

Hunter's Moon

a novel

 *Rie Anders*

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First Edition

ISBN: 9798643830481

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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 known 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, interrupting my reflective thoughts. 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 it?"

"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."

CHAPTER 2

I was completely overwhelmed by the size of Ethan's family. They just kept showing up to the rehearsal dinner, and I couldn't keep them straight. I'd also never experienced so much testosterone in one location.

It was like a sugar-rush, with so many delicious men! They were all gorgeous. *Thank you, Ethan, for bringing me toys to play with!*

On the dockside of the Islander restaurant was a small party room with an attached deck that looked out towards the marina.

The Islander was the summer resort; boaters, families, and weekenders were frequent visitors. Sailboats and larger powerboats were anchored in the large bay, leaving just enough room for the daily float planes to take off and land from the water.

I waited at the front door entrance to the lobby of the resort and greeted everyone as they arrived, directing them to the party room.

Ethan's brothers Lane and Galen looked exactly like him – same chestnut-colored hair and sherry eyes, albeit a little taller. But his brother Ames looked like their mom: dark hair, lean, a little lost and tired looking.

Morgan, one of his twin sisters, was the spitting image of Ethan – the girl version, of course. Skylar, the other twin, had yet to arrive.

The one thing that stood out to me was their love for one another, and for Evie. I could hear the squeals and laughter through the main lobby as each of them greeted Ethan and Evie, weaving a web tighter around her... and pushing me out.

Shaye and Nick arrived with Nick and Evie's parents. Shaye hugged me tightly, always keeping me close now, and asked me to watch for the float plane.

"Ethan's sister Skylar is arriving shortly, and I want to greet her when she lands."

"Do you want me to go down and get her?"

Shaye looked at me in surprise. "Would you?"

"Sure. That way you can visit with the rest of the family."

Her face softened and she reached for my hands, clasping them with hers. "Thank you, Julie." She leaned in to kiss me, and then Nick gently pulled her towards the rest of the guests.

Nick's mom Martha came in next, trying to corral both Noah, Ethan's little boy, and JT, Nick and Shaye's boy, who was about the same age.

Noah's mom, Ethan's former fiancé, had died in a helicopter crash, and Noah had been given to Ethan to care for. Ethan hadn't even known Noah existed until about a year ago. While the demands of being a dad were

daunting at first, he'd adjusted quite quickly, and he and Evie had made a cute little family.

Taking JT from Martha and lifting him in my arms, I nuzzled on his neck, and he squirmed playfully.

Basking in the little-boy-giggles, I playfully swung side to side, and asked Martha, "Where are Ellie and May?" Ellie was Nick and Shaye's first little girl, and May was their newborn baby girl.

"Kira is watching them. They're all too much for me to handle at one time." Kira was a high school student who worked in Evie's bakery, as well as being a part-time nanny.

I laughed at her exasperated expression and turned, once again, to nuzzle JT's neck. He giggled and squirmed until I put him back down. "Yeah, he's a little hellion for sure."

Noah was standing stoically at Martha's side, and I greeted him cautiously. "Hi, Noah. Are you excited for the wedding?"

He shrugged and stepped back behind Martha's leg. When he glanced back up at Martha, she leaned down to pick him up. "He's a little overwhelmed, I think, with all his new family. Aren't you, little guy?"

She turned back to me and said, "I think I'll take him to his Grandma Bonnie. He's very attached to her."

I nodded and smiled in understanding. "Okay. I think everyone is here now, except Skylar. I'll head down to the dock and wait for the plane."

Martha reached up to pat my cheek. "You're a good girl, Julie. Don't you forget that." She added, "A little crazy, but we love you anyway."

I chuckled and tried not to get choked up. In my mind, she was supposed to have been my mother-in-law. My eyes welled up, and I simply nodded. She was as close to me as my own mother – maybe even more so, since she was more in tune with my loss.

Out the front windows, I saw the float plane approaching the bay. Flying low over the trees, I watched as he maneuvered over the water, careful not to hit any of the boats moored in the bay. The pontoons skimmed down to touch the water, slowing the speed of the plane.

