

## Chapter 2

CHARLOTTE

Chase is so close, his eyes are locked on mine. I glance at his lips. Do I want this?

My mind says no, but my racing heart says... maybe?

"I mean," I say, barely above a whisper, "I might consider kissing the right guy."

"Wrong answer!" Chase yells in my face.

He steps back, the heat in his eyes gone instantly. It was just an act.

He shakes his head and steps away as he mutters, "You failed the test. Follow the rules, Charley."

Before I can speak, he walks off without another word, leaving me standing there, lips still tingling.

Well, Chase Tucker is still the dick he always was.

I unpack in my room then look around the house. The kitchen is downright breathtaking, with state-of-the-art appliances—easily the nicest room in the whole house. I heard there was a fire a couple years back, and the insurance payout leveled the place up big time.

My eyes zoom in on the stove; it's not just any stove but the Majestic Techno Series dual fuel freestanding range with eight burners, sealed burner, and warming drawer.

Holy crap, this thing cost at least sixteen grand. My hand itches to cook on it, but the kitchen is messy, along with the rest of the house—the living room, foyer, den, home gym, and game room.

*All a mess.*

Despite their frosty reception, I'm sticking to my plan. Cooking and cleaning might just be my way in. Win their stomachs, win their love. Or at least tolerance?

I pulled on my favorite oversized T-shirt—Dad's old college fraternity tee, faded and threadbare from a thousand washes. Ironically, it's the same frat house I now live in. Full circle, or cruel joke? Still undecided.

The cotton clings to my skin, worn in enough to be practically see-through. I knew my nipples were visible through the tattered white fabric, but no one is here to see me, so whatever. It hangs down to my upper thighs, having shrunk over the years.

Right now, I needed something that felt like home. Something that made me feel less like a trespasser in a house full of testosterone. And something I didn't mind getting dirty as I cooked and cleaned this place.

I fish through my luggage for shorts, but I couldn't find any because I'd packed in such a hurry. Oh well, cleaning in my underwear I guess. I am wearing a thong. Where the heck are the granny panties when you need them? Can't find them either. I need to take a packing class or something.

Thong is better than going commando I guess. Plus, I'm alone. I just have to change before the guys get back from practice.

After an hour, I managed to get the house clean. Okay, fine—cleaner. I'd need an industrial power washer and possibly a priest to get it *truly* clean.

Time for the fun part, cooking.

As I start, my phone buzzes on the countertop.

Raven

Haven't heard from you, are you okay?

Charlotte

Yup, about to make dinner. All the cleaning is done finally.

Raven

What are you making? Pot roast? Shrimp? Chicken?

Charlotte

Grilled chicken, red potatoes, and asparagus.

Raven

Yummers!

Raven

Ciao

I place the phone into my back pocket and look around the kitchen. I take out the ingredients and prepare to make the best meal these guys have ever tasted. This was the first meal I ever learned, thanks to my parents. Both are chefs and damn great ones

at that. I see an iPhone dock in the corner on the counter, a little music while I cook, and it sounds like a great idea.

An hour later, I am prepping the table. I was thankful to see they had a dining table big enough to fit all eight of us.

The sound of Kelis's "Milkshake" vibrates off the walls as I wait for the last thing to come out of the stove.

The smell of the food hits my nostrils, and I am in food heaven. I start dancing right there in the kitchen out of happiness.

I stand up and glide my fingers up my torso, pushing my oversized tee to bare my stomach, lost in my little private dancer moment. I would never dance like this at a club or anything, but alone, I like to make it sexy.

I lean back against the counter, accidentally knocking the bowl with my homemade sauce onto the ground. No, no, no, this can't be happening. I drop to my knees, grabbing a roll of paper towels and attempt to salvage what's left.

As I bend over on all fours, I feel my tee shirt ride up over my hips and rest on my stomach, and a gush of cold air against my exposed butt. I start scrubbing. This kitchen remodel cost a fortune, I can't ruin it on my first day here. Just as the panic sets in, I hear a voice.

