



DIE FOR

You

MacKenzie Scottish Crime Family

AMARIE AVANT

DIE FOR YOU

MacKenzie Street Crime Family

AMARIE AVANT

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ISBN: 9798598515037

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CONTENTS

GLOSSARY

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

Chapter 22

Chapter 23

Chapter 24

Chapter 25

Chapter 26

Chapter 27

Chapter 28

Chapter 29

Chapter 30

Chapter 31

Chapter 32

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

[Chapter 37](#)

[Chapter 38](#)

[Chapter 39](#)

[Chapter 40](#)

[Chapter 41](#)

[Chapter 42](#)

[Chapter 43](#)

[Chapter 44](#)

[Chapter 45](#)

[Chapter 46](#)

[Chapter 47](#)

[Chapter 48](#)

[Chapter 49](#)

[Chapter 50](#)

[Chapter 51](#)

[Chapter 52](#)

[Chapter 53](#)

[Chapter 54](#)

[Chapter 55](#)

[Chapter 56](#)

[Chapter 57](#)

[Chapter 58](#)

[Chapter 59](#)

[Chapter 60](#)

[Chapter 61](#)

[Chapter 62](#)

[Chapter 63](#)

[Chapter 64](#)

[Chapter 65](#)

[Chapter 66](#)

About the Author

Foreshadowing

GLOSSARY

This non-inclusive glossary includes words in the story, many of which can be found in Merriam-Websters Dictionary (MW.com). However, it's my hope that, while the story sounds authentic, you're able to read without comprehension issues. So, grab a glass of wine or a frothy pint, and enjoy!

Aff = Off

Auld = Old

Aye = Yes

Bairn = Child

Bampot = Idiot

Bawbag = Ballbag; scrotum

Baws = Balls (testicles)

Boke = Gag/ dry heave

Clipe = Tell on someone, a snitch

Crabbit = Moans a lot

Da = Dad

Daftie = Daft/ silly person... playful insult

Deid = Dead

Didna = Did not, didn't

Dinna = Do not, don't

Dreich = Dull or gloomy

Eejit = Idiot

Geggie = Mouth

Gub = Mouth

Heid = Head

Jobby = Poop

Ken = Know

Mam = Mom

Mind = Remember

Nae = No

Ned = Petty criminal

Nugget = Fool

Numpty = Idiot

Peely-wally = Pale and sickly looking

Piece = Sandwich

Skelp = A small smack

Skelpit lug = A smack to the ear

Tatties = Potatoes

Wabbit = Exhausted

Wean = Child

Wheesht = Be quiet

Wit = What

Ye = You

Yer = Your

Ye're = You are

CHEVELLE

AT THE CONSTANT, SHARP SOUND OF *LEVELING UP*, ONE would've thought we were operating penny slots at a casino in Vegas. But I was only twelve years old; my fingers moved lightning fast across the PlayStation 2 controller. Sonic ripped around on the television. The thirteen-year-old beside me had a crummy cigarette, swiped from his father, between gorgeous, thick lips. Might I add Leith wasn't a regular white boy attempting to be cool either. No, he had that shit down. Gawd, I was secretly in love with him. Or maybe the love was written all over my face.

I should also add that Leith had an accent. After watching him toss a haymaker at the nose of a bully, we all learned Leith hailed from Scotland. Just one hit had humbled everyone's terrorizer and crushed his nasal bone. So, I kept my opinion of how dreamy Leith sounded, and my occasional difficulty with comprehending him, to myself.

"Turn this up," Leith ordered, breathing out a puff of smoke.

"Remote's broken. Sound button fell off the tv so... ." I shrugged since we were at the age where everything ended on a nonchalant note.

Leith dragged his fingers through his thick dirty blond, perfectly disheveled hair. Red gold streaks glinted in the light. *Would it be creepy if I reached over and did the same?* His hair

smelled good. He smelled *good*. When he was in the zone, kicking ass on *Resident Evil*, I sniffed him.

Leith groaned. “*Och!* I dinna wanna hear yer *mam* being *fecked* ten ways—”

“She ain’t my mom.”

Eyes the color of a tropical ocean pinned me for an answer. I softly cleaved my tongue between my teeth. *Spoke too soon.*

Leith pointed the cigarette at me. “Who the *feck* is the lass to ye, Chevelle?”

That was the hardest question anyone would ever ask me. The lady had been my mother’s best friend since I could remember. When my parents took me on extravagant vacations, she was the house sitter or went island hopping in the Bahamas with us.

But when I was nine years old, I remember sitting, frozen on a grand staircase in the wealthiest neighborhood of Chi-Town. A cop crouched down and rubbed the tears away from my blurry eyes with the side of his hand. As he came into focus, so did the hardened look of regret on his dark brown face. He asked me a few questions and took my hand. While escorting me to the door, he stopped to look up at a painting of quintessential black love—my parents—looming high in the foyer.

Outside, my eyes swept over a coroner’s van near the tiled water fountain. The police officer’s voice struggled to seem excited while he mentioned the gadgets in his police cruiser. While I sat in the driver’s seat, the officer kneeled in the door. The speaker of his walkie-talkie blared. Someone ordered him to call Child Protective Services as he explained the various buttons to me with a warm smile. A second after I pressed the siren, Momma’s best friend arrived.

The bitch was supposed to be my second-chance family. She insisted I call her *New Mom*, and so I did.

For the next few years, we bounced around, lived nicely even. Later, I’d learn how we were blowing my trust fund. But

that's greedy people for you. The bigger they smile in your face, *the harder you fall*.

Once broke, Lady looked at twelve-year-old me in resignation and said she'd do me the favor she and my mother had not been granted. Instead of dropping me off at foster care, where she had met my mom, she dropped me off in public school in Long Beach. When the proverbial slumber party ended, I threatened to speak with the attorney who held my trust. It was a slap in the face to know the guy had been banging New Mom and doctored the family will, hence my dilemma. I threatened to call 911. New Mom mentioned the tragedy surrounding my parents, particularly my father. I wasn't much for dwelling on the past—those were thoughts I already needed out of my head. *Checkmate*.

We forged a new relationship. A marriage of sorts, where we'd skipped over the "for better" and careened straight to the "for worse" part. Thus, I callously revoked New Mom's suggested title, referring to the bitch as *Lady*.

"She's not yer mam?" Leith mumbled, "I just guessed."

The edge of my mouth tipped a little. Like hell was I gonna relive that look of pity the cop gave me. I hadn't seen it since, and I wouldn't see it now. "You know Linny at school?"

"Yep." He nodded.

Linny was biracial. On outings with her mother, people assumed their relationship was of a nanny/child capacity. I made a similar insinuation since I was lighter, with a honey complexion, like my father. Lady was black like my momma.

I feigned annoyance, which wasn't hard. "Today, she's my nanny."

"*Och*, I get it." Leith laughed.

He didn't get it. He had a mom who loved him, and he probably wouldn't trade her in no matter what shady shit his parents were up to. His family was loyal. They'd die for each other. Some kids at school whispered that they'd *kill* for each other too. But at that moment, the mystery behind Leith's vibrant blue eyes sent another sigh breezing through my lungs.

“Yeah, I love her, my ... *mom*.” I cleared my throat, thanking my lucky stars that, in the next room, Lady was no longer getting her brains screwed loose.

A few minutes later, Leith had the controller, sitting back, his legs spread wide. His concentration granted me the reprieve of smiling and staring. The door burst open. I cringed at the sight of the john leaning against the doorframe.

Eyes dead on his, I growled, “Not today, *John*. You see I have company.”

The john removed the cowboy hat from his head—a non-necessity in Southern California. Although, I *had* hoped he’d cover up john number two, nestled against his pale thigh. “All I see is a little boy.”

Leith was up in seconds. “Get those eyes checked. I’m nae wee boy!”

“You a leprechaun?” The john chuckled, and I presumed he was making fun of Leith’s accent since Leith was a cool 5’ 7” to the john’s 5’ 8” or 9”, and still growing.

“I’m nae *feckin’* Irish *paddy*. And we MacKenzies have more respect for our women!”

“MacKenzie?” The john’s eyes requested verbal confirmation from me. When I offered a smug glower, he stuttered, “You’re not ...”

“Aye! Next time, I’ll cut that wee tongue out yer mouth, ye *clatty* bastard.” Leith’s accent thickened. Though the rest of his statement was undecipherable, his tan skin tinged red, driving the threat home. Leith slammed the bedroom door, then his ocean blue gaze pierced through me. “*Wit’s* John’s surname?”

“John? He’s, uh, one of Lady—” I gulped, not sure if it was because of Leith’s stance or my impending reference. “One of Mom’s *johns*.”

“I see. I’ll know it soon.” Leith ran his index finger over his bottom lip, unaware of what it did to me, while deep in contemplation. “He seems to know ye, Chevelle. How much?”

My eyes narrowed. World's biggest crush or not, Leith crossed the line. "*Excuse me?*"

"*Och! I'm a feckin' eejit, some idiot?*"

"Some say you're the smartest kid in class." *So, stop looking at me like a botched science project. I'm good!* Picking up the PlayStation controller, I tapped it in my hand then discarded it. Gaming enabled me to remain numb, but frayed emotions would wreck my score.

"Still need an answer," he insisted.

"Not *that* well, Leith. Okay?"

A slow smile came to his face as if contemplating something. My insides melted into putty. "Ye're my *hen*, Chevelle."

"You called me *hen*?" I snapped each word through tensed, defensive lips. My momma had raised me to be a civilized individual before she fell by the sword. Momentarily, however, I'd forgotten. Leith could sucker punch me way across to Timbuktu. My gaze flicked over his attractive face, and I warned myself to hold tight to my fury. "How dare you!"

Leith shook his head and laughed at me. It almost added insult to injury until I noticed the warmth in his eyes. He wasn't laughing *at me*. The affection starved girl I had become thawed. My heart thumped excitedly as his smile turned my brain, my bones, my soul, into putty. The truth clicked: his *hen*, *his girl*. Speechless, I savored his words. "My hen, my lass, mine."

The air charged with electricity. Leith's arms encircled my waist. Unable to recall my last hug, my heart raced, pounding in my ears as he again called me *his*.

For those few years prior to the wool falling from my eyes, Lady had erased the horror that befell my parents. She'd replaced the loneliness with toys and shiny things for the two of us and drugs and alcohol for herself. Once the motivating factor drained from her bank account, the shiny things disappeared, and I was introduced to the empty vessel. That version of Lady had transformed me into a spirit in a half shell

when I found out she stole my family's money and threatened me with a worse fate. Since then, I cared for nothing until Leith came along.

Think of your boy crush from back in the day. Not the one who just made you blush. The one you would remember until hell froze over.

That was Leith MacKenzie. All he ever had to be was the world's biggest crush. But in that precise second, he became more.