I went out the back door and down the dock to meet Skylar.

The tide was low, exposing the muddy bottom of the bay and intensifying the saltwater scent. Seaweed, murky green and brown, lay like frosting over the rocks, and created a tide-line.

I reached the plane just as the dock-worker tied it to the dock cleats, and the pilot opened the door for the movie-star-sister, Skylar Archer.

She was stunning in her burgundy halter dress and heels. In person, her skin was even more flawless than camera makeup could ever achieve.

Deep, rich auburn hair with expensive highlights fell over one shoulder. I thought my jaw would hit the dock.

“Shaye?” I heard her speak; I might have mumbled my own name in response.

“Oh, Evie’s best friend. I’m so glad to meet you, Julie. Evie talks about you all the time. She said we would be fast friends.”

I was just thinking I’d have to kick her ass for being prettier than me, when she reached out to hug me.

When she pulled back from me, her eyes roved over my face. “You’re gorgeous! You look just like Bebe Rexha. Has anyone ever told you that?”

“Once or twice, yes. And thank you!”

The pilot handed me a very expensive suitcase and I took it from him, setting it on the ground.

I looked to the dock worker and asked him to please take it up to Shaye’s office and lock it. “I’ll let her know it’s there, and we’ll take care of it later.”

Turning to Skylar, I directed her up the dock, making small talk along the way. She was here only for the wedding, and then would leave almost immediately after the ceremony. She’d chartered a plane to take her to Vancouver, British Columbia, where she was filming her next action movie.

Intrigued, I asked her if she did her own stunts.

“Oh, Lord no! For one thing, I’m afraid of heights, so that certainly wouldn’t work.”

As we approached the resort and deck, I saw Evie waving enthusiastically at us. Then she ran around to the walkway and down to greet us.

“Skylar! I’m so glad you could make it!” She hugged her tight, and I felt another pang of jealousy.

“I wouldn’t miss my brother’s wedding! And especially since he’s marrying such a beautiful girl.”

“C’mon, we’re ready to start.”

Evie linked elbows with Skylar and I followed behind, my stomach in knots. My chest was constricting with almost unbearable jealousy.

Skylar received the same level of enthusiasm from Evie as all her greetings, while I sought out the pastor that Evie and Ethan had chosen to officiate their wedding.

Now that everyone had arrived, I gathered them all together, and we talked through the ceremony as a group.

Shaye, Morgan, and I were Evie’s bridesmaids, and Ethan’s brothers would stand up for him. Nick and a friend of Ethan’s from college would be the ushers.

Evie was glowing, looking lovely in a mint green dress that hung so beautifully on her slender frame.

I zoned out a little as the pastor droned on about the vows and who would say what and when. While Ethan's brothers were nice to look at, I didn't feel anything towards them. I wanted to. For once, I actually wanted to be the cute, party girl everyone assumed I was, but I couldn't even gather the energy to flirt.

The planning of the resort had been consuming so much of my time, I couldn't even remember the last time I'd had sex. I tried to run through the last few guys I'd dated, and they all seemed faceless now – blurs. I know I hadn't been interested in going to bed with any of them.

I was standing in the maid of honor position when a brown construction jacket caught my attention. I glanced to my left to see Riley walking down the ramp towards the boats docked in the slips.

He had such a sexy walk, and I found myself staring at the way his jeans hugged his back-side. He was everywhere lately, and if I received my funding, he would be around me every day. Evie's pet. It almost didn't seem fair.

"Julie?" Evie's concerned voice interrupted my thoughts.

"I'm sorry, what?"

"Are you okay?"

Oh my God! I'd groaned *out loud*. "I'm so sorry. I was thinking about something else." All eyes were on me, and I flushed. "I have a lot going on right now."

Evie laughed, "Uhm, yeah, so do I."

Everyone laughed at the implication, and I refocused my attention on the rehearsal.

"Please continue."

