

Chrysalis

R I E A N D E R S

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Chapter 1

“Charlotte! Charlotte, are you even paying attention?”

The entourage of people around the large cherrywood conference table stared at me, their eyes wide with confusion. They looked a bit concerned and slightly embarrassed for me.

My mind had definitely wandered. What had I been thinking about?

With its plush carpet, cream-colored walls, and elegantly displayed contemporary art, the forty-story building’s eighth-floor executive conference room looked out toward the Bayou—which was muddy and stagnant. The dandelion-sculptured fountain and water sparkling in the unusually perfect Houston spring day had entranced me.

Rapidly tapping the top of my pen against the soft laptop mat in front of me, I dug deep (and dug fast) for remnants of the conversation that had taken place before I zoned out. The quick staccato of the clicking brought me back to the present, and I responded confidently.

“I’m sorry, Richard. Yes, I agree with the target demographic, and I feel confident that the campaign will bring in the sales numbers we’re looking for.”

His response was a slow and agreeable drawl, but his look was still doubtful. “Okay, then.”

He stood, grabbed his laptop and phone, and headed out of the conference room, saying over his shoulder as he left, “Charlotte, can I see you in my office?”

Some of my colleagues turned to watch me leave, shrinking down a little in their chairs. Some of them actually avoided eye contact. I could feel them thinking, *She’s in way over her head.*

I stood, gathered my belongings, adjusted my periwinkle blue skirt, and then buttoned its matching suit jacket. My expensive high heels dug into the carpet as I left the conference room and followed behind my boss.

His gait was fast. Slowing my pace, I took the time to prepare myself for this conversation.

“Shut the door behind you, Charlotte,” he said as he sat down behind his desk. He leaned back in his chair, rested his clasped hands across his belly, and waited until I sat down in front of him.

“What’s going on, Charlotte? Are you okay?” His concern was expectedly genuine, different from the tone he had previously used in the conference room. He had mentored me up through this company—which offered financial services,

specifically retirement planning—for the past few years. I was ashamed of my distracted behavior.

My career with the company had started right out of college, and I'd been promoted steadily and predictably over the years. Recently, I became vice president of sales; subsequently, I became disillusioned with my life's path.

Apparently, if this little chat was any indication, Richard had begun to sense my restlessness. The fact that I was daydreaming during our Monday morning executive briefing might have also given it away.

"I'm fine, Richard. I'm a little out of sorts today, but I'm totally on point. I promise."

"You do know that you deserved your promotion. You earned this position." His eyes were kind and soft, and his tone was gentle.

My shoulders sagged. I forced myself to sit up straighter.

Don't show weakness, I thought.

Even if I didn't understand what was happening to me, I didn't want Richard to have any doubts.

"I know, Richard. You picked the right person." Fake it 'til you make it, I guess.

After a thoughtful pause, he changed topics and moved on to something more personal. "Are you looking forward to your party Saturday night?"

My fiancé, Mark, was hosting an engagement party Saturday night to celebrate my promotion. And, of course, to show off our beautiful new home just off Kirby Avenue. The house had a pool and the perfect sized yard for a party tent.

We'd recently purchased an 8,000-square-foot classic Georgian home, and oddly, the size made me feel suffocated. Mark had pressured me into buying it, even though I'd insisted I wanted to wait until we were married. But it was what he wanted for our future, and so I went along with his plan. Mark was a stockbroker, and good impressions meant everything to him. Mercedes, check. Large impressive home, check. Beautiful wife, check. (Not to brag.)

Pasting a practiced smile on my face, I made sure it reached my eyes and responded, "Oh, yes! Mark has found the most amazing caterer and a highly recommended string quartet to play. It should be lovely. You are coming, aren't you?"

"Wouldn't miss it!" He leaned back in his chair again, seemingly satisfied that I was going to get back to normal.

“If there’s nothing else...” I started to stand. “I want to make sure I get my forecasts for the next quarter completed before the end of the day. You know how the Accounting department can be.”

My attempt at levity was well received.

“I’m here for you if you need me, Charlotte. I hope you know that.”

I nodded at him, turned around, and shut his door quietly behind me.

Back in my corner office, I removed my jacket and draped it on the hanger on the back of my door.

After shutting the door, I slipped off my shoes and went to stand at the window. My polished appearance reflected in the glass, and I grimaced at the image staring back. The outer shell was classically pretty, but inside I felt empty. My dark brown hair fell to my shoulders in an asymmetrical cut, meticulously flat-ironed straight. My eyebrows were dark and groomed, framing my dark blue eyes.

