-chaise thing that was so ugly I could hardly look at it.

“This.” I pointed at the ugliest one. “It’s horrible. We could probably have a yard sale and earn all the money you need for your roof with this stuff.”

She gasped. “Are you insane? That’s a Swan mahogany settee from the 1870s. Even in horrible condition, it’s worth well over a thousand dollars, and this is not in horrible condition.”

“It’s pink.”

Charlotte rolled her eyes. “Lord save me from men who fear pastels.”

My face felt warm. “I’m not afraid of the color. I’m trying to figure out a creative solution to the fact that you’re telling me our proposed budget is all but worthless. Extra money for all of this won’t magically fall from the sky.”

“And you think a garage sale is going to do it?”

“Probably not, because if anyone out there wants to buy this horrible thing, I’ll eat my hat.”

She whipped the beat-up hat off her head. “Please, feel free to choke on mine.”

The first half of our day had been spent in an uneasy truce while we navigated the interviews, and that truce was officially over.

I ignored the way her hair fell around her face with the hat gone. And how the blush on her face when she got really annoyed made her cheekbones stand in sharp relief.

I set my hands on my hips and faced her. “Help me out, then. We don’t have a builder. We need a new roof and God knows what else.” I tilted my head. “What do you propose we do about those issues, project manager?”

Her face went unexpectedly earnest. “I don’t know.”

I scratched the side of my face and sighed. “Before anything else, we

have to find a builder.”

She nodded. Then she searched my face before she spoke again. “I’ll . . . you can withhold my paycheck for the time being.”

“What?” I barked. “Why would you do that?”

“It doesn’t cost me anything to live at the carriage house, and I can eat at my aunt’s. She lives just down the street. That’s what I did when I didn’t get a paycheck after Chris and Amie died.” Her chin rose a notch. “If it helps the trust lawyer see how serious I am about getting this done the right way, I can let them keep my income to stretch the budget further.”

My eyes narrowed.

“Only if you agree to leave the furniture alone,” she added. “Not a single piece gets sold without my agreement, because I’ll just have to turn around and buy something else when we’re done, and I don’t think you want me doing that.”

“If I need furniture once it’s done,” I said quietly.

Her head reared back, chest heaving on an inhale. Charlotte didn’t speak right away, and I could see her frustration on every inch of her face. “Trust me, even if you sell it, you’ll want this thing staged to bring in maximum return. You’ll want every single piece.”

I mumbled something under my breath about stubborn women and ugly couches.

She crossed her arms over her chest. “I swear, if you try to undermine me on this, I’ll find the most expensive pieces I can just to spite you.”

I was tempted to laugh. My lips threatened a smile at the fierce look on her face.

It was begrudging admiration for just how little she was intimidated by me. For the lengths she was willing to go for this place that I didn’t even want to own. I towered over her, and instead of backing away, her chin ticked up one more scant inch.

Charlotte held my glare, and for one protracted moment, something hot kindled under my ribs. It curled around my spine and dipped lower until my hands curled into fists.

It felt—quite disturbingly—like foreplay.

Because the first thing in my mind was a sick curiosity about whether she’d bite my lip if I tried to kiss her right then. I’d never touch a woman who didn’t want it, and because it had been so long since I’d been with anyone, I could hardly stop the torrent of images that hit my brain all at once.

Broken couches and messy red hair and sucking, biting kisses during which we fought for dominance.

With a shaky exhale, I stepped back. "I'd never withhold your pay."

Charlotte licked her lips, studying my expression curiously. Then she nodded.

"And I will do my own inquiries about a possible builder."

That had her eyes flashing. "I know everyone in the state of Michigan who's equipped for a historical restoration of this magnitude."

I pinched the bridge of my nose.

Suddenly the back-and-forth didn't feel like foreplay, and it didn't feel fun. Probably because I'd been imagining nonexistent sexual tension and she was just trying to do her job.

Tansy's words echoed in my head. How I was acting like our dad.

"I don't want to fight with you," I admitted. "Whatever this . . . back-and-forth shit is," I said wearily. "I just don't want to feel like we're always against each other."

Charlotte's gaze dropped to the floor, and she sighed. "I don't want to fight either." When she looked back up, her face held an unspoken apology. "It's much easier to be nice to people than . . . this."

"I wouldn't know," I admitted wryly. "I'm not a nice guy, remember?"

She exhaled a quiet laugh.

"Let me try for one interview," I told her. "I have a lead that I found earlier. If it's a bust, then you can call in whoever you want, even if we need to bring someone in from Chicago or farther."

Her chest expanded on a huge inhale, and when she let it out, she nodded carefully.

"Deal," she said quietly.

"And you should've told me that the bed in my room was pint size."

Charlotte grinned, that dimple I'd noticed on the first day finally showing itself. "I knew you'd figure it out eventually."

I gave her a look, and she laughed outright.

It wasn't much. But it was something.

# Chapter Eight

## BURKE

It had been more than five years since I'd shared space with a woman.

I blamed my preoccupation with all the weird shit she did on that one unavoidable fact.

For example, when she was on the phone and something happened that got her excited, she paced. Her system of organization was highly illogical, and with the exception of her phone, she always seemed to know where things were. When she poured herself a cup of coffee in the morning, it always seemed to take a solid hour before she managed two sips. She had an alarming number of hair ties in piles everywhere. There was a stack in the bathroom in the medicine cabinet. On the counter by the fridge. I'd found four of them on the coffee table in front of the couch.

I was up before Charlotte, my restlessness the byproduct of waking at six for my entire career so that I could be in the weight room before anyone else.

In the months since I'd retired, I hadn't lost that habit. Which meant I'd had my coffee and breakfast before Charlotte showed her face around seven thirty.

The first morning after our furniture truce, she came out of her bedroom with the phone wedged between her ear and shoulder. In one hand was a canvas bag and in the other a small blue book with gilded page edges.

"No, I'm looking for a different one," she said.

The canvas bag went on the table; so did the book. She made her way to the coffee maker, still half-full. She nodded at something the other person said on the phone, turning toward the pantry tucked against the opposite wall.

I took a slow sip of my coffee and hid my smile behind my mug.

She opened the pantry, her hand freezing in the air when she noticed

that the mugs were gone. In their place were the plates that she'd had in the upper cupboards above the coffee maker. The mixing bowls—also from the pantry—were still to the left of the sink, but I'd move more stuff around after she was done with her coffee and breakfast.

Charlotte set her hand on her hip and whirled to give me a narrow-eyed look.

I lifted my mug in salute, and she huffed under her breath.

“Sorry, can you say that again?” she asked. When she opened the cupboard and found the mugs, she rolled her eyes. She poured the coffee, and I watched her bring it up to her mouth, pause, then set it back down on the counter. “Yes! The brown hardcover? That’s the one. Publishing date should be 1932, if I remember right.”

Whatever the other person said, she did a happy little hip-wiggling move, and my eyes locked on the small black shorts she preferred to sleep in. She picked up her coffee again, blowing on the surface. Her lips pursed gently, pink and soft looking.

Before her mouth touched the mug, she set it back down.

I tore my gaze away, locking it on to my laptop screen.

“Can you set it aside for me? I promise I’ll come pick it up today.” She punched her fist in the air, pacing to the other side of the house. “Yes, along with the 1928 you found last week. Perfect, thank you.”

Charlotte disconnected the call and, lips curled in a satisfied grin, walked back into the kitchen to grab her mug.

“You know,” she said, “that makes me so happy that I’m not even going to get upset at you for moving my stuff.”

“You mean *my* stuff?”

She exhaled slowly, eyeing me over the rim of her mug as she took a seat at the dining-room table. Instead of taking a drink, she set it down and leaned back in her chair.

“Yes. Your stuff.” She tugged at the hair tie holding all that hair up into a messy pile on top of her head. “Does it give you a sense of control to change something that was working perfectly well?”

“Control has nothing to do with it.”

She set her chin on her fist and studied my face. “Hmm.”

“No need to psychoanalyze.” I snapped my laptop shut. “I just moved the coffee mugs above the coffee maker. Anyone who thinks about logistics would’ve done the same thing.”



Charlotte arched an eyebrow. “Is this your superpower? I’m so jealous.”  
I gave her a long look.

She grinned and lifted the mug back up to her mouth. “You know,” she said, setting it down again, “the mugs did make sense in the pantry.”

“How so?”

“The height on those shelves is shorter, so there was less wasted space.” She tilted her head to the cabinets. “Now you need to find a new place for the mixing bowls, don’t you?”

I narrowed my eyes, and finally, she took a slow sip of her coffee. If the mug hadn’t been blocking her face, I would’ve seen a giant fuck-you smile on those pink lips.

Because we had nothing to do until my builder interview the next day, I found myself antsy. I stood from the table. “I’ll find a better place for the bowls later.”

“I’m sure,” she muttered.

“I’m going for a run.”

I was lying. It would be a slow walk, but she didn’t need to know that.

Charlotte’s gaze locked on to my knee. “Are you supposed to be going for a run?”

“Who told you?”

The mug froze an inch away from her mouth again. “Richard.”

My eyes never wavered from hers, and behind my ribs, my heart tripped on a tumbling beat. “Your boyfriend?”

What kind of name was Richard? It sounded old. Hell, maybe he *was* old. She liked decrepit, falling-down relics, so maybe Charlotte had herself a seventy-year-old man to go with her two-hundred-year-old house obsession.

I had to force myself to unclench my jaw.

Charlotte smiled. “My aunt Daphne’s live-in non-boyfriend boyfriend.”

My shoulders relaxed. And, fuck, I hoped she hadn’t noticed. “I—”

She waved a hand in the air. “Don’t even try to understand it. I think they’re at common-law marriage status after ten years together, but she’s weird about labels.” Charlotte grinned. “The handcuffs were theirs.”

“So glad I know that.”

At my dry tone, she laughed.

I heard that laugh in my head the entire time I walked. Five miles, and my pace was so glacial that I hardly paid attention to where I was going until I ended up in the downtown area of Traverse City.

The stores and restaurants had the clean, tidy look of a tourist town that knew what it was doing. And with the endless stretches of water that seemed to be everywhere, I could only imagine how busy this place got in the summer and fall.

It was busy now, with the weather warming up after a solid turn into spring. I stopped in front of an ice cream shop and found a wooden bench. My knee was screaming, but the warmth in my muscles felt good.

“Burke.”

My eyes popped open. Charlotte stood next to the bench, big black sunglasses covering her eyes, a bright blue handkerchief wrapped around her head to keep flyaway red hair out of her face.

“Do you need a ride back to the house?”

My knee said yes. Emphatically.

I stared up at her. “No.”

She stared right back down at me. I didn’t like it when Charlotte was taller, so I pushed myself up off the bench, and when it felt like someone was stabbing me in the kneecap, I damn well bit down on the edge of my tongue.

“Fine,” I said grudgingly.

Her lips curled into a smile. “Need anything while we’re here?”

I shook my head. Someone across the street looked in my direction, a teenage boy whispering to his friend and pointing.

I kept my head down and waited until Charlotte unlocked the car door before sliding into the passenger seat. If my PT lived there, she would’ve beaten my ass for doing what I had just done.

In the console of Charlotte’s car, there were about eighteen hair ties, and I plucked one out, studying it in the light coming through the window. “You know you leave these all over the house.”

“I’m sure I do.”

“I pulled a red hair out of my tube of toothpaste this morning.”

She laughed. “You did not.”

I had, but I decided it wasn’t worth the argument. Absently, she handed me a bag. “Hold these for me. I don’t want to toss them in the back.”

“Plan on taking the corners too fast on the drive home?”

Charlotte sighed. “Only if the cops are chasing me.”

I pulled open the top of the bag, sliding out the first of two books. *Modern American Homes*. The book was battered and torn, the edges ragged from use. The pages were yellowed, and the smell emanating from the bag

was musty.

“I hope you didn’t pay a lot for this.”

She glanced at me. “About a hundred.”

I whistled. “Someone ripped you off.”

“That one”—she tapped the cover—“is from 1932. Open it up.”

Begrudgingly, I did. It was full of pictures of architectural features, of home and building layouts.

I found a big, boxy house design similar to the Campbell House’s.

*Colonial Revival*, it read. I studied the plans on the next few pages and hummed.

“What?”

My eyes tracked over some more pictures, a few more drawings.

“Nothing.”

I should’ve known that showing any interest in one of these falling-apart books and not explaining why was the meanest possible thing I could’ve done to Charlotte Cunningham.

“Well, it’s something,” she said.

“Nothing you need to worry about,” I amended.

She shifted in the driver’s seat, glancing quickly at which page I was studying. Her eyes narrowed, and the car drifted slightly onto the shoulder.

“Road’s straight ahead,” I told her, keeping my eyes on the book. “I’d like to stay on it, please.”

I hid my grin as she whispered something I couldn’t understand.

Back at the carriage house, Charlotte tried to hand me a small bag after she unlocked the door.

I didn’t take it right away. “What’s that?”

She sighed. “Not an explosive device, I can tell you that.”

“Wouldn’t put it past you at this point.”

“It’s a key, Burke. Calm down.” She tossed the bag at my chest, and I caught it. “Went to the hardware store to make an extra in case you ever get back here and I’m gone.”

The sun was streaming through the large west windows when I followed her inside. I still felt just a bit like I didn’t know what to do with myself when I walked into the carriage house.

“Aren’t you always here?” I asked. I hardly ever saw her leave, unless she went to her aunt’s house down the road.

“Sure feels like it. But since I have no idea how often you plan to be

here, I'm just trying to make you feel at home."

I snorted. *Unlikely.*

I wasn't sure I'd felt like that anywhere I'd ever lived.

She had her established routine. Keys went into a small ceramic bowl on a small console table next to the door that led into the kitchen. Then she'd kick her shoes off and toss her purse onto her bed.

My bedroom—the yellow room, as she'd called it—wasn't as big as hers, but it worked for me. A twin-size bed was tucked into the corner just underneath a big window with ornate white trim. A solidly built dresser, something desperately in need of a new paint job, was set at an angle opposite the bed.

My feet hung off the end of the mattress but not enough to bother me. And because I knew she was waiting for me to complain about it, I'd never say a word.

Charlotte disappeared into the bathroom, and after I set my shoes in a neat line just inside my bedroom, my phone buzzed with a text from my sister.

**Tansy:** This one just went on the market. What do you think?

With a sigh, I clicked on the link she'd sent. It was . . . fine. Three bedrooms. Two bathrooms. Ocean view.

I thought about my blank-walled house in Dallas, a cookie-cutter version of all the homes in my neighborhood. This one gave me those same vibes—probably one of two dozen identical homes surrounding it, and the house number was the only way you could tell it apart.

**Me:** Neighbors are too close. I think I want something with more privacy.

Tansy responded with a thumbs-up emoji. When I set my phone down, I kept thinking about what I'd seen in that falling-apart book. I didn't dare voice out loud what I was thinking, at least not yet.

Charlotte was still in the bathroom when I walked out into the kitchen, glancing around at the piles of her stuff she had set against the wall behind the couch. The rolled-up construction plans for the main house were tucked in the corner next to the low table that held the TV. With a quick gander at

the bathroom, I tugged them out from behind her bags of samples and quietly closed the door behind me when I left the carriage house.

I'd never been inside the Campbell House by myself, and something about the hushed quiet had goose bumps prickling along the tops of my arms.

I wished I had a record somewhere of what Chris had told me when we stood outside the house. How he felt about the house and why.

What memories he'd made there.

What future he wanted to create inside the walls of this place. But it hadn't seemed important back then.

Wasn't that always the way it was after you lost someone?

Everything they'd said and everything they'd done was permanently highlighted in your mind. But the worst part was that you couldn't force those memories to the surface. Not the details, at least.

You couldn't call them and ask what they'd said. Send a text to help your recall.

The memories were mine, and mine alone, now. And I fucking hated that too.

I stared at the entryway, the holes in the plaster, the damage to the floors, and for the first time during this entire thing, I wished I knew what it had looked like before.

*Not* for the first time, I looked around and wished I'd called Chris before he died. Maybe he would've told me about it. Maybe we would've had a single conversation that I could've pulled from in moments like this.

I walked into the drawing room, following the same path we'd taken when Charlotte showed the builders around. Unrolling the plans onto the floor, I crouched down to study them.

The wall placement stayed the same, but as I flipped through some of the pages, I could see where they'd made notes about countertop placement. The addition of larger appliances to accommodate more food. An island where there never would've been in the original house. The upstairs bathroom layout was going to change to allow for a larger shower.

Without Charlotte standing over my shoulder—waiting to spew her encyclopedia of knowledge at me—I was able to think a little bit more clearly as I walked through the house again.

I walked the main floor twice, something percolating in the back of my head.

It would come with a hefty price tag, and the moment I spoke it out loud

to Charlotte, she'd probably hit me with a dozen reasons why it wasn't a historically accurate decision.

But, for the first time, I could see what living in this house might look like.

For someone.

I still wasn't sure who.

Indecision clawed at my insides like the worst kinds of hunger pangs I'd ever imagined.

An inn, she'd mentioned once.

A rental property.

Or, I thought, someone's home. If I could find the right person for it.

When I walked back to the carriage house, Charlotte was pacing again. This time, the phone was aimed at her face.

"Oooh, no, I like that other one. The colors flow better with what you're putting in the kitchen, and because those tiles are such a bold choice, you're better off going subtle on the walls."

"Did we hear back about those tiles? From the estate in Italy?" a distorted voice said from the other end of her phone.

Charlotte paused her pacing, stopping at a stack of books on the kitchen table. "Hang on, I had a note back on that." She shuffled through some papers, eyes snapping quickly in my direction when I set the house plans in the corner. Her forehead wrinkled briefly, but she pivoted back to the phone call. "Right here. They can ship them next week. The freight they're charging is astronomical, but if you want something that's actually vintage for the floor in the back room, I don't think you have much of a choice."

"Tell them to go ahead. Thank you, Charlotte. You're a miracle worker."

The woman in question grinned.

The dimple popped out.

I turned on the TV, locking my eyes on the screen instead of on her.

"I'll let you know when I have a tracking number. Let me know if you need anything else, okay? I think you're good, though. Everything is coming together perfectly."

They said their goodbyes, and Charlotte disconnected the call, tucking her paperwork back into a file folder next to her laptop and all the books. "What did you need the plans for?" she asked.

"What was your meeting about? Your next job?"

She sighed heavily at my evasion. “No, I do consultations for virtual clients when my schedule allows. Usually word of mouth, or they find me on social media and want someone to make sure their design is going in the right direction for whatever time period they’re working with.” Charlotte tapped the file. “This couple lives in California; they bought a Tudor Revival from the ’30s.”

Despite all the reasons I shouldn’t ask, or allow that seed of interest to grow any further, I didn’t seem to be able to stop myself.

“Your aunt lives here, and you lived here when you were younger, right?” I asked.

She nodded, eyes wary. Her hands wrapped around her mug—still inexplicably half-full of coffee, even though she’d poured her first helping hours earlier.

“So why do you need the carriage house?”

Charlotte was raising the mug up to her face to take a sip, and she set it back down.

*For fuck’s sake, does she ever actually drink it?*

“I’ve been on other jobs the last couple of years,” she said. “About a year before I got this one, I was hired to help restore a hotel in Galena, Illinois. It was older than the Campbell House by about twenty years, and in much worse shape. Before that, I had back-to-back projects in southern Ohio.” She shrugged. “I’ve always been able to stay with my aunt Daphne and Richard when I’m back here, so buying myself a place didn’t really make sense.”

I grunted.

She sighed. “You’re not going to tell me why you were looking at the plans, are you?”

“Nope.”

Charlotte leveled me with an annoyed look and moved her coffee mug next to the sink. The mixing bowls were gone, and I saw her glance at the cabinets, reluctant curiosity stamped all over her face.

“They’re underneath the drawer with the silverware, by the mixer.”

“They’re harder to reach down there,” she said. “We’re tall, Burke.”

“How often have you used those mixing bowls, Charlotte?”

Her jaw set mulishly, and I fought the smile that threatened.

“When do you return to the Orange State again?”

“Probably not soon enough for you.”

She smiled sweetly, gathering books into her arms. “How very, very true.”



# Chapter Nine

## CHARLOTTE

It was my yell of distress that had Burke thundering from the yellow bedroom. His dark hair was still wet from his shower, sticking up at odd angles that shouldn't have been endearing.

“What is it?” he bellowed.

Sheepishly, I pointed at the TV. “I was just . . . watching that and got a little worked up.”

He heaved a great big breath, and I did not notice that the T-shirt he'd pulled on was sticking to the wet spots on his broad chest. “Seriously?”

I winced.

“I thought someone was breaking into the house,” he said.

“No,” I answered slowly. “But he was about to sell that at a garage sale.”

Burke blinked. Took another deep breath.

I gestured wildly at the screen. “That's a Duffner & Kimberly leaded-glass shade,” I said.

His face went blank. “And?”

“That lampshade is worth, I don't know, fifteen thousand dollars?”

The blank face was gone. In its place was horror. “That? It looks like my nephew made it in art class. My nephew is nine and not all that good at art.”

“It does not. I would kill to have one of those at the Campbell House.” I pointed at the light fixture hanging over the small, round table in the carriage house. Not a leaded-glass shade worth fifteen grand, but it was cute and warm and added character. “See? They add visual interest. They fill the negative space in the room, warm it up.”

“Just because something's old doesn't mean we have to use every ugly

piece of furniture you can find.”

“That’s it.” I pressed a hand over my heart. “You are . . .”

When my voice trailed off, he crossed his arms over his chest. “What?”

“Impossible,” I yelled. “I take it back. I don’t want you here.”

“Too late, Cunningham.” He turned toward the bedroom, apparently done with this conversation now that I wasn’t getting attacked or whatever. “Mack should be here for his interview any minute, by the way.”

I froze. “Mack?”

He paused in the doorway. “Yeah.”

“Mack Kipling?” I asked with dismay.

His brows bent over his dark eyes. “Yeah.”

“No,” I moaned. “You didn’t.”

“What’s the matter with him? His website was great, and he doesn’t live that far from here. The plumber who came to install the new water heater told me about him.”

Would it be immature to stamp my foot on the ground? Probably.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake,” I muttered.

It was obvious Burke wasn’t used to hearing me swear—because I rarely did—but boy, oh boy, did this warrant it. My stomach got quivery again, and not in a good way.

“What’s wrong with him?”

Oh, there was no pleasant way to tell this story. But there was also absolutely no way in hell I was letting him be the guy in charge of renovating the Campbell House.

I rubbed my forehead. Simple. Simple and straightforward would have to do the trick. “We went out on a date about a month ago. He introduced himself at the hardware store, and when he asked, repeatedly, I told him we could grab a drink.”

Burke’s eyes narrowed. “And?”

With a hard swallow, I held his gaze as best I could. “It didn’t go well. At all.”

“Why not?” he barked.

The sound of a diesel engine punctuated the silence, and I swore again. Burke didn’t move his eyes from my face.

“We can’t hire him,” I said. “Please.”

“What did he do?”

The truck parked in front of the main house, and I blew out a short, hard

breath. “He made me really uncomfortable. He was . . . pushy.”

*Oh.*

*Oh my.*

If I thought I’d seen Burke’s grouchy thundercloud face before, I was very, very mistaken.

“How was he pushy?” His voice was low and quiet.

Something dangerous was flashing in his eyes, and my throat went dry. I tried to swallow, but it wasn’t easy.

There was this deep-seated instinct to brush it off because I hadn’t really gotten hurt, but that was really frickin’ stupid. And it served no one for me to downplay the fact that Mack Kipling was kind of an entitled dick. So I didn’t.

I managed the swallow and took a deep breath. “After listening to him talk about himself for an hour, I was very, very done. He didn’t like that I was ready to leave after one drink, and he sort of . . . followed me out to my car to voice his displeasure over the evening ending that way.”

“Did he, now?” The question was glacial. Burke’s gaze moved from my face out to the massive truck rumbling in front of the house.

That truck was absolutely compensating for something, if you catch my drift.

Mack climbed out of his truck and studied the Campbell House’s facade, completely unaware of our attention. Burke sized him up, his features harsh and unforgiving.

A pleasant shiver slid its way down my spine.

Mack was, objectively, a good-looking guy.

He’d been friendly enough when we talked. I’d seen no obvious creepy red flags. And every once in a while, a girl just wanted to check if she remembered how to flirt or date or kiss or whatever after a long time of . . . not.

All in all, Mack had been an excellent reminder that even if I did remember those things, not all interested guys were worthy recipients of my skills.

Burke glanced at the dining-room table and saw the crowbar I kept leaning against the wall—my flimsy attempt at a home security system.

Without a single look in my direction, eyes locked on that crowbar, he asked, “Did he lay a hand on you?”

Again, I tried to swallow. “Maybe . . . one. Just a little hand, though.”

Burke's eyebrow arched.

"Not little. But he just, like, tugged on my elbow a bit." I swallowed. "When I tried to leave."

That had been enough for me in the moment. Apparently, it was enough for Burke too.

Burke nodded, like he'd come to a decision.

Slowly, he bent over and picked up the crowbar, testing its weight in his hand.

"Burke," I said. "What are you doing?"

"Taking the trash out," he answered easily.

"You can't assault him." I tried to tug on his arm, but it was like trying to move a metal post.

His eyes were on fire. "Why not? He assaulted *you*."

My mouth hung open. The sheer righteous rage pouring off his body was potent. And surprising. "What if he calls the cops?"

"I would love to see him try."

Burke looked down at my hand curled around his arm. The skin underneath my palm was so warm, so firm. And for a second, we both just . . . stared at that single place where we touched.

Then he leaned in, eyes locking on mine. "He leaves now."

Finally, I let my hand slide off his forearm and nodded. Burke took that as confirmation. Or permission. I wasn't sure, but in the next breath, he was striding past me and pulling the carriage house door open with a mighty heave.

Mack turned at the sound, smiling that smarmy smile. "Hey. You must be . . ." His voice trailed off when he caught sight of me behind Burke, the grin falling off his face. "Charlotte?"

He didn't know I worked here, because I'd failed to mention it when I realized he was a giant, icky man-child whom I wanted nothing to do with. And as my big, grumpy roommate made a beeline toward him with a crowbar in his hand and a murderous expression on his face, I gave Mack a sunny smile and a tiny finger wave that had his face contorted in confusion.

When Burke approached the truck with the crowbar up and ready to swing, Mack's face dropped in shock. "What the hell are you doing?"

Burke pointed the crowbar at him. "Get the fuck off my property."

"You *invited* me here."

"I did. Before I knew you were a dick who puts his hands on women."

He pulled the crowbar back and aimed for the rear windshield. “Shall I start here, or you gonna leave, asshole?”

Mack started around the front of the truck, and my back went rigid with fear that these two brutes were actually going to fight. Over me.

Chivalrous displays aside, I wasn’t ready for that.

But when Mack took a step around the side, Burke planted his feet and gave him a look so deadly, so cold, that Mack stopped in his tracks. His throat worked on a swallow, and then he cast a desperate look back at me. “What did you tell him? I didn’t hurt you. I just didn’t want you to leave; it was supposed to be flattering.”

Burke growled, his hands tightening on the crowbar.

My chin rose an inch. “I told him the truth. I wanted to leave because you were a horrible date, and you tried to stop me from getting in the car.”

He huffed out a disbelieving laugh. “Trust me, I never would’ve asked you out if I’d known you were such a frigid bitch.”

The first swing of the crowbar shattered the back windshield, and there was a spectacular crunching sound as hundreds of glass pieces fell into the bed of Mack’s truck.

My jaw hinged open. Mack’s head reared back in shock.

“Want another one?” Burke asked.

“You’re fucking insane,” Mack shouted. “I’m calling the cops.”

Burke took that as an invitation to take aim at the passenger door, even as Mack climbed in and had the engine roaring to life. The crunch of metal was so very satisfying, and I covered my shocked laugh with one hand. Mack was shouting curse words and insults at Burke, who honestly just looked . . . terrifyingly in control.

“You ever come back here, I’ll take this to your balls,” Burke yelled over the roar of the engine.

The tires squealed as Mack backed out, and once he’d turned in a sharp U, they left a track on the driveway.

My hand still covered my mouth as I tried—tried and failed—to process what the hell I’d just witnessed.

Burke’s chest heaved as he tried to calm down, and after a few moments, he dropped the crowbar on the ground with a noisy clatter.

“You . . .” I said, my voice trailing off.

He glanced back at me, the color in his cheeks deepened. “What?”

I blinked and took a step toward him. “You don’t even like me.”

His brows bent in. “You drive me nuts,” he barked. “You constantly leave full coffee mugs sitting around, and half the shit you do makes no sense to me, and you have awful, awful taste in furniture. I hate just about everything you want to put in that house.”

I set my hands on my hips. “I have great taste.”

Burke took a step toward me. “But I don’t *not* like you,” he said gruffly. “What I don’t like is men who treat women like that. Who are disrespectful and pushy. I have a sister, and when I found out her ex-husband called her a bitch in front of their kids, I hopped on a plane across the country, walked into their house, and broke his fucking nose.”

My heart fluttered. A ridiculous kind of flutter too. “Oh,” I said weakly. Silence dropped between us, thick and heavy and sweet.

Burke’s eyes were so intense that it was hard to hold on to that gaze with my own, but I did.

When he chose his next words, I knew he’d thought them through before a single one passed his lips. I could see that in his eyes too.

“You’re my partner in this,” he said. “So no matter how much we bicker, or how much we disagree, I will always have your back.”

I would not cry.

I would not cry.

My chin quivered.

“Charlotte,” he warned.

“That’s just . . . one of the nicest things a guy has ever done for me.”

My voice wobbled.

I sniffed.

His eyes went a little panicky. “Please don’t cry.”

“I’m not,” I said.

Except I was lying, because there were tears, and they were slipping down my face. I swiped the back of my hand over my cheeks to erase the evidence. Burke eyed me warily.

I wanted to hug him. Very badly.

He’d give such good hugs. There was no other *option* than for him to give good hugs. Not with the size of his arms and the breadth of his chest. The sheer height and size of him. It would be warm and all encompassing, the kind of hug that was lingering happiness all the way down to your toes. And if I tried, I had the distinct feeling he’d bolt.

And that was the absolute last thing I wanted from Burke Barrett.

I took a tentative step forward, and he sucked in a breath when I held out my hand.

“Truce?” I said.

His palm engulfed mine. It was warm, just like his arm had been. Strong and confident and calloused.

“Truce,” he agreed.

I didn’t immediately release his hand, and he didn’t immediately release mine. It had my stomach doing backflips.

The loud squawk of a seagull overhead had us blinking out of the handshake. My fingers were trembling when I crossed my arms over my chest.

“So . . . still no builder.”

He nodded, his eyes aimed down at the ground. “Any more names on your magic list?”

I smiled. “I have a guy I can call. William is a referral from one of the builders yesterday. He’s based out of Chicago, but he’s willing to travel, and he specializes in houses of the mid- to late 1800s. I’d never heard of him. He has no social media presence, no website. Works completely on word of mouth and referrals, which means he’s good.”

Burke’s eyes briefly locked on mine, and then he glanced back at the house. “Good.”

“I’ll let you know when he can come for an interview.”

He scratched the side of his face. “I, uh, have to go back to Florida tomorrow.”

*Right.*

I schooled the expression on my face when our gazes met again, managing a polite nod. “Okay.”

“You feel okay being alone here after that?” he asked.

I blew out a breath and stared off in the direction in which Mack had disappeared. “I think so,” I said slowly. “Mack doesn’t know you’re leaving, so . . .”

He clenched his jaw, giving a short nod.

“And I’ll sleep with the crowbar, I promise.”

Burke scratched the back of his neck. “I’d stay, but . . . my nephew has a thing. And I promised I’d be there.”

“The nine-year-old nephew who could make a beautiful vintage lamp in art class?”

He exhaled a laugh. “Yeah.”

“I bet he loves having you around,” I said. It was a good reminder, despite our tentative new truce, that Burke had no real desire to be here.

Not for the long haul.

“My sister has twins. Felicia and Ford.” He sighed. “I didn’t visit much during the regular season or, uh, the off-season.”

“Why not?”

He shrugged. “My former brother-in-law hated me.”

I nodded seriously. “I probably would too, if you broke my nose.”

Burke stared at me for a moment, and then his lips curved into a tiny smile. “Yeah.”

“See? We can manage friendly conversations. Isn’t it nice?”

“It’s not awful,” he murmured.

“I guess we can thank Mack for that, then,” I said. “We’d still be arguing if it weren’t for him.”

Burke gave me a look.

I held up my hands. “I’m just saying. Truces are a good thing.”

“This doesn’t mean I’ll do whatever you say, though.”

I laughed. “I never thought you would.”



# Chapter Ten

## BURKE

**Charlotte:** We have a builder! William is GREAT.

**Burke:** And he can work with our timeline?

**Charlotte:** Yes. He just had a project fall through. They couldn't secure a grant from the state for the renovations, so he's free to start anytime.

**Burke:** Crew?

**Charlotte:** Three guys plus him. He has family here, so we don't have to cover room and board. He only has one subcontractor he's bringing in from Chicago—the plaster guy. Everyone else, he's open to using the people I know here.

**Burke:** Good. I'll be back in a couple of days.

**Charlotte:** Ahh. I was wondering. I sort of filled your room with art that I found in the attic. I'm making a spreadsheet of what we have and its estimated worth.

**Burke:** That'll help when we sell it to pay for the roof.

**Charlotte:** Funny. What did the estate lawyer say about that?

**Burke:** I've got it handled.

**Burke:** And I know that the whole west wing needs new framing. You think I don't notice how the ceiling is sagging?

**Charlotte:** I was going to tell you eventually.

**Burke:** When they started rebuilding walls?

**Charlotte:** ANYWAY. I'll clean out the room before you get here. Unless you don't mind Campbell ancestors staring at you while you sleep.

She attached a picture of a stout, stern-faced woman looking at the camera. She was wearing a high-necked dress and a lace bonnet thing on her head. I didn't realize I was smiling until my sister gasped.

"Holy crap, look at that," she said.

I wiped my expression and fixed her with a glare.

"You were smiling." She pressed a hand to her forehead. Next to her, Felicia giggled.

"I was not."

"Felicia?"

My niece grinned, and the sight of her gap-toothed smile had my heart feeling a little strange. "Definitely smiling. He looks happy."

I set my phone down. "You're the one who told me to be nicer to her."

Tansy gave her daughter a knowing look. "Isn't it awesome when the people in this family listen to me?"

Ignoring my sister, I turned my attention to Ford, who had just entered the kitchen. He was in full costume, ready for a dress rehearsal of the play I'd come home to watch. He gave me a nervous look.

"Well?" he asked.

Ford's class was doing a spring play, and his big theater debut was as Clark the Rooster in an updated version of *Henny Penny*.

Tansy clasped her hands in front of her mouth. "Oh my gosh, you look adorable," she crooned.

That didn't make him feel any better. His eyes went round and his cheeks pink with embarrassment.

“He doesn’t look adorable,” I said.

Ford blinked.

“He looks”—I paused—“manly.”

My nephew’s skinny little chest puffed out. “Do I?”

“Oh yeah.” I stood and appraised his full costume. The red comb coming out of his head was obnoxiously large, and the wings covering his arms were . . . so, so orange. “Clark the Rooster looks like a guy who knows what’s going on. Very commanding.”

Ford grinned.

Tansy gave me a sidelong look, so full of adoration that it made me uncomfortable.

These kids had been through a lot, and maybe it was a bit of a bruise for me—their stern father, who’d constantly tried to push them into one thing. The thing he liked and approved of. For Tansy’s ex-husband, that had been baseball. Neither of his kids had any talent or interest in it.

When I was their age, I had a talent for football and just enough interest that I was easily swayed by my own father. That was when his clear favoritism for me was born. While I was younger, it wasn’t noticeable. Not until I was a junior in high school and caught Tansy crying in her bedroom when he missed one of her orchestra concerts. Again.

When I’d asked him why he never went to her stuff, he’d shrugged. “Why would I need to? That’s the kind of crap people leave behind when they grow up. You’re cementing a legacy; I’d rather watch that.”

That was when I started attending all my sister’s functions—whenever my schedule allowed it, at least.

College had been hard because I was a few states away by then. Playing in the NFL was even harder because it kept me away from her and she’d married the first guy who showed her any positive attention—and he and I hated each other.

I knew exactly what my role was now that I had free time. I might feel a bit unmoored everywhere else in my life, but not with her kids.

They’d never feel slighted over the things they enjoyed, and I’d be in the front row for as much of it as possible.

In the five days I’d been back, I’d gone to a piano recital for Felicia and helped her pick a tea set for her dolls—something she’d wanted for her birthday. I’d listened to Ford practice his recorder—music wasn’t quite his strong suit, as it was for his sister—and managed to keep my wincing to a

minimum when he missed a few notes. I helped him practice lines for *Henny Penny*, and when we took breaks, I showed him how to throw a spiral in the backyard.

He was horrible at it, and I acted like every single wobbly, too-short throw was the best thing I'd ever seen.

Tansy punched me in the arm. "You didn't say anything about the house link I sent you."

"Too modern." I reached over to pinch the skin under her arm, and she kicked her leg out at me. Felicia giggled. "Who's gonna clean all those windows, because it won't be me."

She sighed. "And the other one?"

I shrugged. "I didn't love the layout."

My sister hummed. "It reminded me of that house we lived in, oh . . . what grade was I in? Maybe fifth?"

I grunted.

"Hated that house. I don't even know why I sent it, because I'd *never* want to visit."

"I just don't know what I want." I shifted on the chair.

Tansy gave me a curious stare.

"What?" I barked.

"Nothing," she said lightly. "I'll keep looking if you want me to."

"You don't have to. I'll . . . get to it eventually."

Punctuating the space in my days between those things was my new, tentative truce with Charlotte.

A few times a day, her name would appear on my lock screen with some small update about the project.

**Charlotte:** I found a guy on the east side of the state who can make a spindle to match the one you broke! Aren't you relieved?

**Me:** Tremendously.

**Charlotte:** Have you made a decision on the house yet?

**Me:** Nope.

**Charlotte:** Would it be helpful if I found some numbers on historical properties as income generators?

**Me:** Nope.

**Charlotte:** How do you feel about a high tea service?

**Me:** If I knew what that was, I might have a helpful opinion.

**Charlotte:** How do you feel about schmoozing with local politicians to find out more information about some historic preservation grant funds at the state level?

**Me:** Horrible. I'm not friendly enough to suck up to anyone.

**Charlotte:** Good point.

**Charlotte:** But! You're an athlete. Aren't people like you idolized or something?

**Me:** If we are, I think you missed that class in college.

Annoyance wasn't my immediate response when I saw her name anymore. Neither was it the excitement my sister was trying to ascribe to it, but it wasn't worth arguing with Tansy when she got an idea in her head.

My mistake, in hindsight, had been telling my little sister about Mack, the builder who almost got a crowbar to the face.

She was delighted to hear about my reaction, even though I reminded her—more than once—that it didn't mean anything.

All it meant was that I hated bullies. I hated guys who thought they could treat women like that. It didn't mean that the hot spike of protective anger was specific to Charlotte. Or that the idea of her feeling scared was unique in making me want to tear that guy's face in half.

Her relieved smile after he left, the one that showed the tiny gap in her teeth, wasn't anything special. It didn't turn my heart over because it was

from her.

It was just . . . adrenaline.

“Earth to Burke,” my sister said, snapping her fingers in front of my face.

“Yeah. Sorry.”

“Your phone is trying to get your attention.”

I’d tossed it on the counter because the last thing I needed was Tansy thinking I was waiting for another text from Charlotte. When I glanced at the screen, my eyes narrowed at the unknown number.

**Unknown number:** I’m gonna call you and you bloody well better answer, you asshole.

**Unknown number:** It’s Liam. Davies.

**Unknown number:** I’m serious. I’m calling right now.

“Shit,” I muttered. Liam Davies was Chris’s friend in the pros that I was in college. If Chris had adopted me at Michigan, recognizing a guy who needed a friend, then he’d done the exact same thing for Liam.

A British transplant to the States, playing a game that no one in his family understood, Liam was an absolute monster on the field.

He was fast and strong and the crankiest motherfucker I’d ever met. He barked at everyone on the team, and for some reason, every single guy who played alongside Liam would take a bullet for him.

We’d met on the field, of course. But I’d hardly gotten more than one grumbled word in greeting. The only time I’d heard him string together a full sentence was when we were at Chris and Amie’s house for their wedding reception. At the funeral, we’d both acted as pallbearers, exchanging one long, heavy look before we stood opposite each other around Chris’s coffin. Then around Amie’s.

I excused myself from the family room, and just as my bedroom door was closing, the phone rang.

“Davies,” I said.

“I know you got that invitation. Why haven’t you RSVPed?” he barked. “I just got off the phone with some lady at the school asking me if I was

friends with you, and I told her no fucking way I'd call you a friend of mine."

"Nice to talk to you too." I sat on the edge of my bed and sighed. "And I didn't answer because I don't know if I'm going."

The thick cardstock, stamped with the deep-blue *M* of my and Chris's alma mater, sat untouched on my nightstand.

"Why the bleeding fuck wouldn't you?" Still barking. I held the phone away from my ear. "This is the kind of shit that we have to do for Mira, whether we want to or not."

My eyebrows shot up. "Mira?"

He went quiet. "You didn't hear."

"Hear what?"

Liam sighed, slow and steady. "I'm one of her guardians. Thanks for giving her all that extra money, by the way. Didn't think you were that nice."

My mouth fell open. "You?"

"Don't sound so shocked, you prick."

I rubbed my forehead. "Wait . . . *you're* the other person they chose to take care of her? You and the best friend?"

Liam mumbled something, an impressive assortment of curse words—some British, some American—and I whistled.

"Going well, then, I take it."

He sighed again. "I loved Chris like a brother. But I could kill him myself for not explaining this beforehand."

I exhaled a humorless laugh under my breath. "Same."

"Lawyer asshole told me you got the old house."

I grunted.

"That good?"

"It's two hundred years old and falling apart in just about every way that matters. Just trying to figure out how the hell I'm supposed to do what Chris wanted without it taking over my life."

"That's the point, isn't it?" he asked quietly. "None of this plays out in a way where it doesn't take over our lives. We didn't ask it to. And maybe most days it's the last fucking thing we want to think about. But they didn't get a choice in how they left. I don't see why we should be any different."

"I know that, Davies." I scrubbed a hand over my face. "But don't tell me you reacted perfectly, either, when he called you."

"No, I didn't," he stated baldly. "I blistered that fucker's ears off with the things that came out of my mouth. Because Chris, of all people, knew

why I didn't want a family. He knew better than this."

I managed a grim smile. "So we have that in common, then," I said.

"What?"

"Chris knew that when I retired, all I wanted was peace and quiet. I wanted rest. I'd chased someone else's dreams for too long."

Liam was quiet again, both of us processing that single thread of commonality between us. What it might mean that our friend had made these huge choices that we didn't understand.

"Directing our lives from the bloody grave," Liam said quietly.

"Seems so." My throat went tight. "How's the kid?"

"Doesn't sleep for shit," he growled. "Hates vegetables. Looks like her mum."

When his voice softened at the end, I decided not to point it out.

"And the best friend?"

"Drives me up a fucking wall, she does. Living in the same house with her is not something I can take much longer, not if they expect me to stay sane."

Another thing we had in common, and this time, I didn't stop the laugh.

"What's so funny?" he barked.

"I have a woman like that too," I said. "She came with the house."

He grunted.

Another text came in on my phone, and I saw Charlotte's name. I exhaled heavily.

"You better go to the game," he said.

"Shit," I muttered. "It's at a game?"

"September. They want to do something before kickoff honoring Chris and Amie. If I have to go, so do you."

"That the new rule now? Mutual suffering?"

"Yeah."

"What is it?" I asked. "Anything besides showing up and standing on the sidelines?"

"Open up your fucking mail and read it yourself."

"I sincerely hope Mira doesn't absorb your people skills."

Liam ignored that with a heavy sigh. "You in Michigan now?" he asked.

"In Florida this week."

"How nice," he said, the sarcasm thick in his voice, "that you can take a



week off from your legal responsibilities when you feel so moved.”

“Screw you. I’m going back in a couple of days, and I’ll be there for a while when we start the renovations.”

He grunted again. “Don’t fuck it up.”

I tapped on the text message and barely managed not to laugh out loud.

**Charlotte:** Seventeen settees on my spreadsheet. Maybe we could sell a couple.

I didn’t want to, but I imagined her smile as she sent it. The way her dimple probably peeked out on her right cheek.

“I won’t,” I told Liam. “I promise.”

# Chapter Eleven

## CHARLOTTE

I was not prepared for Burke's return to the Campbell House.