"Whoa! Quite the show, but I'm not complaining."

Then I see them, all seven of them. Standing in the doorway—the source of the cold air. How long had I been scrubbing before I noticed them? I whip my head around, still on all fours. The realization sets in, as I lock eyes with Chase, they have a full view of my ass, covered only by a thin red piece of fabric, practically in doggy-style.

I scramble upright, limbs flailing, and lunge for the speaker to kill the music.

The guys are eyeing me hungrily, big grins on their faces. I suddenly feel self-conscious. I'm fully exposed, Chase is the only one not grinning. "Out of the kitchen everyone. Now. Quit staring," Chase snaps, his jaw tight.

They grumble, but when the captain speaks, they listen, so they go.

Darren shouts over his shoulder as they go, "Food smells good!"

Someone else yells, "I'd rather eat the cook!"

The guys burst into laughter, and Chase's eyes narrow, his fists clenched like he's seconds from launching himself at them.

Why is he being so protective of me?

Chase strides over, eyes locked on mine, voice low but sharp. “You shouldn’t wear stuff like that around the house.”

“I didn’t mean to, you guys weren’t supposed to be home for another hour. And I wanted to make you all a nice meal, but I didn’t want to stain my—”

He exhales hard through his nose, cutting me off, gaze flicking down my body and then away. “Clothes like that... if they even qualify as clothes, they might cause trouble. Some guys might not be able to resist you. It’s a distraction, and they’re animals.”

His eyes linger on my legs for a second too long, then he turns on his heel and storms off.

I throw on a fresh top—not because Chase said anything, but because I was going to change anyway.

The oven timer dings. I’m humiliated from flashing my new housemates not even twenty-four hours into living together. The last thing I want to do is face them again, but I spent so long on this food. It was supposed to be my olive branch. I take a deep breath. It can still be my peace offering. Maybe they won’t give me a hard time about it. *Doubtful*. I grab the food and carry it to the table, calling out, “Come and get it!”

They barrel in like a stampede, chairs scraping, voices rising.

“Damn, this smells incredible,” someone says, already reaching for a plate.

“Haven’t your mothers taught you to wash up before dinner?” I ask as I slap away his hand.

“Yours might’ve, but mine forgot to mention what to do when the chef’s naked in the kitchen.”

A few of the guys choke on their laughs. I blink, mortified. He just shrugs.

“For the record, best appetizer I’ve ever walked in on.”

“Sorry, dol—Charley, it’s been a while since we had a cook to prepare a real hot meal for us,” Everett says.

I try to change the topic so they don’t notice the blush creeping up on my cheeks. “Oh, so you guys had a cook?” I ask.

“Well, not a cook, but Chase was banging some girl last year, and she loved to cook.” He shrugs his shoulders and takes a seat.

I look behind me at Chase, and he seems like he wants to rip Everett's head off. The guys gather around the table, and I look at them all like they are crazy. Growing up, my mother would always reprimand me for sitting at the dining table dirty. If I was outside playing, I would time myself to come into the house ten minutes before dinner.

Always at the table on time with fresh clothes, mud and dirt free. So, cleaning yourself off before dinner is something I can never stray from.

Raven hates it too. She always tells me I remind her of my mother.

"Uh, guys, don't you think you should freshen up before sitting down to eat?"

Tristan looks at me, or it could be Vincent. Well, one twin looks at me and stands up. "Sorry."

It is Tristan—he was the polite one. I smile as he walks out of the room, followed by everyone but Chase. He sits at the head of the table, watching me intensely. I see he will just make this difficult.

"Are you going to join them?"

"No."

"Then I guess you won't be eating," I say, walking towards him, taking his plate and utensils from the table. He grabs my wrist and tiny little lightning bolts spread throughout my body.

I try to yank my arm away, but that makes him hold on a little tighter. "Let go."

"Put my stuff back."