You're probably wondering what awful fate befell my parents. We were living on top of the world before they died by the gun. Their demise should've cautioned me against all things MacKenzie. But I was twelve, and this was love. So that day, something greater, something more exhilarating than I could ever imagine, was forged from the fear and hunger I had for Leith MacKenzie. I became his; he became mine. Still, I was my father's daughter, no matter how much I loathed admitting it. I knew the ins and outs of Dad's life. So, I wouldn't make the same mistakes Momma had. But there was no way in hell I'd let Leith go.

LEITH

CURRENT DAY

Keeping secrets from the one ye love is a bad idea. Keeping secrets from a woman ye personally taught how to shoot a .380, no matter how pink and frilly the gun is, well that makes me a *feckin' eejit*.

Chevelle threatened me on our prom night. With her tawny thighs clamped together, she promised to unlock the key to her treasure. But I had to choose her or the power of my clan. MacKenzies dabble in it all. Racketeering. Robbery. Arms dealing. Drugs. Butchery of body parts.

Well, I said *feck* the family business. Not because I wanted to cut the tightest piece of pussy I would ever have.

Nae.

That ain't me. Besides, the bonny girl became mine the day some *bampot*, some idiot, with his floppy wee *baws*, walked into her room naked as the day he was born.

I've never pushed drugs, and my parents wouldn't have me do *shite* against my moral character. I *had* never killed a man either. But the day Chevelle casually mentioned her adoptive mom crying about her highest paying john missing his usual time, I didna lie to her.

Aye, the John was deider than a wooden plank.

Nae, I'd not *personally* killed him. My sweet, sweet Chevelle should have chosen her words wisely. My mam finished him off herself. Da watched, and he told all his *weans*, me included, to chop the *ned*, the petty criminal, into wee pieces. "Do away with the rubbish," he said.

Today is a new bloody day, though. I have a wife that I'd move the *feckin'* world over for, and I'm breaking her heart. She doesn't even know it. I look at myself through the rearview mirror of my Audi convertible. My blue-green eyes bug.

"*Feck!*" I reach into the glove compartment to grab the baby wipes Chevelle stashed there. I rub the specks of blood from my jaw. My lovely wife will have so many words for me if she saw the faintest indication of blood. *What happened*, she'd ask. *You're not bleeding*, she'd observe. *Where'd the blood come from? Why aren't you bleeding?* I'd make a joke of my response, ask her why she'd want me to be bloody *feckin'* bleeding? The attempt to see her smile would fall short, and in the end, I'd be *fecked!*

Last Sunday, I woke up with my wife, kissed my three-year-old on the forehead, traveled to Silicon Valley for the workweek, and I wasn't a murderer.

Today. I glance down at my hands. Nae matter how much I washed them, red taints my nail beds and stains the grooves of my calloused fingers.

"Breathe," I warn myself, rubbing a baby wipe over the flecks. At least, I'd tossed the suit I was wearing.

I pull up to our home. Getting out of my Audi, I slam the door, edging around our muscle car, a Chevelle SS. If it's not an import, I'm a Chevy guy.

I head through the garage into our one-level home. A glass wall offers a view of the Southern California coast of Laguna Niguel. On the balcony, a flight of stairs leads down to the beach. We had a fence put in the day Mia scoot-crawled across the deck. Another outdoor staircase leads above the house to a pool, jacuzzi, and an area where Chevelle gardens.

I climb up the steps to the roof and glance past the custom outdoor kitchen to an area of potted plants.

“Go back inside, Leith.” I hear her voice before I can make out where Chevelle’s squatting down between the pots. Thick, spirals of hair rustle in the wind. All I see is the top of my wife’s head.

“Chevelle, ye said as soon as I got home to—”

“Leith, get!”

I told myself to exhale in the car. In this precise second, I do so. I breathe *feckin’* easy.

“Glad to see someone’s happy to see me,” I mutter, though her moment of genius has secured my safety. Chevelle will either beg me to come running when she’s crossbreeding various herbs or shoo me away if she’s too engrossed in something new like she is now. Like I once was about computers and coding.

“You know I love you, baby. I’ll make it up to you later. Bye!” A slender hand with manicured fingers pops up between green foliage, pointing to a baby monitor. “Check on your minion.”

Though our Mia is now a wee tot, she’s a very busy *wean*.

Over my shoulder, I call out, “When I get out of the shower, I expect me a frothy pint.” *Make it five pints, enough kick to drink me under the bloody table.*

With nothing but the sound of Chevelle’s snickering, I head back down the stairs, reproaching myself for the life we made for ourselves. The life *I* made for us. I step back into the house.

Chevelle has always been content in my arms. From what she’s shared about her parents in the past, they had some money. Sometimes, she gets skittish around too much money, though.

I lean against the door to Mia’s room. The entire area is filled with princess furniture. In the center of the bed, my lassie sleeps. Her deep chestnut hair has muted fiery red

highlights. Her chubby arms are raised over a humongous head I often tease her about.

I lean down, kiss the big forehead her mom gave her, and murmur per the norm, “I’d die for ye, Mia.”

I stop from heading back to the garage where there’s blood and more DNA evidence in the trunk of my Audi.

“Dinna push it, Leith.” The deid lad will have to wait until later.

I head into my room for the shower. We live in a smart house with all the luxury we never needed. As an application and software developer, I can buy pretty much anything my family wants. My hen rarely asks for much. When Chevelle got pregnant, I got greedy, sought nothing but the best for our wee bairn.

It feels like hot rain spilling from the massive showerhead, but I’m numb to it.

“Incoming call from Leith MacKenzies’ cellphone. Confirm action?” the virtual assistant announces through a speaker along the shower walls.

“Who’s ringing?”

“Unknown.”

“Where is Mrs. MacKenzie?” I inquire.

“Mrs. MacKenzies’ status is on the rooftop of the MacKenzie home.”

“Answer. Volume low. Cut call if Mrs. MacKenzie enters the house.”

Gritting my teeth, I jab the button to turn off the water. With the steam continuing to bellow in the shower, I settle on the Venetian plaster bench.

A voice scrambler comes in loud and clear. “You got your hands bloody, Leith. I knew you had it in you.”

“You know *shite* about me,” I growl.

“When you took a position at Infinity Corp, I assumed it was to align your interests with mine for the sake of your family.”

The hot steam surely does not exceed my internal core. “Ye assumed I was operating on behalf of my clan. I’m a man apart from them. Dinna think that makes me weak or someone ye can threaten.”

“Threatening you wasn’t my intention, Mr. MacKenzie. Though I’m not a fan of assumptions, you’re right. I presumed you created an app for Infinity Corporation to have a bit of fun. All the power in the world—*data*—my friend, is at the tips of our fingers.”

Nae, I still feel the tips of my fingers pushing down the eyelids of the deid *eejit* from earlier. “I’m a good lad.”

The caller laughs at my hypocritical statement. “I understand. You keep your families separate. The big, powerful one from the tiny, intimate one you have there.”

“You dinna speak of them!” I snarl so hard spittle flies from my clenched lips. “As a matter of fact, I’m parting ties with ye.”

“You’re dissociating yourself with me? Tell me, Mr. Leith MacKenzie, what’s my name?”

My eyelids twitch, fingers clamp along the edge of the shower seat. The name behind the automated voice is beyond me.

“I take it you’re not aware of who I am?” A clipped snigger comes through the line.

I bite my tongue. Let ‘em keep talking, and he does.

“That’s alright, Mr. MacKenzie. My identity isn’t important. Earlier, you were quite the hitman. You may have thought that nobody was around.”

“Next, ye’re gonna say that ye’re bloody everywhere?” I snort.

“Everywhere that matters. I saw your patience when you attempted to deescalate Mr. Jiang. You had no idea why he

was angry. Then you defended yourself as is your right as an American citizen. First shot to his kneecap—such a courtesy. But the one straight between the eyes, priceless.”

I contemplate. *Give me something to identify ye by, ye bawbag.* And what was Mr. Jiang’s connection to the stranger blackmailing me? Who at Infinity Corp had reprogrammed the social media app I created for their own gain?

“Poppa MacKenzie trained you well. Ultimately, you chose the straight and narrow for Chevelle and Mia.”

“Say their names again,” I threaten. The steam continues to dance around my hard, focused gaze. “If my clan were to learn about you—”

“I welcome it.”

My eyes shut, burning. All the promises I made Chevelle warp in my mind, tormenting me, reminding me of the lad I became, and how I blew it to *shite* today. “What of the cops, ye son of a rats-faced cunt!”

“Not possible. Your actions today made you more than culpable, Leith. Rage is not your friend.”

I let out a heavy, silent sigh, considering the life I took.

“Mr. Jiang’s murder has forged our relationship. I’ve taken six million and deposited it into an off-shore account with your name on it.”

“I’m gonna kill ye.”

“I just placed six mill in a Grand Cayman account—all for you! A ‘thank you’ will suffice. And trust me, the little shit you did today wasn’t worth it. I have a few more assignments for you, Leith. Then we can part ways or continue our mutually beneficial relationship.”

“Listen to me good!” I command. “Stay away from my family.”

“I respect you, Leith.” Every time the *feck* mentions my name, another dose of venom unleashes in me. Some *fecktwad* knows me, has something dark, sinister hanging over my head.

“Therefore, I’ll give you time to come to your senses. You can thank me *now* for adding an extra zero after your name. Or thank me later, just don’t wait too long. Because, too long, and your appreciation will come off as begging and groveling for the lives of your family. Your call.”

The connection cuts. Seconds later, the smart house’s automated voice gives the warning that Chevelle has entered from the sliding glass doors. I continue to sit in a heated haze.

For the last few weeks, I’ve weighed options. I could go to the cops with the information I learned about Infinity Corp. They’d read the last name on my California driver’s license and lose their *shite* at the thought of a MacKenzie running his *gub!* I haven’t finished counterattacking the hacker who’d infiltrated the Infinity Corp firewalls. The bloody bastard knows his way around code. He mentioned offshore bank accounts. This isn’t new to him. But sure as *feck* is new to me. He also mentioned having other *neds* on his team.

My second option, reaching out to my family about a deadly predicament, will initiate a war. Though the lesser of two evils, it will break Mia’s heart, my heart, and Chevelle’s.

How safe can I keep my wee clan while holding them in my arms?

I’m a *feckin’* MacKenzie.

As beads of sweat glide down my pecs and abs, I beg God for a few stops to pull before we’re to the point of involving my clan. I turn the shower back on to wash the memory of the deid from my mind.

CHEVELLE

ONLY A FEW PRECIOUS MONTHS SEPARATE THE TIME WHEN Lady and I downgraded from a luxury high-rise to my meeting Leith and his family in the same crappy apartment complex. The MacKenzies were kings in the making then, and it was by pure fate that they lived in the same rundown complex for a short time after our worlds collided.

Before Leith and I became friends, I played video games in the crummy ass living room, door open. Families would pass by. Moms and Dads with their kids going about their daily lives. I came to hate the distraction of watching neighbors pass by. Those interruptions sent me back to another life, my old life.