Not because I didn't know he was coming. Or when his plane was landing.

It was so much worse.

I had *butterflies*.

After an hour of cleaning up the carriage house, I heard his car approaching, and my stomach positively erupted with those little assholes.

Fluttering and flying and sending my nerves into absolute disarray.

If I lived in the 1800s, I would've locked myself in my room for the rest of the day to recover from the vapors.

And it was stupid, honestly. One display of chivalry, one display of testosterone-fueled protectiveness, and my stomach was rolling in heady loops.

Wasn't that the scariest part of riding a roller coaster? You could have all the protection in the world. Iron bars locked over your stomach. An entire apparatus cinching you into place to ensure your safe arrival on the other side. But when the car crested the top of the hill, you still had that moment before the free fall.

I didn't really like riding roller coasters, but the last time I had, it felt an awful lot like waiting for Burke to come inside.

It was a perfect storm: terrifying and exhilarating. Every nerve ending—head to friggin' toe—was lit up like one of those Lite-Brite toys I had when I was little.

He wasn't gentle. Or sweet.

He played football.

Didn't care about any of the things that I loved.

We bickered. Constantly.

And without so much as a kiss, or even an acknowledgment that he might feel the same, I was locked in on the Big, Scary Ride before I knew what was happening.

The car door slammed, and before Burke walked into the house, I gave myself a stern look in the mirror of the bathroom. My reflection—that traitorous bitch—was pink cheeked and bright eyed.

“Damn it,” I whispered miserably.

The carriage house smelled like lemon cleaner and fresh laundry, and when the front door opened, I heard him take a deep inhale, then hum appreciatively.

The hum was low and made all the little hairs on the back of my neck stand up.

“Charlotte?” he asked.

Slowly, I blew out a steadying breath, then came out of the bathroom with a polite smile on my face. At least, I hoped it was polite. Not at all manic or tinged panicky from this little winged development happening in my body.

“Welcome back.”

He was staring at the perfectly clean kitchen counter. His eyes cut over to me, and the amusement was so positively brimming, I wanted to slap him. Or kiss him. Maybe both.

“You cleaned for me?”

“No.” I crossed my fingers behind my back. “I was going to clean today anyway.”

He made a soft grunting noise, and I couldn’t tell whether he believed me.

“Good flight?”

“The crew and I are great friends at this point,” he said. Burke tossed his bag onto the floor just inside the doorway of the yellow bedroom. “They told me to say hi.”

I laughed. “They did not.”

He held his hands up. “They did. Damon—he’s been a flight attendant for fifteen years—is already planning a visit to the area with his husband. Wants to see the house when we’re done.”

His casual use of *we* didn’t help the looping, swirling feeling.

*We’re partners in this*, he’d said. *I will always have your back*. It was

hardly a declaration of love, and it wasn't even close to lust. It was scarier than both of those things because it firmly placed trust as the bedrock for whatever this relationship was turning into.

“Good.” I hitched my hip onto the counter as he filled a glass with water and knocked back the whole thing. “Hopefully he can be patient. We’ve got a long way to go.”

He sank into one of the chairs by the small dining table, stretching out his long legs with a groan. “Speaking of . . . When is William starting?”

“He’ll be here next week. We have a pretty hefty list to accomplish before they can start. Because we already had township approval on the plans, it’s just a matter of emptying out the rooms and cataloging everything as it goes into storage, and then”—I shrugged—“the hard part starts.”

Burke eyed me. “He say anything about the west bedroom upstairs?”

I swallowed. “Are you sure you want to talk about that just now?”

He kept his gaze even and unblinking.

“Ugh. Fine. Yes, it’s sagging, and no, we don’t know the extent of why.” I joined him at the table. “If it’s a foundation issue, it will be”—I paused—“significant extra cost.”

Burke nodded slowly. “And you think it is?”

I let out a long breath before answering. “Yes.”

He set his elbows on the table and rubbed his hands over his face. He looked exhausted. “I was afraid you were gonna say that.”

“We have to do it,” I said. “There’s no ‘if we fix it.’ If you want this to be a functioning house—whether it’s an inn or a rental or someone’s home or whatever—it has to be done.”

“But we could cut costs from other places,” he said. “Anyone who has a set budget would say the same thing. Guess what happens when a team hits the salary cap? You adjust somewhere else. We can’t just do whatever we want, Charlotte.”

When I thought about all the plans Amie and I had made, I knew it was the extras—the gorgeous, lush details and finishes—that would get cut first. Then I thought about our first face-to-face meeting. How quickly and easily we’d gotten along. Her hand gestures when she got excited. The cookies she’d made in the carriage house oven, which we ate with tea while we sat in the exact same spot where Burke and I sat now.

“What is it?” he asked.

I blinked, surprised at the serious way he was studying me.

“You look sad.”

“You told me you didn’t want to talk about Chris and Amie,” I said gently.

His jaw clenched, his eyes searing into mine. “I didn’t when you first brought them up.”

“And that’s changed?”

Burke rolled his neck, and the struggle of how to answer was stamped all over that handsome face of his. I’d asked the question kindly because if I felt their loss without really knowing them, I could only imagine how he felt.

“You’ve looked a lot of different ways since I’ve met you. Sad isn’t one of them.” He clasped his hands together on the table, his full attention unwavering on what I was about to say. “Tell me.”

“Such manners.”

Burke’s eyebrow arched slowly.

I stood from the table and went to my bedroom, where I picked up the book of wallpaper that I hadn’t quite been able to open since I’d gotten the call about the car accident.

When I took my seat again, he was eyeing the book with guarded curiosity.

The binding creaked when I opened it to the first marked page, and on the bright pink Post-it note was Amie’s swoopy cursive handwriting.

*Chris hates this one the most. Keep it as a top choice for the primary bedroom.*

My eyes watered before I turned the book in his direction. It took a second for the meaning to register, and once it did, his jaw clenched so tightly that I was shocked I didn’t hear the crack of his teeth. His eyes went a little red, his blinking rapid and obvious. Then he huffed out a low laugh.

“I can hear her saying something like that,” he said. His voice was rough and quiet. “You should’ve seen them when they started dating. They gave each other so much shit.”

I swallowed down my own tears, not because I didn’t have a history with his friends but because neither of us was ready for this to turn into a giant sob fest.

“She didn’t mean it,” I told him. “But she had all these plans to buy a roll of it, just to mess with him when it came time to put it up.”

Burke’s big hand traced the page in front of him—a repeating pattern of a scene with a bird on a tree branch next to a butterfly. The trees and

background were a muted tan and brown, but the bird and butterfly were vibrant in varying shades of blue and green and teal. It was bold. Not something either of us would've picked for the house, but in the right space, I could imagine it working.

"It's really, really ugly," he said.

I laughed. Loudly.

Burke's lips curved into a small smile, but he looked away so that I didn't see it.

"It's not that bad." I turned the page. "But it does come in different colors if you want something with pinks and oranges instead."

"I can guarantee you that I don't."

To my surprise, he started flipping pages. Sometimes he slowed on one and asked me about it.

"That's called a toile," I said. "It was a really commonly used design at the turn of the century—a repeating country scene like that. Sometimes you'll see hunting dogs and horses, sometimes it would be birds and trees." I paused to gauge the expression on his face, but he seemed genuinely interested. "All the designs were pretty formal back then. Maybe the family bedrooms would have had a smaller, simpler design. But anyplace where they'd entertain guests, you'd see these larger patterns, bolder colors."

"Chris would've hated all of this," he murmured. "Would've wanted to paint the whole house white, I bet."

My voice came out in a whisper. "That's what Amie said too."

He blinked hard but didn't respond.

I set my chin in my hands, studying his facial expressions as he slowly looked through the designs. It was indulgent to note the tiny lines next to his eyes, the brackets around his mouth that were deep when he smiled—on those rare, rare occasions.

Of course I'd find the most complicated, taciturn man and develop big, scary, roller-coastery feelings for him.

*Maybe I just need to get laid*, I thought desperately. Maybe it was just years of pent-up sexual frustration, and he was the first available target.

Like in those horror movies where a demon jumps into the nearest dead body.

Not the most attractive metaphor, but it felt appropriate the longer I stared. I shook myself out of that train of thought.

"Amie always lit up when she talked about him."

His gaze darted up to mine, and the firm line of his lips curved into a subdued smile. “He was the same, trust me.”

Life was such a fickle thing. The randomness of it all hollowed out my chest with a deep, aching sadness.

They would never grow old.

Wouldn’t see their daughter grow up.

I sighed. “She had so many big ideas, you know? But she reined a lot of them in because she knew at some point he’d start calling this place their money pit.”

Burke exhaled a laugh. “That is scarily accurate.” He paused. “What kind of stuff?”

As I thought through our different meetings, I sat back in my chair. “One of the biggest was the kitchen.” I smiled. “She actually thought about moving it so we could make it bigger.”

His head snapped up. “She did?”

I nodded.

“To the front drawing room?”

My eyebrows arched in surprise. “Yes, actually,” I said slowly. “How did you know?”

Burke swallowed. “The day I had the plans,” he said, “that’s what I was thinking about. If you swapped those rooms, shifted some of the plumbing over . . .”

Well, shit.

My heart did this horrible melting thing, emitting a weak sort of thrumming in my chest. “What made you think about it?”

“Just . . . thinking about who might live here someday, I guess.” His cheeks went a little pink, and I wanted to climb into his lap when I realized it. “You’d have a better view. Bigger space.”

I couldn’t tear my gaze away from him.

Burke cleared his throat, redirecting his attention to the book again.

When he came to the next page, with another one of the pink Post-its at the top, he paused. *Front entryway*, Amie’s note simply read.

It was beautiful, one that she and I had agreed on easily. The pattern was elegant but understated—a simple light-blue damask design on a slightly darker blue background—while staying very era appropriate.

“She wanted this?” he asked.

“Yeah.” I cleared my throat. “That’s what I got sad about. I was

thinking about some of the finishes we discussed but never decided on. And if it comes down to it, which of those things will have to be cut.” I paused. “And I understand why. I do. But it still makes me sad.”

His voice was quiet when he spoke next. “She painted their daughter’s room this shade of blue.”

I smiled. “Did she?”

He nodded. “She said no matter whether the baby was a boy or a girl, their child would feel like they were looking into the sky all the time. I saw it right before Mira was born, when I visited during the off-season.”

Burke was quiet, his eyes focused on the book in front of him. Carefully, he traced the light-blue pattern. His hand was so big, and I wasn’t quite sure why the sight of him studying it with such focused attention had my throat going tight. “It looks like . . . flowers. Sort of.”

I made a soft noise in agreement. “It does.”

“Is it expensive?”

I nodded. “A lot more expensive than painting the rooms, that’s for sure. We only planned for a couple of rooms to have it. The entryway, for the impact. And the downstairs powder room. We hadn’t picked those designs out yet, but I know which ones she kept coming back to.”

Burke kept his eyes on that blue wallpaper. “Okay.”

I looked at him questioningly. “Okay?”

“We’re doing it.” His eyes locked on me, and what I saw there had my throat going dry. “Tell me what she wanted, and we’ll make it happen.”

“What?” I whispered.

“All of it. Moving the kitchen, the wallpaper, the furniture. Whatever it is, I want to know.”

Oh. *Oh.*

His face was stern.

Decisive.

Harsh and beautiful.

Instantly, I felt sorry for anyone who tried to tell him he couldn’t do the things he wanted in order to honor his friends.

It did strange, terrifying, exhilarating things inside me. Because it was the moment right before the free fall—the headlong pitch where the speed picked up, the breath caught in your lungs, and your heart started racing.

There was no way I couldn’t ask, even though I wasn’t entirely sure I was ready to hear the answer.



I exhaled a shaky laugh. “What happened while you were gone?”

Burke slowly pushed the wallpaper book back in my direction. It was a long moment before he answered.

“I had a good reminder a couple of days ago,” he said. “One I should’ve been able to give myself.”

It was cryptic, but he’d answered. And I had to remind myself how far we’d come in a few short weeks.

“Well, whatever that reminder was, I hope it’s got you excited to empty out furniture and not mess up my spreadsheet.”

He studied my face, conceding with a nod and an amused spark in his eyes. “I wouldn’t dare.”

The amusement was a good look on him. Devastating, actually. My face felt warm when I stood and returned the book to my bedroom.

He was still at the table when I walked back into the kitchen. “Ready to get to work?” I asked.

“You’re the boss,” he said. “Show me where you need me.”

I gave him a disbelieving look, and he chuckled lightly under his breath. The roller coaster was off, and I could practically feel the wind rushing at my face as he and I walked over to the house to start on the first room.

It was a good thing I knew better than to feel anything real for Burke Barrett.

That for years I’d honed the skill of keeping my heart safe.

That I’d never develop genuine feelings for someone who already had one foot out the door.

It was a good thing I was smarter than all that.

# Chapter Twelve

BURKE

As it turned out, moving a kitchen wasn't quite as simple as an impassioned "let's do it" speech.

"I can't talk about it anymore, Charlotte."

"You don't have a choice. Come here."

"I'm napping."

"Sure you are."

I settled deeper into the couch, punching my fist into the throw pillow under my head and closing my eyes resolutely. The sound of her chair scraping back along the wood floor was my warning, but I ignored it. Charlotte tugged the blanket off me and pulled at the pillow.

Because I had a tightfisted grip on it, she wasn't able to get it fully clear of me. But she yanked hard enough that I almost rolled off the couch onto the floor.

I sat up, glaring at her retreating back. Her hair was down today, and I knew it was driving her crazy, because she kept tugging it over her shoulder while she worked at her laptop.

"I want my hair ties back," she called over her shoulder.

"I'll return them if you stop hijacking the TV every night." I stood up, folding the blanket she'd tossed onto the floor and settling it over the back of the couch. "If I watch one more second of *Antiques Roadshow*, I'm tossing that TV into the water."

She snorted. "You were just as into it as I was last night."

My neck felt hot. "No, I wasn't."

Charlotte tapped her chin. "Someone in this room dropped a very impassioned 'What the fuck?' when the appraisers said how much that Alexander Calder mobile was worth, and it wasn't me."

“It looked like a broken hanger. You can’t tell me you thought it was worth millions.”

She laughed. “You won’t hear an argument from me. Modern art is not my thing.”

On the table were the updated plans from the architect. We’d spent days working on the new layout, on virtual meetings with her while she marked up her screen and we talked through the options, trying to finalize the construction plans before William arrived. We’d looked at them until my eyes started crossing. We’d measured and measured and measured again.

Spent hours marking out the space with chalk to make sure we had the functionality right.

Talked through where things would go and why until I was ready to scream into my pillow every night if she asked me one more thing.

“One last pass.” She patted the seat next to her.

“I can’t do it, Charlotte.” I opened the fridge and grabbed one of my beers. I held it up, and she nodded. “If you make me talk through cabinet layouts one more time, we’re keeping the kitchen in the small room. I’ll take it all back.”

She smiled. “No, you won’t.”

I sat down at the table and handed over one of the bottles I’d just retrieved from the fridge. Our fingers brushed when I gave it to her. “I know,” I conceded with a sigh. When she took a long, appreciative pull from the beer, I dug into my front pocket and tossed her a hair tie.

Her eyes were warm and happy when she plucked it off the table and fashioned a complicated knot with nothing more than a twist of her hand. When all that hair was off her neck and shoulders, she sighed. “Better, thank you.”

I kept my eyes on the far wall as I nursed my beer.

She clicked through a couple of tabs on her laptop and then angled the screen so I could see it. “Just verify this is final, and we can go downtown.”

I cut her a look. “We?”

Charlotte batted her eyelashes. “Remember what I said about schmoozing with local politicians?”

“No way.”

“Oh, come on! The city supervisor is a Michigan alum. I’m not saying you’re, like, bribing her or anything. Just . . . smile and be friendly. Talk to her.”

My eyebrows rose slowly. “Be friendly?”

“I understand how difficult this will be for you,” she said patiently. “But I think she’ll be more amenable if you’re there with me. We only have a couple of days until William gets here; he’s already been very flexible, considering our last-minute change.”

I grunted.

Charlotte whispered something under her breath.

“What’s that?” I asked.

She smiled. “Just praying for patience. I still haven’t learned to speak this caveman language that you’re so fluent in.”

“Maybe that’s why I do it,” I said.

Her gaze sparked.

Every so often, I did it just to get this reaction out of her. Because when I did, our eyes would lock for about ten to fifteen seconds. Just like they were now.

I leaned forward, to see what she’d do.

Charlotte took another quick sip of her beer, and a drop clung to her bottom lip when she set the bottle down. The pink of her tongue appeared, licking at the drop. I sat back in my seat with a hard swallow.

I stared at the plans on her screen, then picked up the paper version that we’d been marking up all week.

“These are good,” I said. “I don’t think we need to change anything.”

“You sure?”

“I am quite sure that if I’d known the domino effect of changing the kitchen, I never would’ve said anything, yes.”

She rolled her lips together to hide her smile. Then she shook her head.

Charlotte stood from the table, gathering the final, clean version of the plans that she’d printed off at Daphne’s. “Liar,” she whispered toward my ear.

Under the table, my fists clenched.

When she disappeared into her bedroom to get her purse, I closed my eyes and blew out a slow, controlled breath.

“Let’s take your truck,” she said as she came out of her bedroom. She’d pulled on a nicer shirt, something black and fitted, with a deep V-neck. Her lashes were coated in black and looked longer than normal.

*You look nice*, I wanted to say.

But she always looked nice. Even when she was sleep rumped in the

morning and came out of the room with pillow creases on her face.

She looked nice when she was hauling pieces of furniture out of the house. Or cleaning parts of the yard.

She looked nice when she was curled up on the couch underneath that hideous crocheted monstrosity we fought over.

So I didn't say anything. The words felt like they'd drop heavily and create an awkward shift in our relationship that I wasn't sure would be welcome. I swallowed them down.

*I don't think you even notice when I look different.*

Angela had told me that one Sunday when I was leaving the house for a game. She'd cut her hair. Colored it or something.

And the worst part was that she wasn't wrong.

I hadn't noticed. And by the time we crossed our fifth anniversary—the last one we shared—I would not have said anything even if I had. Even when I did compliment her, it wasn't said in the right way. With the right tone.

It became easier to say nothing at all. To keep my attention where I wasn't a constant disappointment—on the football field.

Oblivious to the path of my thoughts, Charlotte started digging through her canvas tote bag, pulling out one item after another.

“How the hell do you fit all that stuff in there?”

She grinned. “Magic.”

I rolled my eyes. “We going or not?”

Charlotte stared down at the plans and tapped her finger against her chin. “Actually, maybe we should walk through one more time.”

“No. Nope.” I stood up, rolling the plans even as she tried to snatch them out of my hands. “No more, Charlotte.”

“Stop manhandling them.” She plucked them from my grasp. Almost. “What I *meant* is that we should walk through one more time once William is here. If he has any suggestions, we can sneak those in before we get approval on the addendum to the plans.”

I didn't let go right away, so there was a brief moment in which she pulled on her side, I pulled on mine, and it felt like the sexiest, strangest tug-of-war I'd ever engaged in.

Her cheeks flushed pink, and she relented first, carefully extracting her hand as her throat worked on a swallow.

Maybe I wasn't the only one feeling the tight pull of tension between us.

“Makes sense,” I conceded.

“Now you don’t have to be friendly to the scary woman at the office.”

Charlotte reached up and patted my cheek. Hard.

I dropped the plans, snatching her gently around the wrist.

Her mouth fell open on a delicate O.

“Play nice, Cunningham,” I said quietly.

“I’m always nice,” she answered.

I gave her a look, releasing my grip.

Before she turned away, I noticed her brush her fingers against the place I’d touched.

# Chapter Thirteen

BURKE

“I thought they were getting along last week,” Daphne said to Richard. She sort of whispered it, but given that Charlotte and I were facing off less than ten feet away from her aunt and the guy she refused to call her boyfriend, it was pretty easy to hear what she said.

Richard gave her a wry look. “Don’t get involved.”

Daphne held up her hands before helping him move one of the last end tables out of the final bedroom.

“It stays.” Charlotte settled her hands on her hips.

The aunt and non-boyfriend froze, looking between us.

“It goes,” I said. “Put it in the ‘for sale’ storage unit.”

Charlotte pointed at Daphne. “Remember who loves you eternally and will probably be the one feeding you when you’re ninety and can’t do it yourself.”

“That’s emotional blackmail,” Richard whispered. “I didn’t know she had it in her.”

I crossed my arms over my chest. “We have forty-nine end tables. We don’t need it.”

Charlotte scoffed. “We have half that many.”

With absolute glee, I marched over to the side of the room. Picked up her laptop. Handed it to her. “Check your stupid spreadsheet.”

“My spreadsheet is not stupid,” she said hotly.

“You’re right,” I conceded. “I actually love that spreadsheet, especially since it’s about to prove me right.”

Charlotte rolled her eyes, clicking through to the tab under which we were tracking smaller pieces of furniture. My mouth curled into a satisfied grin when she found the line.

Her expression turned flinty.

She shoved the laptop back at my chest. “I hate it when you’re right.”

I settled a hand over my heart. “Please stop. My heart can’t handle such sweet, sweet words coming out of your mouth.”

“Fine. It can go in the ‘for sale’ storage unit, you stubborn ass.” Charlotte threw me a dark, malevolent look and marched from the room.

I was still grinning when the front door slammed.

Daphne chuckled. “You certainly do bring out a different side of her.”

“What happened this week?” Richard asked.

I blew out a breath. “Don’t think we have enough time to answer that question, Richard.”

“The builder isn’t due here for another hour,” he said.

“Exactly,” I answered with grim honesty.

Without asking anything else, they moved the table down the main staircase and loaded it into the back of my rented truck—the vehicle bound for the final trip to the “for sale” storage unit. Into her car, Charlotte was loading the last of the items headed for the “keep” storage unit, which was far fuller than I’d hoped.

Once the table was safely inside, I covered it with a moving blanket and made sure it was secure under a tightened strap. With that done, I closed the bed of the truck just as Charlotte reappeared from the carriage house with the last piece of artwork that needed to go into storage.

Her hair was tied back today in some curly ponytail thing that bounced vigorously with each angry step. Her eyes—when they met mine across the front yard—promised vengeance when we were alone later. Every time her foot struck the ground, her facial expression had me thinking she was imagining my balls underneath her. I lifted two fingers to my temple in salute, and I was pretty sure I saw her mouth something foul underneath her breath.

Frustration bled through every interaction we’d had for the last two days. It clawed fiercely at my insides too, but I’d yet to figure out a healthy way to get rid of it.

Daphne sighed. “You know that little boy on the playground who tugs on all the girls’ braids?”

I glanced sideways. “That’s not what I’m doing.”

“Isn’t it?” She shook her head. “You’re pushing buttons and you know it, young man.”



“She started it.”

Daphne looked heavenward. Hopefully she was praying for Charlotte’s attitude to change. “She’s so nice when you’re not around.”

“So everyone keeps saying.”

“What’d you do to her?”

“Nothing,” I barked.

But that wasn’t entirely true. For either of us.

The week had started out well. We were focused. Agreeable. Building spreadsheets and cataloging furniture and not constantly bickering.

Maybe even friendly?

I’d watched her start and stop drinking her coffee seventeen times. It was amazing, really. After observing her the last week, I wasn’t sure Charlotte had ever finished a full cup in her entire life.

When she watched *Antiques Roadshow*—which happened to be every frickin’ night—she spoke to the cast like they could hear her.

She was organized. Sort of. But only in a way that was indecipherable to others. No one else would ever be able to make sense of her systems.

During the steady days of dusty, tedious work, I’d stopped beating myself up over the fact that I was noticing every little thing about her and simply accepted it as an inevitable truth.

Not that any of those things had caused us to snap at each other all day, but the situation wasn’t anything I felt like explaining to Charlotte’s aunt.

She sighed, walking off with Richard when it was clear that I wasn’t going to give her any more information. The two piled into Charlotte’s car to help her unload at the “keep” unit. I climbed into my truck alone, since everything bound for the other unit was small enough to handle on my own.

It took less than five minutes to get to the unit, and I was able to unpack my load faster than the three of them, just one row over in the same storage facility.

As I pulled out of the parking lot, my phone rang.

“Hey, Tans,” I said. “Is the house still standing?”

“Despite my best efforts. Thought about throwing a rager just to see how much damage we could inflict.”

I smiled—the first real smile in days—and it felt good.

“How’s it going over there?” she asked. “Still getting along with Miss Cunningham?”

“How’d you know her last name?”

“Looked her up online because you are horribly stingy with details.” She paused meaningfully. “*Someone* didn’t mention that she is smoking.”

My face was warm. “Because it’s irrelevant.”

What a crock of shit. It was a good thing she couldn’t see me.

“You remember when I went through my red-hair phase and I was obsessed with that one model? She was on the Swimsuit cover and married the football player?”

I sighed. “Tansy.”

“That’s who she reminds me of.”

Great. Now I was thinking of Charlotte in a bikini. On a sandy beach. That’s what had gotten us into this mess in the first place.

“Anyway,” my sister continued, “I hope you’re still getting along. She seems nice.”

“You cannot know that from looking at her social media.”

“So you’re not getting along.”

I blew out a hard breath. “I’m hanging up on you.”

“No, you’re not.” She laughed. “What happened?”

I didn’t answer right away. While I waited for a red light to change, I pinched the bridge of my nose. “We were doing fine,” I said begrudgingly. “Until a couple of days ago.”

“Tell me,” Tansy said. I could hear the smile in her voice.

“She sort of . . . walked in on me naked.” After a stunned beat of silence, I reluctantly added, “And I didn’t handle it very well.”

Then laughter. Loud, obnoxious, younger-sister laughter.

I pulled the phone away from my ear. Waited for it to stop.

Then waited some more.

“Are you finished?” I asked.

“No,” she wheezed. “What . . . what happened?”

“I had just showered, okay? People shower at different times of day, and I shouldn’t have to clear it with my roommate. She was gone when I got in the damn thing in the first place.” I was yelling and wasn’t quite sure why.

Tansy’s peals of laughter had me tightening my grip on the steering wheel. “Oh my gosh, what next?”

“I couldn’t find a towel. I think she’d just done laundry or was moving things around, because she constantly puts things in random fucking places, so I was drying off my face with a stupid little washcloth that smelled like her. And the lock on that bathroom door doesn’t work very well, and . . . I

don't know, Tansy, what do you want me to say?"

"What did she do?"

My blood pressure spiked just thinking about it.

"She . . . screamed."

Tansy had devolved into snorting. "What . . . what did *you* do?"

I cleared my throat and rolled my neck until it popped. "Does it matter?"

"Yes, Burke."

"I . . . yelled at her. Sort of . . . dropped an f-bomb, and she tripped as she tried to leave the bathroom because my yelling scared her just as much as the . . ."

"Sight of your manhood?" my sister supplied.

"I am so glad you find this funny," I said darkly.

"I find it hilarious. She screams. You yell at her. Then what?"

"Then nothing." I yanked the steering wheel as I turned back into the driveway of the Campbell House.

That was the truth.

We were both—for very different reasons—completely mortified. She'd closed herself in her bedroom by the time I was dressed and out of the bathroom. And the longer I stewed about it without seeing her, without being able to laugh it off, the worse it got in my head.

I'd been noticing everything about her this whole time. What had Charlotte thought when she saw—quite literally—everything about me?

For days, I'd been wrapped up in thoughts of how her hair fell around her face. How she always slept in the shortest shorts in existence. How quiet she was in the mornings.

For days—weeks, if I was honest—I had imagined kissing her. How her skin would feel under my hands. The sounds she'd make if I slid my hand into those short black shorts.

What I hadn't imagined was a scream of horror. Or me yelling. Or her fleeing.

Too much time passed between the screaming, the yelling, the fleeing, and the first opportunity to see her face-to-face. By the time that happened, I was a snarling, snappish mess. A bear with its paw caught in a trap. And Charlotte was giving me a very wide berth.

She could hardly look at me for a solid day afterward.

Tansy's laughter had subsided, and she sighed heavily. "That is such a

disappointing story.”

“My apologies for not knowing ahead of time to make it more dramatic for you.”

“Gawd, if you’d been . . . *you know* . . . and you two had been flirting the last few days, that could have been epic.”

“Tansy,” I yelled. “It’s not . . . we’re not like that. She’s my business partner.”

What. A. Crock. Of. Shit.

“I don’t know,” she said with a sigh. “She sounds pretty great.”

“Great? She’s . . . she’s infuriating.”

I launched into a heated tirade about all the things Charlotte Cunningham did that drove me insane.

The coffee.

The spreadsheets.

The obsession with ugly furniture.

The fact that she argued over every single decision I wanted to make.

The tulip bulbs that she only pulled up because she was annoyed with me.

The handcuffs.

Tansy waited until I stopped, then hummed thoughtfully. I was still trying to catch my breath.

“So,” she said slowly, “she’s exactly your type, then.”

“What? How do you know what my type is?” I asked, completely bewildered at the turn of this conversation. “I don’t talk about women to you.”

“You’re talking about *her*. Pretty forcefully.”

“You *asked* me.”

“I’ve seen so many women throw themselves at you over the years that you played. Remember that end-of-the-season party you invited me to right before I met the ex?”

I grunted.

“You weren’t annoyed by their attention. It just didn’t register. You didn’t notice them at all.”

It was easy to ignore the women at parties like that, both when I was married and when I was single. I could’ve been swapped out for any single guy in a jersey and they wouldn’t have cared. An empty release with a woman I wouldn’t remember had never been my style.

It was easy to tell myself that, someday, I'd have the time to find someone.

Someday, I'd have the time to build a relationship, if that's what I wanted out of life.

Build a home. Build a life that could fill it.

For all those years, I'd never been able to picture any of it—not even when I was married—so the absence of those things never really seemed to register either.

And I hated that Tansy's pointed little barb about Charlotte—the myriad ways I *had* noticed her—stuck right in the center of my chest.

“What does that have to do with anything?” I muttered.

“You're embarrassed that she saw you naked when you weren't expecting it. I get it, whatever, blah blah.” She paused. “Man the hell up and talk to her about it. Obviously she's just as stubborn as you are, which could be a good thing or a horrible thing.”

“Horrible.”

My sister laughed. “Just talk to her. This is a stupid reason for the two of you not to get along. If I thought you'd listen, I'd encourage you to be honest. Vulnerable. Tell her you're embarrassed because you think she's beautiful and she saw your ding-dong when you weren't . . . ready.”

“Stop. I beg of you.”

“Fine.” She muffled the speaker on the phone to yell something at the twins. “I gotta go. Twins say hi. They're begging me to take them up to Michigan to see the house.”

“Soon,” I promised. “The builder should be here any minute. I'll know more about our timeline once I've had a chance to talk to him. Maybe later this summer, when we've made some progress.”

“Speaking of progress,” she said, “what about the link I sent you?”

“The yard was too small.”

Tansy was quiet.

I rolled my lips together. “I just . . . can't see myself there.”

“That's fair enough.” She sighed. “We'll find the one.”

“Thanks for looking, Tans.”

“You won't be back for a while, will you?” she asked.

I stared up at the house. The empty windows. The faded red door. The green grass that had filled in around it. The cherry tree just to the right of the west wing and covered in thick white blossoms.

“Not sure,” I said. “I’ll let you know.”

“Okay. Well, we’ll miss you. You need to get back to work, I’m sure.”

I cleared my throat. “Yeah. Have a couple of phone calls to make before they get back here.”

“Love you, brother.”

“Love you too.”

I didn’t get to my phone calls, though, because a large silver truck hauling a matching trailer pulled up in front of the house.

On the side of each one was a square logo, a looping *W* centered in the middle.

I wasn’t sure what I expected from William. Charlotte and I had never really talked details after she interviewed him. But the guy who stepped out of the truck was young. Younger than I had imagined, at least.

He was easily as tall as me, lanky and long limbed. He glanced up at the house with a small smile on his face, then looked around as he stretched his arms.

I got out of my truck, and William turned at the sound. “You must be William.”

He nodded, his handshake firm and his smile friendly. “You must be Burke Barrett. Pleasure to meet you.”

His face was tanned, unlined by age, and I couldn’t stop the words as they rolled out of my mouth. “You’re younger than I expected.”

William wasn’t fazed; he simply grinned, sliding his ball cap off his head and running a hand through his messy hair. “Yeah, I get that a lot.”

“Charlotte isn’t back yet. We just unloaded the last of the furniture out of the house.”

“Great. My crew is getting settled at my cousin’s lake house. It’s about ten minutes from here, so we’ll be close.”

“That’s a nice cousin to have.”

He laughed good-naturedly. “Indeed. She’s going to Europe this summer, so she said we could use it.”

“So you can really do this for us?” I asked him. “Even with our last-minute changes?”

William looked back at the house. The look in his eyes was far, far different from my own when I’d first arrived.

His expression was one of excitement. Reverence. And passion.

“Yeah, I can.”

He looked at the Campbell House like Charlotte did.

I nodded. “Good. Now, uh, can I ask you for a favor in the carriage house? We need something fixed in there.”

# Chapter Fourteen

## CHARLOTTE

The trucks in the driveway were empty, no men—neither the building kind nor the grumpy, overreacting-roommate kind—anywhere to be seen.

I called into the main house through the front door, but they weren't in there either.

“Huh.”

Daphne tilted her head toward the carriage house. “I think I just saw someone in there.”

“Oh. Okay.” I took a deep breath. It was good that William was in there with him, because Burke and I alone? Not good.

I'd successfully avoided that scenario the last couple of days.

“We'll meet William next time we're here,” Daphne said.

I nodded absently. “Thanks for helping today.”

“Richard wants to get home.” She patted his grizzled face. “Someone wants to purposely leave the bathroom door unlocked for me so we can pretend we're platonic roommates who are secretly attracted to each other and argue as a form of foreplay.”

I leveled a glare in her direction. “I never should have told you.”

Richard whispered, “I didn't say I wanted to do that.”

“I know, Richard. I wanted to get my point across.”

I steepled my fingers in front of my face and focused on deep, even breathing.

In and out.

My aunt simply smiled. “Have a good night, my darling niece.” She paused as she got into her car. “And if you happen to get any more naked sightings of the beautiful man you're attracted to, don't scream next time. Find another creative use for your mouth.”



Richard groaned.

“Please go away,” I told her.

She was laughing as she shut the car door.

In the car on the way over to the storage unit, there’d been a moment in which I’d thought about lying to her. But she was pestering me in that Daphne-pestery way that made it impossible for me to do anything but capitulate.

The minute the story was out, I knew what I should’ve done. Should’ve lied. Should’ve looked my aunt—whom I loved like a second mom—straight in the eye and lied my ass off.

It was embarrassing. For him. For me. For the collective Burke-and-Charlotte Campbell House team.

It was embarrassing for numerous reasons.

First, and not least, I felt really stupid.

The whole last week, something had been different. There’d been a shift. Sometimes I’d catch him looking at me in a certain way.

The kind of look that had my stomach swooping and my mouth going a little dry.

As much as Daphne wished it, I wasn’t that woman who stayed cool and calm and collected—who thought of creative uses for her mouth in such moments. I was the woman who had endured an epically long dry spell—five years and counting—and when confronted with a big, muscled, naked, gorgeous man yelling at me with his hands over his junk . . . I’d screamed and fallen ass over teakettle.

And as much as being tall was lauded as some amazing thing, when tall people fell, we fell *hard*. Like baby giraffes. But . . . whatever. I took a deep breath and walked into the house, ready to do business and ready to get started on this renovation.

I stopped short when I cleared the doorway. William was on his knees in front of the bathroom door, laughing at something Burke had just told him.

And Burke . . . he was smiling. A good smile too.

The smile made my heart skip. Made the butterflies dance through my belly.

Wasn’t that odd? That the sight of his smile made me want to climb him like a tree? At the moment, I could think of a whole slew of creative uses for mouths.

His eyes locked on to mine, and they still held that touch of wariness.

“Hey, Charlotte,” William said. “Your partner already has me hard at work.”

I cleared my throat. “I see that.”

Burke’s chest expanded on a deep breath. “Thought maybe that lock should be fixed.”

There was meaning in that sentence. A distinct tone. I paused before answering.

“Privacy is important,” I said.

He nodded. “It is. I’d hate to”—he tilted his head—“overreact if something happened because we didn’t have a working lock.”

I bit down on my blossoming smile. “I’d hate that too.”

If William had caught any subtext, God bless him, he didn’t let on. He finished putting the last screw in place. “There we go. Just needed to tighten a few things that got loose.”

Burke’s eyes held mine for a moment longer, and I gave him a tiny smile. His answering grin was a little crooked and a lot attractive.

William stood, breaking the moment between us. “You guys ready to get started?” he asked.



The fixed lock was a good turning point in our first week of work—now that we had a builder and crew tearing down all the old and weak and ugly things.

William, for as young and amiable as he was, took charge of the project with so much assurance that Burke and I both seemed to let out huge sighs of relief when he sat us down for our first meeting as a team.

“You’re right about the west bedroom wing,” he said. He slid a paper toward us. “I have a friend who does foundation work, and this is his recommendation. Now that we’ve taken down the plaster walls that can’t be saved and know what’s waiting for us in terms of electric and plumbing, this is the first thing we need to take care of.”

Burke and I leaned in, studying the quote for a moment. He tapped a finger on the total at the bottom, and I winced when I saw the amount of numbers before the decimal point.

“Do you need to call the lawyer?”

Without so much as a disgruntled sigh or an annoyed look, Burke shook his head. “We’re fine to move ahead with whatever we need.”

My eyebrows popped up. “Really?”

He grunted, tucking the quote into the folder where I kept all paperwork.

William nodded. “Great. We’ll start there. What I need from you two isn’t help with the grunt work, though we did appreciate the extra sets of hands with the demo the last few days.”

“From both of us?” Burke asked.

William nodded, handing us a second sheet of paper. “This is our rough timeline for the next sixish months—what will be done when and, more importantly, when I need to have finishes picked. That’s what I need from you two, first and foremost. I know we’re months off from install, but because we’re dealing with a tight turnaround and a historic property, we may hit our biggest delays on things like lights or tiles or plumbing fixtures.”

Burke glanced at me. “What did you and Amie have decided for finishes?”

“Nothing,” I answered honestly. “I have a general idea of the direction in which she wanted to go, but we didn’t settle on anything.”

“Were you working with an interior designer?” William asked.

I shook my head. “Just me. Amie trusted me on what was era appropriate, on how we could update without losing all the character from the time period.”

William nodded. “Good. That’s why the grant fell through on my last project.”

“Happens a lot,” I said.

“What does?” Burke asked.

I turned slightly in my chair. “People want the historic designation because it’s a huge tax benefit to the property. But you have to make design decisions that are in keeping with the era the house was from. They go too modern. Too updated.”

“So they pick couches that normal-size people can fit on? That must be nice.”

Internally, I rolled my eyes. And based on the look on Burke’s face, he could tell.

William glanced between us with a bemused smile.

“You’ll get used to it, William,” I told him, gesturing between me and Burke. “He has a slight prejudice against turn-of-the-century furnishings, but I plan to win him over.”

Burke snorted.

William laughed. "I'm just here to fix the house. You two do whatever you need to do behind closed doors; it's none of my business."

"It's not . . ." I stammered.

"Not like that," Burke barked.

Our eyes locked and then darted away.

"We're business partners," Burke mumbled.

"Who live in the same house," William said slowly.

My cheeks were flaming. "It's . . . easier."

William held up his hands. "As long as you can pick some flooring, counters, and tile in the next week, that's all I need to know."



William's directive, as it turned out, was not quite as easy as I thought. Because my business partner—whom I lived with and nothing else—did not want to come with me.

His new job, it seemed, was as unofficial supervisor of the young local crew that William had brought in for some heavy lifting.

He was sitting in a chair in front of the carriage house pretending to read. That was my first clue he was spying.

I snapped my fingers in his face when he didn't respond. "Burke."

He grunted. "I'm reading. Can't you see the book?"

"If you were actually reading, you'd be out by the water, not up here where a million people keep walking back and forth." I paused. "Plus, you haven't turned a page in, like, ten minutes."

His dark eyes lazily slid from the book in question up to mine. One eyebrow arched, and I felt a corresponding tug behind my navel.

"Someone's watching closely."

"You're being obnoxious."

One of the kids, who couldn't have been more than twenty, walked past the carriage house to get something out of his car. He eyed Burke with a mixture of trepidation and awe.

I gave him a friendly smile, and he tripped over a rock.

Burke snorted. "They're not intimidated by me. It's *you* who's distracting them."

I glanced down. "Me? I doubt it."

He gave me a mild eye roll. “Don’t play dumb; you’re far too smart for that.”

I was wearing soft cotton shorts and an oversize T-shirt that hung well past my ass. It swamped my upper body, which was what I loved about it. “How am I distracting them?”

“By being female and having the appropriate female parts,” he said.

“That’s all it takes? Gawd, I wasted so much time in my teen years trying to get attention.”

He sighed. “It’s the age bracket. These are boys. They think they’re men, which is what makes it worse.”

The kid passed us again, whipped off his hat, and grinned at me. “Miss Charlotte.”

When his eyes dipped down to my legs and slowly back up, Burke leaned forward in his chair.

“Don’t you need to get back to work?” he growled.

“This is ridiculous.” I sighed.

“I agree.”

I kicked at the side of his big, dumb foot. “I meant you. That kid is sweet and harmless, within a decade of my age. If he finds me attractive, then I’d say he has excellent taste.” I tilted my head. “A snowball’s chance in hell of anything happening, but excellent taste nonetheless.”

Burke glanced up at me. “Not your type?”

“Nah. I prefer them with a bit more . . .” I paused, because there was no way for me to finish that statement without sounding like I might be describing him. “Life experience” is what I settled on. “I can’t be teaching him everything, you know?”

Burke hummed.

What a load of shit, honestly. I wasn’t entirely sure that a moth wouldn’t fly out if I opened my legs in front of a man. There could be cobwebs. Creaky joints. Who knows?

I didn’t want anyone young or inexperienced.

When it was dark and I was alone in bed, I thought about big hands and a bigger body pressing me to the mattress, the man to whom they belonged telling me what he wanted to do to me.

My neck started to sweat, and I waved a hand in front of my face. “Come on, let’s go tile shopping.”

“Why do I have to go?” Burke asked. “Isn’t it great that I trust you to

pick everything?”

“Burke.”

He sighed, closing the book over his chest. With a groan, he stretched out his legs.

I had to pinch my eyes shut because I was getting these horrible flashbacks of what he'd looked like in the bathroom. The carved muscles. The light dusting of dark hair over his chest. The thin line of it down his flat stomach.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

“Meditating,” I lied.

“Liar.”

I sighed. “Come on. You're doing no good here.”

“Who's to say I'm going to do any good with you? I've never picked house finishes, and I've definitely never done it for a house that's supposed to look like it's a couple hundred years old.”

I reached down and tugged on his arm, but it was like trying to move a giant, grumpy rock. “If you come with me, I'll let you pick what we watch tonight.”

His head jerked up. “No *Antiques Roadshow*?”

“Cross my heart, hope to die.”

He jumped up. “Sold.”

# Chapter Fifteen

## CHARLOTTE

Expectations are a fickle, fickle bitch.

Though I was normally a glass-half-full, everything-will-work-out type of person, I fully expected that spending the next couple of weeks picking out finishes for the house with Burke would be a bit like pulling teeth: painful, necessary, and something you very much wanted over.

But it didn't happen that way. He didn't do any of the things I expected him to.

He listened.

He asked questions. Good ones too.

He didn't dictate what radio station we listened to, ceding that decision to me.

He didn't question my driving. Didn't interrupt me when I was talking, even if the topic wasn't something he cared too much about.

We picked flooring for the rooms in which the original couldn't be refinished, and even though he mostly deferred to my design choices, he had a good eye when he actually had an opinion on something.

Even if that opinion sounded very manlike in its delivery.

"The color of that counter hurts my eyes, and if you pick that for the kitchen, I'll hold the furniture hostage."

It shouldn't have been charming. Or funny. Or have made me want to pick other options like that just to needle him a little further.

Except that's exactly what I did, moving over to a black counter with massive white veins running through it. "Love this," I purred. I ran my fingers over the edge and sighed.

The horror on his face was so immediate that I burst out laughing.

His body stilled, then slumped in relief when he realized I was kidding.

I nudged him with my shoulder before moving on. He grunted.

“Funny,” he muttered.

We did not pick the countertop in question, deciding instead on a honed quartz in a creamy off-white color with subtle veining. He liked it because it wasn’t “so fucking shiny.”

I loved it because it would look beautiful with the deep blue I wanted to use on the kitchen cabinets.

In the midst of all that, he had moments every once in a while that revealed he didn’t hate this quite as much as he pretended to.

