

Hunter's Moon

Chapter 1



Rie Anders

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The Promise of Hunter's Moon

At some point we're all coming back as birds.
We'll begin in the muck, unrecognizable, stinking,
Until creatures with hands or tools for hands
Scoop us up and start squeezing and pulling.
Suddenly there we are, unmistakably beaked,
Straining against thin leather thongs that someone
Had the good sense to tie around rocks and our twiggy legs.
It's a good thing, this confinement, because free
We'd rip and tear apart anything we could reach.
The things with hands, or tools like hands, feed us
A mixture of water and the blood of the beheaded,
And with this inside of us we develop fast,
Looking more like giant birds you'd recognize
By the minute. Our feathers grow black and glossy,
And the thicker they become the meaner we feel.
When they just can't grow anymore, they fall out.
Our featherless bodies are disgusting to touch,
Hideous to behold. Where once we were murderous,
We grow timid under the mirror-hot sun. Then
More feathers appear, small at first, white feathers,
Beautiful, snowy plumes that dazzle under a Hunter's Moon.
When we're ready She comes. Out of the sea and sky,
Out of the barren ground She comes. Astonishing
Is her loveliness, perfected is Her power. She rises and walks
Among us as we bow, obedient, peaceful, and so in love.

- Robert McDowell

CHAPTER 1

My best friend, Evie Reid, was getting married.

Her fiancé, Ethan, had an incredibly large family and they had all arrived a few days prior, swarming in like a huge hug, embracing Evie and everyone around them.

I'll admit, I was a little jealous of her new extended family, feeling momentarily displaced, and a little lonely.

Growing up an only child, the Reids were the closest I had to siblings. It was difficult to let Evie go.

The day before Evie's wedding, my plan was to spend most of my time at the vineyard making sure everything was ready. Since the event was taking place at my venue, I'd become the unofficial wedding coordinator, deciding on flowers, and caterers, and landscaping.

Waking with the sun, I slipped out of bed and made a pot of strong coffee.

As it brewed, I dressed for the day in my old baggy jeans and a t-shirt. I pulled my blonde, bobbed hair back into a short ponytail and wrapped a bandana around my head, intending to shower and dress later for the rehearsal dinner.

Pouring a large mug of black coffee, I curled up in the window seat and opened the bay windows, letting in the cool morning air. Sipping my coffee, I closed my eyes and felt the soothing rush of caffeine kickstart my system, giving me the energy I would need to get through the day.

I inhaled deeply and smelled the fresh, mossy fragrance of the earth and the bold scent of my coffee.

A low morning fog had settled over the acres of vineyards, damping the sounds and creating a ghostly environment. On mornings like this I loved to relax and enjoy the quiet, undisturbed and reflective.

In the distance, I heard a ferry horn deliver a long, single blast, indicating it was leaving the dock from the landing at the northern tip of the island. The ferry horn was a consistent reminder of the isolation of the island, which was accessible only by boat or plane.

The unique rumble of a diesel engine truck interrupted my thoughts before I saw it coming down the main drive. My morning of serenity had come to a swift end.

The familiar, mud splattered, allegedly black, Ford 350 appeared through the fog. I slid off the bench seat, closed the window, and poured two cups of coffee in steel to-go mugs.

Making my way down the narrow steps that led into the wood-paneled tasting room, I used my elbow to switch on the heater to take the chill out of the still-cold room.

Transferring one of the mugs to my left arm and holding it close against my side, I opened the front door and stepped out to the wooden deck, under the slanted roof. The rattle of the diesel engine stopped in front of the building. The driver stepped from the cab, bypassing the running boards by jumping straight to the ground.

“Morning, Juliette.”

“Morning, *Bob the Builder*.”

“Har-har. You ready to go?”

A flatbed truck, carrying the trellis and tents for the party, rumbled down the drive, and we both turned at the sound.

The driver pulled up alongside us and manually rolled down his window. “Where do you want us, Riley?”

Turning slowly back to me, one eyebrow raised and a smile on his face, he said, “Just waiting on the boss.”

I handed him his coffee and side-eyed him as I walked, almost ostentatiously, around the front of his truck, stepping up into the cab, smirking as I teased. “And don’t you forget that.”

Riley laughed at my attempt to convey a haughty tone and stepped back into the truck. We drove up to the ceremony site, where he’d already laid a concrete foundation in the area we’d chosen for the vows. When, and if, I received funding for the resort, this would be the focal point in the center of the grassy area.

I stared out the windows at the rows and rows of vines. The dirt road we were on would be paved in a few months, and lined with Italian Cypress trees – pending funding, of course.

As my parents’ only child, I’d lived a charmed, albeit somewhat sheltered, life. It also meant I was the sole heir to Hunter’s Moon – our two vineyards and winery.