As soon as I could toddle around the house, designer kitten heels embellished my small feet. Dad spoiled me to no end, carrying me to catwalks and other couture events. The short period I had with my father seemed like a vastly different life. There was no *moving on up* for me. Lady and I had hit rock bottom.

However, there was a benefit to these interruptions. A potential audience walking down the halls kept some of the creepier johns in order. It also provided another nice surprise.

I looked up one day, and Leith was standing against the front door, watching me play. While the cool kid at school

complimented my game, I died, literally and physically, staring up at him in horror.

Soon after, we became friends. The MacKenzies made the American dream their own. They soon moved into a home as imposing as their name. I thought being so near to the MacKenzie fortune might spawn old memories, but I was so caught up in Leith. Lady didn't complain either. She stocked even fewer groceries in the refrigerator and more boxed wine in the bare cupboards.

Now, Leith and I live in what many would call a dream home. Not me. Occasionally, the opulence takes me back to a time when my parents' presence surrounded me, but that usually occurs when Leith is in the Valley.

When he's away, those fragments of my parents echo in my mind. Fragments I could easily erase with the slug of a shotgun. Luckily, Mia's face consigns those thoughts back to hell again.

It took ages for me to share with Leith how Lady and I played Russian roulette with each other's emotions in the past. Only, she'd blast me to smithereens with the slightest mention of my father. Lady manipulated that one card she had to my detriment. It made me a sweep-it-under-the-rug type of person, and I always will be.

I fully understand my history and refuse to let it repeat itself. My husband views me as a happy wife with an aversion to crime, ostentatiousness, and laziness. Being shunted to *housewife*, I can't stand not helping him take care of us.

I open the stainless-steel refrigerator and remove the gadgets and beakers from the bottom shelf. Since I stopped bartending, at Leith's insistence, I'd begun drafting my own beer. I pull out my latest batch of brew. I place the chilled glass on a silver tray just as Leith rounds the corner. At first sight, he's as unattainable as he'd been when I watched him from the comfort of half a courtyard away at school.

While wet, the reddish highlights in Leith's dark blond hair are subdued. He pushes a few strands away from the ocean that is his eyes. His bronzed skin stretches over protective,

ropy arms. Basketball shorts ride low on his hips, and a dusting of hair branches up his lower abdomen.

A sharp inhale fuses into my lungs. *Damn.*

“Take a picture, hen.”

My lips curve ever so cocky. “Nope, you *alright.*” I backpedal.

He commands my arm with one hand and removes the pint with the other. Eyes wide, I observe his every move while he guzzles the lager, one of the most challenging beers I’ve ever experimented with. The amber liquid swooshes until it’s all gone.

In breathless shock, I ask, “What do you think, Leith?”

“I downed it, aye?”

I shake my head, looking into those dreamy eyes of his. Why is this crazy Scot my most favorite feeling in the entire world?

With how badly Lady treated me, meeting Leith was more than a blessing. His love has opened my eyes. A giddy feeling surrounds me. “Of course, you downed the *beer*, hello. But what about—”

“So good got me begging for a *smooch!*” His lips find mine, lush yet firm, tongue dipping into my mouth for a taste. As he moans, “how sweet,” I whimper. The notes of honey and orange infused into the lager heighten the desire brewing in my core. Our kiss builds like a forest fire, alighting my flesh from the inside out. Leith’s arms are my home as he surrounds me fully. Nothing’s better than sex with the one you love. But in these moments, the feel of his mouth along mine almost tricks me into believing his kisses even the score.

Coming up for oxygen, I ask, “But was the beer—”

“Nae, lass!” He growls, grabbing me about the hips.

My ass slams down onto the counter. Heady giddiness surrounds me as Leith’s frisky hands seem to be all over me, kneading my hips, skimming my cheek, tracing my collarbone.

“Wait, Leith. Just tell me. Yum. You taste good. But from one to ten was the beer—”

He clamps the back of my neck and presses his waist between my thighs. “*Feck* the drink, Chevelle. This right here is a ten. This is a ten. And this ...” His mouth keeps pressing down on mine, tongue sweet and delectable. Our moans are synchronized.

Teasing, I press my sex to his thick waist, satiated by his warmth. “Leith, be serious.”

“This is a ten, but yer pussy is a pot o’ gold.” Leith closes the distance between us.

“Hey, pot of gold?” I muster the words, half entranced by his love. The soft swoosh of Leith’s breath across my skin has made me dizzy with desire. “You usually recycle jokes, but that one sounds a little Irish.”

“Aye? I’ve loved ye a lifetime. A guy is bound to run out of jokes.” He unloops my overalls one at a time. My mouth falls open, hypnotized by the stroke of his tongue as he pushes my shirt up. “This ... I have no bloody words, Chevelle. My heart is in there.” His voice grows husky, more Scottish, as he says, “Ye stole my entire heart, hen, placed it right in there with yer own.”

His lips clamp on my nipple, his hand clasp around my breast as he suckles. “Ye will keep my heart safe for me, Chevelle, forever.” This is a game we play. In a voice as soft as honey, as deep as the groan of a lion, he says, “Keep my heart safe for me, Chevelle MacKenzie.”

I feel his love from the depth of my soul every second in his presence.

“Mmmm... .” We’re years into this love story, and I’m still love-struck. Dizzy, I tell him, “Say it again.”

“Chevelle MacKenzie.”

“I’ll keep your heart safe,” I murmur, “guard it with my own. Forever and a day.” All the synapses in my brain fire off, causing a major power outage. There go my questions. All I have is a primal need for Leith MacKenzie.

An incendiary heat sparks in my core and spreads across the surface of my skin. Voice filled with desperation, I beg, “Leith, baby, oh, I love you. I need you.”

Leith peels away the layers of fabric separating my skin from his penetrating gaze. With one arm, he lifts me just long enough to snatch the overalls from me and doesn’t even attempt to save my silk thong. The material shreds from my skin, and my legs are pressed wide against the cool, marble countertop. Leaning my head back against the marble backslash, I tremble as Leith’s kisses scorch along my hips and over the thickness of my thighs. He laps my nub. With tears stinging my eyes, my fingers curl into his hair. Pleasure flies down my spine, and my legs fly up and over his shoulders.

My husband eats me with the dedication of a beast. He signs his name over every inch of my sex, compelling mini orgasms to pop off like fireworks.

Heart in my throat, I relish in our connection as he climbs back up, thick lips glossed so deliciously.

With staggering speed, my legs clamor around his waist. When he glides in, my eyelids shut, and a peaceful hum slips through my lips. His touch leaves me hot and bothered, scorched from the inside out.

“Yes, yes, yessss!” I holler as Leith pistons inside of me, hips moving savagely. After a week away, our bodies tether on the same wavelength. We need it quick; we need it hard. All the sappy shit can and will come later. But now, we’re fighting for a climax. My fingers claw into his ass. His movements become more erratic, and his cock pummels my core.

“Leith!” I screech when my husband drives so deep into my body that I see stars. I purr, wet walls clenching him as he throbs with release. He leans into me for a few long moments. When Leith’s eyes shade, promising round two all too soon, I huff.

Damn, I almost wonder if I look like a wildebeest all out of breath while he’s the one who exerted more energy. But the

way Leith stares at me brings a memory from the one poetry class I took at community college, a poem by Atticus.

“Young love like drugs left us chasing first highs.”

Knowing I’ll never forget how Leith’s eyes settled on mine the first time he called me ‘hen,’ a blush ignites across my skin.

Leith rests his palm between my heaving breasts. “I can’t have ye dying for me when I’m supposed to die for ye.”

I swat at him as he cocks a smile. “Please don’t say that, Leith. Nobody’s dying.” His turquoise gaze moves away from mine. I grab the empty pint. “From one to ten.”

“A number hasn’t been invented for sex with you.”

“Of course.” I grin. “But you know damn well I’m referring to the beer.”

“The best I ever had.”

“Leith, me or the damn drink!” I tilt my head.

“Both.”

“Both?” I gush as he peppers my face with the sweet taste from between my thighs. Leith presses tight against me as we laugh. The vibrations of his abdomen and chest send shockwaves against my softer body.

Sucking in air, I murmur, “Both?”

Gently, he says, “That’ll do, Chevelle.”

The opportunist that Leith is, he bites my bottom lip, hiking my legs over his. We have a visceral need to touch each other, even during conversation. This desire came way before he started traveling for work.

“Hen, the two of us are gonna open a pub. Call it ‘Chevelle’s.’ ”

“My name doesn’t have the ring I’m aiming for. I prefer ‘Mia’s Place.’ ”

“Name like that, it’ll have *fizzy* juice as a call to action on the windows. Nae Mia’s.”

I laugh. “Um-hmm, with my name in lights, you’ll have the place decked out with muscle cars. I’d rather it be classy.”

“Aye right, fancy.” He rolls his eyes. “Nae *nuggets* belting tunes in their ale. A right *naff* place.”

“Boring, really, Leith?” I pop his shoulder. “And the *fools* can still sing in their ales. It will just be fancy... *posh*.”

“*Och!* That’s British, hen. Nae posh.” Leith laughs, taking on a serious stance. He rubs my cheek with his thumb. “So, we save more. Tell me how much ye need, Chevelle.”

I catch his thumb in my mouth, showing my appreciation for his kindness. When Leith groans deep down in his chest, I bite the bullet. “I’ll ... bartend again,” I reply, tentatively. “Mia’s birthday is around the corner. I’ve been out of the game for almost four years.”

He laughs. Not one of those best friend laughs, but a *husband laugh* where the final decision belongs solely to him. He’s vetoed my suggestion. The plains of his chest and abdominals are taut beneath my skin as I push him away. He’s been home for such a short amount of time, and yet an argument breaches our love story.

CHEVELLE

“MY MAM’LL OFFER YE ONE OF HER PLACES, CHEVELLE. JUST ye and she have a chat about which one of her buildings is—less *involved*—in other things.” Leith clears his throat.

What does he expect? Should I jump up and down, clap my hands together with glee?

At my lack of response, he adds, “We’ll purchase yer pub legal—with a *clan* discount.”

“For the trillionth time, no thank you.”

“I’ll call her now. Then ye can add wee sparkly things all over. Aye?”

I *was* shoving him away. Now, I’m tugging him near as he reaches for his pile of clothes on the kitchen floor. No doubt his iPhone is there too.

Holding his thick, muscular waist between my thighs, I level a glare at him. “No, Leith. I love your mom more than you at times. None of your parents’ businesses are squeaky clean. Besides, we don’t have the money. But if I bartend again, we could save. Like the last time when I worked at Michie’s—”

“Nae!”

“Leith, I haven’t said anything.” I snort. “Wow, now I see how ‘no’ became our daughter’s first word.”

“*Och*, Crabbit Chevelle!” Leith snarls. But he doesn’t stop at the usual nickname. He flies off the handle in Gaelic. Though my body craves him, I’m untwining my legs from around his lean body.