As we wandered around our third tile showroom of the day, he listened when I explained why something wouldn’t work for the Campbell House.

“Too modern again?” he asked. The tile in question was large, with beautiful gray-and-white striations.

“The coloring is fine; it’s the size on this one.” I pointed to a different display. “See those penny rounds—the sheet of small circles? Or that one on the edge with the black pattern in the middle? Those are perfect. It was small, detailed, design-focused tile back then. We can get away with neutrals on the floor, but we still have to keep the size correct.”

He hummed, picking the patterned black-and-white option off the wall. “It reminds me of a quilt,” he said, referencing the starburst design. “My sister had one like this growing up. My mom made it for her.”

I stilled. He so rarely shared anything. It was a lot like catching a glimpse of a wild animal. Your movements slowed and your breathing got really shallow because you didn’t want to be the one to scare it away.

“Does your sister still have it?” I asked. “Or your mom?”

Internally, I winced at how uncasual that sounded coming out.

He didn’t answer right away. When he did, his voice dipped a bit, like he was afraid someone might be listening. “My mom died when we were little. I’m not sure if Tansy still has it or not.”

Oh, sure. Of course he’d have something simple and heartbreaking in response.

The common thread between us was so clear. And I had the distinct feeling that if I picked at it, if I tugged on the thread he’d just shown me, he’d want to pull the words back into his head.

It took every ounce of discipline, but I decided to leave them right where they were.

I tilted the tile board in my direction. “I like it. We could do it in the



downstairs powder room.” I glanced in his direction. He was still studying the tile. “What do you think?”

Burke blinked a few times. “Yeah, that’s fine.”

“Good.” I glanced around. “I think one of the upstairs bathrooms should have some color.”

Burke didn’t say anything. In interpreting his grunting caveman language, I always took that as immediate acceptance.

Before we moved on, I added the starburst tile to the pile of samples tucked into my big canvas tote. The weight was heavy for the thin straps, and I grimaced as they dug into my shoulder.

Without saying anything, he gently tugged at the straps with his big hand, taking the bag off my arm and keeping hold of it himself. Why did that make my ribs feel tight?

He gestured to the other room. “Should we look back here too?”

Slowly, I nodded, then followed him into the next area.

There was a large display in the center of that room, and Burke slowed when we walked past it. I smiled because he’d homed in on all the right options.

I stood back and watched while he studied the tiles.

Right in the middle, there was a gorgeous patterned tile in crisp white and deep emerald green. It had just enough blue in it that it wasn’t garish.

It was perfect. I found myself holding my breath when his hand came up to trace the edge of the design.

Quietly, I joined him at the display, my arm brushing against his. “It’s beautiful,” I told him.

Burke dropped his hand. “Yeah?”

He seemed embarrassed that he’d been caught admiring it. Carefully, I pulled the sample board off the hook and turned it so that the green could catch the light.

“It’s a bold choice,” I said. “Where do you see this?”

He answered immediately. “The primary bathroom.”

“Maybe we paint the panels in that color.”

Burke nodded.

It was pricier than I’d anticipated, and I tapped my finger over the square footage price. “This is more than William figured for that bathroom.”

“Don’t worry about it,” he said gruffly.

The sound of a softly chugging engine at the other end of the shop

caught my attention. That's when I saw the train tracks running around the perimeter of the showroom. I smiled, watching the small train chug along through the store.

"We need the biggest, best train set we can find," I said softly. Then I caught myself. "If you keep it." Saying those words almost made me feel sick.

Burke's shoulder brushed against mine when he stopped next to me. "If I keep it," he said slowly.

"Did I ever tell you about the first time I went to the Campbell House?"

He shook his head.

"It was early December. My mom and I had just moved closer to Aunt Daphne, after my parents' divorce, and Daphne told us about this huge old house that did a Christmas open house for the community. They had a train set." I smiled. "At twelve, it sounded so dumb. Go to a stranger's house to watch a train set, right? But once we got there . . ." My voice trailed off. My eyes misted up a little, watching the tiny wheels churn around. "I fell in love. My mom and I both did."

"I'm assuming you don't mean with the train?"

I laughed under my breath. "No. With the house. It was magical. The whole community gathered there, listening to music and drinking hot chocolate and watching this amazing toy train weave all the way through the house. Every room looked like the North Pole exploded. Massive tree in the entryway. Garland and twinkling lights all down the banister. Candles in every window. Angels and different Nativity sets from around the world."

"What happened to them?"

I shrugged. "I don't know. If Chris got them after his grandparents died, I never heard about it."

He was quiet.

With a deep breath, I turned toward him. We were standing close. The closest we'd been since the bathroom incident.

His eyes were steady on mine.

The conversation felt fragile, but the further we went into this, the more wrong it felt that the house wouldn't be loved in the way it deserved.

What I didn't want to voice, even in the back of my mind, was that I was slowly imagining Burke loving it. Filling the space. Spending his days within those walls that he was bringing back to life.

But I had to say something, even if it caused a fracture in this peace

we'd found.

"That's what the Campbell House should be again. Somewhere magical. Not just a place that generates income or sits empty like a model home." I swallowed around a hot ball of emotion. He stayed quiet, dropping his chin to his chest while he listened. "Hot chocolate at Christmastime and Easter egg hunts in the spring. Popsicles and water balloon fights on the lawn during the summer. Maybe . . . a wedding on the water someday," I whispered.

Burke's eyes never wavered; I wasn't even sure he blinked.

"I know it's a lot. And it will cost a lot. But"—I shrugged helplessly—"I think it would make Amie and Chris happy. Knowing that this place he loved would bring joy to the people who live there. The way it did for me and my mom, when nothing in our lives made us very happy."

The words hung in the air between us—things soft and vulnerable that I wanted to take back. But for some reason, despite all the ways we got under each other's skin, I knew I could trust him with that one little piece of me.

He didn't respond, his face serious.

The longer the silence stretched, though, the more I felt like I'd revealed something I shouldn't have.

These were pieces of me—the foundational ones—that I'd never shared with any man.

I cleared my throat. "Okay, well . . . I think we can go place the order for these."

Burke's eyes never left my face, and for a moment, I thought he was going to say something, but instead he nodded.

He stayed fairly quiet as I spoke with the sales associate, and when they slid the purchase order toward him over the counter, he hardly spared a glance at the number on the bottom.

The woman looked between us with a twinkle in her eye, and I was pretty sure Burke didn't notice.

*I noticed.*

What, exactly, was she staring at? We weren't groping each other. We weren't exchanging lingering touches or making out in between tile displays. In fact, we hardly touched at all.

You couldn't have told that to my raging hormones, though. Her knowing look probably only triggered me so badly because I was caught in my own struggle to make peace with all these feelings that he brought out in me.

In the car, he slid his sunglasses over his face, since we were driving back into town with the setting sun aimed straight at us. I did the same because they felt like a necessary sort of armor.

I hated that word, though.

*Armor.*

I'd never associated myself with a hard word. With such a hard thing. And maybe I only was now because his was so thick.

Somehow it felt like I needed to meet him there, with some level of protection around our interactions. Like we were both holding our hands out to create some level of distance.

From what, though?

I didn't need constant access to Burke's heart, to all his secret thoughts and wishes. But my curiosity about him felt soft and fragile, like something he could easily crush if he wanted to.

"Should we pick up dinner for the crew?" he asked.

I glanced at him. "Yeah, we should."

"What do you want to get?"

We were stopped at a red light, and I thought about the options that we'd pass on our way back to the Campbell House.

"It's not necessarily on our way, but you still haven't tried a pasty," I teased. "You can't spend this much time in Northern Michigan without having at least one."

He sighed. We'd had this conversation many times. "They just don't sound good. No sauce? No cheese? Just . . ."

"Beautiful flaky pastry and meat and potatoes?" I finished. "Yes. You're going to regret ever waiting. Trust me."

He muttered something under his breath, and I grinned.

"I'll take that as a yes."

"That's your problem, Cunningham," he said. "You take silence as agreement, and I promise you, that is not always true."

I cut him a sideways look. "I know you well enough now to know that if you don't want to do something, you are *quite* verbose."

Even though his dark eyes were covered with sunglasses, I got the sense that he rolled them.

Oof. I shouldn't have liked it so much when he did that. Especially when his normally firm lips were sort of edged up in a slight smile.

That felt delicate too—the pushing of those boundaries with him when I

couldn't really tell if he welcomed it. If he felt the same buzzing sort of tension.

As we neared the heart of downtown and drove across the bridge over the Boardman River, I caught a glimpse of a recently closed storefront. I pulled my sunglasses down, narrowing my eyes as we drove past.

"Oh man, that boutique closed."

He hummed but didn't comment. I'd learned what that meant too. It was his way of letting me know he heard me, even if he didn't have anything major to contribute. I appreciated it, actually.

"They had really cool decor," I said, more to myself than to him. "Their light fixtures were vintage. Early 1900s, I think."

I slowed the car and tried to get a peek into the alley behind the empty building.

"What are you doing?"

"Do you see a dumpster back there?"

He groaned.

I smacked his arm. "Just check while I slow down. I can't drive and look at the same time."

"A valuable lesson, I think."

"Burke."

"Charlotte."

There was an open spot next to the curb, only about a block away from the storefront, and with a brief glance at the rearview mirror, I pulled the car into the space.

"Just a quick look," I told him.

He crossed his arms over his chest. "Knock yourself out."

"Oh, you're coming with me."

Burke snorted. "Yeah right. I'm not dumpster diving for more crap that we don't need."

"Light fixtures are expensive. Especially if they're vintage."

His eyebrow arched lazily. "If they're expensive, wouldn't they have sold them when they closed?"

Shit.

His smile was smug, so I knew my facial expression gave me away.

"One little look," I told him. "Plus, if there *is* something good in there, won't you be glad we will have saved all that money?"

The smug smile dropped.

Ha.

“What if I fall in because I have no one back there to help me?”

“I don’t know if I’d get that lucky.”

I shouldn’t have, but I laughed. “If I thought you meant that, I might be offended.”

Burke’s chest expanded slowly. “Fine,” he said, his voice growly and gruff and annoyed.

There was a spring in my step as we walked in between the storefronts.

“What was here?” he asked.

I glanced down the street, but no one was paying attention to us. “A women’s boutique. Catered to a little bit older crowd. Daphne used to shop here a lot.”

“I do not want to know what she bought.”

“It wasn’t a sex shop, Burke,” I teased.

His features turned grim. “If it was, you better warn me, because I’ll toss your ass in that dumpster and walk away.”

“I have the car keys.” I patted his shoulder. “And though your knee is getting better, I know you overdid it on your jog yesterday, so I don’t think you’d welcome the walk back on foot.”

He’d been limping slightly when he came back to the carriage house, damp with sweat and man pheromones that I’d done a very good job of ignoring while I worked on a virtual project at the dining-room table.

My comment made him grumble something under his breath, but this time I hid my smile. Part of Burke’s impressive armor was that he never, ever complained about his knee, instead doing as much as humanly possible to prove he was just fine.

The fact that I’d noticed had probably poked a bruise he wanted to keep untouched, so I decided to drop it.

The back of the shop was hidden from the road, in shadows because of the buildings around it. Not that downtown Traverse was a hotbed of traffic this time of year, but the sounds of the cars were muted too. The giant green dumpster sat directly behind the back entrance to the shop, and if I went up on tiptoe, I could just barely see over the edge. But I sucked in an excited breath when I caught a glimpse of amber-colored glass that looked suspiciously like a light cover.

“Here, hold up the lid.”

“Terrible fucking idea,” he muttered.

I rolled my eyes. "It won't take long."

"Why do I feel less likely to trust the woman who's about to make me carry actual garbage back to the car?" But he pulled the lid back and settled it against the brick wall behind the dumpster. He pushed his sunglasses up onto the top of his head and peered into the receptacle. "This is going to take forever, isn't it? It looks like an antique shop threw up in here."

"Does it?" I gasped. "Here, give me a boost up."

"Nope."

I sighed, gripping the edge of the dumpster and then wedging my foot along a support bar on the outside. I pulled my body weight up but couldn't quite swing my leg up and over. As I lay awkwardly on top of the dumpster, I risked a glance. He had his arms crossed over his impressive chest, watching with undisguised glee.

"How's it going?" he asked.

"This will go faster if you help me."

He pointed a finger in my direction. "That's the only reason I'll help."

Burke came up behind me and braced an arm against the dumpster. He bent one leg at the knee, then tapped the side of my bare leg. "Set your foot on my thigh."

Right.

He dropped his hand, but the heat of it remained on my skin. With a more solid place to brace my weight, I could get a better grip on the dumpster and use my upper-body strength to haul the other leg over. When I was straddling the ledge, I could finally see what I was looking at.

"Oooh, there are a couple of lights that aren't broken. They still have chains on and everything."

"Oh goody."

I shot him a look. "I don't dare set these down on the ground in case the glass breaks. I'll hand them out; you'll have to walk them one at a time to the car so you can set them in the back seat carefully."

He cocked his head. "Did I miss a *please* in there somewhere? Manners go a long way, Cunningham."

I turned and gently dropped my feet into the dumpster until I had fairly solid footing. Then I fluttered my lashes at him. "Burke, would you *please* take these lights when I hand them to you?"

He sighed but nodded.

I only fell once trying to get to the lights, and I wrinkled my nose at a

stench emanating from one of the bags. I was able to grab the first light and gingerly hand it over.

For as much as he gave me attitude, Burke treated the light as delicately as I would have.

After I got the second one into his careful hands, I tried unsuccessfully to pull myself over without his assistance while he brought it to the car.

When he returned, he found me with my upper body hanging over the ledge.

“Wipe that smile off your face,” I told him.

Not only did he not wipe the smile off his face, but the smile broadened. Why was the dimple in his cheek that deep? And that adorable?

More importantly, why were we like this with each other?

It was bizarre. Like nothing I’d ever experienced.

I wanted more of it. And I was absolutely terrified of what would happen if we pushed beyond this harmless flirtation that we seemed to always be suspended in.

“Come on, Red. Swing that leg over.”

“What a clever nickname,” I said dryly.

“I’m a clever guy.”

My hands tightened their grip on the rusty metal surface. “You’ll catch me?” I asked. “Because I wouldn’t put it past you to let me fall on my ass just to prove a point.”

Burke stepped closer, his eyes locked on mine. “I’ll catch you.”

My stomach went weightless, but I nodded. Moving slowly, I pulled one leg over the top until I felt his big hand wrap around my hip. A hard puff of air left my lungs, and all my focus zeroed in on his hand on my body. Before attempting to swing the second leg over, I balanced there until I felt like I was as stable as possible.

“That’s it,” he murmured.

The sound of his voice so close to my ear had me shivering slightly, and I pinched my eyes closed in the hope that he didn’t notice.

Burke, true to his word, didn’t let me fall. With his palm hot against my side, he guided my second leg down until my foot found purchase on the top of his leg. His fingers curled around my thigh. Thank God I’d shaved that morning.

“Can you turn?” he asked.

I cleared my throat because I sort of felt like I was about to have an



orgasm with his hand that close to the hem of my shorts, but I didn't think he needed to know that.

Carefully, I turned until the dumpster was hard against my back. Burke stared up at me, his face inscrutable and his eyes hot. I took a shuddery inhale and set my hand on top of his shoulder so I could hop off onto the pavement.

Our bodies weren't touching anymore.

Inches separated us as we stood there staring at each other.

His eyes locked on to my mouth, and unthinkingly, I licked my lips.

When attraction was the driver of silence, there was a unique feel to it. This was a different kind of quiet, not like the kind he'd given me when I was sharing vulnerable truths. It held a distinct weight, a throbbing pulse that built and built and built the longer it lasted.

"Maybe we should get dinner another time," he said. His voice made the hairs on my neck stand straight up.

I blinked. "Why?"

Then he leaned in and tapped the end of my nose. "Because you stink."

I smacked his stomach and left the dark, quiet alley to the sound of his booming laugh.

# Chapter Sixteen

## CHARLOTTE

Burke had been back in Florida for only about twenty-four hours before the quiet in the carriage house drove me over to Daphne and Richard's.

The door slammed against the wall, the poor recipient of my hurried movements.

"I need advice."

Richard froze, a spoon halfway to his mouth.

Daphne patted the cushion next to her on their faded blue couch. "Talk to me."

When Richard offered the spoon up to me, I stopped in the kitchen. "What is it?" I asked.

"Gazpacho."

Humming appreciatively, I took a slow taste of the cold vegetable soup he always made for us when the weather started turning warm. "Delicious," I gushed.

And change was definitely in the air. The night before, I'd kicked off my blankets in the middle of the night because my feet were hot.

Even though fall was generally my favorite time of year in Michigan, summer up north was a very, very close second. The days were luxuriously long, the sun not setting until after ten at the seasonal peak, and even though the humidity always had my hair frizzing out to high heaven if I tried to wear it down, it seemed to me like everyone slowed down to enjoy the heat after the long gray of winter.

I grabbed a bowl out of the cupboard and sighed happily while Richard filled it to the brim. He placed a piece of crusty bread on the rim, and I dropped a kiss on his bearded cheek.

Daphne was working on her cross-stitch, and she tilted the wooden

hoop in my direction so that I could see the design.

FUCK OFF, it proclaimed in bold magenta thread surrounded by some pretty blue flowers.

“Very nice,” I told her seriously. “Where are we displaying this one?”

She held it away from her face to study it with narrowed eyes. “I’m thinking I’ll put it by the front door.”

I nodded. “Of course.”

“What’s up, Charlie Brown?” she asked.

I swallowed the bite of bread in my mouth. I’d lost a bit of my fervor now that I was sitting in front of actual people, but I knew that if I could talk to anyone about this, it was Richard and Daphne.

“Burke is back in Florida.” I had another spoonful of soup. “And I don’t know exactly when he’ll be coming back.”

Daphne hummed, eyeing me over the embroidery hoop. “He’s not needed here?”

I shrugged. “The main focus at the house right now is patching all the plaster and redoing the crown. There’s not much for him to do at the moment.”

My face went warm because that was why *I* was here.

Burke. Doing things. Wanting to do things with him.

“Out with it,” Daphne murmured. “Your face is turning hot pink.”

“I think I’m having sex feelings for Burke.”

Richard choked on his gazpacho, but he recovered gracefully, dabbing at his mouth with a napkin. Daphne’s eyebrows rose slowly.

“Are we fifteen? I’m not sure anyone over the age of fifteen calls them ‘sex feelings.’”

I huffed. “I called them that on purpose. You know what I mean.”

She set aside the cross-stitch. “Well, I’ve never heard you proclaim something like this about any man you’ve ever met, so I’m not sure that I do.”

I took another sip of soup and let my thoughts settle into a coherent pattern.

“We have this . . . tension, right? Anyone can see it when we’re together. And at first I thought that maybe I was having real feelings. Butterfly feelings.”

“You don’t think that anymore?” Daphne asked.

I tore off a hunk of bread, dipped it in the soup, and ate it slowly. That

was a harder question to answer as the weeks went on.

Sometimes I wished there were a different name for it. *Tension* wasn't quite right. There was a slightly negative connotation to the way it sounded in my head. Something tight and uncomfortable, a rigidity that didn't fit the situation I found myself in.

*Tension* sounded like *stress*. Something that might break irreparably.

And that wasn't quite how I felt whenever Burke and I were together.

All I knew was that it was thrumming underneath every single one of our interactions, whether we were getting along or not.

Butterflies, I'd realized, weren't the right descriptor either. Those were innocent and sweet, unfurling their wings and flitting happily about.

"I think that it's been so long since I've been really, truly attracted to a man that I am confusing sweet, lovey feelings with I-kinda-want-to-rip-your-clothes-off feelings."

"Animal lust has a way of messing with the brain waves," Daphne said. "What do you plan to do about it?"

"That's why I need your advice." I set my soup bowl down on the coffee table and took a deep breath. "I have never, not in my entire adult life, had a no-strings-attached relationship with someone I knew I wasn't going to end up with long term."

Daphne's face sharpened with interest. "And you want to have one with Burke?"

"Maybe? I mean, we're both single."

Richard sighed. A long-suffering kind of sigh.

Daphne gave him a look. "Calm down. We haven't even gotten to the good stuff yet. If you can't hack it, feel free to vacate the room."

"No way," he said. "If I leave her to your devices, who knows where she'll end up?"

He wasn't wrong. If Daphne was the devil on my shoulder, whispering encouragement to do all the things I wanted, then Richard was the angel. He was the voice of caution when she wanted me to plunge headfirst into action.

"You don't think I should?"

He paused before answering. "I think you should weigh all the pros and cons before you cross this line in a professional relationship."

My shoulders sank. "I know. I would hate for anyone to think I make it a habit to sleep with clients, because that's definitely not me." I held up my hands. "It's hot in fiction, but this is my life."

“But something about him makes you want to cross that line,” Daphne said.

Slowly, I nodded. “It feels . . . safe, I guess.” I swallowed. Hard. “*He* makes me feel safe enough to consider it.”

“Safe how?” Richard asked.

I blew out a hard breath. “You know what it was like for my parents. They probably started their relationship thinking that their bickering was cute too. And then it wasn’t so cute after years of fighting.” I clasped my hands in my lap and watched the skin on my knuckles go white. “So maybe I can experience the fun part of that kind of relationship with Burke now, while he’s in my life. I’ll move on to another job after this,” I said quietly. “And he’ll go back to Florida. It’s perfect.”

Daphne and Richard were quiet, and when they shared a long, loaded look, I prepped myself for them to tell me this was a horrible idea.

Which was fair. I could flip a coin at any given point in my days and land on a different decision when it came to Burke.

Sometimes I wanted to climb onto his lap and take a nap. See how that big hand felt if he played with my hair while I fell asleep.

Sometimes I wanted to climb onto his lap sans clothes and see how long it took before he tossed me onto the closest horizontal surface. See how that big hand felt when it fisted my hair back.

The dilemma was obvious.

Neither was a convenient feeling. And both stemmed from a shocking lack of physical affection over the last few years.

I loved my life. I wasn’t moping through my days or seeking out any guy who glanced my way. It wasn’t like I woke up with some deep sense of yearning for a husband.

But I couldn’t deny that being around Burke was triggering a different sort of yearning.

It was a hairline crack at first. Something to be smoothed over and ignored. The butterflies were simply signs that I wasn’t doing as good of a job at that as I’d initially thought.

Which left me no other choice but to act.

Or I would eventually, if my older, wiser family members would give me advice.

“What?” I asked them. “Why are you staring at each other like that?”

My godmother broke the look first. She turned toward me. “How do

you plan on approaching him with this idea?”

I blinked. “Am I supposed to have the answer to that now?”

“I’d suggest nudity, but that’s me.”

I rolled my eyes. “Of course you would.”

“You sound like you’ve decided,” Richard added.

“I haven’t,” I answered slowly. “I’m . . . interested. And I think if we go a few more months without acting on all this”—I waved my hands around my face in a way that I hoped conveyed *explosive sexual tension*—“I might lose my mind.”

Daphne sank back on the couch. “That’s the best, though.” She sighed. “One of you will just hit a breaking point and *bam*. Sex in a broom closet at work.”

Richard pinched the bridge of his nose. “Daphne.”

She smiled fondly in his direction. “Remember when we were limber enough for that?”

I jammed my fingers in my ears. “Stop. Oh my *gosh*, stop.”

They both laughed, but Richard’s face was beet red.

Daphne laid her hand over mine. “You know my vote. You want to enjoy the good-looking man when he’s naked? Go for it. Be safe, be honest when you talk to him, and tell him what you want.”

“That easy, huh?”

She smiled. “I have a feeling he’ll get on board pretty quickly.”

“You don’t know him,” I said. “He’s really closed off. Every time I think we’re making progress, he shuts down.”

“Hence the nudity.” Daphne spread her arms out wide. “Guaranteed success.”

I groaned, sinking my face into my hands. The thought of trying to be some sultry temptress made me want to hide under my blanket for life. “I don’t think I can do this.”

“What scares you, honey?” Richard asked.

Everything.

The possible rejection.

Months of awkwardness that would ensue as a result.

Even worse—the thing I didn’t want to say out loud—was the thought of eventually walking away from someone important. He was a risk, no matter how I sliced it.

And I’d avoided that particular risk very well.

My heart remained unbroken, which was no small feat, considering I was closer to thirty than twenty-five.

But he was only as dangerous to my heart as I'd allow him to be. And I was self-aware enough to make sure that didn't happen.

"It's fine if you don't want to answer," Daphne said.

"It's also fine to ignore her naked approach," Richard chided. "Just decide in a way that makes you feel comfortable."

My head lifted slowly. "What do you mean?"

"Make a list of why you'd want to do this. Why you think it's a good idea. You always feel better when you see things in black and white."

I blinked.

Then I smiled.

"Oh shit," Daphne said with a sigh. "Don't tell her that."

"Of *course*," I breathed. "I can make a PowerPoint."

# Chapter Seventeen

## BURKE

“Whatcha looking at?”

I made room as Felicia clambered up onto my chair. It was almost too hot to be out by the pool, but sitting inside an air-conditioned house somehow seemed even worse.

“Pictures.”

“Can I see?”

I gave her a brief look. “You and your brother have this strange obsession with wanting to know what we’re looking at all the time.”

She shrugged, scrolling adeptly through the pictures I’d received from Charlotte the last couple of weeks. “Probably because we’re not allowed to have phones, so everything you look at is exciting to us.”

Fair enough.

“These are boring pictures, though.” She turned the screen toward me. “What is that?”

I tilted it so I could see which one she was looking at.

“Ahh. That’s Styrofoam. They use it as a base for the crown molding, and then they cover it with plaster.”

Based on her facial expression, she was backpedaling on her earlier assessment that everything on my phone was exciting.

“What’s that?”

“Plumbing.” I pointed to the blue tube in between the studs. “See how it connects to this part? That’s where they’ll put the kitchen sink.”

“This is your other house?”

I nodded. “They send me updates every week.”

She handed the phone back. “How come you don’t go back there?”

“Gee, thanks.” I tickled her on her side. “You trying to get rid of me?”



“No,” she giggled.

Ford ran past us, whooping loudly as he did a cannonball into the pool. When he resurfaced, he was blinking water out of his eyes. “Did I get you wet?”

“Not even close, half-pint.” I jerked my chin to Felicia. “If she gets off my lap, I’ll show you how to do a real cannonball.”

I tossed my niece into the pool first, then jumped with knees tucked up toward my chest, to their delighted screams.

When I swam back to the side, Tansy had joined us. She picked up my phone and was scrolling slowly herself.

“Who said you could look at that?” I asked.

“They’re making a lot of progress,” she said.

I grunted. The twins started playing Marco Polo, and I splashed water at Ford when he got too close. “Wrong way, dude.”

“She text you pictures every day?” Tansy asked.

Giving her a sideways glance, I tried to decipher if there was sisterly subtext in the question, but if there was, she was doing a damn good job of hiding it.

“No.”

And look at that—I managed to hide my slight irritation in my answer.

I didn’t need to be in Michigan.

The big decisions had been made, and while they spent their time getting walls and plumbing and electric wiring ready to make it an actual, habitable home, I was sitting by a pool and doing the thing I had said I wanted to do in the first place.

And I was bored out of my fucking mind.

“When you going back?” she asked, still scrolling. She’d stop and study something, then scroll again. “Ooh, who’s that?”

“Who?”

She whistled, turning the phone so I could see. Charlotte had snapped a photo of William holding up a large beam as they fixed the framing in the upstairs bedroom.

“The builder.”

“He is *cute*.” She pinched her fingers on the screen to zoom in on the picture and grinned.

“Stop ogling him.”

“Did you see his arms?”

“I can honestly say I didn’t notice.”

I dipped down into the water, then settled my arms on the hot concrete when I came back up for air. Tansy was still scrolling.

She smiled—a soft, sappy smile that I didn’t usually see on my sister’s face.

“What?”

“The black-and-white tiles. They look like my quilt from Mom.”

That was why I’d picked them. But the admission didn’t want to come out. I didn’t want my little sister to know I’d chosen something that felt so personal.

“You still have that?” I asked.

She nodded. “It’s in the linen closet in the hallway. Not much use for a thick blanket like that in Florida.” Her eyes darted up to mine and held them. “No pictures of your project manager in here.”

I grunted.

One of the twins swam past me, and I tried to grab whoever kicked at me under the water. Felicia popped up from beneath the surface with a laugh.

Tansy started typing.

“What are you doing?”

“Asking her why she hasn’t sent one.”

I narrowed my eyes. “Yeah right.”

Tansy hit the screen with a bit too much vigor, then smiled.

“You did not.”

I hauled myself out of the pool and snatched the phone from her hand.

**Me:** How come there aren’t any pictures of you in these updates?

“Tansy!” I barked. “What the hell?”

Ford giggled.

“What? It’s a simple question. If I told her you watch your phone obsessively for her texts every day and I’ve caught you looking for flights no less than five times in the last three weeks, *that* would be inappropriate.”

Irritation clawed at my insides, but because the kids were out there, I decided to go easy on my sister. I ripped a towel off the stack on the ground and wrapped it around my waist.

There was no unsending the text, and the longer it went without a response—through a dinner in which I did nothing but glare at my beaming

little sister, the fucking traitor—the worse it got.

It reminded me of how the silence between us had stretched and grown and multiplied after Charlotte walked in on me in the bathroom.

I didn't want to acknowledge that, at the base of it, I was embarrassed.

My sister had the balls to send Charlotte something that I'd been thinking for weeks.

I hadn't seen Charlotte's face since I left, and every single time I opened one of her texts, I found myself wondering if I'd finally get a glimpse of her.

Tansy put the kids to bed, and I settled onto the couch with a beer, staring intently at my phone.

"Fuck," I muttered. I ran a weary hand over my face. Anything would be a welcome distraction, and I flipped on the TV. As I scrolled through the guide, only one fucking show caught my attention, and I was cursing my weakness to high heaven as I punched the button to change the channel.

There was an old doll on a stand and two very serious people on either side of it.

The doll was wearing a dirty dress, its painted features were practically gone, and half its hair had been plucked out of its porcelain head, making it a truly nightmare-worthy offering.

"Probably worth half a million dollars," I mumbled around the mouth of my beer bottle.

"What are you watching?" Tansy asked.

I fumbled with the remote, clicking the mute button and pinching my eyes shut. "It was just . . . on."

Tansy's eyebrows popped up, but she didn't say anything else. She set her hand on my shoulder. "I shouldn't have done that. So I'm sorry if I embarrassed you by sending that text."

My face burned hot. "I'm not embarrassed."

"Okay." Her hand patted the top of my head—very condescendingly. "Either way, it was impulsive, and I shouldn't have done it. I just . . ." She paused, emitting a quiet sigh. "It's nice seeing you interested in something. Something good."

I took a swig of my beer. A long one.

She didn't say that I was interested in Charlotte, so as she said her good night and left me alone in the family room, it was easy enough for me to pretend like Tansy was talking about the house.

That was easier to admit, sitting in the dark with a beer in hand and *Antiques* fucking *Roadshow* on my TV screen.

My interest in the house was growing too.

I found myself thinking about their progress. Studying all the pictures she sent me.

We'd spoken on the phone a couple of times, but William was always part of the conversation. Some issue that came up. A question that needed to be answered by the person in charge of the budget.

Those conversations helped me keep Charlotte in the safest possible box in my mind.

She was the most valuable tool I had to get the house ready for sale. For someone.

If that's what I decided to do.

She'd climbed her way out of that box over the last weeks I spent in Michigan. Every time she looked at me. Every time she argued with me.

Every time she made me do something stupid—like study tile or talk about toy trains or help her climb out of dumpsters with discarded light fixtures that I was somehow terrified of damaging—she slid out of her safe box and ended up somewhere far more dangerous.

I drained the beer and stood from the couch to get a second one.

My heart was racing inexplicably, probably because the moment I started thinking about Charlotte climbing anywhere, I got visions of beds and handcuffs and . . . Fucking hell, this was not good.

I tipped my head back and let the cold beer slide down my throat. The bottle was half-empty when I set it back down. I finished it in only a couple of long pulls. Instead of grabbing another one, I went back to the couch and blew out a hard breath.

Drinking to cope with the thought of Charlotte Cunningham. At the beginning of this mess, I would've thought that alcohol would have been a stress release.

Now I was fighting the idea of a whole different kind of release when it came to her.

I closed my eyes.

Which was also stupid.

Red hair. Soft, silky red hair.

Long legs and a sly smile.

Pink tongue and sweet lips. She was on her knees between my legs as I

sat on the couch.

My hand drifted to the waistband of my shorts—

My phone rang, and I jumped.

“Shit,” I muttered.

Her name appeared on the screen, and for a second I simply stared.

I tapped the button to answer. “Charlotte?”

“Did you want me to send you pictures?” she asked. She was whispering. Sort of. Her voice was breathy and short, like she’d just been running.

I pinched the bridge of my nose. “No.” I winced. “I mean . . . my sister is the one who sent that text.”

She was quiet.

“Oh.” Then she emitted a flustered laugh. “Right.”

My chest ached when I thought about the embarrassment I’d felt shifting over to her. “I wouldn’t mind seeing some of you, though,” I said quietly.

She drew in a breath. “*Oh.*”

I closed my eyes. I sucked at this.

I was so rusty at anything approaching this, I might as well have been trying to speak a different language.

So I did what Charlotte and I did best.

“Let me guess—it took you that long to respond because you lost your phone.”

She laughed. “No. Well, not really. I set it on top of the fridge when I was looking for something earlier, and then I forgot that I left it there.”

“What were you looking for?”

“Light bulbs.”

“Above the fridge? Now I know you’re full of shit. No one keeps them there.”

“They’re right by the kitchen light. It makes total sense.”

I shook my head but found myself smiling all the same. With just a little bit of beer loosening my inhibitions, I was surprised at how easily I could admit that I’d missed this.

Missed teasing her.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

She hummed. “Watching TV.”

“Let me guess . . .”

Charlotte laughed. “It’s *soothing*. I don’t have to think when I watch this show. Only British baking shows provide even close to this kind of mental comfort.”

I stared at the screen, a horrific emerald necklace in the shape of a snake covering the screen. “You’d see shit like that necklace in an *Indiana Jones* movie, and it would be haunted by some ancient demon that would possess your soul.”

Silence descended like a bomb, and in that instant, I realized my mistake.

“Holy shit,” she said. “I *knew* it.”

I licked my tongue over my teeth and cursed really badly in my head. “Knew what?”

“You’re totally watching it.”

“You can’t know that.”

“*Shit like that necklace?*” she repeated with glee. “Oh, this is the best thing I’ve ever heard.”

“You need to get out more, then.”

She hummed, and I could tell she’d taken a drink.

“What are you drinking? Finally get to your coffee from this morning?”

“It’s wine, thank you very much.”

I grunted. “Don’t see you drink much.”

“I usually only drink a glass or two when I feel like I can relax. I don’t like how it makes me feel when I’m out in public.”

“You needed me gone to be able to relax?” I asked.

She exhaled a soft laugh. There was a loaded pause before she spoke again. “I do kinda miss you,” she said.

My jaw clenched. “Do you?”

Charlotte went quiet. Maybe she was doing the same thing as me, gauging the tenor of the conversation.

She’d had wine. I’d had beer. And my asshole sister had told her I wanted pictures of her.

“A little,” she admitted quietly. “There’s no one here to tease me, and William is just too nice to take over the job.”

Jealousy roared hot and quick, and I fought to tamp it down. William, with his zoom-worthy arms, was only ten minutes down the road.

“That’s good, considering he reports to you in my absence,” I said gruffly.

“Don’t worry. He’s been a perfect gentleman. They all have.”

“Had to break out the crowbar since I left?”

“Just once,” she said lightly. “It’s very effective.”

I sat up. “Did you really?”

“No,” she said with a laugh. “Don’t worry.”

I let out a relieved exhale, and Charlotte must’ve heard it, because she emitted a quiet chuckle.

“You were worried.” Her voice was light and teasing, and I noticed the way the wine softened her words.

*Hang up. Stop talking to her.*

But there was something about hearing her voice as I sat in the dark. I decided to let myself be selfish for just a few minutes more.

I growled under my breath. “Is that bad?”

“No.” She took a sip of wine. “When are you coming back?”

I let my head fall back on the couch, then snatched my hand away from the waistband of my shorts when I realized it was still there. And I was still hard.

I pinched my eyes shut. I needed her to not say words like *coming* when I could still too easily picture her in the room with me.

“I don’t know. I wasn’t sure I was needed there.”

Charlotte blew out an audible breath. “I think your presence is always . . . wanted.”

“Is it?”

When did my voice drop an octave?

She inhaled quickly. “Actually, when you come back, I have a proposal for you.” She said it so fast, on a rushed exhale, that I almost missed it.

“You have a . . . what?”

She groaned. “Never mind.”

I smiled. “What’s the proposal about?”

“Nothing.”

“Liar.”

“So . . . what do you think about that painting they’re looking at?”

“Charlotte,” I said silkily, “you can’t change the subject.”

“Daphne and Richard might buy chickens. Isn’t that exciting?”

“Fine. Don’t tell me what it is.” I wedged a hand behind my head, relishing the quick buzz of attraction as it zipped between us. “I’ll figure it out.”

She snorted. “Highly unlikely.”

I’d missed this, all right. And if I dared allow my admission to go a step further, I’d missed her too.

“I’ll be back soon,” I told her.

She let out a shaky breath. “Because of what I said?”

“Just want to check on my investment,” I told her.

That seemed to satisfy her.

“Did you decide what you’re going to do with it yet?” she asked.

I smiled. She’d ask me that question until the day they handed over the keys.

“No,” I told her.

I hadn’t decided what to do with her either.

Despite that, I booked a flight back to Michigan less than ten minutes after we hung up.



# Chapter Eighteen

## BURKE

No one was watching for my arrival when I pulled the rental car to a stop in front of the carriage house. Probably because I hadn't told anyone I was coming.

Chances were high that Charlotte wasn't even there, given it was a beautiful summer night, but it was a risk I was willing to take, simply because I wanted to see how she'd react when she didn't know I was set to arrive.

It was so much lighter in the evenings now, something I hadn't remembered about my time in Michigan, and it was bizarre to walk into the carriage house at 9:00 p.m. with daylight still streaming through the windows.

"Honey, I'm home," I called out.

Silence.

On the counter were a half-filled coffee mug and a notepad with her handwriting scrawled across the top page.

Her to-do list covered an impressive array of tasks, some of them things I'd never considered adding to a list before.

*Shower.*

*Dry hair.*

*Wash bras.*

All things that made me grin. Everything was crossed off except the last item on the list, and the tip of my finger trailed over the messy loops in ink.

*Finish Burke PP—work on last transition.*

My eyes narrowed.

*Burke PP.*

I mulled over that one, thinking back to what she'd said in our slightly

tipsy, ill-advised phone conversation. In the bedroom, I opened my suitcase on the small yellow bed and took in a deep lungful of the carriage house's familiar scent.

It took me only a few minutes to unpack my clothes and slide the empty suitcase into the small closet. When I turned the corner into the bathroom, I froze.

Bras everywhere.

Those had never appeared in the bathroom when I was there.

Hanging from the curtain rod was a veritable rainbow of lace and cotton. I swallowed roughly when I caught sight of a black lace design. In the middle of the cups was an impossibly small bow in pastel pink.

For far too long, I stared at that bra, then pinched my eyes shut, tossed my toiletry bag onto the counter, and strode back into the kitchen.

I rubbed a hand over the back of my neck and tried to banish the image of that bra from my brain. In the mirror that hung above the small console table by the door, I caught a glimpse of my reflection.

The color in my cheeks was high, and my eyes were bright and intense.

It was just a bra, for fuck's sake. It wasn't like she had walked out of her bedroom wearing it.

With matching underwear.

And high heels.

I blew out a hard breath.

"I shouldn't have come back," I said. For some reason, it felt important to say the words out loud. Let the walls around me hear the admission unprompted.

Unprompted or not, there was still a buzzing sort of anticipation in the air, and as I tried to decide if it would've been there regardless of our phone call, the sound of her car made me stand to attention.

Through the window, I could see her in the driver's seat, and she tore off her sunglasses to study the rental car.

She looked at the carriage house, then back at the car, then back at the carriage house.

Then she buried her face in her hands.

My brows furrowed.

Was that good? Or bad?

I was in here imagining her in lingerie and wondering what would happen if I licked her body through the delicate lace, and she had to hide her

face at the thought that I'd returned.

Just as my stomach began churning uncomfortably, she sat back up.

It wasn't dread on her face. Or frustration.

She was smiling.

Then she quickly looked in the rearview mirror to fix her hair.

What the fuck was happening?

Someone had flipped a light switch between us, and I still couldn't quite wrap my head around how suddenly it had happened.

When she got out of the car and walked swiftly to the door, I leaned back against the wall and crossed my arms over my chest.

Just waiting.

Her eyes found mine as soon as she walked through the door, and she smiled.

The kind of smile where you're trying to keep it small and polite, but the edges of your lips can't quite stay contained.

"Look who's back."

I hummed. Her gaze moved over my arms and chest, then back up to my face.

"You didn't tell anyone you were coming." She kicked off her sandals and dropped her keys into the yellow ceramic bowl. How was that sound so familiar already? "I didn't peg you for a dramatic-entrance guy."

"It was a last-minute decision," I said. "Over at your aunt's?"

She shook her head. "We made dinner for the workers over at William's cousin's house."

I nodded. "When you say *we* . . ."

Charlotte laughed. "Richard made dinner for the workers, and I went back for thirds, which is more than any of those guys."

My eyes tracked over her frame. She was wearing a pretty green dress with thin straps and a ruffled hem that floated around her tan thighs.

"Nice dress," I said, my voice level and low.

She swallowed. "Thank you."

"Wanna show me the house before it gets dark?"

Her smile widened. "Yes."

We walked slowly, her shoulder brushing against my upper arm as we ascended the perfectly built new steps leading up to the front door. It had been sanded down and was ready for a fresh coat of paint.

They'd added a stoop above the landing at the entrance—one of the

things they'd called me about while I was gone—and I glanced at the new columns appreciatively. “I like it.”

Charlotte entered the house before me, pointing out all the things they'd accomplished in my absence.

It was still a mess, but it was a different kind of mess now.

Tools and sawhorses littered the rooms. We walked cautiously around extension cords, and I carefully placed my hand under her elbow so she didn't trip over someone's tool belt leaning up against the wall.

Where there used to be gaping holes in the plaster, there were now solid walls.

Lights turned on as we moved through the house, and she explained all the things she'd sent me pictures of.

Broken tiles had been removed from around fireplaces; ruined floors had been ripped up and replaced with strong subfloors.

In the new kitchen, they were almost done framing out the cabinets, and I walked the perimeter of the island with a growing sense of satisfaction.

It reminded me of halftime in the locker room: The hard part wasn't over, not by a long shot. But the energy you'd left on the field, the tiredness you felt down into your bones, was for a reason.

All the work—it was building toward something.

In all the destruction and mess, in the days and weeks I hadn't been around to see all the minutiae, they'd erected the beginnings of a home.

It was like looking at the metal frame of an unfinished building. You knew exactly how unshakable it would be when it was done.

Charlotte was watching me quietly, and I said the words before I'd registered I was thinking them. “What's the *Burke PP* on your to-do list?”

Her eyes widened. “Oh, that's . . . nothing.”

Even though the lighting in the room left a lot to be desired, it was easy enough to spot the pink blush as it climbed up her chest and into her cheeks.

“Does it have something to do with your proposal?”

“So what do you think about the house?” she asked, shifting her tone to something chipper. Unnaturally high pitched. She was nervous as hell. “Looks good, doesn't it? Want to see the upstairs?”

“Everything is great.” I walked closer. “What's the proposal, Charlotte?”

“You know, I'm just gonna let you wander some more. Feel free to let me know if you have any questions.”

She bolted from the room with her long-legged stride, and I stifled a laugh.

Instead of chasing after her to push a little bit, I took a few more minutes and wandered through the back of the house. Space to breathe wouldn't be bad for either of us. Might act like a sedative to the awareness that crackled between us—a new energy that had everything feeling slightly out of balance.

Before I turned off any lights, I paused at the windows overlooking the yard and the bay.

You had to walk a little ways from the house to get the full view, especially now that all the tall trees were full of green, glossy leaves.

Everything was lush and filled out, the grass in desperate need of a trim. I made a mental note to ask Charlotte about that as I left the main house. I locked the door behind me, given all the expensive equipment that William and his crew had left behind.

Responsibility for the Campbell House—every blade of grass, every newly patched wall, every light bulb hanging from wires in the ceiling—still rested firmly on my shoulders. And I was trying to decide if the change I felt upon returning was solely about Charlotte or if it was about everything.