I stared vacantly out the window, past my reflection, and longed to rip off this constricting suit and burn it in the nearest trash can. The chains of corporate America were smothering me, and I wasn’t sure how much longer I could do this. I wished I could pinpoint the exact moment I became so disillusioned, but I couldn’t. The feelings crept up on me until one day—most likely the day of my promotion—I just stopped being happy.

Out the window and across the street, in a strip mall of shops, was a dance studio I’d been going to—a pole dancing studio.

Earlier this year, while working late on the mundane task of annual budget activities, Richard had sent me across the street to a local Irish bar to pick up dinner. The pole dancing studio was just around the corner, and the neon red letters and heart on the marquis had caught my attention.

A few days after that budget meeting, I’d stopped in on my way home and was instantly fascinated with the studio. The lobby was small; it had thick, white carpet, white leather couches, and a mirrored wall. A rack of short, short shorts, and a variety of tanks and sleeveless T-shirts stood up against a wall. Below the shirts sat a shelf of high-heeled platform shoes for sale. The shoes were hot pink and glittered gold, red vinyl and clear plastic. I had touched them (fascinated) as I waited to be helped.

The dark-haired receptionist had addressed me, jolting me from my daydreams.

“Hi, can I help you?” She’d placed the phone back on the receiver as she stood to greet me. I’d stared as she’d unfolded herself from the chair and continued to rise. (She was so tall.)

“Um, yes, maybe, I don’t know.” I’d laughed at myself and bit the corner of my bottom lip. This was not a world I was familiar with—but it called to me—and I’d hoped she could ease me into it.

“First time?”

I had smiled at her. “Obvious, is it?”

Her eyes had roved down my pantsuit and then back up. She’d shrugged and giggled, crinkling up her nose. “Kind of.”

Her youthful laugh had put me at ease, and I’d relaxed.

“Are you interested in classes?”

“I don’t know. Maybe?”

She’d reached for a tri-fold brochure and slid it across the desk. Unfolding it, and pointing to a schedule, she’d walked me through the types of classes and cost. I’d glanced at her figure—and her lack of clothing—as she’d talked, and then I’d sucked in my abs a bit.

“You can sign up for ten classes, or fifty, or you can get a membership and come as often as you want to.”

“Maybe I’ll just start with ten.”

Her face had broken into a huge grin. “Great! Do you want to see the studio?”

“Sure!”

As she’d stepped out from behind the desk, I’d glanced down at her feet, noticing that she wore six-inch platforms, leg warmers, and a pair of shorts like the ones on the rack. I’d tried not to gawk, but her body was incredible. While I wasn’t on the heavy side, I had gone a little soft in the past few years—my size twelve suits had gotten a little snug.

“Now, you have to take off your shoes when you go into the studio; only bare feet are allowed.” She’d lifted one foot, taken off her shoe, and done the same with the other.

I’d slipped off my heels, placed them on a silver shoe rack, and waited for her to open the door. She’d smiled at me patiently, raised her eyebrows, and asked silkily (as if she was unveiling the most delicious secret in the world), “Ready?”

I had nodded at her and followed behind as she opened the door to what appeared to be a ballet studio—but it wasn’t. Gleaming gold poles stood floor-to-ceiling, shiny and flawless. The polished wood floors shined up at me, and the red walls at either end gave the room a sultry vibe.

She'd flipped a light switch, and a soft glow had shone from the canister lights recessed into the ceiling. One wall was floor-to-ceiling mirrors; the other was a room separator that opened to the second studio, if needed.

The room had captivated me. I was charmed by the secrets I knew it held. The room had been quiet and empty, and I'd felt the pull to touch one of the poles. Reaching out, I'd touched it gently and then gripped it with my hand.

Looking over my shoulder at the woman, I'd said, "What's your name?" She'd smiled at me like she knew the pole goddesses had bitten me. "I'm Erin."

"Hi, Erin, I'm Charlotte. You can call me Charlie."

"Hi, Charlotte. That's a pretty name. I think I'll call you that. Should I sign you up for classes?" She'd had a cheeky grin on her face.

That had been months ago. I'd gotten stronger and leaner since then. My abs were now tighter, my thighs more muscular, and my size ten skirts had replaced my twelves.

I looked down at the studio sign from my office window, and a flicker of excitement and joy washed over me. What time were classes today?

I looked at the pink bag under my desk, sat down, and then pulled up the studio website on my phone.

There were two classes tonight: one at 5:00 p.m., and the other at 6:00 p.m. I usually went on Tuesday and Thursday nights, but tonight, I needed it.

The clock on the wall of my office indicated it wasn't even lunchtime. Sighing heavily, I glanced back at the site. There was a noon class. Could I make a noon class? Adrenaline rushed through my body at the thought of dancing off the morning's stressful meeting.