The rest of the rehearsal passed easily, and afterwards we all sat down to dinner. Evie had seated me with her parents, Bonnie, Morgan, Skylar, Galen, and Ames.

Martha was a little nervous around Skylar, and commented how fun it was to meet a movie star in person.

"Please, Mrs. Reid, my mother says I'm a country girl at heart and doesn't pay any attention to my career. I do the dishes and clean the stables just like my brothers when I'm home."

Galen jumped in and teased, "Which is probably why you never come home."

She swatted him with her napkin and said, "You're one to talk. It was years before you finally came home to help instead of playing cowboy." She

turned her attention back to the table, “Galen was off traipsing around the world for years as a bull rider on the PRCA.”

We all stilled and I saw the shock register on Martha’s face. Even Galen looked sheepish.

Skylar continued enthusiastically. “Oh, I’m sorry, you probably don’t know what the PRCA is. It’s the Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association. Galen traveled for years competing, and he *always* brought home trophies.”

Martha looked down at her napkin, while Marcus excused himself from the table, heading in the direction of the bar.

I cleared my throat and said, “Evie’s brother, Jason, was a cutter.”

It took her a second before she realized what she’d said. She glanced at Galen and he pulled his lips together, raising his eyebrows at her as if to say, ‘Yeah, remember, I told you.’

She put her hand to her mouth. “I am so sorry. I must have forgotten. I’m so sorry.”

Martha, the ever-steady mother, reached across the table and squeezed her hand. “It’s okay. He loved the circuit. It’s okay.”

Skylar looked so distraught. I felt horrible for her and tried to lessen the tension by asking Galen, “Did you know Jason very well?”

He looked back and forth between Martha and myself, gauging how to respond. “I didn’t. I knew of him and saw him frequently, but we ran with different people, so our interactions were few. I know everyone talked about his blue eyes. And he was quite the ladies’ man, always had a cute girl on his arm.”

Oh, this was just getting worse and worse. I’m sure he was just trying to make Martha feel better, but ended up slighting me in the process.

Martha dropped her head again, shaking it side to side and laughed, “Oh dear. Yes, he was quite the looker. Takes after his dad.” She paused and then said quietly, “Took after his dad.”

Ames rocked back on the heels of his chair, and quipped, “How about that stock market?”

I shot him a look that clearly said humor was not a welcome addition to the conversation. Marcus returned with a gin and tonic, and we all resumed eating, quietly making small talk about the weather.

When Marcus rose to make the rounds of the room, I excused myself from the table and headed to the bar.

Jumping up on a barstool, I crossed my legs, adjusted the hem of my dress, and knocked on the bar, to get the bartender’s attention. “Eric, I need a Jack and coke please. Make it a double.”

“It can’t be that bad already, can it?” He asked, as he placed the drink in front of me.

“Worse.” I rolled my eyes.

Shaye said from behind me, “Can I join you?”

I turned and saw her worried expression, extended my hand to the seat next to me, and said, “Please.”

Eric asked, “Can I get you anything Shaye?”

“Just water please.”

“You got it.”

I looked at her belly and asked, “Lord, Shaye. What are you, pregnant again?”

She raised her eyebrows at me.

“Seriously?”

“No, I was just teasing. I’m breastfeeding, so I’m not drinking.”

“Well, I’ll drink your share. Cheers to a high probability that I will be drunk by the end of this weekend.”

I raised my glass and took a hefty drink of my cocktail.

“What’s going on with you?”

Sighing heavily, I dropped my shoulders. “I don’t know. I’m being a shit, aren’t I? I’m happy for Evie, I really am, but I feel like we’re falling apart. You have Nick, and a million kids, and I feel like things are shifting.”

Shaye took my hand. “They are, but it doesn’t change our friendship. And Evie loves you so much. If she didn’t, we certainly wouldn’t be friends, would we?”

I laughed at her. “So, you’ve forgiven me?”

“I forgave you a long time ago, Julie. I know you were hurting. We were all hurting. If you were meant to be with Nick, you would’ve been.”