I'd had a few months to make peace with their existence—hers and the house's—and I was still no closer to a decision at the finish line. That line drew nearer with every item ticked off the list, with every day that William and his crew showed up to put their skills to use.

Would it look like Chris had wanted it to? When he'd stood out in that front yard—overgrown then as now—and felt like a failure for not being able to step up like he wanted?

Were Charlotte and I making choices that would bring peace to a place that meant so much to my friend?

I had to think we were.

No matter how we bickered along the way, or how that energy was changing into something new, we made a good team.

*For the short window of time that we are one,* I thought.

With the finish line in mind, with the image of what everything around me would look like in a few months' time, I let myself into the carriage house, my mind crowded and my heart unsettled.

Charlotte was sitting at the dining-room table, laptop open and a thumb tucked in between her lips while she chewed mercilessly on her nail.

Her eyes locked on to mine, and she snapped the laptop shut with a decisive click.

On the table next to her was an empty shot glass.

I pursed my lips when I noted the bottle of tequila on the counter next to the fridge. Beside it was her list from earlier. With *violent* scratches of her pen, she'd crossed off the entry that included my name.

"Consider me very intrigued by whatever it is you're working on over there," I said quietly.

Charlotte dropped her head into her hands. Her fingers speared through her vibrant hair, and her chest heaved on a few deep breaths.

Instead of picking a chair opposite hers, I pulled out the seat next to Charlotte.

She rolled her lips together but didn't lift her head as I sprawled back in the chair. I tapped her laptop. "Wanna show me?"

"It's not done," she whispered.

"I'm sure it's perfect."

She cast a sideways glance in my direction. "You don't even know what it is."

"I would if you showed me."

I let the dare of my words hang heavy in the air and refused to drop her gaze when I said it. Not once since I'd met Charlotte had she shied away from a single fucking thing. And I desperately wanted to know what was causing it now.

"Show me," I repeated.

Charlotte sat up, determination in her eyes, then opened her laptop briskly. It whirred to life, and before I could see what was on the screen, she slammed it shut again. "Let's wait until it's dark."

I smothered a laugh. "Charlotte."

She pinched her eyes shut.

I leaned closer, letting my hands hang in between my spread legs. "Chicken," I whispered.

Charlotte let out a shocked gasp. Her eyes went hot. "I am not."

"Come on," I said. "I want to see."

The line of her throat worked on a swallow, and after she held my eyes for a couple of long seconds, she opened the laptop again, clicking over to—what else?—the fucking PowerPoint app.

I narrowed my eyes when I caught a glimpse of my name on the first

slide.

She cleared her throat, let out a slow breath, and then turned so that she faced me in her chair. Her legs—bare and long—brushed against mine while she got herself settled.

Then she turned the screen. I was hardly able to pull my gaze from her face, but when I did, my mouth fell open.

The first slide—with shockingly large black font on a patterned light-blue background—proclaimed: **The Temporary Roommate Sex Agreement: A Summary.**

“Wha . . .” My voice trailed off. I pulled the laptop closer. Covered my mouth with one hand.

“As you can see, I’ve been giving a shift in our relationship some thought.” Her voice trembled, but she didn’t stop. My eyes didn’t budge from the screen.

She clicked forward.

### **The proposal**

- no-strings-attached physical relationship
- exclusivity for the remainder of the project unless mutually determined by both parties
- sleep in separate bedrooms for privacy purposes and necessary emotional boundaries
- any positions, role-play, or locations must be clearly consented to by both parties

I honestly couldn’t decide if this was certifiable or if I was so fucking turned on that I’d lost the ability to think clearly.

“I understand this is a shock,” she said. “And I’d intended to do a verbal presentation along with the slides, but”—she shrugged—“you can read, so that felt a little redundant. I also decided that visuals weren’t necessary, because you can figure out what I mean by *positions* and *role-play*, et cetera.”

“Charlotte,” I said. My voice hardly worked.

She clicked to the next slide. “If you look at this next part, I’ve outlined all the reasons you may object, so you’re aware that I *am* thinking logically about why this might not work. No, I’ve never, ever crossed a physical line with a client before, and I’m only considering it with you because, well . . . I

find you very attractive, despite your occasionally horrible attitude.”

“Hey.”

The next slide after that was a healthy-size list of why I was not a good long-term bet for Charlotte. I narrowed my eyes but didn’t argue.

### **Burke Barrett: Cons**

- no people skills
- hates old houses and basically everything I love
- doesn’t want to live here
- has a slight obsession with undoing all my organization
- lies about watching *Antiques Roadshow*

“I think I get the point,” I managed. “You can move on from that one.”

She blushed. “I’m very aware that you have no desire to stay in Michigan, which is what makes this perfect.” The next slide appeared, and I had the brief thought that maybe I was dreaming this entire thing. “After this job is done, I’ll move on to my next project, which could be anywhere. I’ve got a really good offer in Iowa, and who knows what else might pop up? I don’t want . . .” She paused. “I’ve never found anyone who’s made me want to get married or have babies or anything like that.”

My jaw clenched. If she followed that up with “Until you,” I wasn’t entirely sure what I’d say. I’d had one woman put those dreams in my care, and I’d done nothing but break every expectation she had of me.

“And I don’t think you’re looking for that either,” she finished.

Our gazes collided, producing something heavy and hot and loaded. I shook my head.

She swallowed. “But despite the way we started, I think we can both acknowledge the tension between us has been”—she licked her lips—“potent.”

I could hardly blink.

I was halfway past grinding my molars to dust as I held my entire frame in check.

And I was harder than I’d ever been in my entire life.

Slowly, I nodded.

She clicked to another slide.



## **Burke Barrett: Pros**

- taller than me (tall-girl problems)
- strong
- penis size is above average (will revise this statement if erect state provides additional information)
- big hands
- occasionally thoughtful in ways that make me want to rip his clothes off

My skin was on fire.

Charlotte had no idea how close she was to getting bent over the table.

“I don’t normally trust men with a purely physical relationship,” she continued. With each word she spoke, her delivery settled out. Her posture straightened. Her eyes were direct and clear and never even came close to dropping from my face. “But I trust you. And I think we respect each other enough to be honest. That we like each other enough not to cause damage when it’s over.”

If I moved my chair forward a single inch, we’d be touching. Her legs would be right between mine. My hands itched to move, and even though I never would have approached her with an idea like this, I couldn’t deny that it was fucking genius.

I’d known, deep down, for far longer than I cared to admit, that I wanted her.

I’d also known that nothing about Charlotte and me was convenient or easy to navigate, considering the way we were tangled together in this house.

But this—it was a bit of both. If I decided to believe her that we could come out of this unscathed.

As I studied her face, the way she fearlessly set this offer in front of me so that we could both take our pleasure, I knew that I’d say yes.

She was the only woman who could tempt me into something like this.

And as I silently racked up an impressive list of where I wanted to start first, I found myself staring at her perfectly pink lips.

*You’ll never recover*, a voice whispered from somewhere deep behind my ribs. Where that voice came from, I didn’t want to consider. I thought it would’ve been in my head, but it was much lower. Somewhere dark and secret. It crawled up my spine, the truth of it slipping into my brain.

If I kissed her, I'd never recover.

I sat back in my chair and studied her. I spread my legs out and nudged my chair closer.

“A counteroffer,” I said. It was hard to speak through my screaming need for a bed-breaking release. The guttural drumming under my skin told me how badly I wanted to slide my hands over her, fill my fingers with her flesh, satisfy the raw, aching desire to set my teeth and tongue underneath every inch of that flimsy green dress I was about to tear off her body. But I wouldn't—couldn't—even think about accepting what she'd laid out until I knew we were both completely sure. “Tonight, I give you one thing, and if either of us has even a single shred of doubt, we don't go any further.”

Her breathing was rapid and shallow, her cheeks flushing pink as she listened to me.

“What one thing?”

Gently, I tapped my thigh. “Come here.”

Charlotte stood, smoothing her hands down the front of her dress. Through the thin cotton, I could see the hardened tips of her breasts, and my mouth watered.

When she gripped the top of the chair behind me, stepping her legs outside mine, I settled my thighs so that she had a solid seat. Her eyes held mine unwaveringly as she stood over me.

I jerked my chin. “Show me, Charlotte.”

I'd demanded the same thing earlier in the night, long before I had any inkling that we'd end up here.

With the edge of her dress clutched in her other hand, she slowly tugged it up the length of her toned thighs. When it was almost to her waist and I got the first mouthwatering glimpse of her ass covered in blue lace, I slid my hand up her leg, settling my palm over her hip and guiding her down to my lap. Her dress rucked up over her legs, and she started to lean in toward my mouth.

But I curled my hand around the side of her throat and tilted her chin up with my thumb. I leaned in and sucked at the delicate line of her collarbone.

“Oh,” she whispered, her hips rocking back and forth when my hand moved from her neck into the mass of her hair.

It was as soft as I'd imagined. Thick and lush. I'd be able to wrap it around my fist easily.

And I planned to.

I licked along the line of her throat and sucked her earlobe into my mouth, tugging at it with my teeth.

It had been so long for me that my body shook from how badly I wanted to bury myself inside her. Something coded deep in my DNA wanted it to be quick and fierce and as hot as we could make it.

No foreplay, just the sating of that screaming voice that wanted to take and take and take from this glorious creature perched on top of me.

Make her scream too.

But the rest of me fought that instinct.

I pulled at the strap on her dress. No bra.

With my palm centered on her chest, I gently nudged her so that she braced her hands on my thighs.

I licked a slow circle around her breast, pushing it up into my mouth, sucking hard when she started moving again on my lap.

The hand on her hip, which had only been guiding her back and forth in those gentle rocking movements, moved to the elastic edge of her underwear.

She gasped when I snapped it against her skin.

“Take it off,” she begged.

I pulled my mouth off her chest and held her eyes. “Not this time.”

Her brows furrowed, but when I pushed it to the side and slid one finger, then two, in between her legs, her eyes took on a hazy, mindless quality.

“This time,” I whispered, “is just for you.”

She shuddered on top of me, and with slow, curling movements, I watched her chase her pleasure on the push of my fingers and the pressure of my palm.

When I added my thumb, tracing tight little circles against the hottest, wettest part of her, she gasped, tossed her head back.

“Come on, Red,” I told her. I coaxed deeper, curled my fingers again, and pressed harder with my palm as she rocked her body in sinuous, dance-like moves.

“There,” she gasped.

Her hand came up to her own breast, and I dived forward for the other, giving it a deep suck that had her swearing.

Then Charlotte tensed, all her muscles locked tight, her back arching, and when she exploded around me, I felt it on every single inch of her that I could touch. She came down on long, gasping breaths, sliding against my

chest in a boneless heap.

With clenched teeth, I pulled my fingers from between her legs and slid them up her back while she basked in her release.

Her mouth edged along my jaw in tiny, sucking kisses, and I tilted my chin up.

“Your turn now?” she whispered. Her hands moved to my belt, but I stilled them.

She sat up, eyes searching my face.

“I told you.” I touched my thumb to the curve of her bottom lip. “Tonight is this one thing. And if you still feel like you want to do this, you tell me tomorrow.”

Charlotte blinked, still a little unsteady from her explosive orgasm, but she finally nodded.

Her eyes locked on my mouth, and I held my breath to see what she’d do.

But instead of trying to kiss me, she smiled.

It was the most beautiful smile I’d ever seen.

She used her hand to angle my face away from hers, and she kissed my cheek so softly that I hardly felt it.

“Thank you,” she whispered. “I knew I could trust you with this for a reason.”

I swallowed hard but managed a nod.

A teasing glint lit her eyes. “Are you sure you don’t want me to help with . . .” She pointed down.

I shook my head. “I’m gonna go take a shower,” I told her. “And if you hear anything, just know that I’m imagining a whole different ending to the last time you walked in on me there.”

Charlotte exhaled a laugh.

I didn’t lock the door and took my time removing all those bras from the curtain rod before I cranked the water on. As I stood under the warm spray, I pictured a whole slew of things I wanted to try with her. I groaned her name when a fantasy of her handcuffed to my bed got particularly enjoyable.

“Feel better?” she yelled through the door.

I exhaled a laugh, resting my head against the tile. “Not really.”

She was waiting in the kitchen when I walked out with a towel wrapped around my waist. Her eyes tracked over my chest.

“I have to wait until tomorrow, huh?”

I nodded.

Charlotte sighed. “Fine.”

And as I lay in bed, unable to sleep, I watched the clock in my room click over to 12:01 a.m.

The door opened, light from the hallway spilling in.

“Why don’t I show you what *I* imagined happening if I walked in on you again,” she whispered.

I sat up, swinging my legs over the side of the bed. “Charlotte, this isn’t what I meant.”

She settled onto her knees on the floor in front of my bed. “Your turn, Barrett.” She cocked an eyebrow. “Fair is fair.”

I gathered her hair into my fist, breathing hard through my nose while she pulled my boxer briefs down just enough. She smiled.

“Definitely above average,” she said. Then she licked her lips. Her eyes held mine. “We’re doing this, Burke. You and me.”

Whatever I might have said, whatever words of protest might have sprung up, died on my lips with a groan when she used her tongue, then her mouth. When she moaned in satisfaction at the pleasure she was inflicting on me, the very best kind of torture.

Charlotte Cunningham was every fantasy I’d ever had brought to life, and I hadn’t even been inside her yet.

When I came with a shout a few short minutes later, her hair tight in my fist, I wondered if that should have been the biggest warning of all.

# Chapter Nineteen

BURKE

The microwave dinged, and I sniffed the air appreciatively.

“When did we get popcorn?”

“We didn’t get popcorn,” Charlotte said. She dumped the popped kernels into a large bowl and hopped over the stack of samples she’d left leaning up against the wall. “I got popcorn, and I never said I planned on sharing.”

I eyed her as she settled onto the couch, tucking her feet underneath my leg.

“How are your feet always cold?” I asked her. “It’s eighty-five degrees outside.”

“It’s a mystery.” She tossed a handful of popcorn into her mouth, hugging the bowl to her chest when I tried to take some.

I scrolled through the channels and settled on *Rudy*, happy when she didn’t protest. “Why aren’t you sharing?”

“I heard you sniffing earlier. Like I want your germs if you’re getting a summer cold.”

I stretched my arm over the back of the couch. “You are not serious.”

“Heck yeah, I’m serious. I don’t want to get sick.”

With narrowed eyes, I watched her eat the popcorn.

Over the last couple of weeks, I’d learned all sorts of things about Charlotte Cunningham’s quirks.

She loved it when I fisted her hair.

Her feet were always cold.

The reason she never drank much coffee in the morning was because she got jittery if she had too much caffeine.

And the quickest way for me to get her to cave was to talk dirty.

“Charlotte,” I said quietly, my hands tangling into the ends of her hair. Her chewing slowed. “What?”

“I don’t think you’re worried about my germs.”

“Why would you say that?”

I leaned in, gratified by the instant intake of breath that had her braless chest heaving underneath her Tigers tank top. “Because less than twenty-four hours ago, I had my tongue between your legs, and you didn’t seem too concerned about them then.”

She swallowed. Hard.

Then she shoved the bowl into my chest.

I grinned. “Thank you.”

Her cheeks were a pretty pink color.

After a few bites of popcorn, I offered her it back with a raised brow. She snatched it away.

“We should have a state of the union,” she said at the next commercial break.

“A what?”

She turned, setting the now empty bowl on the floor. “You know, the state of our mutually satisfying physical relationship. Make sure we’re still on the same page now that we’re a couple of weeks in.”

I hummed. “You sure you want to open that can of worms?”

“Why would it be a can of worms? That’s such a gross comparison.”

I held up a hand. “Fine. I don’t really have too many gripes.”

She snorted. “You better not. I did some great work last week.”

When I slowly licked at my bottom lip, her eyes went molten. “You did,” I murmured.

“Stop it,” she whispered. “We can’t constantly have our hands down each other’s pants. One of us will get clingy.”

“I seem to recall that *you* were the one with your hand down *my* pants when William walked into the house the other morning.” I tapped her knee. “And that might have been awkward to explain.”

Charlotte exhaled a laugh, unable to argue that one. Apparently, it had been too much for her when I’d commented on something I liked in the back of the house. She’d shoved me up against the wall, attacking my belt buckle and sucking at the side of my neck while she pushed her hand into my boxer briefs for a very pleasant start to the morning.

Or it would have been if William hadn’t shown up to the jobsite about

thirty minutes earlier than normal.

The oddest part of this fairly odd nonrelationship I'd found myself in was how we'd settled into a rhythm without actually discussing what would happen next.

Charlotte had sensed that first night that I wasn't ready to kiss her.

We never talked about it. I imagined it often. Stared at her mouth when she wasn't looking. Caught her doing the same.

But neither of us tried to cross the line.

Sleeping in our own beds was easy enough because she'd stipulated that in her very efficiently laid-out presentation.

But the biggest nonverbalized issue of all was that we hadn't actually had sex yet.

We'd broken just about every other physical boundary that existed, and hell, we'd come close.

Very, very close.

I'd used my hands and my mouth on nearly every inch of her body, from her neck down. She'd done the same with me. In the bathroom, we knew the exact mechanics of how I could bring her to a gasping release with her hands braced on the counter and me behind her. We'd figured out how to fit both of our tall bodies into the shower so she could talk me through our favorite scenarios with her hand tight around me, my fingers wrapped around hers as I taught her what I liked.

But whenever we approached that line, when all I'd have to do was lift her thigh up and press in, or roll her over and fit my hips between hers, I sensed her pause.

Maybe Charlotte, just like me, had a small voice behind her ribs that told her to hold back.

If that was the case, I'd never be the guy who forced her to cross the line.

That's what no one ever told you about becoming a man. A woman's ownership of her pleasure was ultimately her responsibility. But when she trusted you with it, her comfort level became yours. Charlotte's pleasure—or mine that came with it—wasn't something to be weaponized, something to hold against her so that I could push for more.

If there was something between the two of us that I'd never, ever disrespect, it was that.

And what complaints could I have possibly had?



The days passed in an almost unbelievably pleasurable blur.

We watched the Fourth of July fireworks from the bay behind the house, with Daphne and Richard and William and his crew joining us on chairs and blankets to enjoy far more food than anyone needed. When they went home and it was just the two of us sitting beneath a star-filled sky, I pushed Charlotte back onto the blanket, hiked her dress up, and settled my shoulders between her thighs as I explained in great detail how the only other thing I wanted to eat was her.

With her thighs clamped around my ears and my name on her lips, I gave her an entirely different sort of fireworks, and when I let my forehead rest on her trembling stomach, I imagined what it would be like to slide inside her still-pulsing body.

During the day, I made her life impossible every single time she wanted my help with a decision. There were stacks of paint samples, more shades of white and blue and gray and ivory than I ever knew existed. But we made decisions for all the rooms, and it was immensely gratifying to see the changes as they occurred.

And some nights—like this one—when we seemed to mutually decide that a break from the intense physical build was necessary to keep our heads clear, we settled into the kind of normalcy that I'd never experienced before. Not even in my marriage.

Charlotte nudged my thigh and yanked my thoughts back to the present.

“That’s really your only complaint?” she asked. “You’re not . . . disappointed in anything?”

Right. The state of the union.

In her eyes, I saw the real question.

*Is this enough for you, even though it’s not what was promised?*

I could only imagine how vulnerable this question must have made her feel. Charlotte didn’t realize it, but the thoughts were so clear on her face that it wasn’t hard to imagine at all. It was in the widening of her eyes and the way she held her frame perfectly still while she waited for me to answer.

In all the ways we’d argued, in all the ways we’d disagreed, this was the most personal, heart-baring thing she’d ever given to me.

More than her body or the satisfaction we’d given each other.

I slid my hand up her thigh. “If you’re asking if I’m physically satisfied with what we’re doing”—I held her gaze steadily—“the answer is an emphatic yes.”

Her lips quirked into a smug grin.

“Though I wouldn’t hate it if you broke out some handcuffs,” I said lightly. “I may have an unresolved fantasy or two when it comes to those.”

When she laughed, she let her head settle on my arm where it lay against the back of the couch. I closed my eyes at the sound, at the feel of her hair against my skin.

I wanted to curl my arm around her shoulder and pull her tight against me. Tug the ugly crocheted blanket over the two of us, just so that I knew she’d be warm.

But I didn’t. That was a bit too much vulnerability of my own to contemplate.

So instead of telling her that I wondered what it would feel like if she fell asleep on my chest, or if she made those sweet little whimpering noises during a kiss, or if her lips were as soft as I imagined them to be, I let the moment be what it was. Something good and something pure.

Eventually, it would turn into a memory that I’d hold on to when we both moved on.

# Chapter Twenty

## CHARLOTTE

“Oh my.”

Daphne joined me at her kitchen window. She sighed happily, but her reasons for gawking and happy sighing were very different from my own.

My aunt was looking at Richard.

I was looking at Burke.

Richard had insisted that a tree in their backyard needed to go, and it was no small task when a one-hundred-year-old oak tree came down.

The tree company had left earlier that day, and when I mentioned to Burke that Richard hadn't wanted to pay them to cut the tree into firewood, he offered to help.

The help, as it turned out, was a shirtless display of muscles so beautiful that I hadn't moved from the window at the kitchen sink for about an hour.

“I know,” I sighed.

She nudged me. “How's that going?”

He lifted his arms, bringing the axe down on the small metal split wedged into the wood. The flex of his stomach muscles had me pressing my thighs together.

“It's . . . good,” I said. My cheeks were warm, and Daphne laughed at whatever she saw in my face.

“I can tell.”

I tore my gaze away and found an empty seat at the kitchen table. “Can you?”

“There is a very particular glow to the skin when you're with a partner who knows what they're doing. You and Burke have it.” She hummed, choosing the seat opposite mine. “No blurred lines yet?”

After she asked, she took a long sip of her iced tea, her eyes holding

mine over the rim of her glass.

I shook my head. “Boundaries have stayed firmly in place.” More boundaries than either of us had assumed at the outset, but for some reason, I held back that information.

Daphne was peering so intently at me that I fought to hold her gaze. “Okay.”

“You sound like you don’t believe me.”

Daphne set her tea down and shook her head a little. “I believe you.”

“But?”

She gave me a level look. “When you used to imagine the person you’d end up with, what was he like?”

*Oh.*

In the beat of silence that followed, the axe came down in the backyard, splitting open another chunk of wood.

*Thwack.*

A clean, hard slice delivered by someone strong and determined. You couldn’t do what he was doing without complete focus and impressive strength.

In light of Daphne’s question, I found myself suddenly viewing the chopping of wood as a measurement of someone’s moral compass.

But, no, we weren’t blurring any lines *at all*.

“Umm,” I started, ever eloquent, “someone smart.” *Thwack.* I blew out a hard breath. “Kind. He, umm, he loves the same things I do. Old houses. History. All those things.”

*Thwack.*

The back of my neck went hot.

Daphne’s smile was all patience, but she was prying for something very particular; I could see it in her scheming eyes. “What else?”

“S-sweet,” I said. “Hardworking.”

*Thwack.*

Why was he *chopping so fast*? I couldn’t even get a word out before he was hitting another stupid piece of wood.

I pinched my eyes shut. “I’m sure he’s very academic,” I said in a rush. *Thwack.* “He’d read all the same books as me and probably be a bit of a book nerd. He definitely wears glasses, and he’s more, like . . . approachably handsome. Where you might not notice it at first.”

“Hmm.”

*Thwack.*

When I opened my eyes, I glared directly at her. “Blond. He’s blond. And he never argues with me,” I said, my voice rising in volume. “And we have a peaceful, happy, calm marriage,” I yelled. Just a little.

Daphne had one eyebrow raised and a smug-ass smile on her smug-ass face.

“Much more specific answer than I expected, but I’ll take it.” She sipped her tea. “If I ever meet someone like that, I’ll be sure to grab his number.”

With a huff, I stood and snatched my purse. “*You* were the one who told me this was a good idea. I don’t know what you’re trying to prove.”

“I was merely curious if your tastes had changed now that you’ve *sampled* something new. That’s all.” She tilted her head. “Maybe you’re the person who’s trying to prove a point.”

The entire conversation, with the stupid wood-chopping sound effects, had me feeling defensive and edgy. I left Daphne’s place and marched along the path back to the Campbell House.

As I made my very dramatic exit, I heard Burke call my name. But I didn’t stop.

Fine, I was acting a bit petulant, but I didn’t want to turn back around and face him. Face Daphne and her seemingly innocent questions.

“Innocent, my ass,” I muttered.

Daphne knew exactly what she was doing by asking that when she did.

She still didn’t think I could have this relationship with Burke without picturing myself marrying him. She thought I’d get hurt because I’d start putting his face and his body and his personality onto the list of things that I wanted for my future.

I wasn’t going to do that, though, because we’d agreed on the basis that our futures were taking us in very different directions.

My throat felt a little tight when I ruthlessly banished the image of Burke starting his own life after this.

The image of the person he’d find who fit his own ideal.

She was probably petite and blonde and agreeable. She would never argue with him either.

My hands tightened into fists.

She probably loved football and knew all the rules and terminology and simply *fawned* over his records and whatever else fangirls fawned over.

She'd pop out babies.

Little dark-haired babies with big, dark eyes and smiles that you had to work for.

My pace picked up.

When I got back to the carriage house about eighteen minutes later, my heart rate was no calmer, my embarrassment was acute, and my body was very warm from the walk. Sweat pooled on my back underneath the white tank I was wearing.

I cleared the side of the house—and groaned when I saw that Burke had driven back already.

Settling a hand over my chest, I paused and took a few deep breaths. He had no clue why I'd left or what had gotten me so upset. Hitting him with any of it wasn't smart.

No one was asking *him* shit like this.

Probably because compartmentalizing was one of his superpowers. He had me perfectly contained in the box that I'd put myself in. He was the one respecting the lines I'd drawn.

My heart started racing again. This was the part I couldn't bring myself to tell Daphne.

I wanted to be this badass, carefree woman who could sleep with him and not risk my heart. But now I wasn't sure that would ever be me.

Maybe it was stupid and childish to think that all the other things we were doing somehow kept me safer.

But I did believe it.

I still didn't know much about him.

Burke, for all intents and purposes, was made up of very specific snippets from various aspects of his life.

I knew he adored his sister and her kids, but he'd never once talked about whether he wanted kids of his own.

I googled him once and found out he'd been married for a few years after college, and it was hard for me to piece that together with the man in front of me.

I knew he hadn't walked away from the Campbell House, no matter how badly he'd wanted to.

He grieved his friend deeply, another snippet that made him who he was.

But I didn't know what it was like to wake up with him. To feel the

weight of his body on top of mine. To kiss him.

I had so many pieces of Burke Barrett, but it was the ones I didn't have that I kept thinking about. Those pieces seemed like the most dangerous ones to my heart.

When I walked into the carriage house, he was looking through a box on the table. He eyed me briefly. "Daphne must've really pissed you off."

I exhaled a laugh. "She does that sometimes." I shrugged. "Family, you know?"

He nodded. "Tansy does that to me on occasion too."

The box was large, and I couldn't see what was inside it. "What's that?"

Burke's face was stoic as he pulled back a layer of packing material. He pulled out a small envelope and stared at it. "It's some stuff Tansy sent me. Not sure why, since she knows I'm going back soon."

That was in three days, but who was counting?

"Maybe she thought you'd forget?" I asked.

He glanced back up, his lips hooking to the side in a crooked smile. Burke set down the envelope and then touched something inside the box.

I walked closer—and gasped. "Oh my gosh, is that the quilt you told me about?"

He didn't move at first, his eyes locked on the black-and-white pattern on the front of the blanket. It looked so much like the tile pattern we'd picked. Finally, he nodded.

"You said your mom made this?" I gently traced the stitching along the top. "She was really talented."

"I don't even remember her," he said quietly. "Dad told us that she made this blanket when she was pregnant with Tansy. I didn't get one; she was just learning how to do it." Burke blew out a hard breath. "I don't know why she sent this to me."

I wanted to say that maybe it was so he could put it in the house. Hang it on a wall somewhere as an heirloom piece. Or fold it up by the couch in the den so it could keep someone warm on a winter night.

But I had a feeling he didn't want to hear either suggestion.

Burke picked up a handwritten note and exhaled a laugh. He turned it so I could see.

"Don't be an idiot," I read out loud. I grinned. "Your sister gives excellent advice."

He nodded. The quilt stayed in the box, and I desperately wanted to pull

it out, but it wasn't mine to decide. There was something about the items that cast a cloud of melancholy over the room.

On the envelope was the blocky *M* of the University of Michigan. "What's that?" I asked.

"An invitation to something I don't want to go to." He picked it up and stared hard at the envelope.

Carefully, I slid behind him and set my head on his shoulder, wrapping a cautious arm around his waist. His frame relaxed.

"When is it?" I asked.

"First home game of the season," he answered, his voice low and charged. "End of August. They're doing a thing for Chris."

I closed my eyes. There would be so many memories for him there. All the memories he had with his friend.

"The last time I was at the stadium, I was with Chris and Amie." His voice was quiet. A little ragged. "She was pregnant with Mira."

I pressed my cheek against his shoulder, kissing the muscle through the thin cotton of his shirt. It wasn't nearly enough. But it was something.

He slid his hand over the top of mine and squeezed. My eyes opened.

"Will you come with me?" he asked.

The breath caught in my throat.

"You don't have to come to the event if you don't want to," he continued. His hand tightened over mine. "You can do something else during the game. I know how you feel about football—"

I stopped him by pulling away from his shoulder and turning him with a gentle hand to face me. I hooked my hand into his shirt and tugged him closer. His eyes could hardly meet mine, and my heart somersaulted with a horrible aching sense of how hard it must be for him to ask for help.

"Of course I'll be there with you," I told him. "But you'll have to tell me what 'first and ten' means again."

He huffed a short laugh, his eyes finally holding on to mine. "I can do that."

I smacked his chest. "I know what it means, you ass."

Burke laughed, and that dimple appeared beneath the stubble on his cheek.

"Think you can handle sharing a room with me?" I asked. "Or should I dip into my travel budget?"

His eyes heated at my not-so-innocent question. "I think we can manage



it for one night.”

“You’re sweaty,” I told him.

He glanced down at his chest, then wound his fingers into my shirt, similar to the way I was holding his. He tugged me closer. “So are you.”

I cocked an eyebrow.

Burke’s eyes locked on to my mouth, and my body felt it everywhere. My toes curled in anticipation, my chest muscles struggling to pull in enough air as I imagined kissing him.

Instead, he started to pull my shirt off. When it cleared my head, he dropped it on the floor. I did the same to him, spreading my hands up over his chest as he started walking us backward toward the bathroom.

In truth, I didn’t mind that he was sweaty. And based on the way his gaze devoured the gleam on my chest above my bra line, he didn’t seem to mind much either.

While I started running the water and we waited for it to warm up, he pressed against my back, mouthing at the nape of my neck while he finagled the clasp of my bra. He rolled his hips against my backside as he started pushing my shorts down my hips. He sucked hard at the curve where my neck met my shoulder, and I slammed a hand out to brace my weight. His hand spread over my stomach, fingers wide as he pulled my body tight to his. I was panting by the time we’d pulled all our clothes off, and I tugged him impatiently under the spray.

I wasn’t sure how to keep doing this.

The thought was wild and terrifying as he sucked at my jaw and filled his hands with my breasts.

*How do we only stop here?*

*How do we ever not have more?*

*Have everything?*

I had my hand around him as he pushed me against the tile. He moaned my name, and I shivered.

I wished we were in a bed.

I wished he were on top of me.

Wished he were inside me.

Wished I could wrap my arms around him and kiss him.

And even as I thought about all those things I wanted, I knew exactly why we couldn’t have them. Why I shouldn’t have them. And he shouldn’t either.

Burke wanted all the same things, if I had to guess, and he held back for reasons all his own.

But *this* was something we could have.

Something we could give each other.

He rocked into my hand, pushing open my thighs with his big palm and his demanding fingers.

There was an unnerving ease in the way we knew each other's bodies now. Something bigger than sex. Bigger than a deep, seeking kiss that went on endlessly.

He had me arching up on my toes, gasping his name in only a couple of minutes. And he groaned his own release into my shoulder, his trembling arm braced next to my head while the water beat down on our bodies.

We stood there until the water cooled. He kissed the pulse at the base of my throat and then wrapped me in a towel when we got out. Burke's eyes were intense as he swept the wet hair off my face.

I closed my eyes when he started toweling himself off.

And it was the first time I wanted to climb into bed with him and listen to his heart as we fell asleep.

But I didn't ask if I could.

And neither did he.

# Chapter Twenty-One

## CHARLOTTE

It was when he came back from Florida that I had to admit there was something wrong with me. Something I might not ever be able to fix.

An infection in my blood.

A virus in my brain.

It was the only explanation. Not because things were going bad. It was the exact opposite, actually.

Somehow, despite all the strangeness of how we'd begun, Burke had become my favorite person to be around.

We'd found a rhythm, as odd as it may have seemed to anyone else.

We began our mornings by checking in with William and the crew. Each change at this stage seemed to require just enough discussion, just enough decision-making, that Burke's continued presence was justified.

Light placement.

Paint colors.

Which way would they lay the new floor?

The tile pattern, the backsplash, the fireplaces, the bathroom floors—we had a different conversation for each.

The color of the grout.

Checking and rechecking before things were done that couldn't easily be undone.

Sometimes he got that look in his eye—that if someone asked him to make one more decision, he'd lose his mind.

That's usually when he left to work out. Burke had crafted his own backyard gym on the property, and when I walked the path toward Daphne and Richard's, I'd catch a glimpse of him doing push-ups or pull-ups on the apparatus that William had built for him about a month earlier. He was

always facing the water, no matter what area of his body he was working.

They'd also added a simple wooden bench, which Burke used to exercise his triceps.

The last time I had caught him doing that, I'd tripped on a root coming out of the ground, because he was shirtless and the flex of his massive arms as he pushed his body weight up and down and up and down . . . it was good.

Good flexing of good muscles.

I tell you, the Burke Barrett Orgasm Effect was taking over my brain.

I'd almost tackled him to the ground right then and there. The only reason I maintained self-control was because I wasn't really into exhibitionism and the crew would've gotten a great view from the back of the house.

Once he was done working out, he'd come back to the house and shower. That was usually when I was working at the dining-room table—either on some of my virtual projects or on planning out my social media posts for the next couple of weeks.

I'd received a new inquiry for my schedule after I was done at the Campbell House—this one for a Spanish Revival hotel in California. Months earlier, I'd had a call about a 1920s Tudor-style mansion in Des Moines.

I'd replied to the California inquiry, asking for specifics and a timeline, and ignored the pit in my stomach when I hit "Send."

Our afternoons were a mix of errands—he'd go on his, I'd go on mine—and occasional trips over to the house if William had a question. Burke had taken on the landscaping of the property, and I'd deny it until my dying day, but watching him ride the lawnmower with his shirt off was the strangest kink I'd ever unlocked in my *entire* life.

When the workers left around four thirty or five, we'd lock eyes, wait for the last car to leave, and then walk the house to see what had been accomplished that day.

The walls and trim were painted.

Floors were starting any day.

And the more the house transformed into something real and livable and increasingly beautiful as the days passed, the more his eyes took on a haunted quality.

We almost always ate dinner together.

After dinner, I liked to walk over to Daphne's house for a visit. Sometimes he joined me. Sometimes he stayed back to talk to his sister on

the phone.

And it was only when the skies went dark and we pulled the shades on the windows that Burke's eyes would take on a certain gleam.

Intent and desire.

It wasn't every night. Somehow we both knew when the mood wasn't right. And despite the unspoken lines we'd drawn, there was no shortage of variety in the ways we found fulfillment together.

As the days crept into August, the air became damp and heavy and hot, as was often the case in Michigan. I stood in the kitchen of the carriage house and watched Burke talk to William, fanning my face because the outdated HVAC could hardly keep up.

Burke had been gone for four days, back down to Florida to watch his niece and nephew while his sister met up with some college girlfriends.

That's when I convinced myself that I'd been infected with something.

In his absence, I'd found myself watching a documentary on ESPN that talked about the best defensive players from his era. Richard had sent me a text about it, and despite every single mental protest warning me not to tune in, the remote just . . . did it.

And I'd sat on that damn couch, underneath that ugly green blanket, and felt a freaking hurricane of lust watching that man tackle and run and intercept things—all while wearing amazingly tight pants that did glorious things for his ass. And the arms. They were sweaty and dirty, and he had black shit on his face that I didn't really understand, but it was all very primal and greatly appealed to my baser instincts.

I'd almost called him.

Almost begged him to talk me through an orgasm on the phone because I was watching him do sweaty sports things.

I'd fought the urge to tell him I wanted him there with me. And that I missed him while he was gone.

It was that last thought that had me pinching my eyes shut.

My stomach trembled, and I forced myself to turn away from the window, needing him out of my sight line.

The door opened, and I smoothed out my expression when he exhaled deeply. "I don't know how you ever get things done. I never realized there could be a thirty-minute discussion about light switches."

I smiled. "That's why it's important for the project manager to be on-site if the owner can't. The longer they go without an answer to their

questions, the longer it takes them to finish.”

His eyes tracked over my face. “William is nothing if not efficient,” he said. “He told me they’ll be done by the beginning of October.”

It wasn’t new information. William had told me this when Burke was gone.

All the same, hearing it from his mouth had my chest feeling hollow. I managed a slight nod. “How many builders actually get a project done ahead of schedule?”

How impressive.

I kept my tone light and unaffected, like I was *thrilled* that William would be done almost a month earlier than projected. Stacking subcontractors in a complicated game of Tetris was shaving weeks off the end items. While painters worked from the top of the house to the bottom, he pulled flooring to start working directly behind them instead of having them wait. Once they were done, it was off to the races for everything else. He warned me that the last month of the project would feel like Grand Central Station, but with each puzzle piece clicking into place, the big picture of what we’d accomplished was coming closer and closer into focus.

I filled up my water bottle and risked a glance at Burke. If he felt a similar ache in his chest, it wasn’t showing on his face.

“What did William need? Besides to test your patience about light switch options?”

He didn’t answer right away. Sometimes he got quiet when it came to the house. He didn’t always update me on the things he and William discussed. And I never pushed.

“Just wanted to tell me about their projected finish date,” Burke said. He sat on a chair and untied his yard shoes, setting them in a neat line next to my sandals. He tossed the mower keys into the yellow bowl. “And he said he’d set up the review of the property for historical certification if I wanted him to.”

“I’ll do it,” I said. “We just . . . hadn’t talked about what would happen when the work was done.”

His eyes were guarded. “I told him that.”

My stomach quivered with sudden nerves. “That was it?”

“No.”

The tentative steps around this topic suddenly felt big and clumsy. And for some reason I felt a streak of protectiveness for Burke. If William was

pushing him too hard.

What a hypocrite I was.

“What did he say?”

Burke swallowed, the clench of his jaw one of the biggest tells that he didn't want to answer.

“What would *you* do with it?” he asked. “With the Campbell House.”

My eyebrows shot up. “Me?”

He nodded.

I blew out a long breath, my heart hammering behind my ribs. For some reason, I didn't want to stand awkwardly in the kitchen for this conversation.

Taking a seat on my usual spot in the corner of the couch, I studied his face before I even attempted an answer.

Like I hoped he would, Burke joined me, stretching his arm along the back of the couch in that way that I loved.

It was open body language, an opportunity for me to inch closer if I wanted or let my head rest on some part of him. Maybe we both had our reasons for keeping certain parts of our physical relationship behind a safeguard—him with his kissing, me with . . . everything else—but these were the quiet moments that reminded me why he was the perfect man for this.

*Why he is the perfect man for me*, something in my head whispered quietly. But I knew just how dangerous it would be to listen to that quiet voice.

Burke allowed me to keep my heart safe. And he worshipped my body in every way that mattered.

“You've never asked me that,” I said.

His fingers toyed with the ends of my hair. “I know.”

“Why are you asking now?”

His chest heaved on a hard breath. “If it was your friend who'd died, would you know the best way to honor what he wanted?”

My eyes filled with tears, partially because he still tiptoed so carefully around the topic of Chris and what they meant to each other. It was another glimpse. Another snippet. And I wanted to hoard it somewhere under lock and key.

I swallowed hard, making sure I had control of my voice before I answered.

“I think that's a different question,” I pointed out. “What I'd do with

this house and if that would honor what your friend wanted—they may not be the same.”

At my answer, his tortured gaze shot through every line of defense I could ever hope to construct. What an odd moment to realize just how flimsy they were.

Tissue-paper thin. All of them.

And Burke was a battering ram.

I knew so little of what was inside his head, what he kept quiet in his heart. But when he looked at me like that—seeking reassurance and asking for my opinion, appearing lost in his desire to move forward while honoring the past—he showed me everything I needed to know.

That’s all he’d been doing for weeks. Months.

Without second-guessing, I pushed forward and climbed onto his lap, curling my arms around his neck and filling my lungs with his scent. With my legs on either side of his hips, his arms were locked around my back, holding me impossibly tight as he did the same.

“I know they’re different,” he whispered. “And I don’t know how to make peace with that.”

I pushed my nose against the warm skin on his throat. Underneath me, there was the steady thump of his heart.

I wanted to climb inside that too.

Maybe I already had.

“I don’t know how,” he said again. “And we’re running out of time.”

It wasn’t said loudly. But I felt it everywhere.

How was that even possible? How could you feel someone’s voice in your bones? How did it absorb through skin—the layer made for protection of all your most important parts—and push through muscle and veins and nerves to make your entire frame vibrate?

Maybe it was because he was offering me a piece of himself that he hadn’t given before.

And it was more precious to me than any kiss.

I wasn’t sure how long we sat like that. But as minutes passed, he never loosened his grip.

Our hands never started wandering. His lips never sought out my skin.

He just held me. Let me hold him back.

It should have scared me. But instead I ignored the warning bells in my head and let it be exactly the thing we needed.



# Chapter Twenty-Two

BURKE

“There’s no way those aren’t the same colors.”

She sighed in deep and obvious exasperation. “They are not. This one is grayer. This one is more of a true blue.” She pointed her paintbrush at another sample on the scrap wood. “And this is warmer. You know . . . has more yellow in it? How can you not see that?”

I pretended to study the colors, carefully painted in large swatches by the exasperated redhead next to me. When she tilted the scrap wood to the side, putting the front-door samples in full sunlight, I shook my head. “Nope. They look exactly the same to me.”

She muttered something under her breath, and I smothered my grin.

William walked past us, nudging me with his shoulder. “Ignore him, Charlotte. Pick the one on the left. It looks the best in the direct sun.”

I leaned closer to Charlotte when he was past us. “He’s right. The one on the left.”

She smacked my arm. “I knew it.”

“Did you?”

As I walked back into the carriage house, I whistled. She huffed, picking up her paint sample board and taking it into the main house. We’d decided to keep the exterior of the house a clean, crisp white, with warmly stained wood shutters. I’d heard all week about the various combinations we could go with, and why. Most of the time I listened. Sometimes the words went in one ear and out the other, simply because I liked to watch her face while she talked.

Not that I’d ever admit that out loud.

I always managed to keep those kinds of thoughts from the forefront of my mind until I was next to her. When it was possible for my shoulder to

brush against hers. Or I was close enough to smell the lotion she used—something with lemon in it. My sister had used a shampoo with lemon in it once, and I'd told her she smelled like Lysol. She'd punched me in the balls and called me an asshole, but if she'd used the same thing as Charlotte, I never would've said it. Never would've thought it.

Charlotte smelled like sunshine.

Later that day, I was helping a worker throw away some trash—one of the few things I could still do to help now that finish work was in full effect. With a speculative look in his eye, William helped me heave flooring boxes into the dumpster.

“What?” I asked.

“Doesn't it get crowded in that carriage house?”

The back of my neck always got red when I lied, something Tansy had pointed out once. So I made sure to face William when I answered. “No, it's fine.”

“The bed in that second bedroom is, like . . . a twin, right?”

“I can sleep anywhere,” I told him. That wasn't a lie, at least.

“Why didn't you get a hotel? Or rent a place?”

“First time I stayed here was in the spring—everything was booked up with events. Discovered I like being on the property if something comes up.”

His face was perfectly polite when he asked, “Like what?”

I rubbed the back of my neck. “Anything. An emergency.”

William nodded, his face thoughtful.

“You got something to say?”

He held his hands up. “Just . . . curious about your relationship with Charlotte is all.”

Yeah, I was curious about my relationship with Charlotte too, but he'd have to pry that admission out of me with a knife.

I eyed him as I tossed another box into the dumpster. “Interested?”

Why the *hell* did I ask that? We'd been working together for months, and I'd never seen him be anything but professional with her.