Indecisive, I shove him again. “Hey, don’t start with that Scottish lingo, where you’re talking shit, and I can’t understand.”

“Why’d ye bring up Michie’s then?”

“I was just saying if I bartend again, we can save. And I won’t work for Mi—”

“Last time I *allowed* ye to work there, some *bampot* grabbed yer *arse*! Ye bloodied his nose. Bravo, Chevelle.” He chortles sarcastically. “I broke the *eejit*’s legs when I found out. Dinna *feckin*’ think I’m satisfied either.”

“You better be. We could’ve been sued.”

A hard, foreboding look flashes in Leith’s eyes. “When ye popped the *nugget* in his *feckin*’ nose, Chevelle, ye had my *nighean*, my daughter, in yer belly! Discussion over. And then there’s Michie. That *eejit*.”

I roll my eyes toward heaven. I want to agree with him about the guy. I know Leith was just protecting me. The MacKenzies value family above anything. The MacKenzies would be together through thick or thin. They’d lay their heads on a paved parking lot on the hottest day in August if all their schemes went to shit. They would be together, nothing stopping them.

All that I understand, but it’s his animosity for Michie that’s ludicrous, which hinges in part on Leith’s ability to hold a grudge and part on his unbridled jealousy. Leith felt that, as the owner, Michie should have protected me. But Michie knew I could handle myself. I wish Leith felt that way, or at least, understood. It also doesn’t help that Michie’s an attractive, older man and an aggressive flirt.

My bottom lip trembles in defiance. Though Leith doesn’t know it, there is more to this fight than family handouts, a horny, drunk barfly, and a suggestive boss. My mother

depended exclusively on my father. Look how that turned out—both dead. So, I can't shut my mouth.

Arms folded, I retort, "I won't work for Michie because it's almost forty-five minutes away." Tentatively, I run a hand over my forearm. "So, I checked in with a few bars along the beach."

"Without telling me?" The muscles in his jaw contract.

"Relax, you weren't gonna come home from a week in Silicon Valley with Mia making a pb&j on the floor while I was down the street mixing drinks. During a few evenings out with Justice," I say, mentioning a friend of mine, "I asked around."

"*Wit* happened?"

"Well, Detective Leith, you'll be happy to know that, after introducing myself, all the bar managers asked why not work for Nan MacKenzie. Babe, stop looking at me like that. Leith, I shouldn't have told them I was a MacKenzie. It's either people are afraid to hire me or curious as to why I want to work at all. Anyway, I guess it doesn't matter. You're the one always flying off the handle." I give him a knowing look, referring to the *eejit* with the broken legs.

Leith nods, his handsome face contorted in a wicked smile. "Ye better be glad he can *skedaddle aff* now. I could've left 'em arse up in a ditch."

We can match each other thrust for thrust in the bed or cuss for cuss out of it. But my alpha *tries* his dominant sometimes. I snap. "Oh, doubling down on the threats. Fine. If you're not gonna keep promises, and you wanna do bad shit, I'm bartending again. How does that sound?"

"We'll see 'bout that."

Throat thick with emotion, I bite my tongue. While some married couples can't share one bank account, all of our accounts are linked, even an additional one marked *Chevelle's pub*. Leith's added more funds in it each month than I could add in an entire year. But that's the problem, Leith making all the moves. I'm not allowed to contribute to the family income

at all. Not even to the account that will fund *my* dream. Same as my father once did for my mom.

He huffs. “Ye’re restless? Take the credit card, Chevelle, buy yerself something pretty!”

Something in me shifts at his words. Leith almost sounds like my dad. My husband stares at me like I’m a foreign object. From the little about my parents I’ve shared, I didn’t include the outs-and-ins. Like how petrified I am of becoming like them. My father loved the lavish life, yet his most prized trinket was my mother.

Chevelle, he’s doing this for you and Mia. I tell myself our daughter deserves the best. My husband always said angels coated the warm brown of her cheeks and button nose with cinnamon kisses. He’d say that I made our daughter so beautiful that he could never repay me enough. When he’s not crabby about my desire to work, he’s the most tender, loving man in the world.

Though I wanted to marry him at first sight, it wasn’t until Mia was in my stomach that we had a backyard wedding. I opened myself up to a world of vulnerability. But we’re married now. There shouldn’t be any hesitation on my end. I have to let go of my parents for good because we aren’t *them*. Leith’s the good guy my father once resembled, but he’d never leave me broken like Dad left Momma.

LEITH

AS CHEVELLE TREMBLES IN MY ARMS, ALL I FEEL IS THE voracious rage I had for the man who touched what belonged to me. Touched her while my wee bairn was in her belly. And her mentioning Michie, the *bawbag*, doesn't help. I'm then contemplating Mr. Jiang. How easy it would have been to bypass the attempt to reason with him and bloody *feckin'* snap.

I hold my wife tighter, praying our vows outweigh the innate craving of violence born into me as a MacKenzie. She's asking me if we can stop arguing, hugging me with all her might.

"Leith, you made a beautiful home for us. I'm grateful, but since the beginning of the year, you're *so* busy."

"I know." The muscles in my jaw twist at the thought of today. I should redirect the conversation. I should bloody give in. I shouldn't have murdered that *eejit* today.

She stares at me questioningly. "Leith, we were looking at houses in the Valley in May after the weather wasn't so gloomy."

By June, I'd found us a new house near work. A beautiful place Chevelle could make her own. It wasn't as impressive as this one. But we'd have had funds left over to put down on a business, a few blocks away. It was a coffee shop. The owner was a downright good lad, ready to sell. I would've taken her

to the rundown shop first, blindfolded, of course. Tell her all the things she could do with the place once we bought it. Remove the canvas photos of coffee beans, toss around shiny *shite*. Make it her pub. Then I would've told her that I'm no *eejit*, of course, we're moving here. Once she made that pub a success, we would upgrade to a more prime location. And my sweet hen, always humble, would've thanked me in every way I taught her.

But I stop contemplating the feel of her soft body cupped in my hands. I still have more *shite* I should say. Like how I'll have a MacKenzie or one of our associates watching Chevelle, keeping her and my wee one safe while I'm away. That there will be no pub in her near future. That we're not moving to Silicon Valley. Then the lass will have questions to which I have no answers.

"How will I run a bar if you refuse to let me work, Leith?" Chevelle asks.

"Easy. I'm picking the *arseholes* on yer team." *They'll all be clan loyal and capable of keeping ye safe.*

"Yeah, that's not happening." She huffs. "If you're so worried about me bartending, why don't we downgrade the house. We could save that way."

"Dinna concern yerself."

"Don't be concerned?" She chortles. "Leith, love, we can move back into our old house. It would save money in two ways. One, no mortgage, and two, you could quit Infinity Corp and freelance again, no commuting. The apps you created before working at Infinity were amazing. You enjoyed it. Plus, more time at home." My hen slowly walks her fingers up my chest.

In five, four, three, two, one, I drop a bomb, saying, "Erika lives there."

Chevelle double chortles, steaming mad. She *hates* Erika with a passion. A few years ago, when the redhead moved from our hometown in Northern Scotland, half the MacKenzie lads were dogs in heat over her. Then they found out she's a

crack shot. Erika needed a low-key place to stay, and we were between renters.

“Leith, you neglected to tell me this.”

“Slipped my mind,” I mutter the wee lie for Chevelle’s sake. Erika keeps an eye on my girls while I’m away.

“Alright, don’t let my next statement slip your mind. Kick her ass out! We sell this house. Get some cushion money.”

“She’s leasing the place.” I lie.

“Leasing? Oh, I thought she was practically MacKenzie clan. Or is she paying some other way?” Chevelle folds her arms.

“Low, *low as feck*,” I grumble.

“Okay, you’re right. Sorry.” She pouts. “Leith, I apolo—”

“Nae, that mouth of yers got away from ye! Hen, we’re not *flitting* back to that *clatty* house. Mia can already swim. She has the ocean in her backyard and a pool on the roof. This house is—”

“A major bachelor pad,” she mutters. “What *you* bargained for. Pool on the roof. Gadgets galore. And the old house wasn’t shabby. It was cozy.”

Aye, I selected this house as a *fat-arse* show of *my* success. But the place in Silicon Valley was meant to be our forever home, her place. The home had all the details my hen would appreciate. A reading nook. A gardening area. Her eyes would have been pools of warm mahogany upon seeing the home I had chosen. In the end, someone else got the house.

“Chevelle, are we not living our dreams? Ye’ve almost got everything needed to start a business. These things dinna happen just because the sun *shites* over the horizon on a new day.”

Chevelle groans softly. “I’m not helping. I want to help. That’s all I’ve tried to say.”

“Nae, hen. This is me and you, all the *feckin’* way.” I look down at Chevelle, running my knuckles over her thick strands

of hair. The color is as rich and deep as the earth in my home country. The States was the right move for my da. Though, this place pales in beauty compared to our birthplace.

“Leith, let me help more.”

The third round of an argument stalemates as a thought hits me. “Is this ‘bout yer parents? Yer blood parents?”

I never pressed Chevelle about her biological parents because opening up about her adoptive mom hurt her. Damned the promises I’ve made to my hen, though. That bitch should be deid.

“Chevelle, is this ‘bout yer parents?”

This time she says “no” too quickly for my tastes. But with the sounds of pitter-pattering, who am I to stop my wife from rushing to shove on her overalls. Chevelle’s presentable and already washing her hands when I find my discarded basketball shorts and pull them on in the nick of time.

Mia stumbles into the room, rubbing her eyes. I haven’t seen my wee *wean* in days, and I’m at war between going to her and comforting my hen about her parents. Something always comes up when we’re talking about them. Or Chevelle flat out refuses to speak. I’ve been an *arse*. I should’ve realized it sooner. Her da took real good care of her mam. Then he smothered her. Aye, my concerns about work are leaking over into my marriage life, but still, I must protect my clan.

Chevelle turns her attention to Mia. “How was your nap, sweetheart?”

From the looks of her, the nap was good. Mia’s cork-like curls are a wild birdie’s nest on the top of her head. Noticing me, Mia takes off with the swagger of a sloshed bum. “Daddy!”

I pull Mia into my arms before she can hit the floor. Holding her in one hand, I reach over and grab Chevelle as she attempts to retreat.

“Dinna *skedaddle aff*, lass, I’m not done with ye.”

“Don’t call me lass, you ass. And stop over exaggerating your words for our kid.”

Mia laughs, and I ask, “Where ye going, hen?”

Pursing her lips, Chevelle states, “To read some smut about a *Domme* and her male beta.”

“Bey-tah,” Mia mimics.

“Lassie, *Da* is alpha.”

“Daddy.” Mia’s soft fingers run along my jaw. I always fear how soft and dainty my wee girl is. Removing her hands from my stubble, I kiss her palms.

“Where’s yer *da*’s heart, eh?”

She points to her pudgy belly.