I hurriedly slipped my shoes back on, grabbed my bag from under my desk, and my purse from the drawer.

Hitching my purse over my shoulder, I ran out of my office. My assistant was typing away at her desk, and I spoke in a clipped tone on my way out.

"Peggy, I need to run an errand. I should be back by 2:00 p.m."

Peggy looked like a Peggy, and she had been with me for years. She stopped typing, glanced at my bag, and then back at me. "And what should I tell Accounting?"

I stopped, paused long enough to pull myself back into the moment, and then looked directly at her. Her eyes were knowing, and I felt myself slipping farther from my position. “Tell them I had to taste cake, and I’ll have the numbers uploaded by close of business.”

“Should I update them for you?” She smiled at me.

“I can do it, Peggy. It won’t take me long.”

We continued to look at each other a beat longer—a standoff of wills—until I smiled back at her. “I have to go.”

She shook her head, and then she went back to typing. “Be careful.”

I left the elegant office’s hallway and moved toward the elevator, wagging my fingers at her. The glass office doors shut behind me, and I stepped into the elevator, my smile growing the closer I got to the exit.

Chapter 2

“Hey, Erin, I thought I would take a noon class today. Can you sign me in?” Since the studio was so close to my office, I arrived with time to change and have a quick chat with Erin.

She was standing behind the desk, focused on the computer screen in front of her, and jiggling a pen between her fingers. “Sure, Charlotte. Give me a minute, and I’ll get you taken care of.”

Her clipped tone was unlike the usually bubbly girl I loved to visit. I briefly considered heading back to my office.

Leaning over the counter, I whispered, “Are you okay? Is this a bad time?”

She looked past my shoulder, toward the studio, and then whispered back, “Our owner is in town, and he’s super grumpy today. He’s leaving this afternoon, and he wanted me to pull some promotion material together for an upcoming competition. I’m a little stressed out.”

“There’s a competition?” My voice rose. I stood up straight and then smiled.

Her jaw dropped. “Seriously, Charlotte? That’s what you got out of my answer?”

I put my right hand on the counter in consolation and used my left hand to shift my bag up higher on my shoulder. “Oh, my goodness, Erin. I’m sorry. I just didn’t know there were competitions in this sport. Is there anything I can help you with? I’m really good at marketing campaigns.”

A deep, baritone voice spoke from behind me. “Erin, can you call and confirm the car? My flight leaves at 3:00 p.m., and I can’t miss it.”

I made a goofy face at her, not turning to look at the man standing a few feet behind me.

“Yes, Mr. Crown. I called a short time ago, and they’ll be here right at 1:00 p.m.”

“Thank you,” he responded. His deep voice filled the room.

I waited until Erin relaxed her shoulders and exhaled loudly before giggling and mocking her. “He sounds scary!”

“He’s really not that scary. He’s just going through a difficult time and seems to be snapping at everyone.”

I wanted to sit and gossip, but I also wanted to forget about work. Gossiping would make me more anxious, and that was never a good thing.

Stepping over to the shoe rack, I slipped off my shoes. As I opened the door to the studio, I said, "I'm going to go change. You'll sign me in?"

She nodded briefly at me and added, "Will you really help me with these campaigns?"

"Of course!"

The door swooshed closed behind me, leaving me alone in the studio. It was quiet, alluring. From that very first class, my fascination with it had not changed. Now that I knew there was a competition—I was even more intrigued.

The changing area was in the back, and I shut the dressing room door behind me to change. My bag was packed with a few outfits, and today, I pulled out a pair of red boy-shorts and a matching red sports bra. I slipped a black, backless sweatshirt over my head and put my thumbs through the finger holes at the sleeves' ends. Sometimes, the girls in the class would wear the platform heels, but today I would go barefoot. To keep me warm until we got into the dancing, I wore silver leg warmers that reached my mid-thigh.

Turning my backside to the mirror, I glanced over my shoulder and ran my hands up the backs of my thighs, admiring how my bottom had lifted over the past few months. I felt sexy and giggled at the tiny bit of butt cheek peeking out of the bottom of my boy-shorts.

(Mark would have a heart attack if he knew I was doing this.)

I left my hair down so I could flip it during some of the moves, and then I shoved my worksuit into my bag.

I flipped off the light switch as I left the room and shut the door behind me. Turning back to the studio, I came up hard against a solid, male body coming out of one of the offices.

"Oof," I grunted and reached out to him to keep from tripping.