If he said yes, I might have to punch *myself* in the balls for stupidity, then turn around and punch him because I didn't like the way any of it made me feel.

“She's not my type.”

That didn't really make me feel better. Probably because it was the same thing I told my sister about Charlotte, and no matter how much I lied to

myself, she was absolutely my fucking type. Which was why I had no intention of pushing the subject. I had no reason not to believe him. All the same, he took my silence as an invitation to say more.

“I like blondes,” he said simply.

I grunted.

“The kinda mean ones,” he continued. “Not scary or rude. Just enough of an edge where you’re not sure if you should cover your balls or not when they get worked up.”

I found myself smiling. “Sounds like my sister.”

“Does it?”

“She lives in Florida, William.”

William gave me a look. “Let me know if she comes for a visit.”

In answer, I glared. He laughed.

I’d lost some unknowable tension in my shoulders. I refused to look deeper into why because I wasn’t quite sure I was ready to admit anything.

Maybe because it would’ve been a little too easy to imagine Charlotte and William together. A couple of days earlier, I had to bear witness while they got into a passionate discussion about wide-plank pine floors and woodburning stoves and tin ceilings.

They made sense.

It was too easy to imagine them building some reality TV-worthy empire, traveling across the country to find ugly old houses that they could pretty up and fill with ugly little furniture. They were attractive and outgoing and talented in all the same ways.

If she was his type.

Or if he was hers.

It was already hard enough to think about what would come next for her. Where she’d end up and for how long.

It was hard enough to be distracted by all that when I should have been thinking about the house. Instead, I was almost always thinking about Charlotte.

I rolled my neck, groaning when I got a satisfying pop.

“Thanks for your help,” William said.

“Sure thing.”

“You around first thing in the morning?”

“Should be. Why?”

“While you were gone, Charlotte asked about putting a few extra outlets

in all the downstairs living spaces when electric is back next week to do all their finish work. I wanted to finalize placement with both of you.”

“More outlets?”

He nodded. “Something about making it easier at Christmas, since you always need more outlets when you’re putting lights and trees up.”

My chest pinched uncomfortably. “Right.”

William gave me a steady look. “I wasn’t aware you’d decided what to do with this place once you got it fixed up.”

I dusted my hands off on the tops of my thighs. “I haven’t.”

“Does *she* know that? Because she sounded like she was envisioning all sorts of things.”

My hands slowed. “She knows,” I managed. “She’s just doing her job.”

After another long, searching look, William finally nodded. He patted me on the back once we’d tossed the last piece of garbage from the day, then twirled his truck keys around his pointer finger as he joined the rest of the departing crew.

I took a seat in front of the carriage house to remove my dusty boots, watching them as they walked back to their trucks, laughing and telling stories. Taking long drags off cigarettes now that they could light up again.

Someone pulled a small cooler out of the bed of his truck. He tossed a can of beer to one of his friends, and they settled against their vehicles to enjoy the summer evening.

The sound of their laughter made my hands slow as a wave of grief crashed over me. It was the unexpected timing of it, the bigness of how it swamped me, that had my skin feeling a little clammy, goose bumps tugging at the back of my neck.

Maybe it was the smell of the air or the music or the sight of friends unwinding easily at the end of their day.

Maybe it was all those things, but it snapped a trigger that I hadn’t realized was locked and loaded.

Chris and I had lived together for all four of our years at Michigan, and those first few weeks back on campus in the heat of summer brought a different sort of energy than any other time of the year. We used to sit outside, grill our dinner with some teammates, and drink beer while neighbors filtered over.

And it wasn’t like I didn’t miss the camaraderie of my professional teammates. I did. But those college years were different—a combination of

school and friends and freedom. Football was played out of a love for the sport, not because of a paycheck.

A radio blared from one of the trucks in the front yard, and the song that came on had my bones feeling tight and achy, another pressing wave of something hot against my chest bones that I desperately wanted to keep locked in. It pushed against my ribs, insistent and much, much stronger than I was ready for. I couldn't remember the words to that song, couldn't say who the artist was.

But I remembered it all the same.

I closed my eyes and tried to force something else into my head. Anything else.

But Chris was lodged at the forefront.

For weeks and weeks, I'd been playing house. Thinking about kissing a beautiful woman who'd dug her way under my ribs. Picking tiles and teasing her about paint. Watching her talk about Christmas trains and weddings on the water while I got an immediate vision of her in a white veil standing by the bay.

And all of it because he was gone.

Because he was dead.

I stood from the chair and kept my gaze away from the guys as I escaped into the carriage house. The last fucking thing I wanted was to burst into tears in front of a group of men I didn't know, still cooling down from the day of backbreaking work they'd just done.

I hadn't even cried at the funeral. It was almost like my brain had shut down the bone-splintering reality of what was unfolding in front of me long enough to get through it.

Once inside the house, I braced my hands on the counter and tried to count to ten, breathing deeply with each expanding movement of my chest.

It wasn't because I didn't want to be here anymore; I'd made peace with the reasons I'd decided to stay.

But I shouldn't have been the one doing these meetings. Making these decisions.

Shouldn't have been the one talking to electricians about outlets for Christmas trees or trains or how to make the holidays in that house magical.

None of this should've been my responsibility, because my friend and his wife should've been shopping for tile samples and arguing about tiny couches and budgets and what kinds of things could or should happen in this

house during all the years after I was done with it.

I'd allowed this place to become a massive fucking distraction—allowed *her* to be my distraction.

I missed him.

I missed him.

And I was so fucking pissed that he was gone. That they both were.

I was not the guy to do this for them. To try and figure out how to honor their memory. I could hardly figure out what I was supposed to be doing if it wasn't this, but for some reason, the idea that Chris had sat down and decided I was the first person he'd trust with taking care of this massive thing felt a bit like sharp, rusty iron clawing at the edges of my lungs.

Because for the last few weeks, I'd started imagining the Campbell House as mine.

"Fuck," I said. My legs were weak, and I slowly sank down onto the wide-plank floor, my back braced against the kitchen cabinets. With my elbows firmly on my knees, I settled my head in my hands. My fingers prickled ominously, and someone, somewhere, wrapped their cold, icy hands around my throat and gripped hard.

I tried to remember the trick my sister used when she felt like she was going to lose it.

Five things you can see.

Four things you can hear.

Or . . . five things you could touch and four things you could name.

I couldn't remember. But that slight question about what I was supposed to focus on was enough to shoulder through whatever fog had crept over my brain.

I could see Charlotte's Tigers hat on the kitchen table. The rip on the bill.

I could see the stack of tile samples she'd left on the coffee table in front of the couch.

That was as far as I'd made it when she walked out of her bedroom, headphones in her ears. She was smiling.

Until she saw me sitting on the floor, trying to count myself down from a panic attack.

Charlotte froze, pulling the earbuds out and setting them on the table. Her eyes were wide, her mouth slightly open.

She didn't say anything right away, and I was glad. Standing like she

was in the middle of the house, she gave me more things to focus on.

The soft purple of the shirt that fell over her hips, practically covering her denim shorts.

The wisps of hair that always escaped from her ponytail, no matter how many times she redid it.

She licked her lips and slowly folded her long legs as she sat cross-legged on the floor across from me.

“Will talking about it help or not help?” she asked quietly.

“I’m fine,” I managed. But my voice betrayed me. I hardly recognized it, sounding as it did like it had been pulled through a pile of cracked glass, covered in sand, and dragged along the ground.

My answer didn’t prompt an argument from her, even though I clearly wasn’t fucking fine.

Her eyes looked sad, though, when I said it. And I had to tear my gaze away from her face so that I didn’t have to see it. It made me want to rip my skin off, do something to rid myself of the feeling it provoked. Everything in my head felt too tender, too raw, to think about making Charlotte sad while I was . . . losing my shit.

She let out a slow breath and inched closer. My eyes pinched shut when I saw her fold her hands together in her lap, like she was restraining herself from reaching for me.

If she touched me when I was like this . . .

I’d never been more terrified of anything in my entire life.

We’d constructed our lines so carefully. And I didn’t want to destroy those tender pieces we’d each decided to protect because I was caught tight in the sudden throes of grief.

All this felt an awful lot like rolling over at her feet, exposing the most vulnerable parts of my underbelly to someone who could slice me in half with the wrong word.

No matter what I was or wasn’t willing to admit, Charlotte was important.

To me.

I wasn’t sure when that had happened. But in that moment, sitting with her on the floor, I couldn’t deny the hand that had been dealt in my life to bring us together. I couldn’t deny that all my noticing of her really only meant one thing—I wanted her more than in the way I currently had her.

I wanted her in a huge, life-altering way. And the fact that she moved

toward me in a moment like this was why I liked pushing her buttons.

Why I liked playing with her hair and hearing what she had to say.

Why I liked staring at her face while she talked.

Why all the little details of who she was were so fascinating to me.

Slowly, I lifted my head. "Tell me about it again."

Her brow furrowed. "About what?"

"Your first visit here. Tell me about it. Why did it make you so happy?"

Charlotte sucked in a quick breath, blinking a few times.

*Show me who you are*, I wanted to say. I wanted her to show me why she was here, why she instinctively knew how to handle me. Why she wanted this half relationship. I wanted to know all of it.

Because I had no idea how to give her that in return.

"M-my parents had a pretty nasty divorce," she said. "Pretty nasty marriage, actually. They fought for"—she paused, shaking her head—"a decade before my mom asked for a divorce. We moved here because my aunt Daphne had been in Traverse for years. They were college roommates, and my mom used to visit when I was a baby. I don't remember it, but she said the summers at the beach were some of her best memories."

Slowly, the tension ebbed from the muscles in my shoulders, and I was able to lower them a few inches. I could rest my head against the cabinets and listen to her without still feeling that cold, crawling sensation moving down the lengths of my arms.

"I can't say it's harder being an only child when your parents fight all the time," she continued. "But I didn't have a brother or sister who understood what it was like. My friends had no clue how bad it was. And I didn't have anyone to talk to about it. I just . . . hid. I'd put on my headphones and sit in my bedroom with a book and music on, trying to pretend like everything was fine."

"It wasn't, though," I said.

Slowly, she shook her head. "No. You don't know that when you're a kid, though. Your normal is all you know. Even if you get glimpses of other people's lives, it's only that . . . a glimpse. Half the time, I was convinced everyone else was the exact same and they just hid it better than my parents did. After a few years of that, I didn't want to see what other families did. Didn't really care. Even that felt normal after a while."

I thought about my own father. What our normal was growing up. The way he fixated on me. Tansy's definition of the word was different from



mine, but like Charlotte . . . we didn't really understand what was unhealthy about it until we were older.

"I'm not sure I know how to explain it well," she said. Even though she was sitting on the floor with me, just inches away, Charlotte was right back in whatever that memory was. And I could see the change in her face when she got to the good part. "Moving here, it didn't immediately feel like home. Almost like being on vacation, you know?"

I nodded.

"When my mom and Daphne dragged me to the Christmas party here, I was such a preteen asshole about it. So emo," she said with a smile. "When we walked in the front door, Chris's grandma was the first person I saw. She was standing next to the big tree by the stairs, welcoming everyone who came in. Telling us where we could find the hot chocolate and snacks, the best spots to look at the train, and which bedrooms had the best trees." Then she closed her eyes, lost in that memory. I stayed quiet while she took a deep breath. "The welcome in this house was . . . tangible. Like I could grab on to it with both hands, hold it against my chest, and it would be warm and heavy. And it came from them. It came from the house. They were so intertwined.

"I never wanted to leave," she said simply. "My mom and I stayed for hours. I walked through the rooms all day, studied everything in them. Chris's grandpa explained all the details of the house and who built it and what their story was. And it was the first time I knew what I wanted to do with my life. Give someone that same feeling. Make something vivid and real out of history."

Her eyelids fluttered open, and the look I saw there knocked the breath from my still-aching lungs.

I'd give her anything she wanted if I could keep that look in her eyes. Do anything she needed to help her capture it again.

And for the first time, sitting on the floor, I found myself willing to admit that I wanted just a small piece of that for myself too. But only if she was there with me.

And if I thought about that for too long, I'd probably feel another panic attack looming at the edges of our moment. So I didn't dwell on it. But I didn't fight it either.

As I watched her pull herself from the memory, the thing that bound us together, I simply accepted it as fact.

"Where's your mom now?" I asked.

She blinked again, her eyes filling rapidly with tears that threatened to fall. But they didn't. "She died a few years ago. A heart attack," she whispered. "It was quick. And I guess I'm glad for that in hindsight."

"I'm sorry."

Charlotte smiled. "Thanks. You would've liked her. Everyone did."

We lapsed into silence for a few moments, and I closed my eyes. It would've been so easy to brush off what she'd witnessed, and even though she'd allowed me to shift the attention to her, I fought the urge to respond in the way that my dad would've told me to.

*On your feet.*

*Back to work.*

*Crying about it won't solve anyone's problems, and it won't help you get better.*

I didn't want to get on my feet.

I wanted to sit right there with the beautiful woman who somehow knew exactly what I needed.

So when she started to stand up, I didn't overthink. I didn't second-guess. I reached out and grabbed her hand.

Her eyebrows rose slowly when I wound my fingers over hers. Then I tugged.

"Stay," I said. "Just for a little."

# Chapter Twenty-Three

## CHARLOTTE

*Stay*, he'd said. So calmly, like he hadn't been a completely different person only a few minutes earlier.

I wasn't going anywhere, not while he'd sit there and talk to me.

I'd never walked in on someone wobbling on the tightrope of a panic attack before, but as soon as I saw that haunted look in his eyes, the tension rippling over every inch of his frame, I knew that's exactly what it was.

I'd had them. A few times. And they were terrifying, even more so when you didn't have a name for what was happening to your body.

Daphne did, and she walked me through the first few after my mom died, when I wasn't sure where I was supposed to go with all the boiling emotions trapped under my skin.

Grief had a funny way of coming out when we least expected it. That was the look in his eye that I recognized.

There was always a tipping point.

The moment before everything came spilling out in a messy burst—short, shallow breaths that couldn't be controlled or slowed or regulated, the tears I saw in his eyes, and that trapped, panicky look about him.

Burke Barrett, at the moment I found him, was as dangerous as a wild animal. Capable of causing massive damage and immense hurt, to either me or himself.

But instead I witnessed someone with incredible control over what he was feeling. Instead of lashing out in embarrassment, instead of allowing the physical chemistry between us to serve as a distraction, he directed his focus onto me.

So I stayed.

None of this fit the tidy picture I'd drawn for our nonrelationship

relationship. And somehow that seemed to fit us too.

“What was your mom like?” he asked.

I smiled. “She was . . . quiet.”

“So not like you, then.”

I smacked his arm, and he smiled.

“Sometimes I think it’s because she spent so many years fighting; she just wanted peace once she was free of it.”

Burke made a small noise at the back of his throat, and there was understanding in it.

“My mom wanted simple things,” I continued. “A cup of tea when she woke up. A pretty view to look at while she drank it. A garden to get her hands dirty. A good, hearty meal. And her loved ones close by.”

He took that in quietly, then gave me a questioning look. “Did she find all that?”

I nodded. “Eventually. She rented a small house about ten minutes from my aunt Daphne’s; it wasn’t on the water, but she had a nice backyard that the landlord let her take charge of.”

“She didn’t want to own a home?”

“She didn’t.” My throat felt a little tight talking about my mom. Daphne was the only person I could share stories with, and the memories felt a little rusty coming up. “But she loved the place she lived, even if it wasn’t hers. Her garden is gone now. The person who moved in after her didn’t want to take care of it.”

“So she wasn’t leaving you a house when she passed,” he said.

I smiled. “Nope. Daphne said I won’t get her house either because Richard will probably outlive her by twenty years.”

“Not a chance. That woman is a menace; she’ll live to be a hundred and twenty.”

My laughter was loud, but Burke didn’t seem to mind.

“Last week, I was ready to pluck my ears off when she started explaining why tantric sex was so underappreciated in Western cultures.”

“She didn’t,” I gasped.

He let his head rest back on the cabinets, his eyes closing as he did. “Twenty minutes, Charlotte. I couldn’t stop her for a solid twenty minutes.”

“Poor Burke.”

He grunted.

“I’m sure it was very educational.”

“I am not telling you the things I learned.”

I laughed. “You’re kidding yourself if you think I haven’t heard her talk about it too.” I gave him a sidelong look. “Who do you think taught me about the birds and bees?”

Burke grimaced.

“I wish my mom had done it, though,” I said quietly. “When I look back on it now, I think she offloaded that to Daphne because it was too hard for her to talk about *any* kind of relationship.”

He listened quietly.

My ribs squeezed when, yet again, I thought of how badly I wanted to know things as they filtered through his head.

Anything.

Everything.

“My dad was like that too,” he added.

The air froze in my lungs, and I kept so still. “Yeah?”

He nodded. “I don’t think I ever heard him talk about anything except football. My training. Practice. He never talked to me or Tansy about my mom. Never talked about their relationship. I think that’s why neither of us knew”—he paused, swallowing hard—“how to do it well.”

I turned my head and watched him carefully.

The brief news article I’d found mentioned his short-lived marriage. A college relationship, married for a couple of years after he went pro. Then nothing.

A hundred questions burned at the tip of my tongue.

Who was she?

How had they met?

What went wrong?

“Maybe he missed her,” I said. “Sometimes it’s hard for people to talk about the love they lost.”

His scrutiny was fierce in its intensity, seeking out meaning in my words. I wondered if he’d find what he was looking for.

“Is that supposed to remind me that I’m like my dad?”

“No,” I said gently. “But I do think a lot of people react to grief that way.”

Burke was up off the floor before I could blink.

My stomach dropped cold to my feet.

“I’m not like him,” he said harshly.

Carefully, I stood. “I believe you.”

Burke speared a hand through his hair, the muscles in his jaw tight and tense. His focus never wavered, and I could see the battle play out all over his face. Something about the thread of loss—the urge to bury it, not allow it to the surface—hit a nerve.

I couldn’t apologize for saying it, because the longer I was around Burke, the more apparent it was that he still didn’t know how to process the loss of his friends.

And he needed to. No matter what that looked like for him, he had to do something with it.

Burke turned his back, facing the sink, hands on his hips.

“I’m not mad at you,” he said, his voice tense and tight. “I don’t want you to think I am.”

“I know.”

His shoulders relaxed. Burke reached forward to turn on the water.

Nothing happened.

He crouched, dropping down to open the cupboard. The pipes emitted a horrible groaning sound.

“Burke,” I warned.

Then it was everywhere.

Freezing-cold water hit me square in the face, and I screamed, backing out of the way just a few seconds too late. With my mouth hanging open, I stared in horror as the kitchen sink turned into a lovely indoor water feature.

Burke swore, running toward the bathroom to get the tool kit.

When he stormed back into the room, tool kit in hand and a furious expression on his face, I tried desperately to stifle my laughter.

It wasn’t funny. Not any of it.

But the sheer emotional roller coaster of the last hour had me feeling just a tinge hysterical.

The ends of my hair were dripping, the front of my shirt was soaked, the floor of the kitchen was slowly turning into an indoor pool, and Burke looked like he was ready to light the entire place on fire.

“This isn’t funny,” he barked. He wedged his huge frame underneath the cupboard.

“Sorry,” I said in between giggles. “I-I can’t help it.”

He pushed back, his dripping-wet face appearing. “Hand me that other wrench; this one is too small.”

I crouched on the floor and dug into the tool kit, grabbing the first thing I could find.

“The other wrench,” he yelled.

“Like I frickin’ know which one you have,” I said. I shoved it in his hands and tried very hard not to stare at the soaked T-shirt molding to his upper body. The trim line of his hips where he lay on the floor.

He cranked his arm and ground out a curse, and then the water—blessedly—stopped.

A slow dripping from the counter was the only sound in the kitchen while I waited for him to come out.

He stayed on the floor, head still beneath the sink.

His chest expanded and contracted as he tried to catch his breath, and when he pushed out from underneath the sink, he was soaked.

Water dripped from his jaw. His ears. His nose.

“I fucking hate this place,” he said.

I lost my battle. Irrepressible laughter pressed so hard against my sternum that if I didn’t let it out, I’d probably start crying.

Everything was wet. Everything.

My clothes. My hair. His clothes. His hair. The floor. The counters.

I slumped against the fridge while I tried desperately to pull myself together.

But when Burke slowly pushed himself up to a standing position, it was the look in his eye that had my laughter dying instantly.

# Chapter Twenty-Four

BURKE

“This funny to you?” I asked, swiping my hand over my face.

Her chest heaved on a few deep breaths, her laughter dying when she saw that I was, unequivocally, not laughing with her.

“I mean . . .” She paused, her hand gesturing to the water everywhere. Then her face smoothed out, her eyes wide as she registered the tension I couldn’t quite shake. “No,” she said finally. “It’s not funny.”

I snatched the dish towel hanging over the handle on the oven and rubbed it over my face and neck. I handed it to her so she could do the same.

“I *hate* this house,” I said again. The words were torn straight from my chest. Pain followed as soon as they hit the air.

Her hands slowed as she wiped off her chest. Charlotte set the towel on the counter, her chin notched up. “No, you don’t.”

I took a step closer. “Yes, I do.”

She shook her head. “I don’t believe that for a second.”

I was at the end of my fucking rope, far too raw to be having any sort of conversation with Charlotte. She pushed every button. Every single one I had in my possession.

And for the first time, I realized just how dangerous a game I’d been playing, purposely doing the exact same thing to her.

It had all been innocent at first. But now that I could act, now that I could take different pieces of her for my own enjoyment—the ones she was offering—it made the push and pull so much more volatile.

From where she stood, she watched me with a healthy dose of trepidation in her eyes.

We’d done that before too. Many times.

I was unsteady from all the emotions desperately trying to get out, and



she walked carefully into the space with me, unsure for different reasons.

“You want to know why I was freaking out earlier?” My voice came out harsh and rough.

“Only if you want to tell me,” Charlotte said. But her eyes pleaded for me to do exactly that.

They’d been begging for more every single time we talked. When she shared, allowing me to see a bigger picture of who she was, there was no hiding that she wanted that from me too.

I had so many stories that I could’ve told her.

My dad.

Angela.

How proving myself to one meant being a failure to the other. And that, to this day, I still wondered if I’d chosen right in whose dream I’d carried for all those years.

Charlotte would scoop up every single bit that I gave her. She’d treat them with care.

And if I started telling her what Chris meant to me at such a pivotal point in my life, she’d handle those confidences gently too. She’d listen and listen and listen—to every single word about a man who’d shown me that I could play a game I was good at and still have fun. That it wasn’t all discipline and control and perfect training regimens.

He was the first person to bring me any sort of joy in the thing that I’d dedicated my life to.

She’d take everything I could give her. And in the deepest parts of my mind, I worried about what would happen.

I ignored that, though, deciding instead to grip tightly to the feeling of what was building between us. To ruthlessly prod where I maybe should back off.

I took a step closer.

The push of another button. Her chin rose an inch, and I loved that she did that.

“That’s the point, Charlotte.” I held my hands out. “I don’t *want* to do any of this. I wish my friend were here so I could ask him what he wants. Let him deal with all this bullshit.”

Charlotte’s eyes flashed, and I knew immediately that she was ready to step right into the arena with me. There was no backing down or retreating to our corners.

Not this time.

“But he’s not,” she said.

*Push.*

“But he’s not,” I repeated. My fist thumped at my chest. “I am. And days like today, I fucking hate it.”

“You can hate it all you want,” she said. “No one is trying to talk you out of that. But be honest about why it’s making you feel this way.”

The tables turned before I’d even had a chance to realize it. Charlotte upended the balance, deftly switching the dynamic in the room through her instinctive understanding of what was brewing behind my chest.

What had started out as a desire to push her buttons had suddenly become something so much worse.

“I *am* being honest,” I said between gritted teeth.

Her gaze was unflinching. It ripped through all the things I didn’t want to say. “Then tell me. I want to hear it.”

“No, you don’t.”

She didn’t back down, and I wished she would.

I was glad she didn’t.

Wasn’t that always my problem? I didn’t know what I wanted when it came to Charlotte. To this place. Or maybe I did, and I was too chickenshit to say any of it out loud.

“I thought maybe . . .” Her voice trailed off, her eyes searching mine.

“Maybe what?” My voice was ragged, dangerous.

The air between us was charged and heavy—only the slightest nudge and it would explode.

Volatile.

“I thought you were ready to admit that what they want—”

“Don’t,” I growled.

There was a loaded moment as we stared at each other.

*Don’t leave me alone in this.*

She sucked in a breath. “That what they wanted and what you want now are not the same.”

Something dangerous ignited in the air around us.

“It doesn’t matter what your friend would want,” she continued. *Push.* “Not right now.”

“No,” I growled. “It doesn’t. Because I can’t ask. He didn’t fucking tell me.”

Her cheeks blushed pink, and my hand came up, the tip of my finger tracing the edge of her wet ponytail. Her hair was darker from the water, like it was when we showered together.

“What do you want?” she whispered.

She’d pleaded for quite a few things since I met her. And in the last handful of weeks, the pleading had turned physical. When my hands and lips and tongue teased her, mindless and arching against me. I could handle that kind of begging from Charlotte because it somehow felt easier than this.

She wanted honesty.

She wanted armor peeled back and nothing between us.

I wanted to give her all those things, but I still didn’t fucking know how.

Answers crowded my throat, and I thought for a moment I might choke on them if I tried to say them out loud. Because they either weren’t possible or were so far out of my reach that I didn’t dare let them break the surface. Kept locked in my aching chest, they felt just a bit safer.

“I don’t know,” I managed.

Her eyes flashed. “You’re lying.”

Denial stuck in my throat too.

Charlotte shook her head. “You’re lying. I think you pretend like you hate this, hate having this, hate being here, because it’s harder to admit that —”

“Stop,” I snapped.

She did, but she didn’t concede a single solitary inch.

“You want to know what I want?” I asked.

Charlotte’s eyes lingered on my lips, and my hands shook from the effort it took to keep them off her.

“I don’t want to take a shower with you and slip my hand between your legs anymore. I don’t want to push you onto your bed and hold your thighs down while they shake around my head. Not right now,” I said. I slid a hand along her jaw, and she sucked in a breath. My thumb tracked over the curve of her bottom lip, which trembled at my touch. It felt like warm silk. I briefly wondered if she’d melt underneath my tongue, like cotton candy or chocolate. “I want something new.”

I glided the tip of my nose along hers, coasting it over her cheekbone, the line of her temple. Her fists tightened in the front of my shirt.

I held there, giving her plenty of time to pull back.

But she didn't.

Neither did I.

"I want something that I probably don't deserve." I leaned down, dropped my voice to a whisper.

*I don't deserve you.*

Another man might have been able to tell her that. But it felt even more dangerous than the fact that I was touching her. I kept those words to myself, watched the climb of color in her cheeks as she registered what I was saying.

There was a rough current to this entire exchange, something quick and sharp under my skin. I didn't want to soften it, and I didn't want to walk away.

The wariness was gone from her eyes. No trepidation there anymore. Her pupils, blown wide with desire, had my blood thrumming hotly. A constant *whoosh, whoosh, whoosh* that filled my ears, blocked out any sort of logical thinking.

Her eyelids fluttered closed, and she let out the tiniest, shakiest exhale. But I heard it.

If she pushed, even a little, I would back away.

When I was alone in the dark and had let myself imagine what it might be like to kiss Charlotte . . . it wasn't like this.

I imagined a furious clashing, an ignition with no buildup, no time to think through why we should or shouldn't. I imagined shoving hands and frantic tearing of clothes, furniture pushed over and backs braced against walls.

I should have known that we weren't like that.

We'd test the strength of that want first, making sure it was sound and sure . . . and reciprocated.

Her eyes locked unerringly on mine. Underneath her palm, she could probably feel the thudding rhythm of my heart.

Charlotte slid her hand up over my chest until her fingers brushed the back of my neck, tangling in my hair.

She didn't ask me what else I wanted. She didn't make some coquettish game from whatever line we were skirting. She simply took one last step, her breasts brushing the front of my chest, and traced her other hand down the line of my bicep, my arm, until our fingers tangled together.

"Then I think you should take it," she said.

It was the most straightforward display of desire I'd ever seen, and I had

a distinct feeling that what I saw on her face was mirrored in mine.

There were two of us in this, equal participants from the beginning. But only one of us was brave enough to say what they wanted.

Charlotte was brave enough. Every step of the way, she'd met my reserve with a fearless energy.

My hand on her face slid farther back, over the graceful arch of her cheekbone, tangling in her damp hair, tightening in the strands, my thumb tucking underneath her jaw until I could tilt her face up.

Her lips, pink and soft, opened slightly as I leaned in.

For just a moment, I paused there, breathed her in.

My mouth brushed hers. She let out the smallest whisper of want, a shaky breath that I felt in my toes.

Once.

Twice.

Hardly making contact while I tried to find the words that still crowded my throat.

"I want to know what you sound like," I told her, "when I finally get my first taste."

Her lips fit in between mine, sweet and soft, and it was only the briefest touch before I slanted my mouth over hers, a devouring kiss of lips and teeth and tongues when I licked into her mouth. Her tongue was hot and wet against mine—and that's when I got the thing I wanted.

She whimpered into the kiss, a mewling sort of sound with her hand tightening on the back of my head as she rose up on the balls of her feet. My arm wrapped around her waist so I could bring her closer, feel every inch of her against my body.

Her breasts were soft and full, the curve of her waist warm and firm, and the next sound I heard was my own.

It was something born of relief and tugged straight from the darkest part of my lungs. I wanted to breathe her in into that place, fill myself up with her scent, figure out if the way she tasted was something I could bottle to keep and get drunk from.

Her lips pushed and pulled, sliding over mine, our breaths mingling—in and out—when neither one of us pulled away or stopped or slowed. She tilted her head to the side, our kiss deepening as I walked her backward. Her arms twined tight around my neck as she settled her weight onto the counter. She was tall enough that I didn't have to lift her, and as soon as she had her seat

there, she wrapped her legs snugly around my hips.

Our bodies fit together perfectly, in all the places I wanted to touch her the most. If I had all night, I'd never stop finding soft spots of skin that I wanted to suck and lick and bite.

My heart hammered relentlessly, something that sounded a lot like her name, and I shoved past the bigness of it in my head.

I rocked into her, groaning when her nails pricked at the back of my head. Sucking on her bottom lip had her moaning, her back arching.

We traded air, short puffs out of her nose, which I sucked in at the same time, unwilling to break apart from this kiss.

Charlotte's head fell back when I sucked hot kisses down the line of her jaw, over the arch of her throat.

"Burke," she whispered, curving her body closer to mine.

I hummed into her skin, pulling at the neckline of her shirt so I could nip at her collarbone. I took a deep breath when she slid her hands over my arms. It was so simple, but that touch was enough to send chills down the line of my back. I felt like a cat, arching into her touch. This felt different, though, from all the times we'd touched. The simple addition of a not-so-simple kiss made the feel of her hands on my skin something decadent and wild and indulgent.

Not just because of the kiss.

Because it was her.

The wrong person for me in so many ways but absolutely the only fucking woman I'd ever wanted like this.

Every moment of this felt fleeting, like if I stopped to breathe for too long, I'd lose an opportunity. An hourglass tipped over in my mind, pushing a sense of urgency into whatever we were starting. And maybe it had always been there, a diverging path to where she'd end up, and where I would too.

I slanted my mouth over hers again, diving deep back into the kiss, my hands gripping the sides of her face, thumbs brushing over her cheeks as she gave and gave, then ripped a groan from my chest when she nipped at my bottom lip.

"Fuck," I muttered. "How did I know you'd bite?"

She laughed into my mouth, and I swallowed the sound with a slow, long lick against her tongue. I rolled my hips as I did, and she whimpered again.

I wanted inside her.

I wanted to know how soft and wet and hot she was.

If she'd scream when I had her underneath me, her thighs clamped on either side of my waist.

In that moment, I wanted nothing more than to tear Charlotte apart, feel her shake and shudder because of what we did to each other.

More than I ever had before, I understood why she'd erected this barrier. Why she held back from crossing that line.

If a kiss had the power to devastate me this way, rip through defenses and obliterate my desire to hold back from her, then how much more powerless would I feel if I knew how she felt from the inside? If I was so deep in her that we couldn't tell her pleasure from my own when they tied together.

My hands curled, and I tried to curb the impulse to tear at her clothes, to dive headfirst into the parts of her that I wanted to taste the most. But I wasn't quite sure that was the way we'd do this either.

I gentled the kiss, and she softened inch by inch. I slid my palms down her arms, then up the firm skin of her thigh, pushing underneath the hem of her tattered denim shorts.

Charlotte brushed her nose along mine, biting carefully at my bottom lip, her eyes open and her gaze locked on mine.

We were testing again, searching for any reaction that might threaten whatever it was we were building.

Her lips curled into a tiny, smug smile when my hands tightened on the bottom curve of her ass.

"You feel good," I told her.

She hummed. "I think we'd both feel better if our clothes were off."

I exhaled a laugh. I set my forehead on hers. "Without a fucking doubt," I whispered against her lips.

Her hands started exploring the expanse of my chest under my shirt, dancing lightly down the front of my stomach as she ducked her head to nibble on my jaw. I curled my hands into fists and set them on the counter on either side of her hips.

"Woman," I growled, "I'm trying to be honorable."

She licked at the base of my throat. "Are you?"

"Mm-hmm."

"I can think of other very fun ways we can spend our evening." She curled her fingers into the waistband of my pants, and I hissed when she

brushed against me. “Want me to list them for you?”

“Yes. No.” I kissed her again, pressing her back into the cabinets as she laughed against my mouth. “Maybe.”

She sucked on the tip of my tongue and sighed when she pulled away. “That was such a good kiss.”

It was my turn to smile the smug smile. My turn to study the flush of her chest, the way her lips were puffy and pink from my mouth.

For a moment, all we did was stare. I studied her face, cataloging the damage I’d done with my hands and lips and tongue. She’d have a bruise on her neck, just above her collarbone. Charlotte traced a finger over the curve of my shoulder, and I realized she’d scratched just hard enough with her fingernails that I had a red mark.

I started to lean in again, relishing this pause before we decided how to proceed. I could kiss her while we did, though. Before I stopped to think about the ramifications of what we’d done, I could continue to memorize her lips and try to name the way her tongue tasted on mine.

My phone rang where I’d set it on the table next to the door.

Because of fucking course it did.

She laughed. Her thumb traced along my bottom lip. “Your glare is terrifying,” she whispered.

“Am I glaring?”

Charlotte nodded.

*Because I want to keep kissing you forever, and it’s too soon to think anything of the sort.*

I kept those words in too.

The phone stopped.

I exhaled her name, and I saw the way she braced herself for whatever I was about to say next. Then she held up her hand.

Charlotte tilted her chin at the phone. “We should call a plumber anyway.”

“Oh.” I glanced around at the kitchen. Water. Burst pipe. “Right.” With a disgruntled sigh, I pulled away. My phone started ringing again. “I’m coming, I’m coming,” I muttered.

It was Tansy.

I glanced heavenward and said a small prayer for patience before I answered.

“Yeah,” I said.



“I need you at home,” she said.

My head snapped up at the tears in her voice. “What is it?”

“I . . . I think Felicia has appendicitis. My neighbor said Ford can come to her house until you get here, but I need to take her to the emergency room.”

“Shit, okay. I’ll see if I can get a flight out tonight.” I glanced at my watch with a frown. “It’s gonna be tight.”

“Thank you.” She sighed. “Just send me a text if you find something.”

Charlotte joined me, typing furiously on her phone. She tilted the screen in my direction. There was a flight in less than two hours. “Tans, I gotta go. I might be able to grab a seat on the last flight through Detroit.”

“Okay.” Her voice wobbled.

“Tansy,” I said. “Listen to me. She will be fine.”

“I know.”

I hung up, my chin dropping to my chest as I let out a weighted exhale. When I lifted my head, Charlotte gave me a tiny smile.

“You better go,” she said quietly.

Blowing out another breath, I thought about what she’d do if I told her it felt like a betrayal to my sister that I didn’t want to leave.

If I told her what my first thought was: *I’m not ready to leave home so soon.*

If I told her it was those types of thoughts that had set us on this course in the first place.

Which was why I didn’t say the words. Not now.

Instead, I gave her a short nod. “Let me know what happens with the plumber.”

The moment was over, and we both knew it. In its place was a giant question mark.

I hated those.

As I ran to change my clothes, shove some clean shirts and shorts into a duffel bag, I thought once again about how odd it all was—and if I’d made the biggest mistake of my life by kissing her. If I’d ever be able to move on now that I knew what it was like.

And I wondered when I’d started thinking of this place as home.

# Chapter Twenty-Five

## BURKE

I woke up hot. Very, very hot. And not the good kind, like I'd fantasized about when I planted face-first into the bed in my sister's guest room.

Ford was sprawled out against me, his knee lodged up under my neck and his elbow jammed into my side. I tried to shift carefully, allow my nephew to keep sleeping, but the moment I moved, he rolled, whacking me in the face with his foot.

"Ford," I grunted, shoving at his leg.

"Mhm." He stretched and his arm flopped dangerously close to my balls. "What time is it?"

"Time to stop hitting me in the junk, kid."

His chuckle was sleepy, and he sat up, hair sticking out at all angles. "I slept so good."

I covered my face with one arm. Partially because it was bright and I'd forgotten to close the curtains before crawling into bed, and partially for protection against flailing limbs. "Glad to hear it," I said dryly.

After landing late the night before, I'd picked up my nephew from the neighbor's house, carrying a sleeping Ford back home and walking him up to his bedroom. He'd sat in his bed, trying to get his bearings, before he looked up at me with those big eyes of his.

Kid looked terrified. "Is my sister gonna be okay?"

"Yeah, the doctors are taking real good care of her. Your mom texted me just a little bit ago; she'll be back to normal in no time."

"How long will they be gone?"

"A couple days, probably. But I don't think she'll be running around with you for a week or two."

He nodded, but his eyes filled with tears all the same. "Do you think

she's scared being at the hospital?"

These kids did crazy fucking things to my heart. I couldn't fathom taking much more, and they weren't even my own. Parents must have been losing their shit on a regular basis worrying about every damn thing that could happen.

I sat next to him on his bed. "Nah. You know Felicia; she's probably breaking all the rules and driving the nurses crazy."

Ford smiled, but he still looked worried. "Can we do a sleepover in your room, Uncle Burke?"

I'd basically say yes to anything he asked for, if it made him feel better, but I wasn't sure my sister would appreciate me admitting that out loud.

I nudged him on the shoulder. "Do you snore?"

"I don't think so. Do you?"

"Probably."

My honesty was enough for him. He shrugged his skinny little shoulders, grabbed his pillow, and marched down the hall and down the stairs to the room where I slept. Following behind, I scratched my head while he got comfortable, trying to decide if my sister was gonna kick my ass for allowing this.

"Fuck it," I muttered. I was tired. He was tired. And this way I'd know when he woke up, and he couldn't sneak out to get some cake for breakfast or something.

"Can we go out to breakfast?" Ford asked. He was sitting cross-legged in the bed next to me. I rolled onto my stomach because I'd been having a very good dream about Charlotte.

"Where do you like to go?"

He considered that for a few moments. "I can pick anywhere I want?"

"It's gotta be local, but yeah."

Ford peeked at me from underneath his lashes. "Can we go to McDonald's?"

My head lifted off my pillow. "That's where you want to go?"

"Dad always said it was junk, and he didn't want his kids eating junk."

It was on the tip of my tongue to say that his dad was a self-righteous prick, but I decided to keep that opinion to myself. "Yeah, kid. We can go there."

He jumped out of bed with a whoop of joy and tore off to his room to get dressed.

We spent the day, and evening, rotating through a list of things he wanted to do. I'd deal with the fallout with Tansy later, because Ford happily informed me that he'd never been able to watch movies as late as I'd let him.

I couldn't get Charlotte out of my mind. I wondered what she was doing. Wondered if she, like me, was thinking about our kiss for the millionth time.

I thought about calling her a few more times than that, but every time I picked up my phone, I managed to talk myself out of it.

There was nothing to talk about. Mainly because I couldn't find the words to pick through the tangled thoughts in my head.

Changing the rules now was messy.

We had a countdown hanging over our heads—when she'd go her way, and I'd go mine.

And it was messy because I was starting to want all sorts of things that weren't mine to want in the first place. The kiss, undoubtedly, was a mistake that we should never repeat again. But I wasn't sure I was capable of being around her without kissing her again.

This type of want had never registered for me, to the point where I wasn't sure it ever would. You couldn't miss something you'd never had.

I had it now, though. And I wasn't sure I knew what to do with it.

The next morning, I woke up with Ford's legs shoved into my side, because even though I'd promised pancakes and bacon for breakfast the next morning if he stayed in his own bed, he'd crawled in next to me sometime around midnight after he'd had a nightmare.

"Can I still have pancakes, though?" he whispered once he was curled into a ball on his side of the bed.

I'd never cooked pancakes in my life, but damn it, he was looking at me with those eyes again.

"Yeah, why not?" I mumbled. "Can't be that hard to figure out."

I was wrong, as it turned out, because by the time I'd scraped a doughy mess into the trash and then a burned one after that . . . we took one look at each other and opened a box of Cinnamon Toast Crunch instead.

He wanted to watch *Harry Potter*, and when I told him I'd never seen the movies, he somehow convinced me to watch the first two back-to-back. We were about to start the third when an exhausted Tansy pulled into the driveway with Felicia in tow.

My niece looked pale and tired, my sister even more so.

Ford greeted his sister with caution, wiping a single tear off his cheek when she left the room and Tansy went to get her settled into bed.

I ruffled his hair. “See? I told you she’d be okay.”

He nodded. “I know.”

“Tell your mom I’m gonna go sit out back, all right?”

By the time I sank into one of the chairs on my sister’s deck, I was ready for two naps and about ten more hours of sleep—without getting kicked in the spleen. Ford was inside playing on his Nintendo, and I allowed my eyes to close while the sound of the ocean roared in the background.

*It’s louder* was my first thought.

At the bay by the Campbell House, the sound of the water was so much quieter. It didn’t swarm your senses, didn’t drown everything out. I shifted in my chair, exhaling roughly when I couldn’t get my back as comfortable as I wanted.

“You better not be napping.”

I pried my eyes open. “Nope.”

“Good, because if anyone in this house deserves a nap, it’s me.” Tansy crumpled into the chair next to mine, tipped her face up to the sun, and sighed. “Gawd, that sucked.”

“You okay?”

My sister took a deep breath and then nodded. “Yeah. Only had one meltdown in the hospital after they took her down for surgery, which seems like a win for my first catastrophe as a single mom.”

“You could’ve had five meltdowns and it would still be a win,” I told her.

“Thanks for coming, Burke. Hopefully I didn’t interrupt anything too important.”

My jaw tightened. “Nah.”

The only thing she’d interrupted was the inevitable point in time at which I regained my senses and said the thing guaranteed to wreck the moment.

*We shouldn’t.*

*This is a bad idea.*

*I’m so sorry.*

Any one of those things could have—should have—come out of my mouth. Except my tongue had been shoved down her throat so I could memorize the shape of her tonsils, which made it hard to say anything at all.

“I hated having to call you, but I’m glad you could come home for Ford.”

There it was again. That word.

*Home.*

I managed to smile for Tansy as a singular truth rang like a fucking death knell in my head.

Florida didn’t feel like home.

It didn’t feel like any of the things I’d expected from it when I decided to leave my big empty house in Dallas and move nearer my family—and the too-loud ocean that drowned out all my thoughts.

I used to think that was a good thing.

“Uncle Burke,” Ford called from the slider. “Do you want to play *Mario Kart* with me?”

I muttered a curse under my breath, and Tansy grinned. “Yeah, I’ll be right in.”

“Dare I ask how many hours you’ve spent doing that the last two days?”

“He has kicked my ass every time,” I said, pushing myself up. “My hands are too big for all those stupid little buttons.”

Tansy was laughing when my phone buzzed in my back pocket, and there was an uncomfortable burst of warmth when I saw Charlotte’s name. I didn’t answer until I was out of earshot of my nosy sister.

“Hey,” I said.

“Hey. Do you have a minute?” Her voice was soft, tentative. That last word was not one I’d ever associated with Charlotte.

I’d done that.

My abrupt exit, the complete lack of communication the last couple of days. I’d planted that seed of hesitancy.

“Yeah, of course.”

“How’s your niece?”

“Good. Tansy brought her home a little bit ago; she’s sleeping.”

“Good.”

I opened my mouth to say something but pinched the bridge of my nose instead. What was I supposed to say?

*I should probably apologize for kissing you, but I don’t actually want to.*

*Do you want me to apologize for kissing you?*

It was still a matter of wrestling the strength of my feelings for her,

which had been building in such a slow, subtle way that I'd hardly been able to admit it until it smacked me in the face.