Is he doing this? "Go get cleaned up, and I will." I yank again and he lets me go. I stumble but quickly regain my balance. He stands up slowly, never taking his eyes off of me.

He grunts and walks out of the room.

I stand out of the way as the guys rush back into the dining room, taking their seats.

"Damn, this looks good," Austin says, and he has a lovely British accent. He rubs his hands, reaching for the chicken.

"No," I shout. Everyone looks at me, confused. "We have to wait for Chase to come down before we can eat. It's rude to eat without everyone present."

“Uhm...” Miguel’s eyes meet mine. “Chase isn’t coming down. He said he has a lot of studying to do.”

“Unbelievable,” I mutter. I take a quick pause, calculating my next move.

I don’t want to overstep my boundaries but come on, he is going to the extreme to mess with me. I’m trying to do a nice thing for these guys! I storm out of the dining room, taking the steps two at a time.

I stand in front of his door, knocking. He swings the door open, folding his arms at his chest.

“Let me get this straight, because I asked you to freshen up, you decide that’s too much trouble, and you’d rather not eat at all? I think that is a bit childish of you. Everyone else is waiting downstairs to eat and they can’t.”

I am sounding like my mother. I’m reprimanding him. Raven is so right.

“Why is that?” he asks, leaning on the door frame. “I’m not stopping anyone from eating.”

“Uh, yeah you are. This is our first dinner as a house family.” *I want you guys to like me. Why are you making it so hard?* I want to scream at him. Can’t he just take my welcoming dinner and be nice?

He pushes himself off the doorframe and steps closer. Too close for comfort.

“Let’s get this one thing straight, Charlotte Withers, you are not family. You are someone who accidentally got placed here. It’s not your fault, but hey, there is nothing we can do about it now. I’ve been with these guys since day one, not you. You make one dinner and expect everyone to follow your rules. I told you once already I am the head of the household, and I don’t like to repeat myself.”

He clears his throat, leaning down to my ear. “Don’t push me; things could get really ugly around here if you do.”

He steps back into his room, slamming the door in my face. I jump back, tears forming in my eyes. I just want everyone to be happy.

I turn to head downstairs and I see the guys peeking around the corner before dashing downstairs. *Great, they saw and heard everything.*

“So, can we eat? We’ve been patiently sitting down here waiting.” Everett lies. Do they think I didn’t see *or* hear them?

“Sure, dig in,” I say, taking my seat at the other end of the table.

“Hey, I wouldn’t take whatever Chase says to heart. He has a lot going on and anything ticks him off,” Vincent reaches over, patting my hand. I give him a weak smile, nodding my head.

“Seriously, Charley, don’t sweat it.” Darren looks at me, smiling before shoving chicken into his mouth. “Oh God, this is so good. Tastes better than Brooke, *and she tastes good.*”

The table groans, telling him to shut up. Well, if Brooke tastes like chicken, I would tell her she must go to the hospital to make sure everything’s all right down there.

The dinner is going well, but I can’t help but stare at Chase’s empty chair.

“Damn, I hate how he gets under my skin.”

They talk about football mostly, then the party that’s starting in a couple hours. “How sick it’s gonna be.” Right now, I do not feel like a party, but I can’t exactly avoid a party that will be happening under our roof.

Dinner is over, and I tell the guys I’ll clean up the mess. Not like I have a choice because they are already climbing the stairs, closing their bedrooms.

After twenty minutes of cleaning, the kitchen and dining room are spotless. I lean against the kitchen island, staring down at my drink.

I hear footsteps and turn around. Chase walks into the kitchen. We stay silent and stare at each other.

“I made you a plate.” I look over at the aluminum-covered plate on the counter. “I figured after all that studying you might get hungry.”

He says, “No thanks.” He grabs a protein bar from the pantry and leaves again.

I hang my head and walk up the stairs in defeat.

I hope the school finds an empty room, and fast.

Next Chapter

Continue to the next chapter of Charlotte and the Seven Frat Brothers