He was almost a head taller than me, and my gaze went directly to his collarbone and strong neck. My hands were firmly gripped on his biceps, and my fingers tightened. The smell of him was intoxicating, hints of amber and sandalwood. I pressed my chest closer to him—he was so warm. I was overwhelmed with a sense of familiarity; of intense intimacy between us. My gaze lifted to his face, and I inhaled sharply, entranced by the heavily lashed brown eyes that met mine.

"Ahh..." My voice sounded foreign to me, breathy and seductive. My breaths came quick, and my chest heaved.

His lips were full and framed by a three-day beard. Hints of silver laced the neatly trimmed hairs. I leaned up, my lips parting. I was enthralled, and I wanted

nothing more than to press my body closer to him. His hand slid down to my bottom, brushing the fleshy cheek exposed from under my shorts. I opened my mouth to speak, but only a squeak came out.

Leaning down close to my ear, his deep voice whispered, “I don’t usually fuck the dancers, but I could make an exception for you.”

The vulgarity of his words brought me back to the moment, and I was embarrassed by my blatant display of wantonness.

Now that I had my bearings, I stepped back out of his arms and straightened my shoulders. “That was rude. I think there’s been a misunderstanding. I’m a customer, not a dancer. I mean, I take classes here, so I guess I’m a dancer, but I’m not a *dancer* dancer.” I blushed. “Not that there’s anything wrong with stripping. I’m just not...” I huffed and then took a deep breath and calmed myself before I spoke again. “I’m not a stripper.”

I stood before him stoically, my shoulders drawn back. His eyes wrinkled at the corners as a slow, sexy smile curved the sides of his mouth. He chuckled, and my eyes were drawn to his lips. I licked mine.

“So, you don’t want to fuck?” He glanced at his large military-style watch. “I leave in an hour. There’s time.”

I bristled at his language. I looked at him more closely—the man who had to be Mr. Crown. His jet-black hair was cut short on the sides, longer on top, and it was wavy. A lock had fallen onto his forehead. I followed his hand as he ran it back over his brow, smoothing his hair back into place. His cheekbones were high, and a smattering of golden freckles dotted his nose, making him appear boyish—a direct contrast to the boldness of what he had just spoken.

His crass words turned me on, and that confused me. “No, I don’t want to... you know. And I don’t think that’s an appropriate way to speak to your customers.”

He laughed, and his deep belly laugh made my lady parts ache. “Lady, the way you held on to me and panted, I disagree. But, okay. Have a good class.” He looked at his watch again and then back up at me. “You have one minute.”

With that, he walked off and left me standing, bewildered, in the small area between the changing rooms.

Pulling myself together, I stepped into the dance studio, placed my bag on a bench along the wall, grabbed a bottle of antiseptic cleaner and a rag, and picked out a pole to use. I sprayed the pole with the cleaner and then wiped it down, making sure it was dry enough to grip.

A bottle of pole grip was on the shelf next to the speakers. After shaking it, I squirted a small amount onto my hands before starting my stretch routine.

Three other girls came into the studio from the front reception area, followed by an instructor I'd never met.

"Hi, I'm Dani." She extended her hand to me.

"Charlie."

"Hi, Charlie. Are you new?"

"I usually come in the evenings, but I needed a break today, so here I am."

"Great! Welcome."

Dani was wearing an outfit similar to mine, except it was black. She was short, had a pixie haircut, and reminded me of Tinkerbell. She introduced me to the other three girls.

"They're rehearsing for the competition, so they're going to be moving really fast for this lesson. Just do what you can to keep up."

I tugged on the hem of my shorts. Again, I had that feeling I was intruding. The past fifteen minutes had been so surreal. *What had motivated me to come to a class I don't usually attend? Oh, I remember, budget forecasts.*

Dani moved (almost bounding) over to the stereo system against the wall and scrolled through her iPhone for her playlist. She hit a button on the screen and flipped a light switch before walking back to the center of the room.

I'd taken a pole in the back row; one of the other girls took a pole next to me; the other two girls took the ones in front of us. The poles were placed so that all students could watch themselves in the mirrors.

Sultry music started playing on the speakers overhead, and I forgot all about work. I forgot to be self-conscious, and I *almost* forgot about the sexy, crass man in the back room. Almost.

Dani led us through a stretching routine and then a floor routine. The floor routine was awkward for me, and I tried my best to just let go of my inhibitions. It had always felt a little too erotic to me—ass in the air and chest to the floor.

The effortless movement of the other girls fascinated me. Their bodies moved like liquid gold, seducing me through the motions. I watched covertly, mesmerized. They appeared to be making love, yet lost in their own seduction. The girls in my evening classes weren't this good; I was inspired.