In that uncomfortable beat of silence, I wondered what I'd do if I were someone who didn't struggle in moments like this. If I'd say something inappropriate because I was now existing in a space where I missed her. Where I wanted to be around her.

Naturally, I settled on "Plumber come out yet?"

Fucking hell, I was bad at this.

Charlotte cleared her throat. "Yeah, thankfully we were home when it happened. There's no damage to the floors or cabinets. We do have some fans running in there now; a bit of the drywall along the back of the kitchen got a little damp. Shouldn't need to be replaced."

I rubbed the back of my neck. "Huh."

"We were . . . distracted. We didn't get the water before it hit the wall."

I closed my eyes and tried to imagine what she was thinking. "We were." Ford gave me an impatient look, waving the controller in my direction. I pulled the phone away from my face. "Give me a couple more minutes, bud."

"Do you need to go?"

I walked into the kitchen. "Soon. My nephew is impatient to slaughter me in *Mario Kart*. Again."

Charlotte exhaled a laugh. "I can't imagine you playing video games."

"I think that's why he keeps wanting to play me," I admitted.

I heard the low hum of William's voice in the background. Charlotte answered him in a muffled tone.

"Sorry," she said. "William wanted to know if we were okay making last-minute decisions in your absence if we can't get in touch with you." She paused. "I wasn't sure when you'd be back, and some of this stuff needs to be decided right away."

"Yeah, of course." I fought a wave of frustration. "I haven't talked to Tansy about Felicia's recovery, but I'm sure I'll be here for another week to help out."

"I assumed," she said quietly. "I'm glad you can be there for her."

"Me too."

And I was. But I couldn't stop the clawing sense of weariness.

It seemed like I was destined to be . . . not where I wanted. When I was in Michigan at the beginning, all I wanted was to be back in Florida. Now I

was in Florida for at least a week, and I wanted to be back north.

Guilt climbed up my insides, sticking somewhere in the back of my throat. After a decade of steady focus, blinders on to everything but my job, this was new. And I wasn't sure what to do with it.

Maybe it was me.

Maybe I didn't know how to be retired. Didn't know how to move through my days without one singular purpose. Or maybe I didn't know how to make peace with the unknown, because something about it made me feel wildly out of control. Maybe this thing with Charlotte was born out of that feeling, not because I was trying to upend either of our lives with some new relationship.

"Daphne wants to know if she can send you guys some meal delivery."

"Yeah right, she's gonna pick a casserole made out of tofu and tree bark and tell me it'll extend my life by ten years if I eat it."

Charlotte laughed. "You've clearly never had good tofu."

"No one has. They've all just fooled themselves that it's good because they don't eat steak."

"I'll tell her she can hold off for now," Charlotte said, a smile evident in her voice.

"Thank you." Ford was bouncing up and down now, his impatience turning the corner into something bigger and louder. I held up my hand. No wonder parents didn't get shit done.

"Do you . . ." She paused. "Never mind."

"What?"

"Nothing."

"Charlotte."

"Burke."

I shook my head. "What is it?"

"Do you still want me to come to Ann Arbor with you?"

"Fuck," I muttered. "I didn't even think about that when I booked my tickets."

"I wondered if you forgot."

If I was in Florida another week, I'd have to go straight there. I rubbed my forehead with a heavy sigh. "I'll look at flights after I talk to Tansy, but . . . yeah," I said in a rough voice. "I'd like you to be there if you're still willing to come."

"Of course I am." She sounded relieved.



Maybe Charlotte struggled with the unknown just as much as I did. All this—whatever new phase of our relationship we’d entered into—was unfamiliar. And this didn’t seem like the time to discuss what the future might look like. Not with tiny listening ears and a time limit hanging over the whole conversation.

“Charlotte,” I said, my voice quiet, “I . . . I know we need to talk, but I think we should do it face-to-face.”

She was quiet. The kind of quiet that yanked at the hairs along the back of my neck. “Another state of the union?”

I pinched my eyes shut. I didn’t want to be across the country from her right now. “Maybe,” I said.

“I know, Burke.” She sounded resigned.

“I’ll talk to Tansy. I can let you know later.”

“It’s okay, really,” she assured me. “You should be with your family when they need you.”

It was on the tip of my tongue to ask about what I needed. If she’d be able to tell me. I wasn’t sure *I* had the answer, and that was the hardest part of all.

“Yeah.”

When I disconnected the call, my sister moved into my peripheral. She took a seat at the kitchen island, calmly folded her hands together, and stared me down. “Okay. I think it’s time you got me caught up.”

I set my phone on the counter. “Nothing to get caught up on, Tans.”

“What an absolute crock of shit.”

“Mom,” Ford said.

“Kid, I’m exhausted. I don’t have the mental capacity for a bad-word filter, okay?”

He rolled his eyes, flopping onto the couch when it was obvious I wouldn’t be starting our video game immediately.

“I’m not in the mood for an I-told-you-so speech,” I told her.

Tansy held up her hands. “I won’t.”

I exhaled slowly, then spilled the entire story, not skimming over anything. It had been years since I’d strung together that many words in a row, and it felt good to have someone to talk to about everything that had happened with Charlotte since she’d shown me that fucking PowerPoint presentation.

When I told her Charlotte still wanted to come to the event at the Big

House, Tansy's face morphed into a triumphant smile. I jabbed a finger in the air. "Don't."

She swallowed it down, but her eyes were screaming at me—that annoying sisterly look that made me think I'd just made her entire year. "I didn't say a word."

"Nothing can come from this, Tans."

Her face lost the triumph. The excitement. "Why not?"

"Charlotte was very clear about what this is. I agreed from the outset."

"What if the things she wants have changed?" Tansy sat up straighter. "I don't think it's up to you to decide. Besides, I can turn that around on you too. You deserve more than a fling with an expiration date, and don't you dare tell me that's all you're capable of."

"I didn't say it's what I wanted." I held her unflinching gaze. "I've never been that guy until I agreed to this, and maybe that's part of the problem. I have family here. I'm trying to find a house here. This is the place where I decided to put down roots. I never should have started anything with her."

My sister shook her head. "You are the most loyal man I have ever known. And you're also a giant fucking idiot."

"Mom."

"Sorry, Ford," Tansy yelled. "But he is."

I gave her a long look. "She has a job that will take her . . . all over, if that's what she wants. The thing she loves to do isn't centered in one place. She can go anywhere."

Tansy's hand slid over mine, and she pinned me in place with a ruthlessly honest gaze. "She's not Angela."

I tried to tug my hand away, and she refused to let go.

"She's *not* Angela," she repeated.

My heart went cold at the comparison. At the thought of Charlotte ever looking at me with the kind of contempt that my ex-wife had. At the thought of Charlotte ever feeling like what she wanted didn't matter.

That I'd ever cause her that kind of pain.

And even though I knew what Tansy was getting at, I couldn't poke that bruise. Not right now.

I forced a swallow and pulled my hand out from underneath my sister's. "Once this renovation is done, there's absolutely no reason for me to stay in Michigan. Even if all I do is keep that house ready until Mira is old enough,

like Chris told me all those years ago. He wanted it for his family, his kids.” My throat was raw as I said it. “There’s no purpose for me there. No reason for me to stay.”

Saying the words felt an awful lot like someone was about to saw my arm off. There was no precision or finesse to this particular amputation, just the stunning, breath-stealing loss of something that had taken over my life.

“Do you want to stay?” Tansy asked quietly.

“It doesn’t matter.”

“Of course it does.”

“Drop it, Tansy.”

She didn’t want to. Her eyes blazed, but my sister held up her hands and let the subject drop. “Fine. Just . . . promise me you’ll talk to her. Don’t be that dumbass who makes unilateral decisions without getting her input, okay? That shit makes me ragey.”

I stared at her for a few seconds. “I don’t know why I keep coming to you for advice.”

Tansy laughed, coming around the kitchen island to wrap me in a tight hug. I settled my arms around my little sister and sighed.

“Because you love me and you know that I only want you to be happy,” she said.

“I do know that.” I dropped a kiss on top of her head. “I’ll talk to her, I promise.”

# Chapter Twenty-Six

## CHARLOTTE

Someone, somewhere, should've written up a brochure for people who had been light on relationships in adulthood. Because I'd completely forgotten how to play this whole "Are we or aren't we?" bullshit game with a man whom I wanted.

A man who clearly wanted me.

Before he had to leave, Burke Barrett was about ten minutes away from testing the strength of my bed frame, and I'd have bet my entire life savings on his ability to break it.

If he'd stayed, we would have crossed our last line.

My last line.

Every single night he was gone, I lay in that bed—completely and utterly alone—and played it on an annoying loop in my head.

All I could think about, in those moments alone, was how much I wanted him. Over me. Blotting out all the light in the room, muting all the doubts and questions in my head about what had happened.

The worst part was that it was so much bigger than want. That was the thing I didn't know what to do with. It wasn't just about sex. It was about the quieter stuff that made up a life.

He knew—physically—what to do with me. That much was obvious. The man knew how to kiss. Damn it, did he know how to kiss.

He did not know how to maintain healthy communication once he crossed state lines.

When I'd shown Daphne our midweek text exchange, she'd sighed quite dramatically. "He needs Richard to teach him a thing or two about how to woo a woman."

"Didn't Richard buy you a toaster oven for your birthday and you threw

it at his head?”

She cocked an eyebrow. “That’s like foreplay to us. He made it up to me later.”

She wasn’t wrong, though. It became quite clear, after our strained phone call, that between me and Burke, neither of us had any clue how to navigate our fumbled interactions.

I eyed the clock as I wandered the hotel lobby, staring through the windows overlooking East Huron Street, knowing that his plane back had landed close to two hours earlier. There was still no sign of him.

In our text exchange, when we’d solidified his change in travel for the event, he’d said he would be there. There was no way he’d ditch me here by myself. And my stupid heart ached at the thought of seeing him again.

Because I couldn’t be trusted on my own, I pulled out my phone again and checked the arrivals at the airport.

Yup. Landed. Either he was dead in a ditch somewhere, he was *walking* to the hotel, or . . . he wasn’t here.

My thumb hovered over the speech-bubble icon, and I tapped his name to read through the last messages before I could talk myself out of it.

**Burke:** I won’t be able to leave until the day of. Because it’s a night game, I’ll fly straight into Detroit. It’s less than an hour from Ann Arbor.

**Me:** What time does your flight land? I have a meeting with a stained-glass window vendor I’ve never met in person, and I need to talk to him about one of my virtual clients.

**Burke:** When’s your meeting?

**Me:** Noon. It was the only time he was available.

**Burke:** That’s about when I land. I’ll meet you at the hotel.

**Me:** 👍

No one, and I mean no one, would be coming to me for text flirtation lessons.

He told me he'd be here.

He'd be here.

I could fully understand why Burke was dreading this game, how many layers of grief he must be dealing with, but even with the awkwardness between us since he'd left, I had no reason to believe he'd bail.

I pulled my phone out and sent a very pathetic text to Daphne.

**Me:** He's not going to bail on me, right? Just . . . never come back to Michigan because he's freaking out because things got awkward. RIGHT?

**Me:** I just need verification that I'm not such a horrible judge of character that I'd put myself in this position and it's just the extended amount of time apart we've had that's making my brain go crazy.

**Me:** Never mind. Ignore me. He'll be here any minute.

I shoved the phone into my pocket and wrenched a hand through my hair. As I settled onto a deep-blue velvet couch with a view of the downtown street, my phone rang. It was Daphne, much to the dismay of my now-leaping heart.

"Hey."

"So." She cleared her throat. "Burke has not appeared from his travels?"

I swallowed. "Not that I've seen. And he doesn't know what room we're in."

She was quiet on the other end of the phone. "Plane didn't crash?"

"Not that I've heard."

"You try texting him?"

"I'm not his keeper," I reminded her. Gawd, it sounded even flimsier when I said it out loud. What a chicken I was.

"You want to be?"

It wasn't helpful to bang the back of my head against the couch, but I did it all the same. I kept my eyes closed while I answered. "No, I don't."

"Liar."

"Remember when I walked in on him naked in the bathroom and he yelled and I screamed and then we had days of awful as a result?"

"I couldn't forget even if I wanted to."

I pinched my eyes shut even harder. “That’s what this reminds me of. It didn’t feel awkward when he left. But the longer we’ve gone without talking, it’s like neither of us knows how to break the stalemate when we aren’t face-to-face.”

She sighed. “Is it bad that he wants to talk in person?”

“No.” I blew out a hard breath. “But it’s been over a week. We haven’t talked about anything.”

“Hard conversations are part of being in a serious relationship,” she said lightly. “Isn’t that the point of not having strings on yours?”

Her statement hung in the air, the horrible weight of truth behind it. I couldn’t argue because she’d know exactly how badly I’d bungled this. That I’d gone and done the thing I promised myself I wouldn’t. I sat up and sighed, my gaze pulled to the window facing the street.

That’s when I saw him.

“He’s . . . here,” I said.

“Where?”

“He’s across the street from the hotel. He just went into a clothing store.”

At my first glimpse of him in more than a week, the sight had something in my chest squeezing tight.

He was wearing aviator shades, khaki shorts, and a white dress shirt, unbuttoned at the throat. The stubble on his face was heavier than when he left and, oh, he looked good.

I wanted to bury my face in the side of his neck and breathe.

And I wanted him to handcuff me to a bedpost.

It was so very, very disconcerting. Everything felt unsure in a totally different way than it had at the beginning.

Did I want to be Burke Barrett’s keeper? Not really.

But I was feeling, just a bit, like I wanted to keep him around.

All the time.

“Am I pathetic?” I asked Daphne. “For wanting him like this when he can’t even . . . talk about what happened?”

“You stop that right now,” she said, her voice firm. “That is a bullshit story implanted in your head by society’s expectations of how women should act. If you want a man, you are allowed to tell him, and it doesn’t make you less valuable or worthy if he’s not the one saying it first. I didn’t burn my bras all those years ago for you to feel like you have to let him do all the

proclaiming, young lady.”

I laughed under my breath. “Okay.”

“Just because he has the emotional vocabulary of a toddler doesn’t mean he doesn’t want you right back. No matter what you two decided at the beginning. If there are strings around this now, then you hold on tight and tell him why you like them there.”

“I know.”

“Good luck, cupcake. If you’re unsure of how to proceed, just think about what I’d do.”

“And do the opposite. Got it.”

She was chuckling when I disconnected the call.

By the time I stepped out onto the sidewalk, Burke had disappeared into the store. The front window was filled with the maize and blue gear that covered the entire city.

What would Aunt Daphne do? She was brazen and outspoken; she did certifiable things for what she believed in. I adored her for all those traits. And in this situation? I didn’t really want to think about what her course of action would be. But I was starting to feel a lot more settled in what Charlotte Cunningham would do.

I pulled the door open and smiled at the man standing behind the checkout counter.

“Can I help you, miss?” he asked.

I shook my head, gesturing to where Burke faced a display of collared shirts. He couldn’t see me yet, and I let my eyes trace over the muscled arch of his shoulders, the trim line of his hips.

A few other shoppers mingled around the store, and I paused to let a couple walk past me before I joined him.

The movement must’ve caught his eye because he did a double take when I stepped up next to him. We brushed shoulders as I studied the display in front of us.

His gaze on the side of my face was a physical weight, pressing over my skin as we stood in silence.

“For tonight?” I asked.

Burke cleared his throat, then turned his attention back to the wall. “Yeah. All my shirts are older. Once I unpacked, I thought maybe I should get something new. Something nice.”

I blinked a few times. My stomach curled unpleasantly at the subtext,



but I didn't comment. Not yet. Not until I could trust my own voice.

"I got my own room," he said quietly.

"Oh."

Right. So that's what it felt like when someone took a steel beam to your stomach.

Burke leaned in closer, dropping his voice to something quiet and not easily overheard. "Don't overthink it, Charlotte," he said. "I thought it was best not to assume anything. I didn't know where your head was at, and I didn't want to . . ." He let out a deep breath. "I don't ever want to make you uncomfortable, and we hadn't had a chance to talk yet."

I let my eyes settle on his, analyzing what I found there.

No matter what had happened between us, from the first day until now, Burke had never lied to me. He'd go mute first, and I'd witnessed that on many occasions. This was simply the first time I had to weigh his words for how they reflected our relationship—and the presence of any strings between us.

And as we stood there, I found a man who didn't know what to do. Who wanted to do the right thing. And who was walking into a day that would tear at every scabbed-over wound he'd left untouched since his friend died.

I sucked in a deep, fortifying breath. "What pants are you wearing?"

His brow furrowed. "I have charcoal dress pants. I figured I could wear either a polo shirt or a dress shirt and tie."

I nodded. My hand drifted over a few hangers, trying to guess at what size shirt he'd wear. There was a nice option in the dark blue of Michigan, with thin white stripes and the maize *M* over the chest.

Briefly, I held it up against his chest. "That's nice."

He nodded, fingers brushing mine as he took the hanger out of my hand and set it on a table. Underneath the shirt were folded neckties.

My hand traced a tie in deep navy, with small dots of white and a tasteful block *M* at the bottom. "I like this one."

"Polka dots, huh?"

My lips curved up in a smile as I pulled it off the display. I turned toward him and held it up against his chest. His eyes were locked on to my face, and even though I was doing a wonderful job of studying the edge of his jaw—what a great jaw it was, truly—I finally let my gaze drift up to his.

Just like that, the air felt thin and heady.

Just like that, I was feeling more handcuffed-to-the-bed-type things,

completely swamping my more innocent desire to hug and breathe and be near him.

His lips opened slightly, and with a trembling hand, I lifted the collar of his shirt and settled the tie into place. His chest expanded on a deep inhale, and I took one small step closer.

The great thing about helping him with a tie was that I still needed to breathe. So I could stand there and fill my lungs with him.

He'd showered recently, because the scent of his soap was fresh on his skin, something clean and masculine and toe curling. Briefly, I wondered if it would be assuming too much to shove my nose at the base of his throat and ask to stay there all night.

"The tie might be too dressy for today," I said, even as I smoothed the ends over his chest and did the first loop, then the second. I didn't tighten it all the way, just enough that he could see what it would look like. "But I still want to see it."

"Charlotte," he started. My fingers brushed his neck as I folded the collar back down. His hand, hanging by his side, opened and closed into a fist, and my stomach fluttered weightlessly. "I should've told you about the hotel room. Before."

My eyes were fixed on the tie as I tried to even out the ends.

"It might have been nice to know ahead of time," I managed. "I was . . . worried."

"I was never going to skip it," he said.

I let my gaze drift back to his. "I know."

"You did?"

I nodded. "You're a man of your word, Burke Barrett."

For some reason, what I'd said caused his eyes to fill with something that looked a lot like frustration. "Am I?"

"I know you didn't want to come," I said quietly. "I know why it'll be hard."

"I hate being in crowds like this, where everyone is watching me," he admitted. "It's different than playing a game. Behind your helmet, in the huddle with your team, it's not just about you. That's why I loved playing even when I didn't love football. Because it was about your team. Your teammates. Guys like Chris who became my family. But I hate being on display for something that's this fucking hard."

I watched his face. The tie was perfectly straight, perfectly even. I

didn't need to fidget with it anymore, but I wasn't going to be the one to step back. I'd fiddle with that damn tie for the next hour if I could get away with it.

"You didn't love football?" I asked quietly.

"Not really." The hoarse answer sparked goose bumps along my arms.

"Why not?" Slowly, I brushed my hands along the front of his shirt, smoothing out invisible wrinkles. I wondered if he realized that he leaned into my touch.

"I was good at it," he said. "But I only kept going because it made my dad so happy. It was the *only* thing that made him happy. Somewhere along the line, I kept going because it was the best way I knew how to take care of my family." His throat worked on a long swallow, his eyes boring relentlessly into mine. "But it hurt people too. Carrying someone else's dream."

We were speaking in hushed whispers, ignoring everything else going on around us.

Burke was *still* carrying dreams. Heavy ones too. Almost like it was the only thing he knew how to do, and setting that aside was impossible for him to imagine.

My hands stopped moving, resting lightly over his heart.

*Let me in.*

*Let me in.*

*Let me in.*

Each time I thought it, I imagined another string looping around us, and I desperately wanted them there. In my mind, they grounded us together. They served as an explanation for how everything between us had shifted and changed.

Maybe we had started with no strings, but they were there now.

Whether he was ready to admit it, whether he was purposely adding space between us or not.

Getting his own hotel room was a perfect example. His intentions were noble, true to what he'd told me earlier. But it was still his way of ignoring the things binding us together.

That's the only way I could describe it. His entire body was tense, held back by an unseen contraption of his own making. And me—I was doing my best not to melt against his body and see what happened if I did.

He had his own strings holding him back. And it wasn't my

responsibility to cut them.

“I don’t know how to give you the thing you deserve,” he said.

My face must’ve registered confusion, because he stepped back. My hands fell off his chest, hanging limply at my side.

“I haven’t asked for anything,” I told him quietly. “And you’ve never asked me what I want.”

“Charlotte.” *Weary*. It was the only way I could describe his voice. *Weary* and defeated.

I rolled my lips together and decided to make a calculated retreat.

Today—this moment—was not the time.

My aunt Daphne was right—I was perfectly capable of telling him, unprompted, what I wanted. But that didn’t mean I needed to take a battering ram to an otherwise fragile moment.

Exhaling slowly, I let him see everything in my face.

That I wanted him. And that I was frustrated with what he’d just admitted.

“Just promise me something,” I told him.

“What?”

“Promise me you aren’t going to apologize for kissing me. Or tell me that we shouldn’t have. Because I might strangle you with that very nice tie.”

Instead of answering right away, Burke studied my face. He didn’t smile at what I’d said, and I was glad. Because I didn’t say it to be funny. I was perfectly serious.

“I promise,” he said.

Slowly, I nodded. “Good. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’m going to go back to my room and start getting ready.”

I took a step back, and just before I turned around, I saw the frustrated slump in his frame.

Whatever this was, I wasn’t alone in it. Something was holding Burke back from doing the thing that we both so clearly wanted.

And I wasn’t sure if that made me feel better or worse.

# Chapter Twenty-Seven

## BURKE

The lobby of the hotel—and the city as a whole—buzzed with the energy uniquely reserved for the first day of college football. There weren't many places that could rival a college town on a Saturday during the season, and under any other circumstance, I would have enjoyed the hell out of it.

While I waited for Charlotte to meet me down in the lobby, a few different groups approached me. I signed programs, took a few selfies, and managed not to break the hell down when a little brown-haired kid came up and asked me if I'd sign the jersey he was wearing.

It was Chris's.

I'd just capped the marker and handed it back to him, my ribs tight and my stomach in knots, when someone approached from behind.

"What a fucking zoo," Liam said. "I still can't believe I was friends with someone who attended this nightmare school."

With a begrudging laugh, I turned and took the hand he offered. Liam Davies was not wearing any maize and blue, but that's because his role was simply as an escort to the young lady standing at his side, clutching his hand tight in her own.

I crouched down and studied Mira with a tangle of emotions in my sternum. She was nearing three by this point, and Liam was right—she looked exactly like Amie. It was in the hair and her big blue eyes.

"Hey there," I said. "I haven't seen you in a while, little miss."

"You remember your uncle Burke," Liam said. "He sent the terrible Dallas jersey for Christmas."

Mira leaned forward and shyly gave me a high five. The chatter in the lobby was too loud to make much conversation with her, and if I was being honest, I wasn't even sure how much almost-three-year-olds could say.

Tucked in her other hand was a set of headphones. I tapped them. “What are these for?”

Proudly, she stretched them out and settled them over her ears. Then she grinned. “It’s too loud,” she said.

I glanced up, and Liam’s face wore his normal stone-faced expression. But his eyes—they gave him away.

They looked down at Mira like she was his entire world.

“How’s your falling-down house?” he asked.

“Not falling down anymore,” I said.

“You gonna sell it for a pretty penny and ride off into the sunset a richer man?”

I gave him a steady look. “Why do I feel like you’re baiting me right now?”

The look he gave me in return was absolutely fearless, and because we were roughly the same height and build, there was no chance of intimidating him. “Maybe because I am,” he said quietly.

His tone held an edge I didn’t like. And it was a topic of conversation that I wanted nothing to do with. Not today.

I glanced at the elevators, but there was no sign of Charlotte. “Where’s the friend?” I asked.

Liam grunted. “Couldn’t come.”

“You ready for this?” I asked him.

He didn’t answer right away, staring down at Mira for a moment. When he looked back up at me, there was a haunted look in his eyes. “What the hell do you think?”

I exhaled slowly. That was the point, wasn’t it? Neither of us particularly wanted to be here; it was salt in a wound that we didn’t really want to reopen. But to not come would have somehow been worse.

The elevators dinged, and when Charlotte rushed toward us with an apologetic look, I forgot how to breathe.

Because the game was in the evening and the weather had cooled as the week had gone on, Charlotte’s long legs were encased in tight, dark denim. On her feet were perfectly white sneakers. Her hair was pulled off her face, braided and tied high at the back of her head.

She was wearing more makeup than I’d ever seen on her. Lush black lashes, eyes lined and smudged with something dark and smoky gray. Her lips were glossy and pink.

And she was wearing one of my jerseys.

“Well, then,” Liam drawled, “this explains a lot.”

I elbowed him in the side.

Charlotte eyed me as she approached, no doubt still trying to figure out where the hell my head was at after the time apart, and after that strangely intimate scene in the store.

I was trying to figure out where my head was too, and her looking like that while she was *wearing my jersey* didn’t help matters one fucking bit.

“I’m so sorry I’m late,” she said on a rush. She smiled at Liam. “I’m Charlotte. I’m here with . . . him.”

He narrowed his gaze as she shook his hand. “Liam Davies.”

Charlotte glanced down at Mira, her eyes going soft and sad. “And you must be Miss Mira.” She crouched down and held out her hand. Chris’s little girl took it with a giggle.

She reached forward and touched the end of the red braid draped over Charlotte’s shoulder. “Red.”

I’d called her that a few times, and Charlotte glanced up at me with a twinkle in her eye. “That’s right.”

“We ready?” Liam asked.

Charlotte nodded.

We fell in step beside each other as we left the hotel, Liam hoisting Mira up onto his hip as a driver from the school opened the car door to help us in. The stadium was only about a mile away, but with the crowds downtown and Mira in tow, we’d decided to take them up on their offer to drive us as close as possible.

Because Charlotte sat next to me on the bench seat of the immaculate SUV, her shoulder brushed against my arm.

“You’re wearing my jersey,” I said, keeping my voice low and my eyes straight ahead.

She inhaled slowly. “I am.”

My jaw clenched tight. I wanted to kiss her. I wanted to tell her how beautiful she was.

I wanted to tell her that she looked like she was mine.

Fuck. My hands curled into fists on my lap.

“Where did you find it?” I sounded like I was talking with a throat coated in glass shards.

She crossed her legs, the one over top brushing against mine.

“Online,” she whispered. “I had to look a little bit, but”—she turned toward me, her expression unreadable in the shadowed car—“I wanted to wear something of yours.”

I tore my gaze away and focused on the busy sidewalks, the never-ending crowds of people wearing maize and blue.

What was happening? I didn’t know what any of this meant. If it meant anything at all.

I didn’t have any time to ask, to think too deeply on it, because once we arrived at the Big House, it was all controlled chaos.

A smiling woman from the board met us with VIP badges. She shook our hands and gave Mira a sad smile.

“Please let me tell both of you how sorry we were to hear of Chris and Amie’s passing,” she said. “Their legacy will not be forgotten at Michigan.”

My eyebrows popped up when she turned her back.

“How much money did Chris leave them?” I asked Liam when she walked us through the tunnel and out onto the field, complete with our own security detail walking deferentially behind us.

Liam snorted. “Too bloody much, I’d reckon.”

Charlotte emitted a soft, wondrous gasp. I glanced over at her, and her mouth was open, her eyes wide as she looked around the stadium.

“Wow,” she said.

“Biggest stadium in the country,” I told her, leaning down to speak into her ear so she could hear me over the roar.

It really was magical. And I glanced around for a moment too—at the endless sea of maize and blue, remembering the last time I’d stood right in that spot, with Chris and Amie. There’d been no big goodbye, no extra-long hugs that day. It was busy and loud, and we’d been there so many times that it just seemed normal.

And it wasn’t.

It was good to remember that.

“Wait until they start singing the fight song,” I told her.

Liam heard me. “You’ll know when that is because my ears will start bleeding.”

Charlotte laughed. “I take it you didn’t go to Michigan.”

His affronted scoff had even me smiling.

“Liam thinks he’s better than the rest of us because he went to Ohio State.” I leaned in closer. “That’s why he needs to overcompensate in most



areas of his life.”

“Asshole,” Liam muttered.

Charlotte smiled as she glanced between us, leaning her arm against mine. Because I wanted to, and because it sounded nice, I slid my fingers in between hers and let the warmth of her hand ground me in the moment.

When the coach approached us, she released my hand, hanging back while the three of us talked. A few players—current and former—came to pay their respects, and just before the game was about to begin, the president of the board waved me and Liam over to her side.

“We’ll make the announcement about Chris and Amie’s endowment,” she said. “They’ll do a moment of silence, and if you can just give a small wave to the cameras, they’ll show the two of you and Mira up on the screen.”

Liam straightened. “You didn’t tell me that.”

At his gruff tone, her eyebrows climbed up her forehead. “I’m sorry. I assumed you’d be okay with that.”

Based on the look on his face, he was unequivocally not okay with that. “Give us a minute, will you?”

Mira shifted in his arms, picking up on his instant tension.

Liam carefully pushed the headphones off Mira’s head. She cringed at the noise all around her.

“Listen, duck, do you want to wave hello to all these people? Just a minute? They’d see you up on that screen.”

I’d never heard Liam sound like that. I didn’t even know he was *capable* of sounding nice. Gentle.

Mira looked up at the screen, then back at Liam. She shook her head, a furious and resounding no. He gently tucked the headphones back over her ears. Mira started playing with the collar on his shirt.

The woman glanced at Liam.

“Absolutely fucking not,” he barked. The woman’s face lost some of its color.

“Liam,” I chided. “Easy.”

“Don’t you tell me to go easy. They’re not my concern. She is.”

I rubbed the nape of my neck. This was going *great*.

Charlotte approached, sliding a hand over my back. “Do you want me to hold her while you two talk?”

Liam nodded, nudging Mira to get her attention and pointing to Charlotte. Mira couldn’t hear anything because of the ear coverings, but she

held her arms out to Charlotte with a shy smile.

When the little girl was settled into Charlotte's arms, a sharp pang of sudden longing bolted through my chest.

Maybe it was because she was wearing my jersey, or because she'd been looking at me with soft, understanding eyes. Looking at me like she knew exactly what I wasn't saying to her. Whatever it was, it felt a bit like I was getting a glimpse of something I wasn't ready to see yet.

She held Mira easily, doing a slight bouncing motion as she tickled Mira's belly, which pulled a happy laugh from the little girl.

Liam set his hands on his hips. "I don't give a shit how much money Chris gave—they don't get to spring her face up on a fucking Jumbotron without talking to me about it first."

The board president was motioning to someone else, the stress clear on her face as we ran out of time to make this decision.

I swiped a hand over my mouth.

"Am I wrong?" he barked.

I blew out a slow breath. "I don't know, Liam. I don't think it's a matter of right or wrong. She's not even three. She doesn't know what you're asking. You just have to decide if you feel comfortable with it. If Chris and Amie would've felt comfortable with it."

The noise in the stadium grew louder and louder as the team sprinted out onto the field.

The band played the fight song, and the stadium clapped to the beat, roaring and screaming and pumping their fists in the air as the team leaped up to touch the banner overhead.

There was so much tradition in this place, and that was something Chris and I had done dozens and dozens of times. A lump swelled in my throat as I watched them.

Liam emitted a loud sigh. "What Chris and Amie felt comfortable with doesn't matter right now."

I snapped my head in his direction. I couldn't have heard him right. "What?"

"They're not here." He held my gaze, dared me to argue. "And if they were, they'd have no reason to plaster her face in front of all these people. I'm not letting her be some sympathy sideshow. Chris and Amie put her in my charge because they trusted me to make hard decisions. So whether they'd say yes or no"—he held his arms out—"doesn't matter."

Simple as that.

Something about his words had my skin feeling tight, my lungs struggling to pull in enough air.

How was that so easy for him?

He marched over to the woman, apparently giving her more of an explanation than *absolutely fucking not*. Charlotte stood next to me, shifting Mira to her other hip. “What just happened?”

I had a hand covering my mouth. I shook my head.

Liam marched back and held out his hands. Mira clambered right back into his arms and wrapped her own around his neck.

He looked ready to spit fire. She cupped her hand around his ear and said something. His face softened.

“We gotta go,” he said.

“You’re leaving?” I asked.

“She needs to piss,” he yelled. Mira giggled.

“Good Lord,” I muttered under my breath.

Someone with a mic and a clipboard approached. “Hi. You’re Liam Davies, right?”

“Move,” he barked.

The kid jumped, almost falling backward before Liam ran his ass over. Liam strode back toward the tunnel, Mira waving happily at Charlotte from her safe perch in his arms, and it felt like someone had just spun the whole day sideways.

“We cannot take him anywhere,” I said.

The board president approached. “Well,” she said cautiously, “we have no problem pivoting, if you’re game.” She set her hand on my arm. “But let me apologize. We should have asked his permission first. No one wants their daughter to feel uncomfortable.”

I nodded, throat tight. “What do you need?” I asked.

“Will you do the coin toss?” she asked. “We can announce you as an honorary captain for the game, standing in for Chris. They’ll do a moment of silence, flash a few pictures of Chris, and then your part will be done.”

It was the last thing I wanted to do. My whole body shook from the force of wanting to run right behind Liam.

Instead, I nodded. “Whatever you need,” I told her.

Her shoulders slumped in relief. “Thank you.”

Charlotte briefly gripped my hand, her eyes seeking mine. “Are you

sure?” she asked.

I didn't have time to answer. I had to follow the woman to the sideline, and as we passed in front of the team, they started to take notice. Every time a player thumped me on the back, or nodded with sympathy in their eyes, my lungs squeezed uncomfortably.

I sucked in a steadying breath, focusing on the grass and the white-painted lines.

If Chris could see this, he'd probably be laughing his ass off. That I had to go stand at the fifty-yard line and be the sole focus of 107,000 people in my grief.

I'd do it, though, because Liam wasn't wrong. Mira wasn't old enough to decide for herself.

And the ease with which he'd protected her had me feeling just a little jealous. My whole life right now was decisions that needed to be made, and I found myself paralyzed.

The band left the field, and I walked with the team captains out to midfield.

The booming echo of the loudspeaker had my eyes closing as they talked about Chris. His impact at Michigan, and the tragic way he and Amie lost their lives.

The blood rushed into my ears when I looked up at the big screen during the deafening silence that followed.

He was smiling and sweaty and still wearing his uniform. Amie was tucked under his arm, grinning up into his face.

Next came a picture of me and Chris, standing at midfield.

My eyes welled up, the image blurred dangerously, and it felt like someone was ripping the air straight from my throat.

The young quarterback set his hand on my shoulder and squeezed. “You got this,” he said.

A tear slid down my cheek, because it was the kind of thing Chris would've done if someone were struggling in front of him.

It's what he'd done with me.

Again and again and again.

I swiped at my face with a rough hand and kept my shit together while they announced my name. There was loud applause, which I ignored, keeping my sole focus on the coin in my hand.

Someone called heads.

I snapped my thumb and the coin flipped through the air, landing with a harmless plunk on the grass.

The stadium erupted into cheers when Michigan won the toss, and after a few handshakes, I walked with numb legs off the field. This was worse than their funeral, somehow, this reminder of how much we'd all lost.

And how long I'd been able to ignore it.

I caught a flash of red hair as I strode toward the tunnel.

The team took the field, and the energy ratcheted up again—jumping and screaming and loud music—and all I wanted to do was go somewhere quiet and cool and calm.

When I was clear of the field, everything from the last few months rushed at me with deafening precision, and I sank against the wall, pressing the heels of my palms against my eyes.

Soft fingers slid up my forearms, and I exhaled at the feel of her hands on me.

“I won't ask you if you're okay,” she said.

With gentle pressure, she pulled my hands away from my face and stood directly in front of me. I let out a deep breath and studied her face. I saw patience. Understanding.

“You're never scared of me when I'm like this,” I told her.

Charlotte's lips curled up into a gentle smile. “No.”

“Do you ever wonder if you should be?” I asked.

Her smile grew. “Yes.”

Somehow, she managed to pull a reluctant laugh from me. Winding my fingers in hers, I brought her hands toward my mouth and kissed the soft skin of her knuckles.

“I feel like I'm doing all of this wrong,” I admitted.

“What parts?”

I held her eyes. “Everything. The house. You. That kiss. I always say the wrong thing, or walk away when I should stay. Blame the fact that I never quite know how to handle these things on not having a good example growing up.”

Charlotte stepped closer, pulling her hands out of mine so that she could wrap her arms around me. When she was folded into my embrace, I finally let out a deep, contented sigh.

“Not much felt wrong about that kiss,” she said quietly. “Not to me.”

I buried my nose in her hair and inhaled. “Me neither.”

At my hushed admission, she tightened her arms.

“Then let’s not walk away right now.” She pulled her face back and steadied me with all the certainty I saw in those big eyes. “Let’s go back in there, because you’re not doing this wrong, Burke. The only wrong way to do any of it is to quit when things get too hard.”

I swept my thumb over her cheekbone. “Okay.”

She smiled.

I loved her smile.

“And you’re staying in my room tonight,” she whispered.

Now it was my turn to smile, and I did while resting my forehead against hers. “Okay.”

Charlotte darted up and placed a quick, soft kiss on my cheek, then gripped my hand in hers as we walked back out onto the field.

# Chapter Twenty-Eight

## CHARLOTTE

Football, as it turned out, was a bit of a secret aphrodisiac.

Or maybe watching it with Burke was.

The game was exhilarating, especially the roar of the crowd as the receiver stretched out for a one-handed fourth-quarter catch in the end zone. I screamed myself hoarse, gripping Burke's arm tight while he tried to act like he wasn't completely stressed out watching the close score.

In the end, Michigan won by ten, and when they scored their last touchdown, I watched him throw his fists in the air, tip his head back, and scream. Men traded backbreaking hugs, and it was so weirdly emotional that I had to work at not crying when the team gathered on the field in front of the student section and led the singing of the fight song.

I didn't know the words, but I'd picked up quickly when to punch my fist in the air.

Burke joined them, singing the words at the top of his lungs, and that also almost made me burst into tears. Players had their arms around each other, sweating and joyous.

It was a family.

And today he was feeling a little bit of what he'd missed.

As he walked back toward me, a triumphant, dimple-baring grin on his face, I felt irrepressible flutters in my belly.

He didn't kiss me when he stopped in front of me, not with so many eyes watching, but he did slide his arm around my waist and hold me close.

"We can get back to the hotel faster if we walk," he said, lips brushing my ear.

I nodded, digging my fingers around the back of his belt.

The buoyant crowd of people leaving the stadium made for a jubilant

exit to an emotionally draining day. Occasionally, people would scream his name and ask for a picture, and he always obliged.

Burke might have hated being the center of attention, but he never made anyone aware of it. He gripped my hand tight as we made our way down the packed streets of Ann Arbor. It was dark out, but the city was absolutely alive and buzzing.

The mood was happy and light, and we were content to watch the celebrations as we walked back to our hotel.

It was impossible to reconcile the teasing, easy touches between us as he let me precede him into the lobby. There was a spectrum of uncharted territory between Burke and me, and we were inching closer and closer to the last thing we'd yet to experience.

He didn't even pretend he was going to his own room, and when he tugged me into a dark corner before we got on the elevator, I was only a little surprised.

Burke backed me against a wall, sliding a sure hand along my hip and up my back and ducking his head down to press a hot kiss underneath my ear.

"You're sure?"

He spoke the question into my skin, one last chance for me to back away. To put pressure on the brakes, if that's what I wanted.

I turned my head, seeking skin of my own. His hands were braced on either side of me, blocking me from view of anyone who might pass by.

"Burke," I whispered, "I'm so very"—I kissed his jaw—"very"—the edge of his mouth—"sure."

He pulled his head back to stare down into my face. His eyes were deep and searching, looking for something in me. Or maybe searching for something inside himself.

One of his hands slid down my side, wrapping the jersey in a tight fist. When he pulled, the shirt went taut against my body. My hips arched against him.

"I wish I could redo the moment you came out of that elevator," he said in a rough voice.

My chest heaved as I tried to gulp in the right amount of air. "Yeah?"

"Say what I was thinking. I didn't know how."

I touched his bottom lip. His words from earlier rang through my head. How he was doing everything wrong.

"I don't need pretty words from you, Burke." I pushed closer, the backs



of my fingers brushing against his. His hand turned, allowing our fingers to slide together. His other hand came up and slid around my waist. Mine smoothed over his chest and over his shoulder. When he was touching me, he was settled and calm, his eyes clearer.

Hadn't it always been like that for us? Our bodies knew, deep down, that together we were better.

"I *did* have thoughts when I saw you," he said, brushing his cheek against my temple.

My eyes fluttered closed. "Did you?"

The tips of his fingers found the bare skin of my back underneath the jersey. His skin was calloused, rough from years of doing what he'd done. His palm splayed along my back, and I had to press my thighs together. A weak attempt to ease the ache he was building in me.

"But I didn't have words when I saw you," he murmured. "Not the right ones."

I tilted my head so I could look up at him. "I don't know if there's right or wrong about it."

"To me there is." He was so sincere. "How was I supposed to tell you how beautiful you look?"

My body froze as I stared up at him.

"The first time I saw you on those stairs in the house, I didn't think there were words to describe what you made me feel." His fingers traced over my spine. "Every time I see you, it happens. I don't care whether you're wearing a dress. Or ratty pajamas. Or a T-shirt." His hand skirted the side of my throat, thumb brushing the edge of my jaw while I struggled to breathe. "You are the most beautiful thing I've ever seen, and if I tried to find the right words for it today, I didn't want you to think for one second that you're somehow less beautiful any other time you walk into the room."

My mouth was on his before I registered that I'd moved. And Burke caught up quickly. He wrapped me up in his arms, tight and strong and wonderful, groaning into my mouth as we kissed.

I carded a hand through his hair, delighting in the way we moved against each other.

His lips were dry and warm, moving over mine in slow sips and pulls. I pushed up on the balls of my feet and arched my back, trying to press as close as possible.

Burke angled his head and took the kiss deeper, a delicious groan that I

felt all the way down my spine. He ate at my mouth, desperately. We were just out of view, and neither of us seemed to care.

I'd stay there all night, do just this, if it meant I could keep kissing him.

He was cranky.

And quiet.

He shut down when he didn't know what to say.

He showed up for people, even when it tore at all the edges of his comfort.

And I was starting to suspect that he had no idea just how deeply I adored him for all that.

Nothing about him was what I'd expected, not when I used to try to picture the man I'd fall in love with. Maybe that's what took us so long—trying to wrap our expectations around all these differences.

"Take me to the room," I whispered in his ear, making sure my lips brushed against him while I did. "Mine, yours, I don't care."

His hands tightened, and when they did, I desperately wished for the power to vanish our clothes, to whisper a spell that would make us appear in a place with a bed and a door that bolted shut.

I pulled back, locking my eyes with his. I cupped the side of his face, smiling when he pulled my palm closer to his mouth, pressing a hot kiss there.

His eyes devoured my face, lingering on my lips.

"What do you want to do, Burke Barrett?"

It was what I'd wanted to know from him all along.

The thing he hadn't been able to verbalize, even if he showed me in a thousand different ways that what he wanted was me.

He tilted my chin up, placing a featherlight kiss on my lips. He stayed there, breathing me in, and his hands skated up my back, over my shoulders, until he had my face framed between them.

"I want to count the freckles on your body with my tongue," he said.

I sucked in a breath. "Okay."

Another kiss. "And I want to see you spread out, every light in the room on so there's not an inch of you I can't see."

I exhaled a shaky laugh.

He nipped at my bottom lip. "And then I want to know how you sound when you come all around me." His eyes seared into mine. "And you will."

My heart hammered against my ribs, and it was all I could do not to

shove him against a wall and try all those things right there in the hallway.

“I . . .” I swallowed, my throat on fire and my skin squeezing against my bones until I wasn’t sure I could keep standing.

“I like this role reversal,” he whispered against my lips. “How long do you think I can keep you speechless?”

I gripped his hand and started marching toward the elevator. His legs were so long that I was in charge for only a moment. We stayed quiet while the doors slid open, and it was blessedly empty.