I hated that I’d had a brief affair with Nick after she’d left the island all those years ago. I hated that I had been so desperate for love, I’d tried to replace Jason with Nick. He was in pain too, so it worked for a bit. Until it didn’t.

“He wasn’t very good, you know?” I joked, a smile on my face.

“You can try and deflect with humor, but I know he doesn’t mean anything to you. Not in the way that matters.” She paused. “And you matter to me, Julie. You don’t have to pretend to be strong with me.”

My eyes watered, and I rubbed my fist against my chest. I looked out at the marina, taking a deep breath and exhaling loudly. “I miss Jason so much lately. I don’t know why. It’s been years since he’s been gone, but the feelings seem so strong. My heart just hurts. Like it’s anchored to his and I can’t get free.”

I glanced back at Shaye and she was looking at me sadly.

“Don’t pity me.”

“I don’t pity you. You said to me once, ‘I always had the impression you were made of stronger stuff than this.’ Now I will say it back to you. You aren’t alone, Julie. This is just one day, and you’ll get through it.”

“It’s actually a weekend.”

“Whatever.” She smiled at my attempt to argue. “Are you excited about the resort?”

“I am. Riley brought the trellis out today and had the tent put up. I really hope I get the funding for the building. I have such big dreams for the vineyard. I know I can make it exceptional.”

“Have you met Dax yet?”

Dax Bentley was a prominent Seattle property investor, and the man Ethan and Nick had been courting these past few months as a potential investor.

“No. Apparently he was invited to the wedding, though, so I’ll meet him tomorrow.”

Shaye grinned mischievously at me. “I heard he’s a looker. Swoon-worthy.”

“Oh, please. You’ve been watching too much Disney.”

She laughed, “No, seriously, have you seen him?” She pulled out her phone and searched for Dax Bentley. “Here, look. He’s gorgeous!”

“Huh, let me see that.” I took her phone from her and swiped through a few pictures. “He certainly is, but I was told to be on my best behavior.”

“No flirting, no sex?”

“I think Nick’s exact words were, ‘Don’t fuck this up Julie. We can’t do this without him.’”

She cringed. “I’m sorry. That was kind of harsh of him.”

I shrugged. “He’s right, though. I’ve learned a lot from him and Ethan over the past few years about business, but this is big time, and I can’t sleep my way to a deal.”

We were both silent, lost in our own thoughts, until Shaye quietly interrupted mine. “You know, you’ve never really told me what happened with you and Jason. Do you want to? Maybe that will help.”

“Oh look, the party is breaking up. We should go, I’m Evie’s ride home.”

Shaye groaned, “Julie.”

“I will, Shaye, I promise. But not tonight. And not this weekend. This weekend is for Evie.”

“Okay, but we really need you to...” She started to say, but I was already leaving the bar.

CHAPTER 3

Evie had asked – no, insisted – that Shaye and I stay the night with her in one of the cottages on her parent’s property.

While I balked a little at Evie’s request for us to be together on her last night of being single, I was secretly happy about it.

“It’ll be the last time. I want the three of us to be together,” she’d begged in her endearing, lovely, almost manipulative way, even though she didn’t have a mean-spirited bone in her body.

Her wedding day dawned in almost a magical way. The morning sun was peeking through the shades covering the bedroom window, a prelude to a perfect summer wedding day.

It was a day that Evie had dreamt of forever, and neither Shaye nor I would deny her anything. We would never deny her anything. Our pasts had connected the three of us in a way not many people would ever understand. We were bonded.

The three of us had fallen asleep in the king size bed that used to be Evie’s, giggling and teasing each other about shenanigans from the past.

Shaye nudged me early in the morning, whispering that she needed to get back to her house to check on the babies. “I’ll be back in about an hour with breakfast.”

Sleeping in the middle, I rolled to my side, grabbing her hands between mine, whispering back, “This is going to be such a long day.”

“Don’t wake her yet. Let her sleep.”

“I can’t believe Ethan tried to convince her to come home with him. What a lame-o.”

She giggled quietly and said, “You were so funny, tugging on her arm so she wouldn’t go.”