"Good job, Charlotte, you look amazing." Dani complimented me as we finished with the floor work and moved on to pole moves.

She talked us through a routine of spins and slides, transitioning from one move to the other with fluid movements. I was lost in the music, the sultry beat

and erotic tones lulling me into an almost sexual state. When I moved from a wiggle into pole frisking, I bent at the waist, flipped my hair back, and imagined the man I'd met in the back room caressing me from behind. It was wishful thinking, but I was so lost in my fantasy that I didn't realize Dani had stopped dancing. She was clapping for us and our hard work for the day.

Gradually bringing myself back to real life, I cleaned off the pole, and then took long gulps from my water bottle.

"Thank you for a great class, Dani."

"You're welcome. I hope you come back."

"Definitely." I grabbed my bag off the bench and went out into the reception area to talk with Erin.

She was busy on the phone, so I sat down on one of the white couches backed up against the window and waited for her to finish the call. I sat primly and stared out at the parking lot, watching as a black limousine pulled up in front of the building.

Ending the call, Erin pushed an intercom button and waited until a deep voice answered, "Paxton."

"Mr. Crown, your ride is here."

"Thanks, Erin. I'll be right out."

Erin looked up at me, her eyes wide. She bit her lower lip.

I tilted my head and asked her, "Still need my help?"

Mr. Crown emerged from a side door, rolling a suitcase behind him. A black leather messenger bag's strap crossed his chest. Underneath it, he wore a black, mandarin-collared leather jacket over a black T-shirt. His stance was solid; his attention was resolute.

He started a conversation with Erin, and I took that time to admire his firm backside filling out his worn jeans. I scanned down; his jeans tapered into leather motorcycle boots. As I scanned back up, he turned and glanced at me over his shoulder, catching my eye. I looked away quickly (down at my hands) and then back out the window.

He said to Erin, "I'll see you in three weeks for the event. Send me your ideas this afternoon. I'll look them over tonight after I land."

"Yes, sir, I'll have them for you right away."

He left without another glance toward me. I stared as he walked toward the limo. I stared as the driver opened the door for him and took his bag. I was—still—staring when he turned toward me and gave me a wickedly handsome smile

before stepping into the back. I sucked in air and stared back, watching as the door shut and the limo drove away.

I felt branded.

Chapter 3

“Charlotte, I only have three hours until Mr. Crown is back on the ground. He’ll be checking his email on the plane, so I can’t use that as an excuse for not delivering.” Erin stood behind the receptionist desk wringing her fingers, her brows drawn together.

I sighed heavily. “Okay, let me call my secretary and tell her I’m not coming back this afternoon. Give me a few minutes, and then I can focus on your plan.”

Taking my cell phone out of my bag, I stepped back into the studio so I could have some privacy, and called Peggy. She answered on the second ring. “Should I update the numbers for you?”

I loved this woman!

“Yes, please. The spreadsheet is in my budget folder on the shared drive. All you need to do is check the formulas and upload the numbers by account. I won’t be back this afternoon.

I was pacing back and forth across the studio while I talked, forefinger and thumb at my temple. “Move my leadership meeting to tomorrow morning. Also, can you call Mark and tell him I’ll be late tonight?” I pulled my lips in between my teeth and looked at the ceiling, briefly closing my eyes. I hated asking Peggy to lie for me, but I was tired today, and he would hear the deceit in my voice.

“And if Richard is looking for you?”

I pinched the bridge of my nose. “Well, cake tasting doesn’t usually last all day... Tell him Neiman-Marcus called and my dress for the party needs to be altered.”

“Charlotte...” She drawled slowly, caution in her tone.

“I know, Peggy, I know.” Silence sat between us. She was worried about me. “I just need a few more days, and I’ll be back to being me. I promise.”

We said our good-byes and hung up. Then I called my best friend, and realtor, Suzanne Madden.

Suzanne and I had been roommates at Arizona State University, and we had stayed close all of these years. On our senior trip to Cozumel, she introduced me to Mark, a former—casual—boyfriend of hers. We were all from Scottsdale, Arizona, but had never met until college. I went to a private high school; Mark and Suzanne went to a public one. She was sassy, sophisticated, and could sell hay to a wheat farmer. Suzanne and Mark had dated in high school but discovered they were better off as friends.

Her phone went directly to voicemail, so I sent her a text: *Bring me a dress... let's have dinner*

I followed up with the address of the studio and went back out to help Erin. Slouching behind the reception desk, Erin was staring blankly at the computer monitor in front of her. I pulled up a stool next to her and hopped up on it.

Rubbing my hands together eagerly and then placing my palms on my thighs, I asked, "Okay, what have you got?"