“Nae, Mia. That’s where the food goes.” I move her hand up a few notches.

“Daddy’s heart, here!”

“Aye.” I toss her sky-high and squeeze her giggling, wee body to me.

“Leith,” Chevelle gasps from somewhere in the house, “the cops. They’re here!”

My mind goes instantly to the trunk of my Audi. Humongous eyes shine up at me as I tell Mia that she needs to stay quiet in the pantry until I or her mam calls for her. For a second, my wee *wean* seems to be all-knowing. Bloody hell. *I’m fecked.*

CHEVELLE

I SPOT A SMALL CARAVAN OF POLICE CRUISERS ALONG THE slope near our driveway from the glass walls. I call out to my husband. My forehead rests against the cool glass, neck craning to peek around the corner of the street.

When I hear him rush into the room, I glance over my shoulder. His usually tan skin is whiter than crisp, new linen. There are only two reasons my husband becomes pasty. One, we've returned from an extended visit to the raining highlands. Two, the friggin cops. It's a MacKenzie thing. "Where's Mia?"

"The pantry."

"Why?" I turn around to give Leith my undivided attention. I place my hand on my hip and laugh. "Oh, is she sneaking Fruit Loops? I forgot to tell you, babe. Minion Mia's returned to her old habits."

Leith lifts a brow.

"Remember, we had the old baby gate on her bedroom after one of our many 'I told you so' episodes? If you forgot, I'm implying that *I* told *you* so."

I'd suggested baby proofing the doorknobs, but Leith said her wee hands couldn't possibly get into trouble. I'm pretty sure my husband talked extra shit about me in his language as he laughed and walked away that day.

I grin. "You remember?"

“Nae.” Those dreamy eyes of his slide to the left for a fraction of a second. *Friggin liar.*

“You do! We woke up frantic, only to find her in the pantry, cereal stuck to her cheeks, hand still in the Fruit Loops while she dozed.”

He clears his throat. “Ye said the police.”

I chew my lip, glancing Leith up and down. Then it dawns on me. In the last few months, I’ve had a few spats with his mother over the pub and my bartending. Nan loves hard, and there’s no doubt she cares for me. Leith was a dick a few minutes ago, but his only debate about my return to bartending revolves around the guy who touched me and that Michie did nothing about it. Nan would’ve killed the man who touched my ass at Michie’s while I was pregnant with her first granddaughter. *Her only grandchild.*

If he’s already been talking to his mom about the bar, I assume he’s anxious since his parents are coming for dinner. He’s afraid she and I will have words. I shake my head at him, looking back out the window.

“Yeah,” I shrug. “There are a bunch of squad cars outside. Our new neighbor has a mean backhand. So, I went by with a peach cobbler. The husband answered, had the nerve to take it without saying ‘thank you.’ I had the number to a women’s advocacy group just in case I saw her.”

“Dinna get in others business, Chevelle. Ye tell me.”

“I wish—”

“Don’t!” He says in in English this time to make a point.

“Sheesh! I get it. My attitude with somebody would make you rescind your pledge of nonviolence.” I nod, still in contemplation about the boys-in-blue outside. “Baby, I bet you twenty kisses that Hilda, across the way, called the cops on our evil ass neighbor. Old as she is, she told them to bring the calvary.”

There’s an awkward, foreign silence between us.

“So—my sometimes funny, super-hot Scot—are you worried about dinner with your parents tonight?”

“Nae.” Leith rubs the back of his neck. He offers a sheepish grin. “Aye, ye caught me.”

“I know your parents want life to be easy for us. We have the same desired outcome for Mia—just a different route.” I walk over to him, place my head on his chest, and sigh. Leith holds me close. After a while, I unwrap myself from the comfort of his strong embrace. As I let go of him, Leith catches my fingers in his. It looks like there’s more on his mind. However, if it’s the turn our discussion took earlier, about my parents, the conversation is done.

“I should cook now,” I mumble, looking down.

“Hen, go get bonny for tonight. I’ll get Mia from the pantry. Tell her no more Fruit Loops. We’ll order Italian. Chicken parmigiana for Mam. Wee shrimp scampi for my hen.”

“Uh-uh. Leith, you’re the only person in the world who detests shrimp.” I’m telling him how the shrimp are jumbo-sized when Leith squeezes my midriff. We’re laughing, kissing. The perfect young, married couple again.



THE GUYS AREN’T MUCH FOR ITALIAN, NOT LIKE NAN AND ME. While Camdyn, Leith’s seventeen-year-old brother, sets the table on our massive deck outside with the Italian takeout, I’m zipping around the kitchen. I pour out the boiling water from the potatoes and readjust the heel of my stiletto.

Steam rises into my face. I hiss, “Shit!”

“*Och!*” The familiar voice of Leith’s mother, Nan, comes from behind. “Yer a long time deid.”

“Your nana told you that.” I smile, turning around. At first, when she said so many years back, I thought it was a threat to my life, yet the context seemed way too sentimental.

A simple tan dress covers Nan's buxom curves and skims her wide calves. For the head of a Scottish crime family, Nan dresses like a choir conductor, and the only jewelry she wears is a cross pendant. While the rest of Leith's brothers are various shades of blond, Leith and his mother share the same reddish highlights in their hair. Nan's hair is cut short so that it curls around her naked ears. Their sons' gorgeous eyes came from their father, whose loud voice carries from the dining room. He's speaking an old Gaelic that I'll never understand.

A small smile begins to nudge at the edges of Nan's chubby cheeks until it spreads wide. "How many times have I said, 'yer a long time deid,' Chevelle?"

"Lots. Usually, I'm running a mile a minute."

"Aye. Ye would drop textbooks, a paper cup of coffee, and be already on the ground before my laddie could help ye up. But that's what they're for, lass. Helping you."

I sigh, seeing how this conversation is about to be tied up with a nice-shiny bow, Hallmark-style. "Nan, I know you want to help us."

"Nae." Nan shakes her head. "Big Brody threatened to skelp me wee behind. Wee? Heh. Ain't nothing wee about me. Listen, Chevelle. I have always valued yer tenacity. Ye may think I wanted for ye and Leith to be more like us. Many years ago, my son lost his heid for ye, Chevelle. It made ye my daughter."

"I know," I murmur, though, I'd rather thank her and assure her that she's closer to me than any mother I've ever known. Although Leith taught me the art of love, I'm still a little standoffish. Showing affection is hard for me, except with Mia, whom I loved before I set eyes on her.

"Chevelle, I remember when I tasted yer first draft. I held the pint in my hand, could feel the passion ye poured into creating it. I got so excited, knew the value of investing."

"Awe, I appreciate your belief in me, Nan."

She nods. "I'm glad ye do. But still, I'm as stubborn as the hairy cow in the highlands I once ran through as a not so wee

lassie. As much as I tell myself what will be will be, I watch the two of ye work so hard for Mia. My instinct is just to throw a bit of money yer way. Enough on that. Can I help ye with the neeps and tatties?" She gestures to the steaming potatoes and another pan, containing turnips.

"Sure."

"Do I smell delicious haggis?"

"Yup." I nod toward the Viking oven where the haggis is baking. Haggis with neeps and tatties are a MacKenzie favorite. And this is how the cornerstone of one of the biggest crime syndicates in Scotland and I squash a quarrel before it starts. We work together to feed our family.

LEITH

CLENCHED FISTS BEAT AGAINST THE GLASS WALL, SILENCED BY the ultra-thick pane. Bright green eyes with caterpillar lashes appear through the window.

Feck me. My eldest *brathair*, Brody, named after our father, has brought Erika along. Though I only have eyes for Chevelle, my hen has eyes, too. Erika is bonny in her own right. It's been a source of contention between my lass and me for years.

Dressed in slacks and a button-down, I open the door, step outside, and close it. Though I'm a smidge taller than Brody, I've had to be cunning when he roughed me up in the past. We call him Little Brody on occasion, but the bloody bastard is nae wee guy. He's bigger than an ox, dressed more casually in jeans and flannel. A foot shorter at his side, Erika is wearing jeans too, along with a leather jacket and a wee shirt over her wee tits, and those pointy shoes that she likes to use when she's not fighting fair. Her red hair is in braids on one side and flows long on the other. When Chevelle does her hair like this, it makes her look sweet and innocent, Erika not so much.

"I told ye to come by later." I corner Erika.

She rolls her eyes. "Here I am—now. Just leave me alone in the room with our sweet Chevelle. I'll make the hen mine."

Brody gestures. “*Wit’s* this ‘come by later’ between the two of ya?”

“My business, Brody. When I go to ye, ye’ve got shite to do.”

“Aye! Ye’re a snooty, hot *shite* career lad. So, *wit* am I, chopped fish guts? I’m supposed to sit around ‘til ye ring me?”

I wave him on. “Ye never answer, so ye can *feck* off.”

He opens the door to my house. “*Och!* Haggis and neeps and mash. The two of ye have at it.”

Just as Brody slams the door in my face, I hear him shouting a pleasant greeting. “*Awright, ya wee bawbags!* Feed me!”

The surface of my skin burns, and my hand is at the knob, ready to tackle him down. “That disrespectful *arsehole* slammed *my feckin’* door in *my feckin’* face!”

Erika touches my arm. “Ye’re up to *high doh*, Leith.”

“I’m not riled up—”

“Ye are! Now, let it go because if ye give that lad a skelp, he’ll skelp ye back! Then ye’ll forget all about the help I’m supposed to give *ya*.”

“*Nae!*”

“Okay, Leith.” Erika crosses her arms. “Looks like ye’re ready for me to go. Like *go, go*. I can watch our bonny Chevelle and keep her safe, but I can’t eat? *Nae?*”

“Did I say that? Get in the bloody house, Erika.”

She stands a little taller. “Leith, ye’ve got something to learn about letting the clan help.”

“Did I ask ye to hide a body for me?” I snarl.

“*Nae*, ye asked for cement,” she snaps, matching my aggression. “But ye did ask me to watch the girls while ye’re away. Seems someone should’ve watched ye instead.”

I run a hand through my hair. “Chevelle will have my *feckin’ arse* if she learns *wit* I did. Okay?”

Erika lifts her hands, imitating a calming exercise, then she pats my shoulders. “All I’m saying, Leith, is I’ll help. Yer clan’s mine too. I can do more than provide cement—I’m not friggin Lowes or The Home Depot. *Wit’s yer plan?*”

“Hmm, let’s see. There’s a bloody ocean in my backyard. Ye figure it out, Erika. Now, shut yer *geggie* ‘bout my business!”

Erika shuts her mouth, then mimes zipping her lips, and I let her inside. On our way into the dining room, I clamp Erika’s shoulder. I bring her scrawny *arse* by the kitchen so as not to surprise Chevelle with her presence. Erika’s father would take a bullet for mine, same situation was it reversed. But my wife doesn’t understand certain aspects when it comes to the clan way. So, all I can do is my best.