My parents planned on staying on-island through Evie’s wedding, and then they would promptly retire to our property in eastern Washington. They’d turn the vineyard over to me to run and manage as I saw fit.

I’d always know this would happen one day, and as the day had loomed closer, I saw fit to expand.

About a year ago, I’d started floating my idea to Nick and Ethan, getting their input and legal advice. When I’d felt like it could really happen, we’d started developing the business plan.

Since Ethan is a property attorney, he'd worked on a number of development properties over the years in the San Juan Islands. Both he and Nick were helping me with the future plans.

Ethan had helped me with finding an architect to create formal drawings of my vision. He'd also helped me gather the information for an environmental impact statement. When we'd felt we had all the requirements of the business plan ready to show to investors, Ethan had reached out to his contacts, sending them a preliminary teaser about the resort.

As Riley and I drove, I commented that we hadn't planned the timing very well.

"It'll all come together. It may not be perfect for tomorrow, but Evie knows that. And you know her – she'll love it no matter what."

"I know she will. I just wish the main building didn't look so po-dunky."

He laughed a very masculine laugh and reached for my hand, squeezing it in consolation. "Hey! It's beautiful and rustic, and it worked for over thirty years. You'll have your resort, and then you'll look back and want the simplicity of before. Enjoy it today."

Glancing down at his hand holding mine, I felt a warmth seep into me, comforting and unexpected.

Riley had built Ethan's – and now Evie's – house. He was also the architect Ethan had recommended. He lived in Friday Harbor, on San Juan Island, another island a short ferry ride from here. From what I understood from Nick and Ethan, his craftsmanship and individualized architectural designs had won him many awards. I trusted both Ethan and Nick to build a team that would deliver a world-class resort for me, and they had recommended Riley.

My time alone with him had been limited, but always friendly – although, I sensed he was restraining himself from getting too close to any of us. He was polite, professional, and had a little bit of swagger that I always found kind of sexy. Jason had had it. Maybe that's why I steered clear of Riley.

Riley and I'd met for the first time last summer, then again on Friday Harbor when Evie and I had gone dress shopping. His truck was a frequent fixture on both islands as his reputation was growing as the 'builder to hire' in the islands.

I didn't have time to analyze the zing that ran through me at his friendly overture, so I gently pulled my hand from his and focused on the road ahead.

As we crested the hill, Riley pulled into a makeshift parking lot and waved out the window to the flatbed to pull up in front of him. In a few months, this is where the main house and dining area would be, looking

down towards the vineyard, and out towards the Strait of Juan de Fuca, and the Pacific Ocean. Tomorrow it would be the location for the two-hundred-person tent that would shelter Evie and Ethan's wedding reception.

I stared wistfully out at the ceremony site and lost myself in the imaginings of a fairy tale. A fairy tale Evie deserved. A fairy tale I'd lost.

"The landscaping looks great!" Riley said as he stepped out of the truck. Turning to me from outside the cab, he held on to the door frame and asked, "You coming?"

"Right. Yes." I mumbled as I stepped out of the truck, then we strode down to the location of the trellis together.

"The landscaping looks fantastic, Julie. Did you design this?"

"I did. I wasn't sure all the trees and plants would survive, but they seem to be doing well."

"Has Evie seen it?" He'd stopped on some wood-look porcelain pavers. They led around the grassy area intended for the folding chairs to the main area built for the nuptials. Cornflower blue Agapanthus were planted along the walkway, their frivolous sprays sparkling in the morning sun.

"No. She wanted to wait until you'd installed the trellis. She wants to see it for the first time when it's finished."

A feeling of jealousy snuck over me, and I pushed it away. Riley and Evie were good friends. He'd asked her out once, but to me they'd always seemed more like brother and sister. He was still very protective of her.

"Well, let's get this thing built then." He waved high above his head at the crew by the trucks, put his fingers in his mouth, whistled loudly, and waved the crew down.

Then he turned to me and said more quietly, "C'mon, builder girl, you can help."

Two of the men from the construction crew carried the beams and bolts down to the site, while the other two started laying out the tent.

A bricklaying crew had come earlier in the week and built two-foot casings for the posts. The main arch trellis was six feet across, with beams and lattice extending out twenty feet in both directions. I intended to plant vines and roses. Once they wrapped themselves around the lattice, this would be a stunning garden.

As they worked, another crew arrived with tables and chairs, and quiet generators to power the dimmed lights and chandelier Evie had requested.

Later in the day, I ran into town to get sandwiches and water for all the men. When I returned, Riley had just finished connecting the final pieces to the main arch.

I extended a bottle to him. "Water?"

He reached for the hem of his dirt smudged T-shirt, lifted it and wiped the sweat from his brow. "Thanks."

My eyes darted to the sprinkling of blond hairs on his belly, and I felt myself flush.

He took the bottle from me, unscrewed the cap, and took a big long drink, causing the plastic to cave in on itself.