She turned sad eyes to me and then swiveled the screen so I could read it. Nothing. It was blank.

"Erin! Does he know you haven't even started?"

She shook her head, tears welling in her eyes.

"When is the event?"

"Three weeks."

"Oh, jeez. Okay, not a problem. First, we need to create an event on Facebook and set up an advertisement. Do you have a budget?"

Tears rolled down her face.

I jumped off the stool and pushed her off hers. "Trade me places."

Placing my hands above the keyboard, I closed my eyes and waited for inspiration. A feeling of calm settled over me. Once I started the creative process, the plan just flowed from me.

I pulled up a website to make quick, creative flyers, and Erin told me the information while I typed. I put her to work researching local yoga studios to contact. We'd need somewhere to hang these flyers.

Facebook advertisements were easy; I used my personal credit card to run the ads.

"Don't you think we should run this by Mr. Crown before we do it?" She started biting her nails.

"No. He strikes me as the type that prefers action." I didn't look up as I typed out an ad. "Tell him what you've done and be confident about it. He wants publicity and a high turnout. This is his business, Erin. It's not a charity."

My eyes bugged, and I was struck with a shot of adrenaline. "Oh, a charity! That is a *great* idea. Does he feel strongly about anything? A cause? Animals?"

Her face turned pensive and a little sad. "Well, his wife was recently involved in an accident."

"What? He's married?" My shock wouldn't seem strange, given that she had no idea what had transpired in the back room. My stomach clenched. A hot

flash ran through my body, and my eyes burned. I shook my head to clear it, the hypocrisy of my feelings shaming me. I calmed myself and said in a more neutral tone, "Huh, I wouldn't have thought."

Then I looked back at the computer screen so I wouldn't keep talking.

"I think they've been separated for a while. She worked in the Phoenix studio as an instructor. I don't know much about her before that, but she might have been a stripper."

I glanced at her in warning. "You shouldn't assume if you don't know."

"Sorry," she said meekly.

"What about a charity?"

"Right. I was getting to that." She continued with her story. "They were married for a few years. Rumor has it..." She looked pointedly at me so I wouldn't cut her off. "*Rumor* has it that he wanted a family, and she wanted to keep competing. Having a baby would ruin her figure—or so she said. She started an affair with a Harley Davidson salesperson, and Mr. Crown was filing for divorce when a drunk driver pushed her and her boyfriend off the side of the road. Her boyfriend was killed, and she's in the hospital," Erin paused, "in Phoenix."

My fingers had frozen above the keyboard, and I looked at her in shock. "Wow." It was a lame response, but I had nothing else to say.

She reverted to her young, chipper self. "Yeah, so that kind of sucks, and it's probably why he's been so grumpy."

I stared at her incredulously, torn between desperately wanting to ask more about him and chastising her for her lack of empathy. Instead, I focused on Erin's most pressing problem. "The charity?"

"Oh, right. So, maybe we do something like Mothers Against Drunk Driving."

"Huh. Okay. Well, that one you *do* need to run by him. I'll help you draft an email, and you can recommend it. We'll definitely run the Facebook ad. Is there an opportunity to do an exposition here at the studio? Maybe a preview of local competitors?"

"The event is in three weeks, Charlotte. How do I do that?"

"You have a mailing list of all the members of the studio?"

"Yes."

"Current and inactive?"

"Yes."

"Great! Let's call a couple of competitors to perform their routine here at the studio. Maybe the night before, we'll host a little party, and serve champagne

and snacks. Send out an invite to members. Build their interest again, and maybe they'll come watch the competition."

"Why do you keep saying, 'we'?"

My head jerked back just a bit, and I shook my head. "I don't know. Uh, I guess I was just getting excited for you."

The grin on her face grew, and she leaned in to hug me. "Ahh, you love us!"

At the risk of getting too attached, I teasingly brushed her off. "Whatever. Let's finish this up and send off the email."

In the email to Mr. Crown, we drafted an outline of the plan: what she had done so far (I made her take the credit), her recommendation on the charity, and her idea about the expo. I told her to start calling the competitors to see if they were interested, and I gave her a list of caterers that would be on the less expensive side. The Facebook ad would start running as soon as it was approved, and I told her to blame me if he was upset with her.

"Charlotte, thank you so much! I couldn't have done this without you. You saved my job."

I almost (sardonically) agreed with her. Instead, I took the less offensive path and told her she did great.

"He'll be impressed, Erin, I'm positive. And if you need any more help, here's my personal cell number." I took a post-it off the counter, wrote my number on it with a fine tip marker, and handed it to her. "You can call me anytime."

