
THE ROOKIE

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The Rookie

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Published by Cathryn Fox

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ISBN Ebook: 978-1-989374-41-2

ISBN Print: 978-1-989374-40-5

I lift my head to the sound of seagulls squawking over the Bay of Fundy and breathe in the briny, ocean air. I've been on the road with the Seattle Shooters for the past hockey season and while I love what I do—I live to play the game—sometimes a guy just needs to return to his roots to center himself.

I take in the picturesque scenery before me, the fishing vessels bobbing in the rising tide, and the numerous tourists who flock to Nova Scotia every year for the scenic charm, friendly people, and of course, the catch of the day—which reminds me why I'm standing at the docks in the first place.

I tug my ballcap down on my head and walk to the Lobster Pound. The huge red building near the docks has been around for as long as I can remember. It's one of many places dotting the shoreline that sell fresh and canned lobster, as well as other products, and supply our orchard with lobster shells. We compost the shells to feed the fruit trees on our family farm. Nothing goes to waste in our neck of the woods.

I swing open the door, a little bell jingling overhead as the air conditioning hits like a refreshing wave, cooling the droplets on my forehead. The smell of seafood fills my nostrils as my gaze goes to the guy at the back of the shop. He's dressed in coveralls, a ball cap, and steel-toed boots. His back is to me as he takes lobster from a gray bin and places them in a big, gurgling tank. I shove my hands into my pockets and size up the fillets creatively arranged on crushed ice in the seafood display counter before me, as I wait for him to finish his task.

After a couple minutes pass and he reaches for another bin, I call out to him, assuming he hadn't heard me come in. "Hey Mack," I say. "I'm here to pick up the shells for the Hatfield farm." I have no idea what the guy's name is, but Mack is just a friendly moniker we call someone when we don't know their name.

The guy straightens, and turns to me. That's when I realize my mistake. Not a guy. Nope, not a guy at all. Just a girl dressed in clothes that made me think she was of a different gender. I'm used to the puck bunnies, and their tight, flimsy designer clothes. The woman before me is the anthesis of those women, and I'm not saying that's a bad thing.

"Oh, I didn't hear—" Her big eyes narrow in on me, and what I only assume was the beginning of a smile morphs into a scowl. It hits like a puck to the face, and I nearly falter backwards.

Okay, I get it. She doesn't like being called Mack. I hold my hands up, palms out. "Sorry...I thought—"

"Your shells are over there," she says and points to a big gray bin beside the door. My apology clings to my tongue as she goes back to what she was doing, completely dismissing me.

Alrighty then. “Thanks,” I say, even though I’m sure she’s no longer listening to me, but I’m a simple farm boy who was raised with manners, and can’t help myself. I’m about to grab the shells and leave when she mumbles something under her breath. Something that sounds like asshole. What the hell?

“Do I know you?”

“You tell me,” she counters, and drops the last of the lobsters into the big tank. She tugs off yellow gloves, and sets them in a nearby sink. I wrack my brain. We’ve been picking up shells from the Baxter family for years. It’s always been a family run business and if memory serves me correctly, there are four girls in the family, and they’ve all been helping out at the pound since they could walk. She’s obviously one of them, but not one I used to see regularly.

Her head lifts and I take in her pretty profile, and that’s when recognition hits. “Charlotte?”

She snorts, and shakes her head. “Don’t you mean, Charlie?”

Okay, now I’m confused. Was there a Charlotte and a Charlie and I’m mixing them up? Wait, isn’t Charlie short for Charlotte? I don’t know, but what I do know is that the Charlotte I remember was a few years younger than me. We very rarely crossed paths here at the pound, but I’d see her when she was leaving U15 hockey practice and I was gearing up for my U18 game. She was one hell of a player, and I used to enjoy watching the team’s highest scorer. I scratch my head, not sure what I ever did to her—I don’t even remember speaking to her—but it’s clear from her scowl that she doesn’t like me much.

She folds her arms and aims those gorgeous blue eyes at me. “Is there anything else you need, Wes?”

I blink at her. “You know me?”

“Of course, I know you,” she huffs out. “Everyone knows you. You’re Weston Hatfield, a famous hockey player. You put Digby, Nova Scotia, on the map.”