I might have mumbled, "You're welcome." I wasn't sure, though, since my mouth seemed to have gone dry.

Completely oblivious to my discomfort, he reached for my hand, his now-cold fingers gripping my suddenly warm ones, and told me to come take a look.

Bunches of grapes had been intricately carved into the main arch, giving the illusion of vines. I reached out and delicately touched them, running my fingertips over the bumps and grooves, marveling at the craftsmanship.

I sighed with awe. "Riley. They're exquisite." I looked at him over my shoulder. "I don't know what to say."

He pulled me to the other side. "Here, look at this one."

At the top of the arch was a full moon, complete with shadows. A goddess, with a bow and arrow and her arm pulled back aiming for the moon, was carved on the other side.

My gut clenched and I turned watery eyes to him. "Why?"

He looked caught off guard. "What do you mean?"

"Why did you go to so much effort?"

"Evie thought you would like it. It's Diana, the Huntress, and the Hunter's Moon. She said your middle name is Diana, and it's your vineyard now, so..." He shrugged.

My heart was stuck in my throat. "It's lovely. Thank you."

His smile was broad, his slightly crooked tooth making him appear devilishly sexy. "You're welcome."

Feeling somewhat uncomfortable, I looked at the time on my phone, and then back at him. "I need to start getting ready for the rehearsal dinner. So, I guess I'll see you tomorrow? At the wedding?"

I turned to walk away, and he caught up next to me. "Let me give you a ride back."

"No. It's okay, I need to walk. I'm okay. Thanks though." He stopped in his tracks, and I continued to walk. "See you tomorrow."

I heard him playfully shout from behind me. "See you tomorrow, Juliette."

END CHAPTER 1

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About the Author

Rie Anders was raised in the Pacific Northwest and has led a very colorful life, paralleling a previously successful career in the country's aerospace program and corporate America. Leaving behind the nine-to-five, she has woven her knowledge of aviation, Pacific Northwest culture, commercial fishing in Alaska, and the rugged landscapes of the west, 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 in there as well, and enlists her daughters' input on the daily drives to, and from, the ice rink. Topics range from character development to who will play the hero on the big screen, and what new song fits a scene to perfection.

If you want to know more about Rie, when her next book will be released, 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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And don't forget to join my Romance Newsletter on the homepage at www.RieAnders.com!

Please also enjoy an excerpt from the first in the Crown Family Series, CHRYSALIS (coming April 2021)

Charlotte “Charlie” Chase appears to have everything: a lucrative marketing career, a handsome fiancé, a mansion in Houston. But a chance encounter with the mysterious, and alluring, Paxton Crown (owner of L.O.V.E. enterprises) at a pole dancing studio, is forcing her to admit that she’s disillusioned with her stellar-but-soulless job and frigid fiancé. The world of pole dancing pulls Charlie in, and the passionate, sultry environment has her questioning her life’s direction. Taking a leave from her executive position, Charlie becomes immersed in a world of independence, unbending friendships, and sensual power. The studio and the thrilling knowledge of an upcoming competition become the only bright spots in her conventionally basic life.

Paxton is crass and unapproachable, and despite the delicious way her body responds to his presence, Paxton has made it clear he’s not interested in an emotional attachment. As Charlie and Paxton work more closely together, Charlie finds herself caught between his vulgarity and his warmth. Wanting desperately to discover what has caused him to close himself off from falling in love, she pushes him to open up. As layers of a dark past are revealed, Paxton closes himself off further from Charlotte, preventing him from seeing how sensuous, courageous, and strong Charlie really is... And how this could be the love they both need, in order to live a life of not so basic things.

Please enjoy this excerpt from CHRYSALIS

Chapter 1

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

I turned to face the entourage of people around the large cherry-wood conference table. They all looked confused, a bit concerned, and slightly embarrassed for me.

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

The eighth-floor executive conference room, with its plush carpet, cream colored walls, and elegantly displayed contemporary art, looked out towards the Buffalo Bayou; the dandelion sculpted fountain, water sparkling in the unusually perfect Houston spring day, had entranced me, taking me out of the moment.

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 been taking 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 drawl, and 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?” Disappointment oozed from his tone.

Some of my colleagues turned and looked at me, 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.*

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

His gait was fast. I had to intentionally slow my walk so I could prepare myself for this conversation.

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

“What’s going on, Charlotte? Are you ok?” His concern was expectedly genuine. He had mentored me up through this company, which offered financial services (specifically: retirement planning) for the past few years, and I was ashamed that he thought I was distracted.

My career with the company had started almost right out of college. I’d been promoted steadily, and predictably, over the years. Most recently, I had been promoted to Vice President of Sales, and subsequently, had become increasingly disillusioned with my life 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. Either way, he was calling me out on it.

“I’m fine, Richard. I’m a little out of sorts today, but I’m totally on point. I promise.”