She took the post-it and put it in the top drawer, thanking me.

My phone vibrated on the counter, and I looked down to see a text from Suzanne: *I think you gave me the wrong address, this is a strip club*

Laughing out loud, I texted back: *Right address, not a strip club, come inside*

A moment later, Suzanne sashayed in with a fancy leather tote bag resting on her left forearm. As she removed her sunglasses with movie star flair, she said, "Well, this is interesting."

She glanced pointedly at me and then gave the room a cursory look.

When her gaze returned to mine, I introduced my friends to each other. "Suzanne, this is my friend, Erin. Erin, Suzanne." I gestured to both of them and watched as Suzanne crossed the room on gazelle-like legs to shake Erin's hand.

"It's nice to meet you," Erin mumbled back. I could tell she was intimidated.

Suzanne was stunning: perfect model body, tall, porcelain skin. She didn't believe in tanning and was high-maintenance from her pedicured toes to her

perfectly arched eyebrows. She was also razor-sharp-smart and wasted no time with pleasantries. "Why are we here?"

"Well, I have been taking pole dancing classes, and today, I took the day off from work. I was helping Erin with some marketing ideas and thought you might want to join me for dinner. I didn't want to put my work clothes back on, so I asked you to bring me a dress. Did you bring me a dress?"

She squinted at me, saying nothing. Then she rested her arm on the counter and started strumming her fingertips across the surface. The rippling clicking of her nails annoyed me. I slapped my hand down on top of hers, trying not to laugh. "Stop it!"

She stopped, but continued to stare at me. "I don't understand, Charlie. What's going on here?"

Erin giggled. When I glanced at her, she lowered her chin to her chest and her eyes to the computer screen in front of her. A slight smile still sat on her face.

"Did you bring me a dress?" I asked again, brusquely.

She removed her arm from the counter and pulled a silk halter dress from her bag. "It's all I could find that would fit you."

I took it from her and gave her a pointed look. "I'll be right back."

"Should I just wait out here?"

I glanced from her to Erin. Erin's eyes went wide. She shook her head, mouthing, "No, no, no."

Suzanne turned to look at her just as she mouthed her last 'no,' and then rolled her eyes and went to sit on the couch.

"I'll just sit over here. Erin, could you please get me a glass of water?"

She responded, "Yes, ma'am," which got her another raised eyebrow.

I quickly went into the back room, took off my workout clothes, put the dress on over my head, and slipped my feet back into my work heels. Suzanne was usually only like this in front of other people. I had seen her party and cry and joke with the people she was closest to. When it came to strangers, however, she always pulled the Cruella de Ville act. I usually ignored her.

I grabbed my gym bag and my purse and went back out into the lobby. "Ready?"

Suzanne stood from the couch, once again placing her tote bag on her forearm. "Yes."

She was polite as we left, acknowledging Erin and pleasantly telling her, "Have a good evening."

I stood in front of the counter for just a moment, giving Erin a few final instructions.

“Text me if he responds; call me if you need help. You did a great job today, and you’ll be fine.”

She stepped around the counter to hug me. “Thank you, Charlotte.”

I thought I heard tears in her voice as I hugged her back. She smelled like cookies. It felt good to have this young woman hug me so enthusiastically, and I relaxed in her arms, feeling like I was important to her.

Suzanne cleared her throat behind me, and I stepped out of Erin’s arms, making eye contact with her. “I mean it, you call me!”

Erin nodded at me as we walked out the door. I fished my oversized sunglasses out of my bag and then put them on to dim the afternoon Houston sun.

“How does The Rice Box sound to you? It’s just around the corner,” I asked.

“Perfect. And then you will tell me about... this?” She waved her hands toward the studio.

“Yes, I will tell you about... this.” I laughed at her as I opened the door to my luxury SUV, stepped in, and buckled up.

I waited until she pulled her car out of the parking spot to follow me to the restaurant.

The Rice Box was neon-lit with lots of glass windows, had a few stools at the bar, and was just classy enough to make it a hipster place to be.

We settled in at the bar with our dinner: I had baby bok choy and orange-peel beef; Suzanne had Chinese eggplant with green beans.

“Talk,” she said a little after our food was delivered.

I nodded at her and pointed at my mouth. She waited patiently until I finished chewing and took a drink of my tea.

“I started taking classes a few months ago. And Suzanne, I *love* it!” I looked heavenward and then back at her. “Sometimes I feel like it’s the only place I can be me.”

“What are you talking about? You’ve been you for a really long time. Mark adores you. *Everyone* adores you. You have the perfect house—that I sold you, of course.” Her face had softened from the snooty face she used on Erin. “You’re blessed, Charlie.”