Mam’s smashing tatties, and my wife is pulling milk from the fridge. Chevelle turns, giving Erika a once-over. She eyes Erika’s wee tits, barely concealed under the tiny top. Tits I’d never touch. Then Chevelle’s eyeing me, hard.

Damned if I do. Damned if I don’t. Best bloody American saying I’ve ever heard about marriage.



IN THE GLOAMING WITH THE STARS TWINKLING, WE ALL SETTLE outside at the table. Though it’s warm, Chevelle keeps offering Mia a jacket. My lassie has scooted into Da’s lap.

Camdyn complains about the forks he’d set on the dining room table. Irritated, the teen tries to get our little *brathairs*, who stashed them, to pass them back out as Little Brody tosses plastic forks from the to-go bag across the area.

“Camdyn, shut up, ye crabbit.”

Camdyn argues about how he’s not moaning, and how he rarely voices his opinion. He does have a point. Our wee *brathairs* like to play tricks.

“I’ll shove yer opinion up yer *arse*,” I snap.

Mam threatens us all.

I lift a brow. “*Wit* I do? I’m on yer side, Mam.”

“So? The whole lot of ya are me *bairns!* Can’t give these ingrates a *skelpit lug*,” she refers to popping our ears, “without including ye!”

With that, my wee *brathairs* chuckle, pulling the missing silverware out of their pockets. Camdyn grumbles again about setting the table just right, and Brody stops tossing plastic forks.

My wife starts back into the house. Erika pops up. “I’ll help ye, Chevelle. If this big brute takes out my eye with a plastic spork, Nan won’t be able to save him.”

Brody laughs boisterously, putting his feet up in the chair she just left, middle finger in her direction. I glare at him.

“Ye’re too auld, Brody,” our da warns.

With a twinkle of mischief in eyes that resemble my own, Brody clicks his tongue. “Aye, but I’m just missing my wee *brathair*. Leith’s a bloody smart lad. Doesn’t work with the clan. *Wit ye been up to?*”

I laugh under my breath, calling him a hairy cow.

“*Och!* ye too,” Da says. “Brody, ye are my namesake. Would it kill ye to show a little compassion to yer *brathair?*”

“Da,” I begin, so he’ll drop the subject. Brody and I get along all right. My older *brathair* just expected me to come crawling back to the family. Now, he thinks an opportunity may have presented itself. He’s baiting me. His main reason for wanting me around is to have his back in dangerous situations. *Never gonna happen.* The bastard is sitting on the fruits of my labor, eating the food I bought. My success is all around Brody, and my *feckin’* smug face says as much.

While they stack money by way of brawns, I’ve got myself a pile of golden nuggets from my brains.

Da sighs. “I’m proud of ye, Leith. Though yer mam had to go and name ye something fancy after the harbor we fled to for holiday—first time in a long bloody time. I made love to

yer mam the entire week. That's how ye're the good lookin' one outta the lot. Got yer mam's bonny reddish-blond hair too."

"Aye, boke, Da! Cam's hair is 'bout the same too," I mutter, ignoring Da when he cheers about his hairy *baws* and Mam's ... unmentionable ... until he calls me *different*. Different from my *brathairs*. It's as if I'm somehow better for being my own man and charting my own course.

Brody's the *feckin'* brute. Camdyn is the quiet one, who I'm sure appreciated the solitude of setting the table to a T. But what my *brathairs* have in common is killing.

Brody pumps iron like a madman. He'll use his fists to bash a man's face in. Camdyn appreciates dissecting his enemy while wearing headphones, listening to music. Mam let Cam have at an enemy once. The bastard returned as if he'd attended a therapy session. Around the table, four more wee *brathairs* of mine are joking quietly among themselves, but they'll learn under Da's training one day.

Me?

The bloody *feckin'* normal guy.

The good lad who paved his own way, creating a legacy aside from the MacKenzies.

The *eejit* who attempted to talk Mr. Jiang down before my MacKenzie instincts got the better of me.

I rub the back of my neck. When I look up, Brody's pawing his beard in contemplation. He regards me like he did when he got me *wrecked* off a few good pints. It was the first time Mam gave the okay for me to drink. He helped me off my *arse*, told me to wipe the bit of boke from my mouth, and gave me gum. So, later tonight, I'll bond with him over the deid *fecker* in my trunk. I owe my big *brathair* that.

For the next few hours, we climb on top of each other, shouting and eating. It's like the first time Chevelle came for dinner, except then Cam was a wee tot and Jamie a new bairn. Now, there are three more bairns, and my younger *brathairs*

are in a match to dominate the conversation with the rest of us. Even Erika and Chevelle are talking together.

Finally, Mam, Da, and my youngest *brathairs* hit the road. Camdyn says he'll stick around to watch Mia for us. He's a good uncle and all. But he has an agenda. As soon as her head hits the pillow, the teen will be twiddling his fingers on his cellphone, begging a friend to pick him up. On his way out, the bastard will have swiped a bottle of my alcohol as barter for gas.

"You," I snatch Camdyn's cellphone from his hand as he sits in the corner of the living room, "keep an eye on the lassies."

"I am."

"Nae," Brody heckles. "Listen good, ye American."

Camdyn begins to sneer. "Fuck you!"

I skelp the back of his head. "Keep an eye on all of 'em."

Our little *brathair* was born in our homeland, and though we visit at least once a year, he doesn't sound like us. With all the twiddling he does on his cellphone, there isn't any other nickname we can give him. Camdyn is *the American*.

I smile as Camdyn slaps my next attempt to pop him. He asks, "Where are the two of you assholes going?"

"Dinna worry yerself," I reply.

"And they call me the sneaky one."

"I need to chat with this *nugget*." Brody claps my shoulder. "That enough answer for ye, Cam?"

I pull out my wallet and toss a few dollars in his lap.

Camdyn's white row of teeth shine. "Now, you're speaking my language, Leith. Though, I would've done it for free. Watching my sister-in-law's ass as she sashays around the house is enough payment for—"

Brody grips me about the waist as my fist glides toward Camdyn.

“Ohhh, fight!” Mia stops staring at the television. Erika and Chevelle are coming from the kitchen with a bottle of wine. My wife cocks a brow, and I pat the top of Camdyn’s head. Leaning down near his ear, I whisper, “Keep breathing, American.”

LEITH

A FEW MINUTES LATER, BRODY AND I STAND AT THE TRUNK. He leans in to get a good look at the stiff. Jiang's body is curled in a ball.

"Och, boke!" He wriggles his nose, pretending to gag. "Wit happened?"

"The *feck's* it look like?"

"Who's the *eejit*?"

"Nae. I can assure ye the lad was quite smart, well, on paper." I shrug my shoulders.

"I assume so. Or he didna go down after that clean shot to his brain."

I roll my eyes. Da trained us to go for the kill shot. So, Brody's taking a stab at how I shot Jiang in the knee first. "It's a mess. My mess."

"Well, I'm bloody *feckin'* here, aren't I?" Brody snaps.

"So, *wit*?"

"So? Ye're a MacKenzie, Leith. Ye can go around chumming it up with university scholars. Then when *shite* goes south, ye come to me, not go it alone. I'm yer *brathair*!"

"I know!"

"Ye rang Erika."

“First of all, I reached out to ye.” I get into his face, glaring hard at him. “Dinna make me seem like I’m not for the *feckin’* clan, Brody. I rang ye. No answer. I asked Erika for cement, so I’m not tied to the purchase of such. That’s all. Second, and I hope this is bloody clear, I still dinna *need help!*”

“Whatever, Leith, I’m helping whether ye want it or not. Moreover, if ye missed the glint in Camdyn’s eyes, our *brathair* would’ve lent a hand or a knife. Aye, whatever ye prefer.” He runs a hand through his hair.

“Nae, the American is seventeen, a *feckin’* kid.”

Brody shrugs. “Cam will be an even better lad than me one day. *Shite*, I can admit that. Da trained us all as wee ones. The second we learned to walk, we knew right from wrong, and we knew the drill. Leith, tell me what the wee lad in yer trunk did to piss ya off?”

I shake my head.

“Okay, so we put ‘em in a cement block, toss him in the ocean. Tell me later. I’ll wait.”

“Brody, *I’m* putting this bitch in a cement block. *I’m* tossing his *arse* in the ocean. *Me!*” I slap a hand to my chest. “I was just showin’ ye. Ye wanted in my business like a dusty, auld hag. Now, ya know.”

He chortles. “What the bloody *feck* do I know, Leith? Deid Chinaman in an expensive suit. Explain it to me, since I’m apparently dusty, *old*—wait that’s not what yer wife said to me last—”

My fist rockets straight to his mouth. *Aye, eejit move.* I shake my aching knuckles as Brody spits a bit of blood, laughing.

“My *brathair’s* back!” Brody holds his arms wide.

“*Feck* ye.”

“Nae. I assumed Chevelle took a cleaver to yer *baws* when ye married.”

“*Bullshite*. Ye always believed I became weak the day I made her my hen. Nae, *brathair*.”

“Alright, my mistake. Hen’s—”

“*Wheesht!*”

“Och! Dinna tell me to be quiet. Fine. The hen’s off the table,” he says, massaging his jaw. “Ye’ve a good arm, Leith. So, back to the deid man. What’d he do? Ye still haven’t made it clear to me.”

I haven’t the slightest idea. Running a hand along the back of my neck, I mutter, “Nae. Because if I make it too clear to ye, ye will make it bloody clear to Da.”

Unbuttoning my shirt, I decide to get the body out. Next, I’ll prepare him to dump—once he’s good and solid in cement.

Brody removes his shirt too. “I’m nae *clipe*, Leith, nae snitch. I’ll keep yer secret. Like Erika. I know she’d help with more than buying cement, by the way.”

He winks, staring at me a beat, waiting for me to catch up. When there’s no acknowledgment on my part about Erika, he snorts. “*Och*, of course, I’d tell Da! *Feck* ye for spinning this around like it’d make me a snitch, too.”

“That’s right. It would.”

“Nae!” Brody points a finger at my face.

I slap it down. “Where’s the cement?”

“My truck. I backed all the way down this windy *arse* lot. Ye’re welcome.”

I head to the garage door switch, but Brody stalks over and slams the button himself.

Sighing, I share a little more. “Aye. Erika’s keeping an eye on Mia and Chevelle.”

“From what?”

I’ve not the slightest idea!

Brody gasps. “Ye’re lookin’ a bit *peely-wally*.”

Nae shite, *I look pale!* I snarl, “I’ve got *shite* to consider, *brathair*. About work. That’s all I’ll say. I’ll have ye on yer *feckin’ arse*. Keep trying me.”

“But Da—”

“Nae Da! Just me. Ye wanna help *or* nae?”



A LITTLE WHILE LATER, A TIN TRASH CAN, CONTAINING CEMENT mix, is in the bed of Brody’s Silverado. As I stuff Mr. Jiang into the tin can, Brody combines the ingredients. Brody still isn’t aware that the bastard was my coworker. After we finish, we hide him in the tool area, a section of the garage Chevelle would never venture to. I’ll take a speedboat, maybe in a day or two, and dump ‘em in the deep water. But it’s nae done deal.