When the elevator closed on a whisper, Burke punched the button for his floor, then turned, caging me against the wall. When he gripped my leg, wrenching my thigh up against his side, I gasped.

He mouthed the side of my throat, sucking hard against the top of my collarbone.

I tugged him back up, sighing into a fierce kiss that stole my breath. Burke didn’t attempt to gentle his mouth when the car slowed upon arrival at his floor. He sucked my bottom lip into his mouth, releasing it with a filthy pop.

“Please tell me your room is close,” I murmured. His fingers gripped tightly onto my thigh, still wedged against his side.

All it would take was an unbuckled belt, the drop of a zipper, a yank of my pants, and he’d be inside me.

I was crazed enough, pressed against that elevator wall by his big, strong body, that I might have allowed it.

Someone cleared their throat sharply, and we broke apart.

A man in his late fifties gave us a stern look, settling his hand on the door so it stayed open.

Burke gripped my hand tight in his and gave me a sly smirk as we exited the elevator.

“Oh my gosh,” I moaned.

He laughed under his breath, pausing outside a door just a few down from the elevator.

The sound of his laughter helped soothe some of my nerves. He didn’t laugh often, and maybe that was why it felt like such a precious thing when it happened.

The wide expanse of his back felt like a perfect place to press my forehead, and I wrapped my arms around his waist while he slid the key in the lock. The door opened with a click, but for a moment, we just stood there

in the darkened hallway. He settled one big hand over mine, inhaled slowly, and then plucked my hand from the hard heat of his stomach so he could intertwine our fingers while he walked us into his hotel room.

The door closed behind us, and Burke turned, eyes inscrutable and fathomless in the dimly lit room. The tips of his fingers were light as he traced the line of my upper arm, over my shoulder, playing with the hem of the jersey.

“This looks good on you,” he whispered. Then he grabbed the bottom of the shirt and tugged it up over my head.

He licked his bottom lip, a filthy tease of that tongue, and I shivered.

My hands coasted up the front of his chest, and I gently started jerking at his shirt. He tilted his chin, allowing me free rein to undress him, helpful man that he was. His hands rested lightly along my rib cage, thumbs skirting the outside curves of my bra.

I wanted skin on skin.

Burke slid his fingers into the curling ends of my braid, a contented hum coming from deep within his chest. “You probably don’t want me to ruin all this, do you?”

My lips quirked. “I think if you don’t, I’ll be very”—I kissed his bottom lip—“very disappointed.” I kissed his top lip, pulling away only when he tore his shirt all the way off. While we kissed, I ran greedy hands over his chest.

The breath sawed through his lungs, loud in the quiet room as my hands traced all the muscles covering his strong frame. He found the zipper on my jeans and tugged it down, shoving his hands down my waistband, filling his fingers with the flesh of my backside.

While he kneaded the skin there, I pried at the clasp of my bra.

Burke rolled his forehead against mine. He pulled at the straps slowly, so very slowly, each inch of skin that appeared causing a slight tremble all over his body.

“Charlotte,” he whispered. I stepped back, toeing off my shoes and pushing the jeans off my legs. I was left in only white lace underwear, cut high on my hips.

Burke was trying to decide where to touch first, and he used the backs of his fingers to brush against the tight buds of my nipples.

My hands faltered on his belt buckle, my breath shaking as it came out. My knees trembled at the impossibly light touch, and I gripped his bicep to keep myself standing.

“Oh,” I breathed.

He didn’t stop that maddening rhythm.

Back and forth, back and forth, back and forth.

Burke stepped into my space, running his lips along the shell of my ear. “You are perfect, Charlotte.” He moved those fingers to the sides of my breasts, running along the bottom curve. “Did you know that this is my favorite place to taste you?”

His palms skated over my ribs and along my hips, and my head fell forward against his chest. My skin was quivering at the way he charted a delicate course over my body with the impossible strength of his hands.

I sucked in a sharp breath when he pushed his hands underneath the white lace, rough hands kneading my ass. He tugged his hands up, moving back to my breasts.

Back and forth.

Back and forth.

“I-I could—ohhh!”

“You could what?”

I pulled my head up and met his gaze. I couldn’t say the words.

Sparks coated every inch of my body, something dangerous that could go up in flames if he did the right thing. Hot all over, flushed and feverish, just waiting for him to strike the match of what he’d started.

“Could you come, just from that?” he whispered. A shiver ran down my spine at those toe-curling touches on that one part of my body.

I managed a nod, and with a groan, his mouth sought mine again, hungry and seeking and deliciously deep.

Ignition.

The light touches were gone as he walked us back to the bed, ripping at my underwear until I stepped out of it. I tore at his belt buckle and yanked the zipper as my knees hit the edge of the bed.

He fell on top of me, our embrace tight and writhing. My hands tangled with his as we both attempted to rid him of his pants.

When he stretched out over me again, hot skin against hot skin, I moaned at the feel of him against my stomach. He was so big and hard, and I had the briefest moment that I’d only read about in my books.

How was that going to fit?

I couldn’t wait to find out. I knew the weight of him intimately. How he felt against my tongue, how hard and hot he was in my hands.

But I didn't know this.

He rocked his hips, the soft silk of him against my stomach, and I whimpered while I tried to arch my back, bring his hips in between mine.

"Not yet, Charlotte."

"Please," I begged.

"One to take the edge off first," he said against my lips. His hand pushed my stomach down and curled between my legs. I gasped, tossing my head back on the bed. He nipped at my jaw. "It's been a long time for me too," he admitted. "And the second I get inside—you feel so good like this—I won't last."

"We have all night," I begged. "Please, Burke. I need you."

"One," he coaxed.

My eyes screwed tightly shut as he added another finger, pressed his thumb in tight circles. My thighs clamped around his arm, and he kissed me through the first back-bending explosion.

It was the first time his lips were on mine as the warmth flowed sweet and hot through my veins, and I couldn't hold him closely enough. It couldn't possibly get better. Couldn't possibly feel any better than it already had.

But with him, there was always more. And I wanted to know how far we could take that.

What kind of more we could find together.

As I came down from the high, I wanted to melt into the bed, but the pulsing throb continued, so much longer than I expected. And he whispered me through it, slowly stroking his hand along my side, kissing across the line of my chest as I tried to catch my breath.

He told me I was beautiful when I came.

That he'd imagined it a thousand times while he was gone.

As I came down from that first crest, I realized that it had hardly even taken the edge off, probably because it was him.

I wanted every day with him. Every night. All the hours and minutes and seconds in between.

My arms wrapped around his back, and he took my mouth in a fierce kiss as he rocked against me.

My hand tracked down his chest, intent on the same torture move he'd used on me. I brushed the backs of my fingers along his abs, following the thin line of dark hair until my hand got to where I wanted it. Where he wanted it too, based on the tight clench of his teeth, the muttered curse torn

from his mouth when I trailed my finger over the tip of him, soft and teasing.

Back and forth, back and forth, back and forth.

I was certain my touch was light enough that he wouldn't be able to come that way, but there was a dark rush of pleasure in seeing what it reduced him to. How it strained the muscles in his shoulders and jaw while he worked to keep control.

"Charlotte," he warned.

I nipped at his chin. "Not so fun when someone does it to you, is it?" I whispered.

His hand gripped my thigh, wrenching it up against his side, and with a grin, I mirrored its position with the other one. Burke snatched my hands away and took both wrists in his tight grasp, holding them down on the bed over my head. I was helpless so quickly, and I arched my back as he kissed me.

He settled his hips between mine, teasing me with a few rocking motions that had my toes curling.

I was begging again—loudly, desperately—and I didn't care.

Burke's gaze locked on to mine as he pushed inside.

Oh, he was big. So hard. And I didn't care if it hurt—I wanted all of him. I tried to rock my hips along with his movements, and he bit out a curse, telling me to stop unless I wanted it to be over before it started. I tried to keep my eyes from rolling back into my head—the sensation of fullness was almost too much, just shy of painful, even though I was more than ready for him.

He made slow, shallow thrusts, never moving his eyes from mine, until he was fully seated. Then his eyes fluttered closed, his mouth falling open on a soft gust of air.

I wanted this moment frozen forever. Wanted to snap a picture of him and stare at it for the rest of my life.

He was perfect. And he was mine.

Burke's eyes opened. "Ready?" he asked.

He didn't wait for an answer, simply slid his hips back and snapped forward.

Again.

And again.

And again.

I was moaning with each one, the friction of his body against mine

starting that slow, delicious build again.

He muttered filthy things against the skin of my shoulder, stopping only when he locked his mouth on to mine and unleashed months of pent-up sexual tension and who knows what else.

The snap of his hips was relentless, hard and punishing.

There wasn't finesse in this slap of skin, our tongues tangled and our breaths hot against each other's mouths. His teeth clacked against mine on a particularly brutal drive of his hips, and I sobbed something incoherent.

Once he let go of my wrists, I wrapped my arms around him and held on for dear life, warning him with a call of his name when I was just about to tip over the edge again.

"Come on," he said between gritted teeth.

He was so close, and he was waiting for me.

The next thrust snapped the headboard against the wall, and it was the violence of that sound—knowing we'd done this to each other—that was the last shove I needed, something bright and borderline painful unfurling inside me. I shook from the force of it, my whole body racked with rolling trembles of pleasure as it coursed through me.

My breath came out in small sobs, and for a moment, I worried I'd burst into tears because of how good I felt—how desperately, completely, soul-shakingly good.

Burke shouted my name, guttural and deep and wonderful.

His movements slowed as he took us down from that mutual high. My hands slid over his back, damp from sweat, and we rolled onto our sides, him still inside me.

It was messy and glorious.

I kissed him, my fingers tracing over his cheekbones. My heart felt too big for my chest with the feel of this man against me.

"We should've been doing that the entire time," I whispered against his mouth.

And with the sound of his laughter, I realized I'd never been happier in my entire life.

If I'd known what the next day would bring, I never would've fallen asleep.



# Chapter Twenty-Nine

## BURKE

Locked in the hotel room, it was like Charlotte and I had hit the pause button on all the unanswered questions that waited outside those four walls.

It was a space meant for one thing, and one thing only.

Muted were all the questions that had yet to be answered.

We muted them with hands over skin and endless kisses, even as her eyes drifted shut. We managed to clean ourselves up—her back in my jersey, me in only boxer briefs—and slide under the covers.

“Thank you for inviting me,” she said. Our faces were close together, her legs tangled between mine. Charlotte gently scratched her nails through the stubble on my jaw, and I tugged her fingertips to my mouth.

“I’m glad you were here,” I told her. “I would’ve left, and it was good to watch the game.”

She smiled in the dark. “You would’ve marched out with Liam.”

I exhaled a short laugh. “He’s . . . something else. I never really got to see him and Chris together.”

Gently, she traced the outline of my lips. “Maybe Chris had a soft spot for grumpy loners.”

I narrowed my eyes, and she laughed.

“Do you think I’m a loner?” I asked.

Immediately, Charlotte shook her head. “I think you just keep your circle small.” She snuggled in closer, and I smoothed a hand up her back. “And once you decide someone is in, they’re in forever.”

Where did that leave her?

Charlotte was settled smack-dab in the middle of that circle, whether she realized it or not. Had been there for longer than I was willing to admit, especially in light of the lifeline she’d been to me through the event. And if

she'd be there forever, then I was in for a world of heartache once she left.

“Did you really get on a plane to punch your brother-in-law’s nose?” she asked.

I smiled. “I really did. Tansy wasn’t overly pleased with how I handled it, but fuck it felt good.”

Charlotte buried her face in the pillow to hide her grin. “When you told me that . . .” Her voice trailed off, and she shivered slightly.

“What?”

She sneaked a quick kiss, pulling back before I could deepen it. “Hot. Very hot.”

“Yeah?” I tugged her closer with a hand low on her back. “Wanna show me?”

Charlotte laughed. “I’m too tired to show you anything right now. I hope you’re okay with driving tomorrow because I’m sleeping the entire way back.”

We lay quietly for a few minutes. Not sharing a bed had been smart for all those weeks. Distance had allowed for a certain amount of clearheadedness. There was no distance between us now, and it was shocking how quickly infatuation and attraction could grow into something more permanent. Something life altering.

“Tansy wasn’t really mad at you, was she?” she asked sleepily.

“Nah. Once the surprise wore off, she enjoyed the sight of his bloodied nose about as much as I did.” My hand curled over her hip, and she inched closer. “She left him after that.”

She blinked her eyes open and studied my face. “That must have been hard.”

“It was. But I promised her I’d always take care of her and the kids. That’s why I kept playing.”

“You mentioned that yesterday. It’s hard to wrap my head around,” she admitted.

I let out a slow sigh. “I’ve never really loved it. Some days I enjoyed it more than others. Chris helped me with that. I loved the guys I played with. But I lost a lot to that game. I sacrificed a lot—some of it good. Some of it not. When I hurt my knee, I was . . . relieved.”

Disbelief had her brow furrowing. “Really?”

“Chris was the only person who knew that,” I admitted quietly. “The last time we talked on the phone was a couple of weeks before—” My throat

tightened. “Before.”

She pulled my fingers up to her mouth and kissed my knuckles, clutching my hand to her chest while I kept talking. The words were just there. I didn’t know how, and I didn’t know what had changed in my head to allow them out.

My dad had never seen it. He’d just pushed me to be better and work harder and give everything to this one area of my life.

My ex-wife had never seen it either. All she’d seen was a single-minded focus on something that always put our relationship second. Put her—what she wanted out of life—second.

Even Tansy hadn’t.

And, for some reason, I wanted to know that there was someone else who could understand this about me. Charlotte’s presence in my life might be fleeting, but I’d always have this. I’d have parts of her story, and she’d have some of mine.

She’d given me so much of herself, and I didn’t want to reach the end of our time together with her feeling like I hadn’t met her in the middle.

“It was never my dream,” I told her. “It was his, and I just . . . kept going because I was good.”

Her eyebrows bent in a concerned V. “That makes me sad for you,” she admitted.

I kissed her forehead. “Don’t feel too bad,” I told her. “They did pay me a lot.”

She laughed. “I know, but . . . didn’t anyone ask you what you wanted?”

The irony was so thick, I could’ve choked on it.

That was the entire foundation of my problem. With everything.

I’d worked so hard for everyone else my entire life. I wasn’t even sure how to untangle what I wanted in the midst of that.

What I wanted—what I was willing to sacrifice as a result—was the thing that kept my life in a holding pattern.

Instead of taking the subject any further, I kissed her slow and sweet.

“There’s this redhead in my life who can’t *stop* asking me what I want,” I whispered. The redhead in question grinned. “And she’s very tired.”

Charlotte hummed. “She is.”

Within minutes, we were out.

Charlotte slept like the dead, and so did I.

I woke while it was still dark, and it took me a few moments to orient

myself to where I was.

Charlotte was on her side, hand splayed over my stomach, her leg slung over mine.

Leaving all the thoughts in my head suspended, I turned my body toward hers.

My palm coasted up the length of her leg, hitching it over my hip while I tugged her closer. Her skin was so warm, her body so pliable. Her hair was everywhere, and I pushed it behind her shoulder, allowing the soft strands between my fingers while I breathed her in.

Charlotte's hips shifted incrementally.

"I should let you sleep," I whispered against her forehead. She hummed, still not fully awake.

I'd never been more selfish than this night with her.

I could take from her for hundreds of nights, just like that one.

Thousands of nights. Days. Mornings. Every second in between.

I'd always want her.

This was the puzzle piece I'd never quite been able to picture.

As I closed my eyes and let my lips drift over the arch of her cheekbone, the straight line of her nose, I caught a glimpse of us in a different room: big circular window in the peak of the wall, the sun streaming in over a big bed with a very sturdy carved frame.

Green-and-white tiles on the bathroom floor.

My heart turned in my chest on a slow, chugging beat when I realized what I was imagining. The guilt may have crippled me any other day, but I snapped the door shut on that, refusing to let it intrude on this warm, sweet moment with her.

My kisses on her face moved to each corner of her mouth, my hands pushing up beneath the shirt she wore, the one with my name on it.

She arched her back, her breath moving faster as she stirred awake.

Her breasts were so soft and warm, filling my palms as her skin tightened underneath mine. Her nipples were pink, sweet, and hard when I tasted them.

Charlotte's eyelids fluttered open, illumined only by the parking lot light coming in through a slight break in the curtains.

"What time is it?" she asked.

I kissed her instead of answering. I didn't want questions right now. Because I knew that if we started asking them, the house of cards in my head

would blow over.

*Selfish.*

The word echoed in my head, but I shoved it away as I deepened the kiss. Her tongue was warm and wet when it slid against mine.

Charlotte pushed her hands under the elastic band of my boxer briefs, gripping me firmly as I rocked my hips.

We didn't remove the shirt that covered her; I simply pushed it up and sucked her breast into my mouth while she worked her hand in a slow, maddening rhythm.

It was hard but not quite hard enough.

Slow, just a bit too slow.

She was teasing me, trying her very best to push me to my breaking point like she had before.

But this time, I didn't want fast, punishing, and fierce. I wanted to take my time with her and see just how much I could wring from her body before she begged me to stop. Begged me to finish.

Carefully, I pulled her hand off me and moved down her body. She shifted with a sigh as I settled my shoulders between her thighs.

Charlotte clutched my hair in both hands while I worked her into a writhing frenzy using the flat of my tongue in long, slow licks. My fingers with intentional, curling hooks.

I studied her face in the dark as she finally toppled over the edge with a long, shaky sigh. Underneath the flattened palm of my hand, her stomach trembled.

For the rest of my life, I'd close my eyes and see that expression on her face, no matter if this ever happened again or not. But even as I watched, relished, and memorized how beautiful she was, face slack with pleasure, I refused to listen to the voice that told me she was slipping through my hands.

The sand in that imaginary hourglass was still tumbling out, each second and each minute bringing us closer to something inevitable.

The vision in my head—a future that wasn't mine to want—would be something that I could keep locked there. No one could take it from me.

I rolled onto my back and slid my hands over her hips, watching the slow lift of her legs as she settled over my lap. She moved to take the jersey off, and I shook my head.

“Leave it on,” I told her. “I want to think about this every fucking time I see that shirt.”

She smiled, leaning down to kiss me. I smoothed my hand up her back, inhaling the scent of her hair while it curtained around us.

Charlotte straightened, lowering herself over me with tiny rocking motions of her hips. I held her so tight in my hands, gritting my teeth when she was fully seated.

“So good,” she whispered. Her hands braced on my chest, and I started directing the movement of her hips. Tiny shifts, back and forth, and she sighed happily at the way our bodies rubbed together.

It didn’t take long; those small shifts were no longer enough.

Nothing would never be enough with her.

She moved faster, pulling up farther. I slammed her body back down on mine, hands tight around her skin, and when she started chanting my name, I dragged my thumb between her legs, desperately trying to pull her over again before I fell.

I flipped us, swallowing her breathless laughter with a deep kiss and once again tugging her leg up against my side.

Charlotte arched her back as I drove my hips forward, faster and faster and harder, and I felt the moment she exploded. I broke away from the kiss, letting her pleasure milk my own. I chased it with slow, rolling thrusts, memorizing the way it curled down my spine, swamped every inch of my body.

We kissed in the dark after that, nothing that led to more, just the gentle slide of her lips on mine.

Her hand traced over my back and shoulders in big, soothing circles. I let my fingers weave through her hair, directing the angle of her head as we kissed.

She slipped out of bed to use the bathroom, and I wedged my hand behind my head to watch her when she padded quietly back.

Charlotte tucked herself beside me, and I curled my arm around her shoulder as I drifted back into a half sleep.

I still saw the circle window. I saw the four-poster bed. I saw the sunny kitchen and the big backyard with towering trees that overlooked the bay.

The dream was spliced with flashes of the photos from the Jumbotron at the game.

Amie and Chris on the field.

Me and Chris in front of the house.

Me and Charlotte inside the house.

No matter what I tried, I couldn't banish the images from my head. And when I rose hours later, the sun brightening the room, Charlotte still sound asleep at my side, I felt an unsettled pit in my stomach.

I rolled out of bed, careful not to disturb her. I showered, letting the hot water cover my face while I tried to shake that feeling I'd woken up with.

My phone buzzed on the bathroom counter, William's name flashing across the screen. He only called me if it was time sensitive, and so as not to wake Charlotte, I made sure the door was closed.

"William. What's up?"

"Sorry to call while you're away, but I was at the house getting something ready for tomorrow and ran into a delivery guy who needs your signature on something he tried to deliver yesterday. He saw my truck, so he came to the main house when the carriage house was empty."

"What is it?"

"Not sure. Looks like it's from a lawyer's office, though. You okay if I sign it for you?"

I scratched the side of my face. "Yeah, go ahead. We'll be back before dinner."

"Slow start to your Sunday?" he asked slyly.

"Bite me, William."

He laughed good-naturedly.

"What's the firm name?" I asked.

When he rattled off the last name of the estate attorney for Chris and Amie, my chest went tight. "Thanks. Yeah, if you can hold on to it until we get back, I don't want it lying around outside."

"You got it, boss."

Before I walked back into the room, I sent the lawyer a text, letting him know I was out of town but someone else had signed for the package, whatever it was.

When I entered the room again, rubbing a towel over my hair, Charlotte was still curled on her side, her hands tucked underneath the pillow and her red hair streaming out behind her. Her eyes tracked over my bare chest.

"Morning." Charlotte's voice was soft and sleepy.

"Morning," I said.

She sat up, stretching her arms over her head and yawning widely. I stood there admiring the way her body shifted underneath my shirt when she spoke. "Who were you talking to in there?"

“William.” I draped the towel over the back of the chair by the desk and tugged on a pair of gym shorts. “He wanted to know if he could sign for something at the house.”

She gathered her hair into a messy bun. “What was it?”

I shrugged. “Something from the estate lawyer. Guess I’ll find out when we get back.” My tongue almost stumbled over that last word, but I resolutely kept the word *home* out of my mouth.

Charlotte climbed off the bed, tugging me close for a quick kiss. “I need to get my stuff out of my room,” she said. “Is there coffee?”

“Would you actually drink it if there was?”

Charlotte laughed, and I stole another soft kiss, just to feel the sound against my lips. I wanted to trap it in my skin, inhale it into my lungs.

Maybe I’d be able to carry it around with me that way.

She slipped her jeans back on and returned to her room to pack up her stuff. While she was gone, I packed my clothes and toiletry bag.

Each piece that disappeared into my suitcase had me feeling more and more on edge. When I set the folded shirt she’d picked out on top and pulled the zipper closed, my temples started to pound.

It was easy to pretend like what we’d done didn’t have ramifications, given that we were so far removed from our typical reality.

We’d need another state of the union. My chest ached thinking about the first time she’d approached that conversation, feet wedged underneath me on the couch.

Any invisible lines we’d affirmed during that talk had been obliterated this weekend. But I tucked away my reservations, made some fucking coffee, and filled up a to-go cup like a fucking chump.

When Charlotte came back to my room, she was wearing denim shorts, a Michigan shirt I’d never seen before, and flip-flops. She took the coffee with a grateful smile.

I tugged on the hem of the shirt with an arched brow, and she blushed.

“I got a little carried away when I found your jersey on that website.”

I didn’t tell her how much I liked it. “You ready to go?”

Instead of answering, Charlotte gave a tiny nod and held my eyes while she took a sip of her coffee.

I shook my head with a laugh and opened the door to let her out first.

Charlotte yawned as I set her duffel bag next to my suitcase in the trunk of her car.



“How long do you think you’ll last?” I asked, buckling myself into the driver’s seat while she settled her pillow into a tight wedge between the door and her seat.

“Less than ten minutes,” she said. Absently, she patted my leg before curling up on her side. “Wake me if you need anything.”

True to her word, Charlotte was out within six minutes, the deep, even sound of her breathing the only thing to punctuate the silence in the car. As I navigated through Ann Arbor, I decided to take a slight detour past the stadium. Because it was Sunday morning, the traffic was light. There was no one behind me, so I slowed the car, staring hard at the block *M* as we passed.

I’d never be able to untangle that place from my memories with Chris.

The traffic light ahead of me slipped from yellow to red, and I eased the car to a stop. Charlotte shifted slightly, and I smiled when she let out a soft snore.

From the console, my phone buzzed.

**Byron Cogswell:** Thanks for letting me know. They found a key for a storage unit not far from Chris and Amie’s house. The envelope was in a box of paperwork, and it was sealed when they sent it to me. To my knowledge, no one has opened it. If you need to talk anything over after you’ve read the contents, please don’t hesitate to reach out.

Like someone had shoved a boot into my chest, my tight lungs expelled a heavy breath. The whole weekend had been a bit too emotionally charged for a vague answer that held so many possibilities.

It could be anything, I reminded myself.

As we drove back to the Campbell House, Charlotte sound asleep in the seat next to me, I tried to ignore the possibilities of what awaited us upon our return. But it didn’t help. I couldn’t shake the feeling that everything we’d just experienced was about to implode.

# Chapter Thirty

BURKE

Charlotte woke briefly when we stopped for a late breakfast about halfway back to Traverse City. It was the sleepy smile, the contented sigh as she fell immediately back to sleep, that had my heart turning over in my chest while I drove us the last stretch back to the house.

The continued quiet in the car wasn't good for me.

It allowed for too much reflection, too many memories, too much conjecture to mix themselves in my head.

By the time I pulled the car into the long driveway, I felt the need to run for ten miles as fast as I could possibly go. I needed something draining to siphon out all the energy running heedless through my head.

William was seated at the patio table in front of the carriage house, his laptop in front of him and a pencil stuck beneath his ball cap. On the table, tucked under the edge of his computer, was a piece of mail.

My stomach tensed, and my heart thundered.

When I turned the car off, Charlotte finally stirred, emitting another huge yawn. "Mmmm, that was a good nap." She sighed.

I managed a smile. "I think that was more than a nap, Red."

She tucked her face against her pillow and hid her smile. "I suppose. I'll be up all night now."

All the things holding me on edge kept me from making some teasing statement, the words stuck somewhere in the back of my throat.

For a brief moment, it had gotten so much easier to tell her what I was thinking, as if the crossing of those unseen lines had broken some chokehold I had on myself.

But it was back—an unwillingness to speak when I didn't know the answers for sure.

An unwillingness to tell her anything that I might have to take back. That might promise her—us—something that wasn't mine to promise.

So, instead, I memorized the sweet look on her face, and smiled.

We got out of the car, and William leaned back in his chair. "Welcome back, kids."

Charlotte fixed the mess of her hair. "What are you doing here?"

He patted the envelope. "Needed to give this to the big grump who drove you back."

I rolled my eyes while Charlotte laughed.

William grinned. "Plus, the tile guy will be here early tomorrow morning. Thought we could go over a couple of things so you don't have to be over here before seven if you don't want to."

"He's starting tomorrow?" I asked.

"I thought he wasn't due until next week," Charlotte said. Her eyes cut over to mine.

I glanced back to William, who nodded easily. "Yeah, he had a cancellation, so he's starting here early."

"Great," Charlotte said, but there was a slightly forced quality to it. "One less week."

The distinct lack of excitement had William's brows rising slowly, his gaze bouncing between us. "Interesting," he drawled.

I held his gaze unflinchingly. Since when did that asshole have the ability to read the subtext in all our conversations?

"So," he said, "this was awkward, and I'm going to change the subject now."

Without fanfare, he pulled the envelope out from underneath the laptop and handed it to me. I accepted it with a nod.

Charlotte dug her keys out of her purse. "William, let me show you something while you're here. It's for one of my virtual clients, but I'm curious about your thoughts."

As I gripped it in my hand, the envelope seemed to weigh about a million pounds. "I'll get the bags," I told her.

She gave me a secret little grin, and I felt it like a dart in between my ribs.

The two of them disappeared into the carriage house, and I stood in the yard for a solid minute, staring over at the Campbell House.

I'd been gone for ten days, and the change in the house absolutely

knocked the wind out of me. In my absence, they'd completed the paint job, and it was . . . incredible.

This house was alive. It was fresh and bright. Nothing looked its age. There were newly built shutters and warm window frames. The white siding was crisp and inviting among a backdrop of trees. And the blue front door was an understated sort of exclamation point.

Would Chris even recognize it if he saw it now?

Did it look the way he'd wanted it to all those years ago, when he felt like such a failure?

I tightened my grip on the envelope and thought about what might be inside. How it might affect all the biggest question marks in my life.

The house.

Charlotte.

What I wanted out of my future.

I just wanted one fucking minute to be able to breathe. Pulling open the envelope, I saw that there was another, smaller envelope inside. Folded against the second envelope was a piece of paper stamped with the lawyer's letterhead.

I tugged it out, surprised to find a handwritten note. When I saw the first line, my heart stopped.

Burke,

I think this letter from Chris might give you the clarity you're searching for. Amie's best friend found a key to a storage unit not far from their house, and this was inside one of the boxes from Chris's office. No one has read it; she saw your name and sent it directly to me. The contents of the letter are yours to disclose as you see fit. I hope this brings you some peace as you near the end of the renovation and have decisions to make.

My hand was trembling when I saw the battered edge at the top of the second envelope. I hesitated just long enough, my throat desperately dry, my lungs aching as I tried to pull in a full breath.

Months ago, I would've torn into it, desperate to see what he had to say. But now, I hesitated.

It could change everything.

It could serve as a reminder, tangible and from his own mouth, that the things I'd started dreaming of, the things I'd started wanting, the things I'd started thinking of as mine . . . were in direct contradiction to what he and Amie wanted.

And the pause was ultimately my undoing.

Guilt clawed at my insides, because I *paused*. Because I didn't immediately rip into the paper and devour the words he'd left for me.

There was something really fucking disconcerting about getting a message from someone you'd already grieved. Something heart stopping about receiving something new in their handwriting, because there was absolutely no guarantee that it would help or that it wouldn't hurt and make things a million times worse.

"Not right now," I said. With trembling hands, I tucked the envelope into my back pocket and turned away from the house.

Without the ability to see it—this new, shiny version—I could still imagine it as it had been when I came with Chris. When I saw my friend hurt, feeling like the weakest version of himself for not being able to secure this place and a future that only he could see.

In a horribly ironic full-circle moment, I thought about my dad's advice.

*It doesn't matter if you don't want to do it, Burke. Doing the hard stuff when you don't want to is going to make you the best version of yourself.*

But, suddenly, I wasn't sure what the hardest thing was anymore. I'd done a lot of hard things in my life.

Losing my friend? I had no choice.

Carrying this dream for him when he was gone? I had a choice in that. And I made it when I decided to see it through to the end.

Only now I couldn't see what the end looked like. And I definitely couldn't see how any of this was making me better or stronger.

Standing there with the bags in my hand and the weight of Chris's letter in my back pocket, I felt like . . . him.

My dad had been no great teacher in any of the things that mattered. His solution to grief had been to ignore it. And I was following in his footsteps just fine.

Distracting myself with the last person I should have lost myself in. Someone good and kind and funny who deserved a man who loved more like she did.

When I walked into the carriage house, she was gesturing widely,

making shapes in the air with her hand that made William laugh.

“You didn’t say that,” he said.

“I did. They wanted a scrolled iron arch, William, come on.” Her eyes were bright with laughter.

His booming laughter grated in my ears. Not just because I didn’t understand what they were talking about, but because I’d walked through one simple doorway and the entire mood was just a bit too bright, a bit too happy.

Because they couldn’t possibly know what was in my head or what was weighing down my back pocket.

“You’ve got to send me pictures when it’s finished,” he said.

“I will. I hope to drive down to see it once we’re done here.”

I kept my eyes on the floor as I walked Charlotte’s bag to her room. If she was watching me, I didn’t know.

“That’s in Kansas City, right?”

She made a noise of assent.

Slowly, I walked toward the yellow bedroom and set my suitcase at the foot of the too-small bed. I pulled the letter out of my pocket and let it rest on the bed while I sat on the edge of the mattress.

I’d never been in any condition to start a relationship with Charlotte, and I’d always known that. There was some instinct deeply hardwired in me that I hadn’t been able to fight against, and all those things roared to the surface.

He asked her about that job in Iowa, and she paused before answering. My breath caught as she did.

“Have you not answered yet?” he asked, lowering his voice a touch.

“I haven’t. They’re being very patient, though,” she said.

“Why haven’t you?” William sounded genuinely curious.

She didn’t answer. At least not out loud.

William kept talking. “Remember me telling you about that couple I met downtown?”

“Yeah, from the east side of the state; they had the Gothic Revival cottage.”

“That’s the one,” he said. “They decided to do a renovation after we talked. I think I’m gonna take it.”

“That’s great, William.”

He paused. “If you wanted to stay closer for your next job . . . I may have told them they’d be fools not to reach out to you.” Silence pulsed

through the room. “It’s not as big of a job as the Des Moines mansion, but the house is amazing.”

Still, Charlotte said nothing.

“I . . . I can’t wait to hear from them,” she said after another beat. “Thank you, William.”

I couldn’t read her voice, not without being able to see her face. So much of what she thought about everything was in her face.

Her eyes.

Her mouth.

My heart went cold, tight and hard in my chest, at the ramifications of her ensuing silence.

The thought that she’d ever put her future on hold because of us, because we hadn’t laid out what all these new changes in our relationship meant . . . it was too much.

William was already acting like I was staying.

It’s what she’d always wanted, even if her reasons had changed. I had no doubt her feelings were real, and that’s what made everything seem so much worse.

I pinched my eyes shut, ruthlessly yanking up memories of my dad.

Angela.

Chris.

Reminders of all the hard things, the things that made me who I was, for good or for bad.

The ways I’d fucked up with Charlotte—my inability to say what I was feeling, thinking that I could cross any line with her and not end up wanting more and more and more.

“You okay?”

Her voice came from the doorway. When I pried my eyes open, she was studying me with concern.

“Tired,” I told her.

Her gaze moved to the letter. “What was it?”

“I haven’t read it yet.” The truth.

And the only one that I was capable of uttering.

If she had even the slightest hint of the self-flagellation brewing underneath the surface, she’d stop at nothing to disrupt it.

She’d barrel through all the poison that I couldn’t seem to purge from my system, the instincts that ran deep, the talent for compartmentalizing that

was buried so far down I couldn't remember where it began.

I'd done it before without even realizing it.

I'd curled my fingers around my friend's coffin and shut down any hint of feeling, simply because I needed to survive it. And if I tried hard enough, I could remember the smooth surface underneath my skin.

Feel the scratch of his suit all those years ago when we hugged in the front yard.

Charlotte's scrutiny was intense, and she seemed to weigh whether she wanted to push or not. I stood from the mattress, unzipping the top pocket of my suitcase and carefully tucking the folded letter in there.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

I took a deep breath, and before I turned to face her, I let my dad's voice ring through my head again.

*It doesn't matter if you don't want to do it. Doing the hard things . . .*

But I couldn't finish. The thought sputtered and fizzled out.

This wasn't for my betterment. This wasn't to make me stronger. Doing this thing would shred my insides, but I was better off letting her go now.

So was Charlotte.

The break should be clean, because it would be better for her that way. Respect what she'd asked for all those months ago, when she'd told me she trusted me.

"I'm gonna head back to Florida."

She sucked in a fast breath through her nose, her chest expanding as she did. "Why?"

I hardly recognized my own voice; the eerie steadiness of it was foreign and cold. It was especially strange because tearing the words up my throat was a new, acute kind of pain.

"Things went too far this weekend," I said. "Emotions were high, and . . ." My voice trailed off as I registered the impact. The color leached from her face, and her pulse fluttered wildly at the base of her throat. "We agreed to keep things simple, and I think it's for the best that we do."

Charlotte didn't cry.

She didn't slap me.

I wished she had. Maybe that spark of pain on my skin would've matched what was happening under my ribs.

"What are you doing?" she asked. Her eyes never left mine, relentless and seeking.



I inhaled slowly. “I’m being honest with you, even if it’s hard to hear.”

“Bullshit.” She crossed her arms, the color climbing back into her cheeks. “I don’t know what’s making you run scared right now, but that’s exactly what you’re doing. You’re shutting down—*again*—because you think you know what’s best.”

“That’s not—” I stopped, because my throat caught on the lie.

“You can’t even deny it. Burke, this is crazy.” She took a step closer to me.

I steeled myself, because I wasn’t sure I could resist if she touched me.

“My time here was always limited,” I told her. “I had one job to do, and that’s it. Same as you. It’s better if we go our separate ways before things get more complicated.”

“You never asked for my input on that. I’m in this too.”

“I know.” I rubbed the back of my neck.

“Partners.” She was unblinking and unyielding. “You promised me you’d have my back.”

“I know,” I ground out. “But I never promised I’d uproot my life, or that I’d leave the life I’m building down by my family.”

“I didn’t ask you to,” she said. “You’re putting words in my mouth, making decisions without even asking me how we can make this work. I wasn’t alone in that bed last night. It was *something*. It wasn’t simple, and yes, we need to talk about it, but it wasn’t nothing.” She narrowed her eyes. “What happened?”

“Nothing.”

It was the first time I’d outright lied to her. It tasted horrible—acidic and raw.

For the first time, her eyes filled with tears. “You’re lying. I can hear it in your voice.”

I clenched my jaw. “I know you don’t want to hear this, but I think once you get some distance, you’ll see that I’m right to leave now.”

Charlotte exhaled slowly. “I know things changed. I know we broke our own rules. But at least I’m brave enough to be willing to see what that means for us, no matter how much it scares me.”

I wanted her anger.

I wanted her to snap at me, to curse and tell me not to be such a patronizing asshole.

I wanted her to call me a coward.

But she didn't.

When I didn't respond, her eyes were sad. Resigned. Determined.

"It's so tempting to feel stupid for falling in love with you, Burke," she whispered. That whisper—soft and sure and deadly—was like an arrow. And I saw it in her eyes when she pulled back, notched it into place, and aimed it straight at my chest. I braced for impact. "No. I'm stupid for believing that you're strong enough to admit you're in love with me too."

She took a step back, cleared a path for me to walk out of the room.

It was the hardest thing I'd ever done—to nod at her statement.

To not reach for her when I passed.

Wrap her in my arms and tell her that she was right and that I wanted her to help me figure out what to do with all the things she'd said.

But that wouldn't help. Not her, and not me.

I let out a slow breath and lowered my gaze. I picked up my suitcase and straightened, careful not to brush against her when I walked out.

# Chapter Thirty-One

BURKE

Tansy took one look at me when I walked through the front door—far earlier than she ever expected me to return—and wisely said nothing.

Twenty-four hours later, she'd had her fill of staying quiet.

“What happened?”

I met her gaze unflinchingly. “It’s none of your business, Tans.”

She arched an eyebrow. “It’s my business because you’re stomping around my house like a preteen with a temper tantrum. If you don’t want to talk about it, fine, but quit acting like a child.”

Finally, I flinched, breaking the stare and walking out onto the back deck.

I didn’t worry about the unopened letter on my nightstand.

I didn’t think about Charlotte.

William texted me the kinds of questions that she used to ask, and I wondered what he knew.

I dug through the boxes from our dad’s house that Tansy had never opened, searching through albums. Staring at pictures of our mom. Of my parents together. All the houses we lived in.

I didn’t worry about the letter.

I didn’t think about Charlotte.

I pored over old high school film, listened to my dad’s voice barking commands from where he stood on the sidelines, camera in hand. Days of that. And I came to the conclusion that I probably would’ve hated football if it hadn’t been for Chris.

I moved on to my college games. Every year, I got better.

The longer I watched, each glimpse of Chris hurt less and less.

Tansy shook her head every time she passed me in front of the computer

screen, but she said nothing.

I spent an entire week poring over everything I could find from the first twenty years of my life, trying to find some missing puzzle piece that I'd never been able to identify.

I didn't worry about the letter.

I didn't think about Charlotte.

I got very, very good at lying to myself about both of those things . . . because it took almost a week before I started dreaming about her.

# Chapter Thirty-Two

## CHARLOTTE

Heartache was very good for work, as it turned out.

Tile didn't shut down on you.

Furniture didn't walk away.

Paint colors didn't lie about their complete inability to process their feelings.

For the first week, I kept my blinders on, ate a lot of freshly baked bread (thanks to Richard), and reminded myself that I'd lived without Burke before.

I could do it again.

I napped a lot because heartache was also a bit tiring.

I found myself sitting out on the bay in the mornings, drinking my coffee and staring at a pull-up bar with a bit more violence than was probably necessary.

I didn't call him. I didn't text.

Daphne and Richard watched me carefully, like they were bracing for the moment something would crack and I'd melt into a puddle of tears.

I reminded myself that I'd lived without Burke before, and I could do it again.

I sat at the dining-room table and laid out three really good job offers, then reviewed every single one carefully. I met with each prospective client on the phone.

It took me less than a day to decide which one felt the most right. The sole consideration was the flicker of joy I'd felt down under my ribs when they showed me the house.

It wasn't about money. Or time. Or distance.

I picked the one that made me happiest. It was the only option coming off this one, where I was leaving so much of my heart behind.

When William came and told me he'd turn over the keys in another week, I reminded myself that I'd lived without Burke before.

I could do it again.

For the first time since he'd left, I cried myself to sleep on the couch underneath the black-and-white quilt he'd left behind.

# Chapter Thirty-Three

## CHARLOTTE

Everything at the Campbell House was picture perfect.

Gleaming floors.

Gorgeous counters.

Stunning trim and doors and windows.

I worked myself to the bone, cleaning every single inch of the beautiful, empty, unfurnished house.

The house that, according to all signs, would stay empty and unfurnished until Burke made a decision about what to do with it.

I swiped an arm across my forehead as I finished wiping down the interior of the upper cabinets in the kitchen.

“Have I mentioned I love this color?” Daphne asked.

I managed to smile. “A few times.”

“I never would’ve picked this blue for a kitchen cabinet, but it’s sexy.”

Reverently, I traced my finger over the woodwork. It *was* sexy. The whole place was, if I could allow myself to really enjoy the entire picture that was coming together.

Summer melted into fall while William and his crew put the finishing touches on the house, each room slowly turning into a home. The air wasn’t hot and pleasant during the day anymore, and the night before, I’d had to pull the blanket up over my shoulders when I woke.

Everything about the world I was living in should’ve been perfect and sweet, seeing the fruition of months of hard work at a place that I loved. Unfortunately for me, that love was tangled up with stupid Burke Barrett and his self-destructive tendencies.

I couldn’t look at the tile in the bathrooms without wanting to ugly cry.

Couldn’t stare at the color of the front door without wanting to eat my

body weight in chocolate.

What a jerk.

“You answer those people about the job?”

I blinked, snapping out of my Burke-induced cycle of bad thoughts.

“Um, yeah. I emailed her yesterday.”

“I’ll miss you around here, but I’m glad you said yes.”

I was glad I’d said yes too. Even if my head and my heart warred about whether it was good to move on from the Campbell House or the worst thing in the world.

What a *jerk*.

“What’s next after we clean out the kitchen?”

“We can be done for the day. They still have some outlet covers to install, and I think the painters still have to finish their touch-up in the west bedrooms.”

“Is the primary bathroom ready to be cleaned?” she asked quietly.

I hadn’t gone in there yet.

I couldn’t.

“No.” I sprayed down the next shelf and scrubbed vigorously.

“Charlotte.”

Ignoring my aunt’s soft tone was super-duper easy because I’d perfected the art of ignoring tones and loaded looks and heavy subtext.

She sighed, reaching over to snatch the bottle of cleaning solution away from me.

“Hey.” When I tried to take it back, she moved it out of reach. “I can’t talk about this,” I told her. “Not now.”

“At some point, you should,” she said. Her eyes were soft and understanding. This wasn’t burning-bras Aunt Daphne; it wasn’t chain-yourself-to-the-building Aunt Daphne. This was the woman who had held me when my mom died and had always listened to me when I needed to unburden my heart.

“If I talk about it,” I said quietly, “I’ll start crying. And that’s so stupid because he does not deserve my tears.”

“Oh, honey.” She came next to me and wrapped her arm around my shoulder. “It’s not stupid if you’re sad. Burke is . . .”

“Also stupid.”

She laughed. “I don’t know if I’d use that word.”

I swiped my nose. “What word would you use?”



Aunt Daphne didn't have to think very long. "Lost."

My eyes snapped up to hers.

"That man has had a lot of change in his life in a very short amount of time. And that does not excuse how he left," she said firmly, "but after I moved past my unquenchable desire to chop his balls off for hurting you, I had to ask myself why he did it."

My chin trembled.

It was the question I refused to dwell on, because there was a giant cavern behind my ribs where he'd bruised my heart. It still throbbed painfully when I thought of it.

Thought of him.

"He's not cruel," she continued. "And if you saw the way he looked at you for months, you'd have no doubt in your mind that he's been in love with you for even longer than he realized."