“She was going over my dead body.”

“And Ames trying to toss her over his shoulder.”

“Ethan has some hottie brothers, that’s for sure.”

Wiggling out of bed, she waved her hand at me. “Come outside.”

I slipped out of bed, put Evie’s slippers on my feet, and quietly followed her out the front door of the cottage, shutting the door carefully so it wouldn’t creak.

The morning air was crisp, the earth damp from the humidity. I inhaled deeply of the fresh, salty air, and watched as Shaye zipped up her jacket, tucking her chin into the neck.

I laughed at her. “That is the weirdest habit you have.”

“What?”

“You always tuck your chin into your coats.”

She scoffed at me. "It keeps me warm."

"Silly." I wrapped my arms around myself and asked her what time the hair and makeup girls were going to be at the cottage.

"They're scheduled for eleven. That gives us time to have breakfast and get organized. Morgan will be here a little after noon, then we can all help Evie get dressed. Nick will be here at three to pick us up."

"Okay. I need to call Amy and make sure she has all the catering ready. And the flowers. Oh, crap! I just remembered, I need to call the florist and make sure they have flowers for the archway."

"How did it look? I saw Riley a few days ago at the grocery store and he said he was almost finished with it."

"Oh, Shaye. It's beautiful. He carved grapes and vines into the wood and it is exquisite."

She smiled slyly at me. "He's very talented. What did you think of the Hunter?"

"You knew?" I was a little stunned.

"I was at Evie's picking up JT when he was there designing it. He wanted something that you would want forever, not just for Evie's wedding. I saw the sketch. I can't wait to see it today."

I felt her watching me intently, so I shooed her away. "Hurry back with breakfast, I'm already hungry."

She pointed her finger at me. "Don't wake her yet."

"I won't. Go!"

I watched her walk towards the path that led through the wooded forest to her home. I closed my eyes briefly, calming myself and thinking about the day.

In the distance, I heard the rumbling of a familiar diesel engine, and I turned just in time to see Riley's truck coming down the driveway.

I ran as fast as I could to stop him. When he saw me, I put up my hand, and he stopped abruptly, eyes wide.

He put the truck in park, killed the engine and jumped from the cab. Glancing down at my feet he commented, "Cute."

"What are you doing here so early?"

"If I'd known you'd look so adorable in your jammies, I would have come sooner."

He towered above me. Without my shoes on, I was a foot shorter than him, and his morning voice was doing something to my insides – something I didn't want to examine.

I drew my brows together and tried to sound offended. "Jammies' is a stupid word. Seriously, Evie is still sleeping, and this beast of a truck is really loud."

“Well, my dear Juliette, I’m not here for Evie. I’m here for Ames. We’re playing golf this morning.”

It was then that I noticed he wasn’t wearing his usual jeans and work boots. Instead, he looked like a frat boy. “Ethan is getting married today, and you guys are playing golf?”

“What else would we do? You girls do your thing, and we do ours.”

I pointed my finger up and down the length of him. “I don’t like this look on you.”

His eyes twinkled. “Want me to take it off?”

Behind me, I heard the door to the second cottage shut. Ames appeared, dressed similarly to Riley, and with a pair of golf shoes in his hands. “Hey, Jules. Cute slippers.”

“They’re Evie’s.”

Riley was still looking at me, but addressed Ames. “You ready?”

Ames opened the door to the truck, responded yes, and said he would see me later.

Riley stepped really close, leaned down, and whispered, “I don’t like this look on you either.”

“Clever. Are you going to follow up with something trite like, ‘It would look better on my bedroom floor?’”

His eyes scanned me from head to toe. “Is that an offer?”

I rolled my eyes. “Please. You’re not my type.”

“From what I’ve seen, you aren’t that discriminating.”

I inhaled sharply. I saw red and I almost slapped him, but then something in his expression shifted. He almost looked surprised at my reaction, like he didn’t expect me to be hurt by his flippant remark. He took a step towards me and started to reach for my hand. He was so close; I could smell the mint from his toothpaste.