“It’s just Wes. I don’t go by Weston.” Not that there is anything wrong with the name—it was, after all, my grandfather’s name—but I just prefer Wes.

“Fine, Wes.” She takes her ballcap off, and bends forward to shake out her long blonde hair. My gaze goes to the sexy bend of her body, the way her overalls hug her curves, not to mention the sweet swell of her ass. As I stare, unable to tear my gaze away, I realize one of two things are happening. Either my jeans shrank in the laundry last night, or I really like the vision before me. She pulls an elastic off her wrist to tie her long hair into a ponytail. My heart beats a little faster against my ribs as she straightens and looks back at me.

“You’re still here?”

My dry throat scratches as I work to swallow. Despite what’s written and rumored about me, it’s been a while since I’ve been with a girl. I’m the new guy on the team, the rookie, and my first season was spent proving myself. I didn’t have a lot of time for extracurricular activities, no matter what was said. Now that the season is over, however... That thought brings on a laugh. Am I really thinking about starting something with a girl who clearly hates me—for reasons I don’t understand? Plus, lessons learned taught me the girls in this town are always looking for a way out. I’m not about to make the mistake of getting involved with anyone from here, only to get dumped when something bigger and better comes along. Not again, anyway.

A line forms on her forehead as she frowns at me. “Something funny?”

“No...I just ah...I don’t mean to sound stupid, but are you or aren’t you Charlotte from U15 hockey.”

“Of course I am.”

“You go by Charlie now?”

The cute freckles around her nose bunch as her lips pinch, and one hip juts out as she plants her hand on it in a no-nonsense manner. Nothing about her clothes, or the way she’s standing there glaring at me should be construed as sexy. It’s not the look she’s going for. She’s not trying to impress me by any means, which means my damn dick should not be hardening.

Down boy.

“You say that like you had nothing to do with it,” she shoots back, blatant accusation dripping from her words.

My head rears back. “What are you talking about?” I barely know her. Why would I have anything to do with her nickname?

She looks like she’s about to explain it, but then she exhales and says, “You won, it’s Charlie.”

I have no idea what I won, but I say, “It suits you.”

She glances at her clothes. “Yeah, of course you’d say that.” Before I can ask what the hell she means, the door opens and in walks a group of tourists, no doubt from the big bus that just pulled up. She calls for help from the back room, and when a girl with very similar features to Charlie’s jumps in to help, Charlie turns her attention to the people stepping up to

the counter. A smile reserved for tourists—or people she likes—lights up her pretty face.

I stand there for a second, a little mesmerized by her beauty as she chats easily with all the sightseers. She hoists a new bin of lobsters up to the counter for her customers to peruse, and for a tiny girl, she's damn strong. That bin must weigh a good fifty pounds. It's probably half her weight.

I get shuffled to the back of the store as more customers pile in, everyone looking for fresh lobster and scallops, and I scoop up the bin with the lobster shells and step out into the fresh afternoon air.

My phone pings and I walk to the wharf to avoid a group of tourists steamrolling my way and pull it from my pocket. I grin as I read the text from Rider, letting me know his arrival time. He and Jules are flying here from Seattle and I'm looking forward to showing them around my province. They're leaving their little girl Sophie with Jules' family and are taking a much-needed adult vacation. I text him back to let him know I'll be at the airport to pick them up first thing tomorrow.

I shove my phone back into my pocket, and lift my head at the sound of papers flapping in the ocean breeze. I spot flyers in a wooden box nailed to the end of the dock, and pull one out to read about the boating and whale watching tours to Brier Island. It's funny. I lived here until I went off to college and I've never once went on a tour or camped at Brier Island. I scan the brochure and check the departure dates for the overnight trip. I have no doubt Jules and Rider would love to do something like this.

“You won't enjoy it.”

I turn to find Charlie coming my way, and as I take in the way her breasts tent the bib of her coveralls, and the soft sway of her hips as she walks, my dick twitches, once again reminding me I haven't been with anyone in a long time. Charlie here though, she's different from the girls who hang out at the rink and pretend they're not cold in their skimpy clothes, even though hypothermia is nipping at their heels. Charlie would likely show up in an ankle length coat, a toque, and mittens. Something tells me she's smart like that.