“That’s just it, Suzanne, it’s not perfect. I hate my job. I hate being there every day. Mark and I haven’t had sex in weeks. My home is a museum...” I rushed on, putting my hand over hers so I wouldn’t offend. “Don’t get me wrong,

it's beautiful. It just seems like everything after we graduated moved along like some checklist we were supposed to follow. What's next? Kids? A dog? A second home? A Peloton? A *second* Peloton?" I was starting to tear up, and she flipped her hand over to hold mine, squeezing my fingers tightly. "I just feel empty, Suzanne." The tears started to flow.

"And you thought stripping would fix it?" she whispered to me, sarcastically.

I laughed so hard that I snorted. The customers all turned their heads to us, and I lowered my voice to match hers. "It's not stripping; it's pole dancing."

"What's the difference?" She forked her dinner, taking a small bite.

"The difference is that I'm dancing in a studio with friends, feeling sexy and feeling uninhibited. I'm not in some lecherous club having creepy guys shove one-dollar bills in my panties." A handsome, sexy face entered my thoughts, and I inhaled sharply.

Suzanne paused her chewing, not missing the change in me. "What was that?"

"What was what?"

"You just got all flushed."

"My dinner is spicy."

"No." She tilted her head, tapping her finger on her lips. "Is there someone else?"

"No, Suzanne, there isn't anyone else." I pushed the thought of Paxton Crown out of my head and focused on my conversation. "There might be someone else for Mark, but I don't ask. I don't know if I care."

"Charlie, that makes me sad." She pouted.

"Don't be sad for me. I'll figure out what to do." I leaned back over to her and whispered, "There's a competition in three weeks. I'm thinking about entering."

She laughed and then said more quietly, "You're serious?"

"Yeah, sure, why not? They have instructors that can help me choreograph a routine. I pick music and an outfit." I waggled my eyebrows at her and shook my shoulders in a shimmy. "I get to be a real stripper."

I giggled, and then she laughed at me. "You're crazy, Charlie. But I support whatever you decide to do. I love you, and when you come out on the other side of this, I'll still be here for you."

Tilting my head to the side, I said, "Aww, I love you too. Thanks for not judging—too much."

She shook her head, and we finished our dinner in friendly conversation. For the party, we made plans to do our hair and makeup together on Saturday. Her fingers flurried across the keyboard of her phone, texting her contacts to make appointments. We talked about our dresses: mine was a gold brocade, off-the-shoulder mermaid gown, and hers was a ruby red, high-neck backless crepe ball-gown. Perfect for the bourgeois, elite crowd of Houston.

After we finished our dinner, we walked out into the humid Houston evening. The sun was setting and casting an orange glow against the glass of the high-rise buildings around us. A light breeze lifted my hair and blew it in front of me. I pushed it back behind my ear.

My phone rang. Reaching into my purse, I recognized the number to the dance studio. I let it go to voicemail, making a note to call Erin when I got in my car.

“You’ll let me know what you decide about that stripper thing?” Suzanne feigned disinterest.

I smiled and responded matter-of-factly. “I will let you know about the pole dancing competition.”

She chuckled as she got into her car. “Yeah, that.”

Suzanne drove away, waving at me out of the top of her convertible.

I stood in the parking lot a moment longer, breathing in the night air and listening to the sounds of traffic rushing by on the freeway around the corner. I was startled from my trance by the shrill cry of my phone again.

I looked down to see an Arizona number light up the screen. I didn’t recognize the number, but it could have been any number of people I knew. Suddenly, awareness shot through me, my phone felt like it was on fire, and I almost dropped it.

Calming myself, I clicked the green phone icon and said, “Hello?”

“Charlotte Chase?”

Oh, crap!

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About the Author

Rie Anders grew up in the Pacific Northwest and has led a very colorful life. After successful careers in the country's aerospace program and corporate America, she picked up a pen and left the nine-to-five life. She wove her knowledge of aviation, Pacific Northwest culture, commercial fishing in Alaska, and the West's rugged landscapes, into beautifully crafted, happy ever after, contemporary romantic fiction novels.

Rie lives in Texas with her husband and competitive figure skating daughter. She is sure there is a story there as well. On the daily drives to and from the ice rink, Rie enlists her daughter's input on many things. Character development, possible actors to play her feisty heroines on the big screen, and new songs to inspire perfect scenes are just a few.

If you want to know more about Rie, when she will release her next book, and where you can find her, please visit her website at www.rieanders.com and follow her at <https://www.bookbub.com/profile/rie-anders> <https://twitter.com/RieAnders>.

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