"Then why?"

"I don't think he knew what to do with that."

"That's still not an excuse."

"It's not," she agreed.

"I thought we were starting something special." I dashed at my cheek with the back of my hand. "Like . . . forever special."

"I thought you were too." She studied my face, which I'm sure was puffy and red and splotchy. I'd inherited my mom's crying face, and it wasn't pretty. "I wish your mom was here right now, because I know I don't always give the best advice."

"Well, that's not going to help me stop crying," I said in a trembling voice.

She laughed. "Sorry."

I exhaled. "What do you think she'd say?"

That's when Daphne's eyes watered, and a fresh wave of emotion about knocked me over at the sight of her tears. "I think she'd remind you how precious your heart is, Charlie Brown. Because it is. And I think she'd tell you to think about why you fell in love with him in the first place."

My chest ached for something I'd never have again, something that I'd grieved a long time ago. It *was* the kind of thing my mom would say. "How does that help?"

"There's always a wound underneath the kind of thing he did. Everyone has at least one. But some people can acknowledge their wounds, so they stop

hurting others—hurting themselves—as a result.” Daphne held my gaze. “Your dad and mom hurt each other so much it was impossible for them to move forward together. But as the years passed, she could see it more clearly. How his hurts formed him. How hers did too.”

“We never talked about Dad much after she moved us here.”

“Understandable,” Daphne said. “But your mom gained a lot of understanding later in life. It was good for her—helped her make some much-needed peace with that relationship.”

“Burke isn’t like my dad,” I said immediately.

“And you’re not your mom,” she countered. “You are your own person, and you don’t take their baggage into your future.”

“Didn’t I, though?”

Daphne tilted her head in understanding, silently waiting for me to continue.

“There’s a reason I never really wanted a relationship. Why all the guys who asked me out had something about them that wasn’t right. I didn’t want to be *them*.” I shrugged. “It wasn’t worth the risk.”

Understanding filled her face. “Until him.”

“Isn’t that the ironic part of it?” I managed to smile. “I’ve never fought with anyone like I did with Burke—the very thing I wanted to avoid—and he’s the first one to steal my heart.”

“I think that’s why you worked.”

I laughed. “Oh, come on.”

“I’m serious.” She nudged me with her shoulder. “There’s a reason it wasn’t hard to convince yourself to jump into something with him.”

I gave her a look. “Because I was delusional?”

“No,” she said gently. “You thought he was safe because he was so different than what you expected in a partner. That you’d keep those guards up, even if you . . .” She waved her hand in the air.

I waved my hand right back. “Jumped into bed with him after a vulnerable and emotionally taxing weekend?”

She laughed. “You knew, deep down, that you could trust him with that side of you. The one you don’t show to many people.”

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. “Whose side are you on?” I asked.

Daphne cupped the sides of my face. “Always yours.”

I shook my head. “You were the one who told me I should go for it with

him.”

“I know. Because I saw something between you two.”

“Yeah . . . unhealthy coping mechanisms and a massive screaming need for therapy.”

She smiled. “That’s not why I’m saying this. And everyone needs therapy from time to time, honey.”

“Then why?”

“Sometimes that means helping people see the big picture when they’re stuck in the mud of a hurt heart. And, honey, you are still knee deep.”

“Maybe even deeper than that,” I whispered.

“He left, and he was wrong for the way he did,” she said. “But the hurt he caused you doesn’t mean you were wrong too. Your instincts about Burke were good, Charlotte. You were good for each other.”

When she wrapped her arms around me, I let her hold me like my mom would have. And I cried. Because I missed him. And my heart felt even more than hurt. It felt something bigger and scarier than that.

It was still his.

And I had to figure out what I was supposed to do with that.

# Chapter Thirty-Four

BURKE

“Holy shit,” my sister breathed.

She kicked at the pile of laundry at the foot of my bed. Judging by the wrinkle in her nose, she was worried that something would come scurrying out.

“Did you know that Dad and Mom only dated for two months before they got married?” I flipped through a brown photo album with a gold accordion binding.

“Uh, nope.” She blew out a slow breath. “How long has it been since you’ve slept more than a couple of hours?”

I ignored her question.

My dad was smiling. In every picture.

Tansy was a clone of our mom.

“Two months, Tans.” I flipped to a picture of them standing outside a theater. She was wearing purple bell-bottoms, flashing a peace sign. He had long, shaggy hair and ridiculous sideburns. He had his arms wrapped around her and was kissing the top of her head. Tansy studied the picture with sad eyes. “I was reading Mom’s stuff, and she said it was love at first sight. She saw him playing football at a park by their first house. He tripped trying to make a catch, literally fell at her feet.”

“Uh-huh.” She leaned a hip against the dresser and eyed me warily. “You need to shower. And shave. And . . . I don’t know . . . get some fresh air?”

I set down the album. “He never took us to her grave after she died. Isn’t that weird to you?”

Her face softened. “Yeah, I guess it is.”

“We’ve never talked about this.”

Tansy shrugged, clearly uncomfortable. “I was a baby when she died, Burke. You were, like, three? We didn’t even remember her enough to grieve. We were just trying to grow up. I don’t think we needed to talk about it back then.”

I couldn’t even put into words what it did to me to realize that I was Mira’s age when my mom died. The mom I didn’t remember. That my dad never talked about.

I scrubbed a hand down my face. “I know I sound a little obsessed.”

She cleared her throat delicately.

“Fine. A lot obsessed.” I tossed the album back onto the pile, watching as she picked it up and glanced through the first few pages. Her eyes filled, but she blinked the tears away, set the album back down.

“What are you trying to figure out, Burke?” she asked quietly.

I was so tired.

Ignoring and pretending was exhausting. I’d given up on both of those things after the first week.

I didn’t fight thinking about her.

I didn’t ignore the ache in my chest when I woke up night after night, the same dream making it almost impossible to get a full night’s sleep.

“I want to know how this happened.” I settled my head in my hands. “How you can grow up and ignore so much around you until you don’t even realize the damage it’s done.”

She carefully joined me on the bed. “Like what?”

I stared at the stack of albums. “I never thought about getting married or starting a family until Chris started dating Amie. Did you know that?”

She laid her head on my shoulder. Just listening.

“Seeing them together was . . . foreign. I didn’t understand it.” I paused. “But I wanted it.”

“You married the first person you dated,” she said.

“So did you,” I pointed out. “All in all, I don’t think that worked out too well for us.”

Tansy exhaled a watery laugh.

“Your kids are pretty great, though.” I wrapped an arm around her shoulders. “At least we can thank the dickhead for that.”

Instead of agreeing, instead of allowing the subject to rest, Tansy turned to the side and tucked one of her legs up under the other.

“I need to ask you something seriously,” she said.

“Go ahead.”

“You know you’re not like Dad, right?”

I stared at the albums. Didn’t answer.

She shoved at my arm. “Burke.”

Glancing over at my sister, I tried desperately to keep the crawling, anxious sensation under my skin to a minimum.

Her eyes widened. “Holy shit, Burke, you are so not Dad. You’re the opposite of him.”

My heart was in knots at how sure she was. And my voice was ragged when I asked, “How do you figure?”

“Because I have a lifetime of proof.” She laid her hand on my arm so that I wouldn’t look away. “When he all but ignored me, you were the one who showed up for things. You’d come to art shows and concerts and musicals, straight from games and practices and training. You’d stay up until the middle of the night to get your own homework done after you’d helped me with mine.”

Her eyes were pleading, her grip impossibly tight. “You are one of the most unselfish people I’ve ever met, for dozens of reasons that go far beyond what you did for me. And Dad was . . .” Her voice trailed off. She paused to gather herself. “Dad may have loved Mom a lot, and missed her even more than that, but he never stopped to consider the effect of his decisions on us. Not once. *All* you do is consider other people. That’s the difference.”

“I still don’t know how to handle all this”—I tapped my chest—“guilt. How I reacted when I got the house. How selfish it all sounds now that it’s almost done. I carried Dad’s dream for my entire life because it felt like the only way to make him happy, and once that was over—I had no break from that. The second they told me about that house, Chris and Amie’s dream replaced Dad’s.”

“And you’ve been honoring that,” she said. “You’ve done an amazing job with the house.”

I shook my head. “I started imagining it as mine. Mine and hers. I stood outside it before I left—right where Chris told me how much it would mean to him to take care of this place for his family someday—and I realized I was staring up at a house that looked more like me and Charlotte than Chris and Amie.”

She took a deep breath. “And what’s so wrong with that?” she asked carefully.

My eyes locked on the envelope. Still sealed.

It had taken days to figure out exactly why that letter terrified me so much. My chest throbbed dully as the words finally came up.

“What if he left it to me because he knew that I was the only person who could handle doing all this for someone else? What if he knew I was the *only* person who could handle putting in all that work, all that sacrifice, for something I didn’t really love? For years, he marveled at my ability to do such a hard job when I didn’t really enjoy it. What if that’s why he picked me? Because he trusted me not to get attached to it?”

“Oh, Burke.” She sighed.

“All week, I have dreamed about me and her and that house. Building the kind of life that I never saw for myself.” I pinched my eyes shut.

It was always the same.

We were in the upstairs bedroom: Bright, sunny walls. A four-poster bed. A deep-blue velvet chair and ottoman in the corner. A long, low shelf filled with the colorful spines of books.

And propped up against the headboard, I sat with Charlotte’s back to my chest. She was always settled between my legs, my arms wrapped around her. She was soft and warm, her skin smooth and her weight comforting against me.

In my dream, my hand coasted over her pregnant belly. And just before I woke, a small voice yelled my name, footsteps pounding down the hallway.

I never saw who called me Daddy. Never knew if it was a boy or a girl, red hair or brown.

But I didn’t want to tell my sister any of that.

She couldn’t fix this for me.

I needed to make peace with the things I wanted, no matter what that letter said.

“For the last two weeks, I have been trying to figure out where the balance is,” I told her. “How do I reconcile that I fell in love with that place when it might be the exact opposite thing my friend needed me to do.”

She was quiet for a moment. “And Charlotte?”

Hearing someone else say her name, after nothing but my thinking it for almost two weeks, was like a bullet straight through my ribs. “I want her too,” I managed. “She has a job that can take her anywhere. And I will *not* be the man who makes her feel like she can’t. The man who makes her feel like she has to concede something she *does* love, that she’s passionate about, for

me. If she ever looks at me the way Angela did at the end . . . I couldn't live with myself."

"Angela was the wrong person for you," she said calmly. "That's it."

I gave her a look. "It's not that simple."

"Sure it is." She was unflinching. "She was the wrong person for you. She married a guy who ended up playing professional football, and boohoo, it was hard work and kept you away a lot and you made a shit ton of money doing it. I feel very little sympathy for her because that's my right as your sister to vilify your ex." Tansy nudged my shoulder. "Just like it was your right to punch *my* ex because you wanted to."

"He more than earned that," I said dryly.

"Agreed." She shrugged. "We messed up. We picked the wrong people at first because we had no example of what a good marriage was supposed to be like. That's on Dad because he chose not to talk to us about it. You know better now. So do I. The difference is that you've experienced something right and good and real. I haven't had that yet."

"You will."

"I know," she said easily. "Someone will snatch me up because I'm awesome."

I laughed. It felt good. It felt easy and light after days and days of dark and hard.

"What are you gonna do?" she asked. "Because I'd highly recommend showering first."

I sighed. "I was horrible when I left, and she was right to let me walk out."

"You miss her?"

"Yes."

"You're in love with her?"

Fuck. I was going to cry. And if I cried in front of my sister, she'd hold it over my head for a solid decade. "Yes," I managed.

Tansy grabbed my face in both hands. "Then tell her you're sorry, and tell her all the things you just told me. A real apology. Not one of those bullshit ones that don't really count. No excuses. No *but*s attached to it."

"I . . . I can do that," I told her.

"I know you can." Tansy clapped her hands together. "You done studying the past, so we can get your stinky ass out of my guest room?"

"I think so." I swallowed. "I just needed to understand why, and I didn't



want to drag her into my shit if I couldn't figure it out. She'd want to fix me, or try her best." I smiled at my sister. "That's what she does, you know? She sees a hollow wreck of a building and makes it whole again. Makes it a place where life can happen."

Tansy smiled softly. "You're not a wreck, Burke."

"I was." I stared down at the floor. "I just didn't realize how much until Charlotte."

"I really want to meet her."

"The thought of you two together terrifies me to the depths of my soul."

Tansy laughed. She sat back, eyed the letter on my nightstand. "You gonna open that?"

"Not yet." I scrubbed a hand down my face. "I have a couple of things I need to do first."

My list was short. Two things, really. Face down the two big, hard things that I didn't want to face.

Chris.

And why Charlotte had every reason not to forgive me.

The first was mental.

The second . . . that would require something a bit more strategic. I'd need a game plan.

"Anything I can help with?"

I took a deep breath. "No. But I may need the twins' help, if that's okay."

# Chapter Thirty-Five

## CHARLOTTE

“Can we be done now?” I whined. “My feet feel like they’re going to fall off.”

Daphne looked at her watch. “But there’s a couple more estate sales down the road.”

“Nope. I am done. You’ve dragged me all over, and I really should be at the house today to clean the last few rooms.”

“You still leaving the furniture in storage?” she asked, eyes locked on the rearview mirror.

I nodded. “Yes.”

Daphne shook her head. “It’s a damn shame. That place staying empty after all this.”

“I can’t,” I whispered. “I can’t take this step for him when he’s not willing to take it for himself. Moving it all back in, making it look like a home.” I curled my hand into a fist because every time I thought about it, I had the urge to press my palm over my chest, make sure my heart was still where it was supposed to be. “I don’t know what he’s so scared of, but this is not a decision I’m making for him.”

“I get it.” Daphne patted my leg. “We all do.”

“Does this mean I can go back now and take a nap?”

She smiled. “I still think we should hit one more. You never know what you’ll find.”

“Couches from the ’80s and another porcelain bell collection and absolutely nothing that will work at this job or my next one,” I told her. “I don’t even know why I’m still looking for stuff anyway. It’s just gonna sit in storage with everything else.”

She nudged me gently with her elbow. “Because you still want it to be

perfect.”

It felt just a bit too incriminating to admit it out loud, because the truth was, when it came to the Campbell House, I’d moved past all my own reasons a while ago. They were still there. They were still important.

But Burke, damn him, was now at the forefront.

He was all I thought about lately, as the silence stretched into another week.

The house was done. William had officially handed me his key the day before.

But since I’d technically been contracted to see the historical certification process through, it wasn’t quite time for me to pack my bags yet. Which was why every night I sat on the couch and tried not to cry when I thought about the moment when I’d have no other choice.

I’d loved it before. Before I ever saw him. Met him.

And now, because he was so imprinted in every square inch, it felt like I was leaving a massive piece of myself behind in all the empty rooms.

Daphne turned the car down the road toward the house, and I closed my eyes. Each dip in the road was familiar. The way the trees curved over the long stretch of pavement—I practically had each branch memorized at this point.

I’d driven it so many times. Had seen it during each turn of the season. Now the canopy was full and lush, every branch layered with glossy leaves—fiery reds and burnt oranges. It had rained overnight, and the bark of the trees was still damp enough that it looked black.

I was still studying the foliage when the house came into view.

William’s truck wasn’t in its usual spot, and my brows furrowed when I saw an unfamiliar car.

“Who’s that?” I asked. “No one else is supposed to be out here today.”

Daphne didn’t say anything.

My eyes cut over to her. “Do you know who that is?”

She pulled the car to a stop in front of the carriage house. “I’m sure you’ll find out soon enough.”

Oh, how I hated the way my stomach flipped when she said it.

“Daphne,” I warned. My heart was pounding.

“Maybe you should”—she gestured at my hair—“fix that.”

“Who is that?”

But did I immediately yank at my messy bun to try to smooth it out?

Yes, because I wasn't stupid. And I had a healthy enough amount of vanity that I didn't want to needlessly walk into any situation with a bird's nest in my hair if it could be avoided.

When my lungs seized on an I-can-do-this deep-breath attempt, she settled her hand on my arm. "You'll be fine."

My heart was racing. "Is it him?" I whispered.

She smiled. "Just go."

I didn't, though. I was terrified.

Excited.

A million other things that I could hardly name because they flew at me so fast.

"Charlotte," she said gently.

I pinched my eyes shut. "I'm so scared," I whispered. "What if he's not here for . . ." My voice trailed off, and I pressed my hand against my chest.

Carefully, my aunt pulled my hand away from where it was keeping my heart contained, and she pressed it between her own. "You won't know unless you *go*."

I sucked in a deep breath and nodded.

My feet felt wedged in concrete blocks as I pushed open the door. My heart catapulted from head to toe and back again.

But still . . . I had to fight the urge to run toward the house. I kept my steps measured, let my heart rate settle into something a bit calmer.

Yeah right.

Outside the front door, I paused before turning the knob. But the pause was short because, no matter what happened, I was ready.

No matter what happened in the next few minutes, I could handle it.

It was quiet when I opened the door. I glanced around but didn't see him right away.

The lights were on in the house, the beautiful curve of the staircase railing gleaming underneath the gorgeous light fixture we'd installed. The stained floor was a warm, golden tone, and the wallpaper stretched all the way up to the top of the two-story entryway.

But it was when I registered something new that I blinked.

Against the wall was the console table from the carriage house. It was too small—the proportions weren't right for the space—but while I stared at the yellow ceramic bowl that held our car keys, my heart thrummed dangerously fast.

I swallowed roughly, but it was almost impossible around the giant knot of emotion lodged in the back of my throat.

On the table was a laptop with a bright green Post-it stuck to the screen. *Press Play*, it said.

Biting down on my lip, I scrolled on the mouse pad until the computer flickered to life. I moved the Post-it to the table, careful not to smudge his neat block handwriting.

When I shifted my attention back to the computer, leaning in slightly to read the screen, a shaky hand covered my mouth as I fought a smile.

My favorite love story

Burke Barrett (with special advisers Ford and Felicia Barrett-King)

Underneath the too-small font was a small stick-figure couple with a heart over their heads.

The next slide appeared with a shockingly loud transition noise, like the whooshing of air, and I exhaled a laugh.

This slide held a picture from my social media, copied and pasted right smack dab in the middle and far too large. My name wasn't centered, and underneath it was a small drawing of handcuffs.

The next slide was a picture of the Campbell House when we'd started, something that Daphne must have taken. I was pointing at something on the roof; Burke had his hands on his hips and a terribly grumpy expression on his face.

Slide after slide of pictures from the last few months. And with each one, as I stared at his face, I saw what Daphne had talked about.

The way he looked at me.

We don't make much sense, the next slide said. We're about as different as two people can be.

There was another shocking whoosh, and my eyes watered at the next slide.

I don't know why you trusted me. But I'll work for the rest of my life to earn it. Every single day.

A tear slid down my cheek when the next one appeared.

I will mess up sometimes. I've already messed up.

Despite all the things I've done wrong, all the ways I need to make amends, I know that the thing I do best is the way I love you.

Underneath that was a picture from the Fourth of July, one I hadn't seen yet. We were sitting shoulder to shoulder on the blanket. I was laughing, and Burke was looking down at me, his expression overflowing with tenderness.

And love.

A sob got stuck in my chest, and I wanted to dig it out when I registered the weight of all the ways I'd missed him.

Another whoosh, and I closed my eyes when I read the next line.

I'm right here, Charlotte. Turn around.

He was in the middle of the room. He'd come in quietly while my focus was elsewhere. His eyes were clear, his face expectant and full of hope.

"Hi," he whispered. His eyes drank me in—head to toe—and I felt it everywhere.

Slowly, I sucked in a breath, trying to fill my lungs when my knees felt a little weak. "I'm surprised to see you here," I said.

Burke swallowed, gave a brief nod. "I'm so sorry for what I said to you when I left." He took a small step closer. "It was wrong. And cruel."

The bridge of my nose tingled, and I clenched my jaw to stem the tears that threatened to fall. "It was."

"I thought . . ." He stopped, shaking his head. "I thought I was doing the right thing. Thought if I left, and didn't complicate things, you'd be better off. I didn't know how to do any of this, and it seemed easier to run instead of tell you how much it all scared me."

“I kinda pieced that together.” I swallowed. “After you left.”

He breathed out a laugh, his lips curving into an endearing half smile. “That doesn’t surprise me.”

My feet and hands tingled because the desire to move closer was so strong, but I held steady right where I was. “We all protect our hearts in different ways, Burke. But if the way you protect yours is to lash out when you can’t admit what you want, that’s not something I’d like to be a part of.”

His eyes seared into mine. “I will never do that again.”

Tingling nose.

Burning eyes.

And my heart—it was screaming his name.

But still, something held me back.

“What changed? You were gone for weeks, and you didn’t say a word.” I looked around the entryway. “What does this mean?”

His chest expanded on a deep inhale, and he took another step closer. Close enough that he could’ve reached out. I could’ve too.

“I had to make peace with a few things,” he admitted. “It wasn’t easy. And I might not be done with it—I might be working on it for the rest of my life—but I’d rather do it with you.” His face was so heartbreakingly earnest, so determined. “I don’t deserve your forgiveness, Charlotte, I know that.”

A tear slid down my cheek. “No one deserves forgiveness, Burke. That’s why it matters so much. None of us deserve grace for our mistakes, but if you love someone”—my voice trembled—“you give it anyway.”

His shoulders slumped in relief. He took another step.

“Make a home with me here, Charlotte,” he said simply. “Make a life with me. All this time, nothing felt right, and nothing else has given me a purpose or made me feel like I belonged. Because it wasn’t a place I was missing. It was you.”

My stomach trembled, like I was standing on the edge of a tightrope. Nothing below me. Nothing to hold on to.

What I wanted to do was leap into his arms, let his mouth lock into place over mine. I wanted him to catch me because I was nervous to leap.

He saw all of it in my face. And what I saw in his was just exactly how much this meant to him.

How much *I* meant to him.

“Don’t be scared,” he whispered.

“You’re the first thing I’ve ever lost that I wasn’t sure I could live

without,” I admitted, tears coursing down my face. “Do you know how terrifying that is?”

Burke took the final step. He moved to where I was, coming closer when I wasn’t sure I could, because all along he’d been the one to run when it got to be too much.

But he wasn’t running anymore. And I needed to see that.

“Yes, I do.” He settled his nose against my hair and breathed. “It’s how I felt, even before we left the hotel.”

He slid his hands up my arms, grazing his lips over my forehead while I cried quiet tears.

“We both need some fixing, Burke.” My hand spread over his chest, and when I looked up into his face, he exhaled quietly. His thumb brushed underneath my eye, wiping at my tears so gently. “But I’d rather do that together, wouldn’t you?”

My hands clutched at his shirt as my soul took its first deep breath in weeks. His frame shook as he pulled me into his arms and inhaled deeply at the crown of my head.

“Yes, Charlotte, that’s exactly what I want.”

We stood there, holding each other, for a long, soul-sighing moment.

“I still have my job,” I said, my voice thick and full. “I leave in a couple of weeks.”

His hands glided up the length of my spine. “And I will come see you every weekend,” he promised. “We’ll meet in the middle sometimes. Get a room at an inn that’ll serve horrible tea and tiny sandwiches, and we’ll have sex in a bed that will probably break.”

I exhaled a laugh. I could see it. It was the kind of life that I’d never even thought to imagine for myself.

We could have it all. His dream and mine.

Some new version of both—something better, something sweeter.

“You didn’t even ask which job I took,” I said quietly.

His gaze was direct when he answered. “It doesn’t matter. Our life can look however we want it to.”

It could.

We’d make it the perfect life for us, anchored in this home that we both loved so much.

I smiled, tracing the bottom edge of *his* smile with my pointer finger. “I took the job on the east side of the state.”



His smile deepened. “Did you?”

I nodded. “They showed me the house and”—I shrugged—“I fell in love.”

Burke laughed. “Let me guess—little couches, ugly lamps, terrible rugs.”

I smacked his chest.

It was the gleam of laughter, the spark of relief in his eyes, that had my gaze locking on his mouth.

“Can I kiss you now?” he asked in a husky voice, coming closer and closer until my heart trembled. “I owe you thousands.” He slid his lips over mine. A touch. A sweet taste. “Millions.”

I pushed up on the balls of my feet, curling my hands behind his neck. His mouth descended over mine with a groan, his arms tight around my back, clutching me to his chest like he’d never, ever let me go.

Forgiveness was sweet when it was asked for and given freely.

He kissed me deeply. He kissed me like he was drowning in all the things we made each other feel.

I couldn’t believe we were there.

I couldn’t believe we’d made it through.

The kiss was everything I’d wanted from him—a bold declaration, a fearless acknowledgment about our future.

And he’d started it off with a PowerPoint. My heart was about to explode in a messy burst of happiness.

I broke away and stared up into his face. “Wait. How did you know when to come into the room?”

Burke grinned. “I counted the whooshes.”

I laughed.

“Felicia told me you’d be very impressed,” he murmured, dropping sweet kisses along my cheekbone and the tip of my nose.

“I was,” I said feelingly. “I wasn’t aware anyone used that after the late ’90s, but you have managed, yet again, to surprise me.”

He grinned. “I didn’t know how to get rid of anything once they added shit to the slides.”

I was laughing again when he kissed me, and the sound morphed into a relieved moan when his tongue slid over mine.

I broke away again. “If we’re living here, does that mean I get my little couches back?”

He kissed me, rubbing his nose along mine before he answered.  
“Not a chance.”

# Chapter Thirty-Six

## BURKE

Charlotte made herself a little nest in our bed of blankets on the floor of the primary bedroom, and she curled up next to me while she listened to me talk.

With her chin resting on my bare chest and my hand stroking up and down her naked back, we talked until my throat was sore.

We traded stories of our time apart. Together, we dug into pieces of our past, something we'd never done.

I told her about all the albums, and watching all the film, trying to unearth some hidden truth about why I acted the way I did.

I told her about my freakout in front of the house when we got back, and her eyes filled with tears.

I told her about the letter and how I hadn't read it yet.

She pressed a kiss onto the skin above my heart. "There's no rule book for grief. I think you should read it whenever feels right."

Wedging a hand behind my head, I rose up just enough to give her a lingering kiss. Then I tilted my head toward my suitcase, set against the wall. "It's in there."

She blew out a breath. "Do you want some privacy?"

"Privacy?" I growled under my breath. I rolled to my side and tugged her into my arms. She pushed her legs in between mine as we kissed again. "Woman, I'm not letting you out of my sight for days."

She laughed against my mouth. "Good."

"I'm ready to read it," I told her. "I wanted to wait until you were with me."

The amazing thing about Charlotte's eyes was how clearly I could see her heart in them. She was unbearably touched.

"I made peace with the fact that Chris trusted me with this place. So did

Amie. And no matter what that letter says, it doesn't change that."

"And if they want you to sell it? Set the money aside for Mira?" she asked.

My chest expanded on a deep breath. "Then we'll find another place to live."

"Simple as that?"

I looked around the bedroom, at the circular window in the peak of the ceiling. Where we were lying on the floor was where I had imagined the four-poster bed. But we could create that feeling anywhere, if we needed to. "You're my home, Charlotte." I kissed her softly, brushing my tongue over hers. "Simple as that."

Her eyes shifted. Now she was unbearably turned on. I skated my hand over her hip, the curve of her backside. "Not now. Get that look off your face."

She emitted a soft laugh. "I can't help it."

"Will you get the letter from the front of my suitcase?"

Charlotte hummed. "Knee bothering you?"

"No," I said against her lips. "I just want to watch you walk naked across the room."

She pinched my stomach, and I laughed while she tossed the blankets off, strode shamelessly to my suitcase and back.

I propped my head on my hands and watched. She rolled her eyes as she tossed the letter onto my chest.

I sat up, tugging the quilt over my legs. We scooted back until we sat propped up against the wall. Charlotte wound her fingers through mine, bringing my hand to her lips for a sweet kiss.

The edges of the envelope were worn from hours of handling it. I hadn't been able to bring myself to break open the seal.

"I wish I could've known him better," she whispered.

I kissed the top of her head when she rested it on my shoulder. "Me too."

With careful tugs, I opened the envelope. The sight of the blue ink had my chest feeling tight. I blew out a slow breath.

Burke,

I hope you don't read this letter for another fifty years. I hope I'm old and cranky and I've lost all my hair, dying

peacefully in my sleep, surrounded by the people I love.

Amie told me I should write this in case that doesn't happen, and because my wife is a hell of a lot smarter than I am, I decided it would be wise to listen to her. You were the guy who was there for me when I didn't have anyone else. We both know, even though we don't talk about it much, how fucking awful it is to lose the people around you. And when I met you, I knew I had a brother for the rest of my life.

That's how it was for Amie too, something we've always had in common. To find family and know how important it is to keep those people around you—blood or no blood.

When I told Amie I wanted to buy my grandparents' house someday, bring it back to the way it was when they lived there, she never hesitated. Never looked at me like I was crazy, even though our life is busy enough.

It was important to me, so it was worth whatever we needed to do.

And after Mira was born, we knew we had to put plans in place in case something happened to one or, God forbid, both of us.

This house is a piece of my life. It's a part of who I am.

Amie and I agreed that whoever gets the Campbell House should be someone who deserves a home—a place where they can take care of a family and fill it with love. Someone who will treat it with the same care that we would. It didn't take us long to come to an agreement.

We knew, without question, that person is you.

You've always taken care of everyone else in your life. That's what makes you a good man, Burke. But what will make you happy is finding the people, the place, that will take care of you right back. I hope you've found something like that by the time you read this.

It's always been my biggest wish for you.

But if you haven't, then let this house be a place to

bring you some of that happiness.

If it comes to you in a year, or thirty, I hope you know that it's something given because we love you.

Maybe you'll have a wife and ten kids when you read this. Fill the rooms. Make a mess. Keep it loud.

It's all I've ever wanted for that place. To be filled with family, filled with people I love.

I trust you with that piece of my story, and hope it's an important part of yours.

I love you. I hope you know that.

Chris

With my arm around her shoulder, Charlotte curled herself against my chest, sniffing quietly. My face was wet, and my heart squeezed painfully while I digested just how well he'd known me. And how easily he saw what I needed.

"Damn it, Chris," I whispered in a broken voice. "You couldn't have put a stamp on that and mailed it, like, a year ago?"

Charlotte laughed a watery laugh. She sat up, brushing at the moisture on my cheeks. "Are you okay?"

I nodded, tucking a few stray hairs behind her ear. I pulled her close, and she slid her legs over my lap so I could embrace her fully. I buried my face into her neck and breathed deep.

"I'm good," I told her. And I was.

Pulling back so I could stare down into her face, I still wasn't sure how to separate the sad tug of grief, the bittersweet pain of loss, and the overwhelming love for her.

But that was part of what I had to learn.

They were all there. They were all true. One didn't erase the other, and my love for her didn't lessen how much I'd miss him.

I kissed Charlotte, my hand sliding across her cheek to settle in the soft strands of her hair. Anchored against her, it was a cool sweep of gratitude that I felt next. Felt biggest of all.

We sat there for a few more minutes, trading sweet, slow kisses. Her hands coasted over my back and chest.

Charlotte shifted down farther, tucking her face against a pillow. "My ass is falling asleep."

I smiled, massaging the area in question with greedy hands. Her cheekbones blushed pink, and she bit down on her bottom lip when my fingers started wandering.

“Can we move the furniture in tomorrow?” she asked. “A bed would be so nice, wouldn’t it?”

Humming against her skin, I pulled us back down into the pile of blankets, tugging them up and over us so that we were cocooned away from the light. “Are you kidding? I’ll need to go get one of those mattresses from the carriage house in about fifteen minutes.”

As I nibbled down the slope of her shoulder, my hands wandering over all the curves I’d missed so much, she emitted a breathy laugh. “Only fifteen minutes?”

She slid her legs up on either side of my waist, breaking off in a moan when I rocked my hips between her legs, a slow tease even though we’d already had one fast and furious round on the floor.

I sucked on the edge of her jaw while she arched her back and tried to pull me into her body.

“Did I tell you about the dream I had?” I whispered.

“No.” Her hands clutched at my backside, tugging me ineffectually. “This fifteen minutes would be so much more fun if you just . . . *Please*, Burke.”

Against her mouth, I laughed, nipping at her bottom lip, teasing her tongue with mine.

Only when I started whispering pieces of my dream against the delicate shell of her ear did she relax, did she thread her hands through my hair and move with the slow, rolling curl of my body over hers.

I told her about the bed under the window, sliding forward inch by inch until my body was tight against hers and I could swallow her sweet sigh of relief.

I told her about the bookshelves and the chair and my hands over her body—full with a child, something we’d never discussed, never even hinted that we might want, and she kissed me furiously.

I told her about all those things my head and my heart kept showing me—the future of love and family and us—and she seized around me with a cry.

I followed her there—it was bright and hot and so acutely good that it stole my breath for just a moment.

We tugged on some clothes to move the queen-size mattress from the

blue bedroom in the carriage house. We ate cold pizza in the big kitchen, and when I told her I was ready for bed, she held out her hand with a smile. Instead of taking it, I swept her up in my arms, swallowing her laugh with a deep kiss as I carried her up the stairs.

“Admit it,” she said, “you wanted to do this the first day you saw me here.”

As we passed the place where one spindle was only slightly different from the rest, I grinned and kissed her again, my heart full of something that felt a lot like peace.



# Epilogue

BURKE

## *Three months later*

“I think you planned this for your own selfish purposes,” I whispered into Charlotte’s ear.

She settled her arms over mine where they wrapped around her waist, and we watched the twins run around the backyard. Even though it was December, we were experiencing a warm front, and the early snow had melted, leaving trampled grass and bare trees as their playground. “Would I do that?”

“Find my sister the perfect house when she decided to move here, just down the road from ours—minutes away from two beaches—and it happens to be a 1900s Colonial that you can treat as your personal pet project?” I nipped at her earlobe. “Yes.”

She laughed when I buried my head in her neck and kissed her warm, clean skin.

From the kitchen, Daphne said something that had Tansy laughing loudly. They did that a lot. Once Tansy packed up the kids, got their house on the market, and made the twenty-hour drive up to Michigan, it didn’t take long to realize that those two were trouble together.

“He didn’t,” my sister gasped.

Daphne nodded. “He sure did. First time we met, if you can believe it.”

Tansy clutched her stomach, struggling to breathe because she was laughing so hard.

“I don’t think I want to know,” I said.

“I wouldn’t if I were you.” She turned her face, mouth seeking mine for a soft kiss. “She told me this story when I was seventeen, and I swear, it

traumatized me.”

My smile was easy, as was the case most days.

Had been that way since Charlotte forgave me and we moved into the Campbell House together.

The first few months of her new job, we traded off weekends, but lately, she’d decided to just come back every week.

She spent Monday through Thursday outside Detroit at her job with William but drove back to Traverse City on Thursday afternoons so she could be home in time for dinner. Once my sister and the kids moved into town, Charlotte said she had way too much time to make up with my family and didn’t want us both gone on the weekends.

Family dinners, as it turned out, were now the very best kind of chaos that either of us could imagine.

Richard was teaching Ford how to bake bread. Daphne was giving Felicia tips on her artwork. Tansy, despite the massive shift in weather, was in heaven.

Somehow, out of the remnants we both had in our lives, we’d built a loud, crazy, amazing family.

“Charlotte,” Felicia yelled. She was hanging upside down from a tree branch, her brown hair almost brushing the grass. “Look what Richard taught me to do.”

“Show me,” Charlotte called back.

Richard stood back, giving my niece an encouraging nod. She flipped her legs around, landing neatly on the ground, arms raised.

She beamed at the yells and whistles that her little audience sent her way. Then she ran to Richard, and he swung her up in his arms for a hug. From the woods in the backyard, Ford emerged with a leaf stuck in his hair and a giant stick in his hands.

“My turn,” he shouted, tossing the stick and scrambling up the tree trunk.

Tansy caught my eye, and she winked. I smiled.

I motioned toward the door.

She glanced over. “You going?”

I nodded. “We have a few things to do yet.”

Tansy hugged Charlotte first, then me, giving me a smacking kiss on the cheek. “Thanks for coming back here, brother. I kinda like these people.”

I kissed the top of her head. “Me too,” I murmured.

Daphne and Richard decided to order pizza for Tansy and the kids, so we said our goodbyes and told them we'd see them tomorrow.

By the time we got back to our place, Charlotte was watching me through heavy-lidded eyes. Our hands were intertwined, and I lifted them up to my mouth, kissing the skin on her knuckles.

As the car turned down the long driveway, I stared up at the tunnel of trees and said a small little prayer of thanks.

I wasn't sure how any of this had come about. I couldn't think about it too hard—what I had to lose in order to find this kind of happiness. What Charlotte had to lose too. All I knew was that as long as my heart beat in my chest—this was it for me.

This was my dream.

To be able to build a future with the best person I'd ever met, a future where everyone I loved was happy and safe and taken care of. It was more than any man could ask for.

I parked on the long roundabout we'd added after the house was complete, and Charlotte waited for me by the front of the car, reaching her hand out for me when I got close.

"We need to check those lights once it's dark," she said.

"If you think we need any more, then your ass can climb up on the ladder and do it."

She laughed. "You would never let me do it. I saw you redo the lights on the bush next to the landing last week."

My neck felt hot. "The lines of the lights didn't match the shrubs on the other side."

When she arched her brows knowingly, I smacked her ass as she preceded me up the front steps. Charlotte's laughter echoed in the entryway when we walked into the house.

The door closed behind me. I set my keys and wallet in the yellow bowl by the door and toed off my shoes. She kicked off her boots, and I bent down to line them up.

She grinned.

I leaned down, brushing a soft kiss over her waiting mouth. Charlotte hummed happily, her tongue lightly grazing mine.

"Should we order pizza too?" she asked.

"Then why didn't we stay and eat with them?"

She walked backward, her hands tucked into the waistband of my pants.

Her eyes glittered. “You know why.”

With a groan, I followed her as she pulled me through the entry into the family room. “If you make me run through this one more time,” I warned.

She bit down on her bottom lip, stifling her laughter. “I already caught you testing it again this morning.”

Now my neck really *did* get hot. “You did?”

Charlotte nodded.

I cupped her face in my hands and planted a searing kiss on her lips. “One more time, but you have to order the pizza first because I’m starving.” I kissed her again. “And if you make me wait too long, I’ll have to eat you for dinner.”

Her body slumped against mine. “That’s not much of a threat,” she said weakly.

I held myself still as she left the room to find her phone and call the restaurant. The track started behind the couch, and if everything remained untouched, then I should be fine. I’d checked it that morning just as she left to help Tansy unpack her kitchen.

My heart thumped dangerously fast, but it was all excitement. No nerves.

I could hear her on the phone, and I wiped my palms down the fronts of my thighs before walking closer to her.

She was standing in front of the biggest tree in our house, the twelve-foot monstrosity that had taken almost every last shred of my sanity as we tried to decorate it for the event tomorrow. I didn’t know this until Charlotte, but when you had a house with multiple Christmas trees, you also needed multiple themes.

The one in the family room was covered in red-and-green lights, as well as white and red and green ornaments that we’d pulled from her own family storage.

The tree in the dining room was silver and gold, with sparkling white lights and tinsel hanging from the ends of the branches. That, if nothing else, was the ultimate display of my love for her—that I’d hung tinsel from every fucking branch of that tree.

We had a tree in the carriage house because Tansy and the kids had stayed there until they closed on their house.

We had a tree in our bedroom.

I’d asked her once why we didn’t put trees in all the bathrooms too, but

she didn't think I was very funny.

As I stood back and watched her, though, I couldn't deny that there was something magical in the air when the house looked like this.

Charlotte confirmed our dinner order, adjusting one of the bows that she'd tied onto the branches. That tree was covered in white lights and antique crystal ornaments and dark-green velvet bows.

When I asked her how much the vintage ornaments cost, she'd distracted me with bathroom-counter sex, and I had a feeling I didn't want to know the answer anyway.

The only lights in the entryway were from the tree, and when she ended the call, she didn't pull her gaze away from the festive sight right away.

I pushed my hand into my pocket and toyed with the edge of what had been hiding in there all afternoon. In the other hand was the remote for the train.

When I pressed the "Power" button, the sound of the engine whirred to life in the room behind me.

Charlotte smiled at me over her shoulder.

Approaching behind her, I slid my hands over her hips, settling them on her stomach while I laid my chin on her shoulder.

"Tree looks good," I told her. "Everyone will love it."

She coasted her hands over mine, letting our fingers intertwine. "I'm nervous," she admitted.

"How come?"

Charlotte looked up at the top of the tree, her mom's gold-winged angel looking down with a beatific smile. "It's a good scary, you know? Finally doing the thing you've dreamed of for so long."

We'd open our doors the next day for the whole community. We had no idea how many people would show up, or if it would just be our family. But we had enough hot chocolate to serve hundreds, and Richard had been baking cookies with the kids for days.

"Everyone will love it," I told her, kissing her cheek softly while she closed her eyes. "And if they don't, they can get bent."

Charlotte chuckled. "I think I'll do the greeting at the door tomorrow, if you don't mind."

The train emitted a low whistling sound, and we both turned to watch it come around the corner into the entryway. It had taken us weeks to find something close to what she remembered. And I'd spent days setting it up

throughout the house to make sure everything worked the way it was supposed to.

The first time she watched it go through the house—with all the trees up and holiday music playing in the background—she cried.

That’s when I knew how I needed to do this. The *only* way I could do this.

As the main engine came into sight, I let out a quick sigh of relief when I saw the box was still strapped to the front.

“What is that?” Charlotte asked.

The train curved around the side of the stairs, looping under the Christmas tree, ready to start the journey again, when I hit the button to bring it to a stop.

Charlotte’s body stilled, her eyes whipping to mine. “Is that a . . .”

She pulled out of my arms and crouched down to gently tug at the white ribbon that held the box in place.

It was an antique velvet box with a small gold clasp.

While she straightened, the box in her trembling hand, I got down on one knee behind her.

Charlotte turned, her mouth covered with her fingers and her eyes brimming with tears. Her gaze locked on mine for a moment, and I smiled.

A tear slid down her cheek when she plucked at the clasp, but her mouth fell open when she found the box empty.

I pulled my hand out of my pocket, the vintage ring glinting softly in the light from the tree behind her.

“Oh, you ass,” she gasped. “You should feel my heart right now.”

I smiled. “I didn’t want you to find it and do some peeking,” I told her.

Carefully, I slid my hand under hers and brought her hand to my mouth for a quick kiss against her knuckles. Then I looked back up into her face.

“I could’ve done this a million different ways. I’ve thought over all of them. Something big and flashy, something in front of all the people we love. But I wanted to ask you to be my wife in the place you first showed me your heart. It’s the most important gift I’ve ever been given”—I paused and let out an unsteady breath—“and if you’ll let me, I’ll take care of it for the rest of my life.”

She exhaled a tiny sob.

“Marry me, Charlotte,” I whispered.

Charlotte dropped to her knees and wound her arms around my neck.

Her mouth found mine with a desperate whimper, and I held her as close as I could, as tight as I could manage.

“Yes,” she said against my lips. “Yes, yes, yes.”

Sliding the ring onto her finger and kissing her again under the light of the tree, I couldn’t help but think about how the past wove its way into our present, into the future, in a way we couldn’t always plan for.

For me and Charlotte, it was the past that gave us all the very best parts of our future.

And I couldn’t wait to start it.

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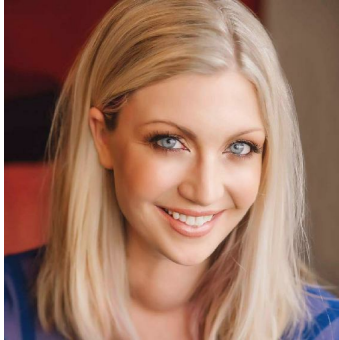
To Kelli Collins, who is the most capable person I can imagine trusting my stories with.

*For every house is built by someone, but God is the builder of everything.*

*—Hebrews 3:4 (New International Version)*



# ABOUT THE AUTHOR



*Photo © 2018 Perrywinkle Photography*

Karla Sorensen is the Amazon Top Ten bestselling author of numerous series, including the Ward Sisters, the Washington Wolves, the Bachelors of the Ridge, and Three Little Words. When she's not devouring Dramione fanfic or avoiding the laundry, you can find her watching football (British and American) or HGTV or listening to Enneagram podcasts so she can psychoanalyze everyone in her life, in no particular order of importance. With a degree in advertising and public relations from Grand Valley State University, she made her living in senior health care prior to writing full-time, and never reads or writes anything without a happily ever after. Karla lives in Michigan with her husband, two boys, and a big shaggy rescue dog named Bear. For more information visit [www.karlasorensen.com](http://www.karlasorensen.com).

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