"What makes you say that?" I ask as she walks past me, and with deft fingers unties a boat from the metal ring attached to the dock like she's done it a million times before. Rope in hand, and with the grace of a seasoned fisherman, she jumps onto the lobster boat and lands with a loud thud.

"Your legs." She efficiently weaves the rope around a metal post attached to the floor of the vessel. It probably has a fancy boat name, but I'm a farm boy, not a fisherman, so I don't know it.

"What about them?" I ask.

"Those aren't sea legs." I glance at my legs and when I look back at her, I'm pretty sure she's trying to hold back a grin. For a split second, I think she might be flirting with me. "Legs like those, they'll have you tripping up and before you know it, you'll be losing your lunch over the side of the boat."

"Are you messing with me?" She steps into the cab, and starts the boat. I watch as she expertly handles the large craft like it's an extension of her small body. "What are you doing? Should you be on that thing alone?" I glance around. "Shouldn't you get the captain? Is he around here? I can get him for you."

"I'm a boat-napper, and I work alone." She puts her fingers to her lips to hush me and I get it, my question was judgmental and sexist. I really didn't mean it that way. I'm truly impressed with her skills. "Tell no one."

I laugh, and so does she, but I don't think she's laughing with me. She spins the big wheel and moves away from the dock, and even though I suspect she's laughing *at* me and my stupid questions, I stand there, a big ridiculous grin on my face as I watch her go. I glance at the brochure again, more intrigued than I was moments ago. The engine revs and I shade the sun from my eyes and look past the dock.

"Where are you going?" I shout out.

"Anywhere but here."

I nod. I get it. She wants out of rural Nova Scotia, like every other person our age. Fishing and farming aren't for everyone. I wave the brochure at her. "Do you run these tours?"

"Of course not. That would be a man's job."

Okay, another stupid question, and another sarcastic response I deserve. But I like it. She's non-apologetic, seems completely comfortable with who she is and what she does, and she can handle a big-ass boat all by herself. There's something so damn real about her, it taunts me—draws me in.

Before I can call her on her lie, she shakes her head. "Don't do it, Wes," she yells back at me, her words barely audible over the roar of the engine.

"I'm doing it, Captain," I holler back, and as she shakes her head, I can't deny that I might want to 'do it' with her. Might?

Yeah, okay. I for sure want to 'do it' with her, despite the fact that she hates me. But nothing about getting involved with Charlie—a local girl more likely than not looking for a ticket out of rural Nova Scotia—is smart or wise, and I usually like to listen to that smart, inner voice and make informed decisions.

Screw that, Mack.

CHARLIE

If you think I was flirting with him, I wasn't. I was simply trying to engage in polite conversation, doing the best a girl can do when she only has one working brain cell. Apparently, all the others packed a bag and headed south the second Weston—or rather Wes—Hatfield stepped into the Lobster Pound. I heard he was back in town, and figured sooner or later I'd run into him. We do, after all, provide his farm with lobster shells on a regular basis. I just hadn't expected my far too needy body to react quite the way it had when he strolled into the shop with pants that fit too nicely, and a T-shirt that did little to hide rippling ab muscles. I hate the boy who relentlessly teased me the winter before I grew boobs.

My God, it's been a little over twenty-four hours since I set eyes on his gorgeous face, and lean muscled body, and I'm pretty sure my nipples are still hard enough to shuck scallops—now that would be a sight to see for the upcoming shucking competition. Nevertheless, I might not like him, but that doesn't mean I don't know a hot guy when I see one.

Seriously, though. I hope he takes my advice and doesn't sign up for a tour. I must check on my online reservation system. We're all booked except for this coming weekend. If he doesn't jump on it, he likely won't get it, and I'd rather go a weekend without income than spend it with him.

Spending hours on a boat with him, our bodies in close proximity with no way to escape, would be pure torture and might just send my body into hyperdrive. The last thing I want is for the cocky hockey player who teased me at the rink to know I'm attracted to him. I mean, did you see his face, acting all innocent, like he hadn't tormented me about my non-existent curves, or breasts, calling me Charlie instead of Charlotte and rudely joking that I must have signed up for the girls' team by mistake. The nickname eventually stuck and I don't hate it, but that doesn't mean he's not the world's biggest asshole, either.