My head was spinning with a whiplash of conflicting emotions. I couldn’t determine whether the look in his eyes was more apology or pity, but either way, I felt the need to deflect whatever action he was about to take. He was too close, either for comfort or comprehension, I wasn’t sure which. But it didn’t matter. His body in my personal space was beginning to feel like an intrusion, and I couldn’t sort out my feelings fast enough to tell if it was a welcome one or not. That indecision was making me even more testy, and I hadn’t had enough coffee yet, this early in the morning, to be able to deal with such an avalanche of feelings. Right now, confusion was giving way to renewed anger, and I needed to get him away from me as quickly as possible. So, I chose the words I thought would be the most effective in getting him to back off. Doing my best to keep my dignity, I said, as evenly as I could, “Evie’s scraps don’t interest me.”

His nostrils flared, his eyebrows popping up – and then suddenly he backed up, grinning broadly. “Fair enough, Juliette. I withdraw the remark, as Ethan and Nick would say.”

He turned towards his truck and I shouted after him, “Would you please stop calling me that? You’re annoying me.”

When he shut the truck door, he turned on the ignition and gunned the engine.

Under my breath I said, “You are so pissing me off.”

He waved as he backed down the driveway, until he rounded a corner and I could no longer see him.

Huffing back to Evie’s cottage, I tried to shut the door quietly. If the engine hadn’t woken her, I certainly didn’t want to. But as the door clicked shut, I heard Evie call from her bedroom, her voice gravelly from lack of use, “Did I hear Riley’s truck?”

I looked heavenward. Too late.

I went to her, crawling in behind her and snuggling up. I closed my eyes and rested my head on her pillow. “Yes. He was here to pick up Ames. Apparently, they are going golfing on our rinky-dink course.”

She sleepily said, “They’ll probably just smoke cigars and drink G and T’s. It won’t matter to them what the course looks like.”

“Hmmm. I guess.”

We lay quietly together for a bit, and then I asked her why Riley was going with them.

“I asked Ethan to include him. Also, they’re friends.”

She rolled over so she could see me, and I scooted back on the mattress a little to let her adjust. “Do you not like him?”

“He’s okay, I guess. I don’t know him very well.”

She laughed a little. “That’s a weird thing to say. You’ve been with us a lot.”

“As a group, yes. But I’ve never spent much time talking to him.”

“He said you’re funny.”

I leaned up on my right elbow, adjusting myself so I could see her better. “You talk about me?”

“No, we don’t talk about you. I asked him how the trellis looked, and he said it looked great and that you did a beautiful job on the landscaping. He also said you called him Bob.” She smiled her angelic smile at me.

“Well, I did. You know, like Bob the Builder? It just came out.”

She laughed. “See? Funny.”

I lay back down on my side, cheek on my arm stretched out above me. “Shaye went to take care of the babies. Said she’d bring back breakfast. Do you want some coffee?”

Evie looked at me, tears in her eyes. "I'm getting married today, Julie." My heart squeezed and my eyes stung. She'd waited so long for the right guy. She loved Ethan intensely, and he loved her.

"I know, sweetie." I reached out and brushed her hair off her face. "He's a keeper."

"I couldn't do this without you, Julie. You are my sister. You know that, right?"

I swallowed past the lump in my throat and said softly, "I know."

"Maybe one of Ethan's friends will be good for you."

I jumped out of bed. "I am not having this conversation." I went into the kitchen to make a pot of coffee. "Why are both you and Shaye trying to hook me up with these people? I can find my own dates."

She'd followed me in and was waiting for the coffee to brew. "You do kind of pick the shitty ones."

My eyes bugged out of my head. "Wow! So little faith in me from everyone these days."

"I just want you to be happy."

"And a guy will make me happy?"

"You know what I mean." Her sad eyes met mine. "You did kind of have a melt-down earlier this year over Jason."

A few months before, I'd been cleaning out storage and came across a box of clothes that had belonged to Jason: a pair of old ripped jeans and a hoodie. I'd put them on and proceeded to get drunk.