In the back of my mind, all I can think about is the *fecker* who hacked me while I was looking into a discrepancy in the system at work. He’d placed six mill in a Grand Cayman account. The money could be mine, but I’d not touch the Cayman Island account if there were a sawed-off shotgun at my head. What also frustrates me is not knowin’ what Jiang had to do with this hacker—if anything.

The *arsehole* blackmailing me knows of my clan, but he underestimates us. Hmmm, *us*. It’d be so much easier enlisting my clan’s help, but I’d rather kill the bastard myself. Da respects my ability to walk in a *feckin’* straight line. Seeing how I already screwed my vow to Chevelle to *shite*, I just have to finish this. Once complete, I’ll be the reputable guy in the family, again.

CHEVELLE

I’LL ADMIT TO CHURNING IN AN OCEAN OF JEALOUSY WHEN I first met Erika. I don’t buy into the absurdity of hating the female race, just because. I had my reasons for hating her, such as I’d been slim and trim until my seventh month of pregnancy when she waltzed into town, tiny and hot. A mix of hormones and a whole lot of baby weight did me in. Plus, the whole Leith and Scotland thing. The two of us have never meshed, even after four years of holidays and birthdays in our shared family.

Now, I meander alongside the wrought iron racks in the wine cellar, searching for a conversational wine. Instead, my fingertips trail over a bottle of whiskey. I hold it out to Camdyn as he comes to lean against the door. He’s in a long-sleeve thermal tonight, which hides the range of tattoos over his entire arm.

His hair is shaved on the sides, but the top flops into his striking blue eyes. Out of all Leith’s brothers, Camdyn reminds me of my husband the most. Polite to females. Often quiet, though, he has a short fuse.

Camdyn gestures toward the bottle. “Thanks, but nobody’s coming to get me tonight. They say it’s too far from Lakewood.”

“Damn, Speed Racer, when they suspended your license and chopped it into bits, I heard your heart break. Cam, tell

me, does it still hurt?”

“Heh, I don’t need a license to drive. I just don’t feel like borrowing one of your neighbors’ rides tonight.” He winks.

“One day, your ass is gonna understand the concept of consequences, you little thief.”

“Tsk, take that back, Chevelle. I thought we were friends.”

Chuckling, I start to place the expensive whiskey back into the slot, then mumble, “I’m not letting this go to waste. Forget shot glasses. Can you reach those plastic cups on the top shelf? Leith thinks everyone can reach them.”

“Damn, now I recall why you’re my favorite sister-in-law.” With ease, Camdyn plucks the red Solo cups from up high, then follows me from the wine cellar.

“First of all, I’m your only sister-in-law. Second, who says the third cup is yours? I might have a cup in my left and right hand while drinking with Erika.”



TEN MINUTES LATER, CAMDYN, ERIKA, AND I ARE SEATED AT A stone table on the far side of the deck. The salty wind feels good against my shoulders as Camdyn stacks up the wooden Jenga blocks into a tower.

“Let’s make this fun, *weans*,” Erika suggests. “We’re playing two truths and a lie.”

“*Weans*?” I glare, remembering how she never made it easy for me to like her.

“Who’s going first?”

I open up my mouth, but Camdyn shrugs. He can sense the unresolved tension between us and sacrifices himself, saying, “I’ll go. I’ve wrecked two Honda Accords. I’ve had four broken bones. I’ve been bitten by a viper.”

“Easy, no snake bite,” I reply.

Moonlight glints off Erika's attentive green eyes. "I'm gonna agree with Chevelle. We can't have the lass be the only one sloshed when the guys return."

"How are you certain I'm wrong?" I demand. "Besides, it takes a lot to get me drunk. I'm a bartender, remember."

"*Och, ye were.* I remember."

Oh, so now, I'm just a housewife? Leveling her a stony glower, I tip back the whiskey straight from the bottle. Already irritated with us arguing, Camdyn groans, checking off the names of broken bones with his finger. "Had an ankle fracture after a motorcycle accident, broke my arm, twice, dirt bike riding."

Erika seizes the bottle straight from my lips and guzzles it down.

Frustrated by his ignored attempt to keep the peace, Camdyn mutters, "With you broads doing all your *lip flapping*, I'm the one who needs this most." He delivers the same impatient treatment to Erika by snatching the bottle and dominating it.

"*Feck ye, laddie.* Now, *wit* was it?" she asks.

After taking the bottle to the head, Camdyn runs the back of his hand along his mouth. "The two of you need to listen. Neither one of your asses has balls. Calm the fuck down. My friend had a pet viper. That bitch got me good."

"See, we were wrong." Erika stares at me, finally pouring ample shots into the cups.

After a while, the stars bleed into each other like tiny rays of shooting light. I'm enjoying our banter or lack thereof. Whereas Camdyn is usually polite to the general female population, he's not so much with Erika. And that is why I give him premium alcohol when he goes to hang out with friends.

A euphoric feeling tingles through my veins when Erika holds up the bottle, a quarter of alcohol left. The three of us have had our fill of the poison. The effects finally catch up to us.

“Alright, ye *bawbags*, last round of two truths ... and ... um, a lie.” Erika slurs. “One, my weapon of choice is this here.” Failing at an attempt to lift her foot onto the patio table, she leans over. “*Feck* it!” She pulls off the leather bootie to show a silver-studded stiletto.

“Well, that has to be true.” Camdyn laughs tipsily.

“Yup, she’s a bitter ass woman,” I mumble.

“Two, I’m a lesbian. Or lastly,” she snarls, staring at me accusingly. “I’m in love with my best friend, *who snuck off and got married.*”

CHEVELLE

ANGER SEARS FROM MY CHEST, SPREADING THROUGH ME LIKE a wildfire. Trembling mad, I pin Erika with my gaze. She's unblinking in response. A teeter of a laugh escapes my throat. Her words run through my mind on repeat, "My best friend, who snuck off and got married."

"It's the shoe," Camdyn assures. The daze in his vibrant teal eyes fades fast as he sits upright in his chair. "Sis, Erika's all talk. Can't kill nobody with that *feckin'* shoe." The slightly Scottish accent weaves into his speech.

"Better be the damn shoe." I rise from my chair.

"Nae, I kinda shared how it *wasn't* the shoes!" Erika gets up, redirecting her stance to her opposite heel. "How 'bout we have us a talk."

"No, Erika," Camdyn says, holding up his hand in my direction. "We're too drunk to chat about—"

"You being in love with this mysterious man who snuck and got himself married," I sneer.

"Aye, my *best friend*."

From the open partition into the house, I see Brody and Leith are walking through, shirts off. Both have muscles for days, but nobody's here for abdominals that could cut the tension between Erika and me. The salted air has thickened. The ocean is rushing to the shore below.

“We’re playing two truths and a lie, guys.” I share, psychotic smile and all. I probably look like I’m asking them to enter a blossoming, golden field for a remake of *Children of the Corn*. “Join us.”

Yup. Sounds creepy too.

“We’re done,” Camdyn mutters.

“You guys have known Erika for years.” I clear my throat.

“All their lives,” Erika adds, stumbling around the table. She slides an arm around my shoulder. I two-step to a tune in my own head and away from her touch. Chuckling, she ends up placing her hand on her hip.

“Uh, yeah.” Brody winks. “Some of us know her a lot better than others—if ye know what I mean.”

“Whatever, Brody. You’re a player.” I fold my arms. “Which indicates that the two of you most likely haven’t bonded to the level of being best friends. The only woman you’ll ever love is Nan.”

“*Och*, Chevelle, ye done hating these big *baws*!” He grabs his junk.

Leith is across the room with an arm scooping around my waist in what seems to be less than half a stride. He yanks me to him. “What is my drunk wife talking about?”

“Not drunk enough.” I chuckle.

“Guys, join in the fun, eh?” Erika holds up the bottle that hardly contains a shot or two of whiskey.

“We’re not finished with this round yet,” I snarl, stopping myself from calling the woman out by her name. “We were saying Erika hasn’t used the shoe as a weapon. So, that’s the truth? The lie? Damn, how many truths are there supposed to be?”

“I don’t remember,” Camdyn gripes. “Sis, just drop it. Fuck her, okay.”

“*Och*, two truths,” Erika corrects. “Appears ye’ve forgotten to repeat the other choices. Chevelle, were ye using

the lads as a lifeline to change yer answer? Like is she a lesbian? Is she in love with her *married* best—”

“Ye’re off yer *feckin’* heid!” Leith points a finger at Erika.

“Nae. Just a wee bit *pished*—drunk.” Erika lifts her hands parallel to the ground, tips her face upward, and slowly touches the tip of her nose.

“Eh, c’mon, ye ‘wee bit drunk’ wench, let’s go.” Brody clicks his tongue. “Camdyn, ye want a ride home?”

The teen nods, ready to ghost us all.

“All of ya, get the *feck* outta my house,” Leith snarls.

“*Och!* He’s all worked up.” Erika runs a hand along Brody’s beard before slinking past his muscular frame.

“And lock the *feckin’* door!” Leith calls out to them.

Brody replies, “Aye, *brathair.*”

A few minutes later, Leith is still staring at me. He knows good and damn well I don’t want to be touched right now. He orders the virtual assistant, “Turn on the alarm.”

“Alarming, secure. Inhabitants include Mr. and Mrs. MacKenzie and Mia MacKenzie.”

He reaches out to me, and the same tune as before with Erika is playing in my head while I step away. “Is she in love with you, Leith?”

“Nae!”

“Then what?”

My husband chuckles softly. “Ye’re easy to *feck* with, hen. Now, do I allow Erika to get away with her antics? Huh? Nae, Chevelle. I shut her the *feck* down.”

In a silent rage, I assess the situation for a moment. After a few beats, I demand an answer. “Is she your best friend? Who else do you know that snuck off and got married?”

An elopement was not part of our plan, nor was our backyard wedding abrupt. There were changes to our plans, but there was no sneaking. Leith pulled out all the stops during

his grad year while attending MIT. Those two years were trying times. With him in Massachusetts, I settled on a job at Michie's. Leith came home anytime he wasn't asleep, in class, or didn't have a final to prepare for.

His proposal was priceless. Leith was on break, and we took a chartered jet back to his school because he wanted me at his side until the very second that he had to return to classes. Instead, the jet took us to a private bed and breakfast in Michigan on the lake. Crying happy tears, I said yes during his proposal.

Leith and I saved for a wedding. But his family ties were my constant insecurity—that bastard Brody MacKenzie most of all. He was always trying to pull Leith back to him and away from me. His big brother's antics caused me to call it off, leaving Leith devastated, and my stubborn heart shattered.

A few weeks later, I found out I was pregnant. Leith was over the moon. Thus, the backyard wedding. Contrary to Erika's opinion, it was a spontaneous, beautiful affair, not a sneak.