Thank God we were never in the same school. He's older than me by three years, so by the time I'd reached high school, he was off to college, and up until yesterday I was able to avoid him by running the other way when I saw him coming, or ducking into the back office when his folks sent him to pick up the lobster shells.

I shove the last of the brochures into my bag and turn the sign on the door from open to close. The warm night air falls over me as I make my way along the shore to restock the shelves with my tour pamphlets. It's a side hustle I started last summer. With lobster season finished until the fall, I repurposed the boat for whale-watching tours. I'm an entrepreneur at heart, and I have great management skills, if I do say so myself. That's why I went to the city for a four-year degree in business management, which I've not really put to use outside my hometown. A measure of guilt eats at

me. The truth is, I love it here in rural Nova Scotia. I love working the fishing boat with my sisters as well as the salty fishermen we hire to help out. Dad left after his fourth daughter was born, leaving Mom, and me, since I was seven, and the oldest, to run the show ourselves.

I guess seven years into the marriage he decided this life wasn't for him. He wanted different things, but lobster fishing is in my mother's blood and according to her, the only thing she was good at. She's a fifth-generation seafarer, and my father wanted her to walk away from it—wanted her to be something she wasn't.

I walk along the shore, contentment weaving its way through my blood as seagulls circle above, looking for a late day snack. I breathe in the thick, salted air, and I get why Mom couldn't leave. I love it here too, but I have a degree she paid for, and I don't want it to go to waste. She's making sure all of us girls get our education, and really, she doesn't need any of us to help her with the business. She can hire out like any other company, and she's wanted to make sure she gave us opportunities, because she never wanted to keep us here for fear that we'd come to resent it—like our father.

The sea isn't in everyone's soul.

While it is in mine, there's guilt too. Mom worked hard to make sure I was educated, and I can't let that money go to waste, which is why I applied for a couple of jobs in Toronto last month, and I really shouldn't be hoping they fall through. But she knows I'm good at other things besides deep sea fishing, and wants me to explore my opportunities.

The sea isn't going anywhere, luv.

I grin as her words dance in my brain, and music blares from the open windows at Captain Jack's Fish Shack. I cut down

the path, and pull open the glass door, and the smell of deep-fried food reaches my nostrils. They do make the best fish and chips around and my stomach grumbles, reminding me I'd skipped lunch today. The tourist season is picking up, and while that's good for the bottom line, I barely had time to breathe.

I reach into my bag and pull out a handful of brochures as I spin the rack with my other hand, to see how many of my old fliers are left. A loud booming voice reaches my ears and my entire body reacts in ways I wish it wouldn't.

Wes Hatfield.

Really? Wes is here? At Captain Jack's? Does this mean I'm going to run into the big jerk everywhere I go? I grip the metal rack to stop it from spinning, and slowly, carefully, glance around the display, but the second I do, I wish I hadn't. As if sensing my eyes on him, Wes' head lifts, and those light brown eyes latch on mine. Damn. Damn. Damn. I jump back to hide, but it's too late for that. Too late to pretend I wasn't checking him out, even though I wasn't—I don't think—and I have nothing to feel guilty about, so I have no idea why I'm trying to make myself invisible.

I shake my head at my foolishness, and as I pull myself together, I recklessly start jamming brochures into the slot. A strong wave of perfume wafts before my nose as Breton Boudreau, Wes Hatfield's high school girlfriend walks by, a coffee carafe in her hand. I'm surprised she's still here. Those who don't join the family business leave right after high school. My friends are all long gone, and of course, none of the people I met at college are working in this podunk town.

I keep my head down, but I can still feel Wes' eyes on me. From my peripheral vision, I spot Breton walking to his table,

an extra little sway to her hips when she approaches. I almost snort. Maybe she's trying to get him back. It's not like she has any competition.

Taking my time, I clean up the rack, and I'm not lingering because I want to eavesdrop. That's not my style. I'm taking my time because I made a mess of the arrangement, and I want my brochures to stand out. If there is one thing I love, it's being on the boat, touring the bay for whales, or hiking Brier Island.

Once I'm done shuffling, I stand back and admire my handiwork. I'm pleased with the brochures I made weeks ago, and love how the color pops and grabs attention. Ready to move on to the next restaurant, I hike my bag up higher on my shoulder, and I'm about to turn when a big heavy palm lands on my shoulder.