Ethan had been out of town, and Evie had texted me to meet her for a drink. I'd ended up crying my eyes out and had spent the night with her.

I shrugged and looked down at my feet. "I was having a moment of weakness."

Softly she said, "It's okay to have those, but you have to let him go. You've been holding on to a vision of what could have been, and you're missing out on what could be. He's been gone for a long time. He loved you Julie, but you know he wasn't ever going to commit like you wanted him too."

The coffee beeped. "Lord, Evie, you are starting to depress me. And this is your wedding day. Let's not talk about Jason or setting me up with anyone. This is your day. Here, drink your coffee."

I handed her a mug, and then poured one for myself. "Let's sit outside and enjoy this beautiful morning while we wait for Shaye to feed us."

I didn't wait for a response. Instead, I left the cottage and sat at the bistro set on the tiny patio that looked out towards the water.

Evie followed me out and sat timidly next to me. Quietly she asked, "Are you still my Maid of Honor?"

I couldn't help but laugh. "Yes, but I don't think most people think I have any honor."

We talked about the flowers and the catering until Shaye showed up with bacon-and-egg bagels.

"Oh yum! Give me one of those." She handed me the sandwich and I bit into it, moaning at how delicious it was. "You do know this is seriously the worst thing we could eat this morning."

"You need your protein. And Evie won't be eating at all tonight, I'm sure, so, eat up." She handed Evie a sandwich, and we all ate heartily, washing them down with the orange juice Evie brought out from her kitchen.

The morning passed by way too fast. The three of us took a walk on the beach, throwing rocks into the ocean and simply breathing in the fresh sea air, calming our souls.

By the time we returned to the cottage, it was almost eleven and the hair and makeup artists arrived. They'd brought a trunk of high-end, long-lasting products, and expensive hair tools, putting my personal arsenal to shame.

Shaye went first, and by the time she was finished, Morgan had arrived.

The cottage became a whirlwind of giggling girls, champagne pops, and teasing innuendos about how sexy Ethan was.

If Evie had told me when we were little girls that I would be wearing a dusty blue, strapless, floor length tulle dress as her bridesmaid, I would have ended our friendship right then and there. But her choice was exquisite – soft and flowy, simple and flattering. The layering of tulle was so pretty, I actually felt like a princess myself.

While Evie had her hair styled, I helped Shaye get into her dress. It was a little too tight, and she had to suck in her stomach, while I wrangled the zipper in the back.

"I hope you don't pass out. It's going to be a long day," I said as I gripped the zipper and tried to pull the sides of the dress together.

"My saving grace is that I can't drink, so I won't bloat."

"Your boobs might fall out of the top, you know?" I teased her. She was still breastfeeding, and I was quite certain she'd ordered a smaller size with higher expectations of fitting in it.

She inhaled and said, still holding her breath, "Just zip it up! I can't hold my breath forever."

Zippering it up as fast as I could, I hooked the top closure and told her to relax.

She put her hand to her belly, gasping for a breath. "Oh, good Lord. How did women ever wear corsets?"

“Don’t worry, you’ll be back in your leggings and sports bras before you know it.”

Evie’s mom arrived a short while later with Evie’s dress. We all waited expectantly in the living area of the cottage while she helped her put it on.

While we were all chatting, Morgan told us she was a librarian, and that she was working on her first novel.

“Oh, what do you write about?” I asked as I filled her champagne glass. She took a small sip and muttered, “Romance.”

“Huh, that’s interesting. Historical, or what?” Her pretty skin turned a shade of pink, and I was intrigued. “Aha, naughty romance. Even better.”

We were interrupted by Evie stepping out of her room and twirling in front of us. “Well?”

My heart skipped a beat and I took a few stuttering breaths so I wouldn’t cry. In my mind, she immediately became six years old – the memories of us as girls planning this day with childlike innocence: happy-ever-afters, beautiful dresses, and true love.

I now understood the phrase ‘you took my breath away.’ In Evie’s case, the saying was woefully inept. “Oh, Evie.”