“You do know that your promotion was well deserved. You earned this position.” His eyes were kind, his tone gentle, and I knew that his gruffness in the conference room had been just for show.

I felt my shoulders start to sag, and I forced myself to sit up a little straighter. *Don’t show weakness*, I thought to myself. Even if I didn’t really understand what was happening to me, I didn’t want Richard to have any doubts.

“I know, Richard, and you picked the right person.” *Fake it ‘til you make it, I guess.*

After a thoughtful pause, apparently satisfied that I was alright, he changed topics on me, moving into the personal. “Are you looking forward to your party Saturday night?”

My fiancé Mark was hosting a *very large* engagement party Saturday night, to celebrate my promotion... and, to show off our beautiful new home just off Kirby Avenue. The house had a pool, and a perfect yard for a party tent.

We had recently purchased an eight thousand square foot classic Georgian home, and oddly, the size actually made me feel suffocated. Mark had pressured me into buying it even though I had 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, check, check.

Pasting an engaging smile on my face, I made sure it reached my eyes and responded, “Oh, yes! Mark has found the most amazing caterer, and a well-

known string quartet to play. It will be absolutely lovely. You are coming, aren't you?"

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

"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."

Nodding at him, I turned and left, shutting his door quietly behind me.

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

Shutting the door behind me, 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 I saw staring back. The outward shell *looked* 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 just 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—"this" being my job. I wish I could say for certain the exact moment I became so disillusioned, but I can't; it just crept up on me, until one day—most likely the day I was promoted—I just stopped being happy.

Out the window and across the street, in a strip mall of shops, was the dance studio I had been going to. A pole dancing studio. I looked down at the sign and a brief flicker of excitement washed over me. I wondered what time classes were today.

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 the heart on the marquis, had caught my attention.

A few days after that meeting, I'd stopped in on my way home and was instantly fascinated with the studio. The lobby was small, with thick white plush 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, and below that, a shelf of high-heeled platform shoes for sale. The shoes were hot

pink and glittered gold, red vinyl and clear plastic. I'd touched them gingerly, and with utter fascination, as I'd waited patiently to be helped.

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

"Hi, can I help you?" She was placing the phone back on the receiver as she stood to greet me. I'd watched her unfold herself from the chair and continue to rise. She was *so tall*.

"Uhm, yes, maybe, I don't know." I'd laughed self-consciously 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'd smiled sheepishly at her. "Obvious, is it?"

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

Her youthful laugh had put me at ease, and I'd felt my shoulders relax.

"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 surreptitiously glanced at her figure (and her lack of clothing) as she'd talked, and had found myself sucking 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 out in a huge grin. "Great! Do you want to see the studio?"

"Sure!"

She'd stepped out from behind the desk, and 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, and 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 bit snug.

"Now, you have to take off your shoes when you go in the studio. Only bare feet are allowed." She'd lifted one foot to remove her shoe, and did the same on the other... becoming noticeably shorter.

I'd slipped off my pumps, placed them on a silver shoe rack, and waited for her to open the door. Smiling at me patiently, she'd raised her eyebrows, and asked—as if she was unveiling the most delicious secret in the world— “Ready?”

Nodding at her, I'd followed behind as she opened the door to what appeared to be a ballet studio. But it wasn't. Gleaming gold poles had stood floor-to-ceiling, shiny and polished. The polished wood floors had shone up at me, and the red walls at either end had given the room a sultry vibe.

She'd flipped a light switch, and a soft glow had emanated from the canister lights recessed into the ceiling. One wall was floor-to-ceiling mirrors, and the other a room separator, which could be open to the second studio, if needed.

The room had captivated me. I'd been enchanted by the secrets I thought it held. It was quiet and empty, but 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 girl, I'd said, “What's your name?”

She'd been smiling at me, like she knew I had been bitten by the pole goddesses. “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 firmer, and my once-size-twelve skirts had been replaced with tens.

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

I saw there were two classes tonight, one at five p.m. and one at six p.m. I usually went on Tuesday and Thursday nights, but today, I felt like I needed it.

I looked at the clock on the wall of my office: not even lunch time. Sighing heavily, I glanced back at the site... 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.

Renewed enthusiasm for the day sparked inside me. I hurriedly slipped my shoes back on, and grabbed the bag from under my desk and my purse from the drawer.

Hitching my purse over my shoulder, I quickly left my office. My assistant was typing and I spoke in a clipped tone on my way out.

“Peggy, I need to run an errand. I should be back by two.”

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

Stopping in my tracks, I paused long enough to pull myself back into the moment. I 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 kindly at me.

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

We continued to look at each other a beat longer, a stand-off of wills, until I smiled back at her. “I have to go.”

I saw her shake her head, and then she went back to typing. “Be careful.”

I left the plush office hallway and went towards 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.