The heat of his skin scorches my body and travels downward, creating warmth and need in every erogenous zone along the way. Oh boy.

"Hey," a deep male voice says, and I don't need to turn to know that big hand belongs to Wes.

Keep your cool, Charlie.

Do not act like you want to throw yourself at him and beg him to take you, right here, on the restaurant floor. I take a fast breath and move forward until his hand falls from my shoulder. With my lips pinched tight, I turn to face him, but what I failed to do was brace myself against that small smile flirting with those ridiculous kissable lips.

"What?" I blurt out, flustered, aroused...confused at the things this man makes me feel.

He holds his hand up, the same one that left a burning imprint on my shoulder. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to grab you like that.” He looks over his shoulder and rubs his chin. Why the hell is he acting so cagey? Wes Hatfield isn’t as calm and cool as he’s trying to portray. How interesting.

“What *did* you mean, then?”

His laugh is nervous, forced, and he takes a small step closer. The smell of deep-fried food is replaced with the enticing aroma of freshly washed skin, and laundered clothes. I think he uses the same fabric softener as I do. Ohmigod, why the hell am I thinking about fabric softener when he’s standing so close, crowding me...arousing me?

I clear my throat and step back a bit, needing a reprieve from his gravitational force, but he follows me, keeping close. Electricity arcs between our bodies, but I’m sure I’m the only one feeling it. I might have grown boobs and hips, but they’re certainly not noticeable beneath my loose-fitting T-shirt and jeans, and from the women I’ve seen on this man’s arms—our local paper always follows their homegrown hero—I am so not his type.

Another little nervous laugh bubbles in his throat, and he glances over his shoulders a third time. I lean to the side to see what’s ruffling his feathers, and I spot Breton standing at his table, her eyes narrowed, brimming with shock and disbelief, as she stares at us.

“What’s going—”

He puts his hands on my shoulders again and I forget what I was going to say next. “Please, just go with this. I’ll explain everything later.”

I open my mouth again, and his lips land on mine. Wait, what the hell does he think he's doing? That wasn't a damn invitation... Oh, hey, wow, that's kind of nice. Soft. Sweet. Hmm, he tastes like warm rum, and I could use a glass or ten at the moment. That's probably the reason I'm sliding my arms around his body, widening my fingers so I can touch every inch of his hardness. Yeah, yeah, that has to be it. Nothing else makes sense. I don't even like this guy. His fingers on my shoulders tighten, and that's when I realize my eyes are shut. I open them to find light brown eyes that can only be described as salted caramel staring back. Our mouths hang out a little longer, our lips a breath apart, as he whispers to me.

"Thank you."

"What?"

"For pretending..."

Pretending? What the hell is he talking about?

"Can you please do it for a second longer?" he asks. "I know it's a lot to ask, but..."

"Sure," I say, my voice a breathless whisper. I part my lips without hesitation, ready to kiss him a second longer, or maybe even an hour, when his deep voice curls around me.

"I really appreciate it."

With my 'good-decision-making-skills' on hiatus, it's hard to understand what he's saying to me. Cripes, I don't really believe in fairy tales or happily ever after, but I feel like Cinderella with birds chirping and singing as they fly and dance around my head. "Appreciate it?"

“Yeah, the pretending...you...me...” His dark lashes fall slowly over those rich, caramel eyes. “This is for show.” He gestures with a nod toward Breton, and that’s when that one working brain cell I have left smacks some sense into me.

I straighten and square my shoulders. “Yeah, sure. I know.”

Nope, didn’t know. Still kind of don’t know what’s going on.

“I’ll pay you back for this. I promise.” He tugs on my hand to set me into motion. The room is wobbly in my view, and I can’t seem to focus on anything. Like a fish following a shiny lure, I blindly let him lead me to his table and he holds his hand out for me to slide in. I drop down and shimmy to the other side, thankful to be off my feet for a second.

I smile at the two people seated across from me, and instantly recognize Rider Lewis, aka The Wingman. The gorgeous woman with him must be his wife. Breton is saying something—correction, sputtering and spitting something—and my gaze slowly turns her way. Why do I feel like I’m caught in a bad nightmare, and everything is moving in slow motion?