Shaye went to her and took her hands. “You look gorgeous. Ethan is going to cry like a baby.”

Evie stepped out from Shaye’s embrace. “Julie?”

Evie stood before me as the most beautiful creature I’d ever seen. She’d always been pretty, in a girl next door kind of way. Now, with makeup accentuating her arctic blue eyes and elegantly contouring her delicate features, she was otherworldly.

Her shiny black hair had been styled in a voluminous updo – soft and loose, with tendrils framing her face. A tiny halo of flowers and pearls wrapped around her hair, held loosely at the back in a low chignon.

The exaggerated sweetheart neckline on the ivory silk ballgown highlighted her tiny waist. Layers of raw silk handiwork softened the look. When she moved, she seemed to float rather than walk.

She looked dreamy, and everything Evie.

“Evie.” I sighed. I couldn’t even speak. “I can’t even...” I felt my eyes burning, and I blew out my breath slowly. “You look beautiful.”

I heard sniffles behind me and I turned to see her mom already pulling tissues out of her bag. I teasingly scolded her to help keep my own emotions under control. “Martha! You need to keep it together or none of us will get through this day. And our makeup will be ruined.”

She blew her nose. “I know. I just can’t believe my baby girl is getting married.”

Someone had to take control before we all dissolved into a puddle of tears. “She won’t be getting married if we don’t get her there. Where are Nick and Marcus?” I looked back and forth between Shaye and Martha.

“I just texted Nick. He’s on his way,” Shaye said. Just then, Evie’s dad pulled up in his SUV to take Martha, Evie, and myself to the vineyard.

“Do you want us to wait?” I asked Shaye.

“No, go ahead. Morgan and I will be right behind you.” Shaye was putting Evie’s cosmetics in a bag to take with us.

I looked to Evie: my best friend, my most cherished person. “You ready?”

She nodded, conserving her emotions, too afraid to speak.

I smiled lovingly at her, held her hand, and led her to the door. “Then let’s do this.”

END SAMPLE CHAPTERS

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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 cherrywood 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 sculptured 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, embarrassed, dutifully behind my boss.

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, became 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 about to call 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 all-right, 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 mile on my face, I made sure it reached my eyes and responded, “Oh yes! Mark has found the most amazing caterer, and a lovely 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 in 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 time I became so disillusioned, but I can't; it kind of 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 heart on the marquis, had caught my attention.

A few days after that meeting, I 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 touched them gingerly, and with utter fascination, as I waited patiently to be helped.

The dark-haired receptionist 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 watched her unfold herself from the chair and continue to rise. She was *so tall*.

"Uhm, yes, maybe, I don't know." I laughed self-consciously 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 hoped she could ease me into it.

"First time?"

I smiled sheepishly at her. "Obvious, is it?"

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

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

“Are you interested in classes?”

“I don’t know. Maybe?”

She reached for a tri-fold brochure and slid it across the desk.

Unfolding it, and pointing to a schedule, she walked me through the types of classes, and cost. I surreptitiously glanced at her figure, and her lack of clothing, as she talked, and 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 broke out in a huge grin. “Great! Do you want to see the studio?”

“Sure!”

She stepped out from behind the desk, and I 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 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 little snug.

“Now, you have to take off your shoes when you go in the studio. Only bare feet are allowed.” She lifted one foot, took off her shoe, and did the same on the other.

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

“Ready?”

Nodding at her, I 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 polished. The polished wood floors shined up at me, and the red walls at either end gave the room a sultry vibe.

She flipped a light switch, and a soft glow shone 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 captivated me. I was enchanted by the secrets I thought it held. It was quiet and empty, but I felt the pull to touch one of the poles. Reaching out, I touched it gently, and then gripped it with my hand.

Looking over my shoulder at the girl, I said, “What’s your name?”

She was 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 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 stronger, 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 at five p.m. and six p.m. I usually went on Tuesday and Thursday nights, but tonight, 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 mornings stressful meeting.

Renewed enthusiasm for the day sparked inside me. I hurriedly slipped my shoes back on, 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.