“...You have got to be kidding me,” Breton says, and the strangers seated across from me squirm uncomfortably, but Wes here, he throws his arm around me, and tugs me closer. I shouldn’t like the way my body presses against his, nor should I like the strength in his embrace, and the need it arouses in me. His fingers skate over my skin, and in no way at all should that reduce me to a ridiculous schoolgirl crushing on the popular jock. I never did that back in high school, and have no intentions of losing myself, or who I really am, in this guy. Which means I need to get the hell out of here, pronto.

His hand slides up and he lightly brushes my cheek. I lean into him, absorbing his warmth. Okay, what was that I just told myself?

“She...she plays for the other team, Wes,” Breton blurts out, and heat crawls into my face as her words register. I’ve never once corrected the rumor, never cared too. If people want to think I prefer girls over guys, let them.

Wes’ hand tightens for a second and then he laughs it off. “Small towns and their rumor mills.” He winks at me. “Maybe I’m glad there were rumors. Otherwise, some other guy might have snatched this beautiful woman up before I found my way back home.”

I smile at him, and my lust-rattled brain slowly starts to put the pieces together—he wants me to pretend to be his girlfriend. I’m not sure why. Maybe it’s some weird revenge scheme against his ex, or some ploy to make her jealous and win her back, and I just happened to be at the right place at the right time for him. Or the wrong place at the wrong time. Yeah, that’s more like it.

“You know I can’t stay long, babe,” I say, falling into the ridiculous role, for reasons I can’t explain. “I still have some work to do.”

“We were just about to order dessert. You can stay for dessert, can’t you? You know they make the best apple pie here.”

“I...I...”

“Please,” he murmurs quietly as Breton stomps off. “It’s the least I can do, you know, for letting me kiss you like that.” He stares at me with those syrupy eyes, and as my heart beats faster, I’m suddenly back in fairy tale land, breathing in a bed

of daisies as I run barefoot through the wide-open meadow, the sun in my hair, the birds singing a love....

Ohmigod, kill me now.

“I suppose,” I say. What the hell am I doing? What happened to that no-nonsense woman who promised herself she’d never get drawn in by a charming guy? Then again, I’m a bit of a softie when it comes right down to it, always the first to jump in when someone needs help, which clearly Wes needs. Is it really going to hurt me to have a piece of pie with him and his friends—payment for letting him kiss me? Afterward, I can simply go out of my way to avoid him, but pie for payment, yeah, why not? And no, I am not going to be thinking that I should be the one rewarding him somehow because that kiss was...traumatizing in the most delicious ways that are going to keep me up at night.

“You’re welcome,” I say, the fight going out of me.

“I appreciate that you didn’t stab me in the nuts with a fork when I kissed you.”

“Only because I didn’t have one in my hand,” I lie. I liked it. A lot.

He grins and his friends burst out laughing. “So if I ever do that again, I’ll be sure not—”

“We won’t be doing that again.”

His brow crinkles. “That bad, huh?”

There’s a hint of teasing in his voice but I also sense he’s fishing for information. He can’t seriously think he’s a bad kisser. Can’t seriously be hoping I liked it. Which, of course, I did.

“Uh huh.”

“Yeah, well I appreciate you helping me out.” He glances at Breton, then briefly looks down, a frown on his face, and I can’t help but think he’s remembering something painful. “I can’t...”

Breton hurt him. I hate that. I hate seeing anyone hurting. Yeah, I know he was mean to me, but still...

I smile at his friends as he struggles with some internal war. “Nice to meet you both. Rider, I’m a fan.”

His smile is big and genuine, and there is a real warmth about him as he extends his hand to shake my hand. “Thanks. This is my wife, Jules.”

“They’re visiting from Seattle,” Wes tells me like he’s back on his game.

“Nice, I hope you enjoy your stay. How long are you here?”

“For a week.”

“I suppose I’ll see you around then.” It’s Wes I’m avoiding, not these two.

“Yeah, you will be,” Jules says a big smile on her face. “We just went online and booked a tour on your boat. We can’t wait. We’re so excited to go whale watching and camping. Aren’t we, Rider?”

“You bet.”

“Great,” I say through clenched teeth as I force a smile and remind myself to bring along a short plank. You know, so I can take a nice long walk off it.

FML.