"I didna marry ye for yer childbearing hips, Chevelle. Or yer 'I'm angry frown.'" Leith plants a kiss on my lips, pinning me in his arms. I look deep into his eyes, drowning in the sincerity of them. "I married my best friend. Am I wrong, hen?"

"No, because I married my best friend too." My eyes twinkle.

"Good. I've worked up an appetite."

Hypnotized, I melt in his arms as he carries me to the bedroom and out onto the balcony.

"Ye're in trouble, hen."

Chewing my lip, I reply, "I'll apologize after you dish out my punishment."

He sits, his slacks unbuttoned, with me straddled over his huge cock. As I laugh, he continues to say words I never understand or need to. I flush hot, reveling in being the center of his attention.

My dress shreds down the center. I screech, “Leith!”

“Do ye know the trouble ye’re in, lass?” His mouth presses against my neck, leaving a frenzy of sparks as his lips work their way to my breasts. Leith’s calloused fingers knead the flesh of my ass in his strong hands. The other hand grips the back of my neck, and his mouth has worked its way back up my jaw. When he hovers over my mouth, I gasp, burning in need.

“Chevelle, say ‘Please kiss me.’ ”

“Kiss me, Leith. A thousand times, please,” I beg.

In a tone I’ll never question, Leith demands, “Nae. Earn my smooches.”

In agony, I can hardly think, let alone speak. I snake my hands between us and grip his enormous cock like a stick shift. My thumb settles at the precum along the meaty head of it. “You wanna play dirty, baby. I can too.” My palm gives his dick a leisurely stroke while I zero in on his lips.

With a devilish smile, Leith turns his face away. “Nae, I said ye had to earn it, hen.”

I groan. There’s something about my husband denying me the taste of his lips when we make love. His eyes have grown dark, leaving my body in agony.

“Leith, may I feel your dick throbbing in my mouth? Then will you consent to a kiss?”

“I just might.”

“Hmmm,” I scrape my teeth over my bottom lip, “maybe I want your cum more than a kiss.”

I’ve one leg around my husband. The beast that stalks just below the surface of his clean-shaven demeanor appears. His hands slide around my throat, thumbs following the path of my pulse. I’m focused on the blood throbbing beneath my flesh until he speaks.

“Ye be a good *feck doll* while sucking my dick, Chevelle.” Leith’s grave voice vibrates through my entire body, sending

shockwaves to my sex. Damn his inflection while talking dirty. I imagine my eyes have gone Stepford wife trance-like.

“*Sook* me good. I’ll give ye that kiss ye’re begging for. Aye, yer pussy wrapped around my cock with my tongue down yer throat. That’s the kiss ye’ll remember yer entire life. Got that, lass?”

An inferno ignites me from the inside. Submissive, I fall to my knees and pull as much of my husband’s erection into my mouth as humanly possible. I’m exploring his thick girth, sucking him gently, when his hand clamps the back of my neck. Leith buries his dick past the point of my tonsils’ resistance.

I run a single finger along the hood of my clit, choking on his fat cock.

“Hands behind yer back,” Leith orders, “and I’ll not tie them together. Ye’ll hold position like a good *feck* toy all on yer own.”

The need to have him inside me has become so frantic that I clamp my hands into fists behind my back. Suctioning Leith in and out, I give a body aching whimper, aroused by his order. The caring lover has disappeared. I crave the vicious dominant who’s taken over.

My walls tremble in the night air. I want so badly for him to wrap me in his arms. My inner muscles begin to work as I feel the tension in his thighs. His orgasm is ready to unleash. A second later, Leith has yanked me from the ground. His chiseled jaw brushes along my cheek. “Not so fast, hen.”

Grabbing my thighs, Leith lifts my legs until my calves dangle over his shoulders, and his dick strokes my core. Instead of my husband coming undone, my moans lift toward a trillion stars.

“Leith,” I writhe. “I’m cumming! Kiss me, please.”

The anticipation creates an ache. His hands are plastered over my ass, pumping me up and down. I groan, begging for more.

“Ye want me to stuff yer pussy ‘til it aches?”

“Oh, yes! Kiss me, baby, please!”

He brings my wrists behind my back, pumping into me harder. He growls in my ear, “Who owns yer climax, *feck* toy?”

“You do!”

One hand still holding my hips, Leith runs the other up my neck and bites my jaw. “That’s right. I own it. Now, beg me to kiss ya again.”

An exquisite feeling, like I’m free-falling in Leith’s love, wraps around me. “Please, please kiss me.”

The climax hits like a tidal wave. My voice pitches as Leith pistons into me, but this time, he does so with his tongue lodged down my throat. One orgasm flows straight into another. The coupling of his erection thrusting into me and the kiss I craved has me crash landing on a distant galaxy.

LEITH

RUNNING MY HANDS DOWN THE LENGTH OF HER DELICIOUS body, I cherish this moment. All the bloody *shite* I've been holding in suddenly evaporates as I kiss Chevelle hard and *feck* her even harder. My hips thrust. My biceps drive her up and down until the crown of my dick collides with her cervix. Her amazing, tight pussy keeps getting wetter around me.

She'd begged me to kiss her. Not pressing my lips against hers had tormented us both. I'm banging my wife hard, growling in between each thrust. "*Feck* the luck of those Irish paddies. I'm the luckiest *nugget* in the universe. Ye're so bonny, so beautiful."

"Awe, Leith. You know what it does when you talk to me while you're fucking me. *I love you!*"

I watch Chevelle's breasts bounce as I piston into her repeatedly. When she screams, I cover her mouth with mine, kissing her until she's left broken in my arms. My cum jets into the depths of her.

I frame her bonny face in my hands. "Ye're mine, hen, never forget it."

She pants, "I know, Leith."



SOMETIME LATER, I'M BREATHING IN THE TEA TREE MINT OF her hair. The soft kinks tickle my jaw. Chevelle looks up at me, wholly trusting. I'm stunned by the need to be truthful with her. I tell her everything, usually. But not this weekend. I have a few moves to pull. I pray to God that she will understand what I have to do next.

"Baby, what are you thinking?" she murmurs.

"Ye wanna know?"

"Did I ask?"

I squeeze her about the waist. "I'll pop yer mouth the good, auld fashion way."

Chevelle laughs, shaking her head. They say women have a knack for minding *shite*. Well, I remember it too. Not that I hold onto it forever. I wait until she's sleeping, and I pop her mouth with my cock. She'll wake up, arms flying, though she moves like a snail.

Chevelle yawns. "Tell me what's on your mind, Leith."

"Ye *wabbit*?" I ask, knowing full well she must be exhausted.

"Yup." She elbows me softly. "The night's still young."

"She says, as she falls asleep in my arms," I retort.

"Hey, I only have you on the weekend. If I fall asleep tonight, wake me anyway."

Touched by her words, I run my knuckles along her cheek. "Alright, my thoughts. When I was a laddie—"

"So, you're finally admitting you were a boy and did not come out of the womb a man."

"Dinna be mistaken, lad or nae, I came into this world with hair on my *baws*."

"Not funny, Leith," she groans, laughing anyway.

"Do ye bloody want the story or nae?" It feels like a gnat is swatting at my chest, but it's my wife's hands. "When ye and Mam had yer chat earlier, I heard her mention yer textbooks

falling. I never told ye, but I noticed *ya* at school a few weeks before ye thought we met.”

“At La-, ahem, my adoptive mom’s apartment?”

“Aye. Asked around about ye. I admit I would’ve looked like an *eejit* running after *ya* from across the hall. So many other guys around offering to help, but ye refused them.”

“You thought I would refuse you too, after sprinting down the hall?”

“Nae, ye couldn’t refuse me back then. But I had a reputation, lass.” I square my shoulders.

“Reputation my ass, Leith. You and that accent of yours cared about no one’s opinion. So, you stalked me.”

“I’m no *daftie nugget*! Alright, I followed ye. Imagine my shock when, the hen I would marry, lived in the same building.”

She snorts. “You had no idea we’d marry.”

“The second ye dropped those texts, I knew. Hearing Mam’s version of apology tonight just reminded me.” My fingers slide through hers. “Sometimes, I might not be there for ye. Well, it might seem so.”

“Leith, you’re always here.”

“Nae, hen. Just listen. No matter what, I *love* ye.”

She lifts her head. “Why are you mentioning this?”

I can’t reassure my wife without digging my grave. Quickly, I make a million promises disappear. I pull her up with me and turn, sitting her in the chair. Kissing the sliver of worry on her brow, I determine to kiss a trail to her cunt and make her forget that I’m not bloody perfect.

LEITH

THE NEXT AFTERNOON, I PLACE MIA'S BOOSTER SEAT INTO THE back of my '70 Chevelle SS. Jiang had been in the trunk of my Audi for half a day. I dinna have the heart to place my wee *wean*, innocent eyes and all, so close to where the deid rested. We go on our traditional Saturday morning Father-Daughter date, a swimming class followed by hamburgers and shakes for breakfast. Of course, it's nae breakfast of champions, but Mia gives me those puppy eyes, and I give her those squishy gummy vitamins to counter the harm. What her mam doesn't know won't hurt her.

Then I drop off Mia at my parents' home, so my mam can deal with the hassle of washing the sand from her hair. In my ride, around the corner, I ring up Wendy. She's the cybercrime attorney I first sent information to when stumbling upon the shoddy actions at Infinity Corp. The law firm is not too far from my parents', and she agrees to meet at a rundown taco stand for lunch.

Wendy sits across from me, dropping an oily paper plate. "Want one?"

"Nae."

"Forget price. These are the best tacos from LA to the IE." She makes small talk for a few moments longer before taking her first bite.

“*Wit* have ye been able to dig up?” I ask.

Hiding her mouth, she chews the food down before responding. “The app you created was marketed perfectly to the demographic. It’s like no other dating app around. There are interactive games for the tweens and a forum for young adults who want to voice their opinion, which is separate from the forum for the more established individuals who prefer to debate.”

“Aye,” I grit. “The company had behaviorists and anthropologists assist with that part of the algorithm.”

“On the outside looking in, Leith, everything’s great.”

“Nae, it’s not bloody great!”

“I’m getting there.” She grabs a small plastic container of salsa and pours. “The AI data you encoded was updated to target wealthy users.”

“I know that.”

“Instead of real, live love connections, an AI is responding to them. Whether this millionaire is lonely or that billionaire wants a sugar baby to spoil, the program is saying all the pretty words rich people want to hear.”

“And stealing their banking info. Robbing people blind.” In retrospect, it’s the kind of *shite* that’ll appeal to the gangsters affiliated with my clan. I pinch the bridge of my nose. “How deep am I? Seeing how my *feckin’* name is pretty much on the entire function!”

“Deeper than you think. Unless you can break the firewalls —”

“I’ve tried, Wendy.” I fork a hand through my hair. “The hacker from the fiery pits of *feckin’* hell is blocking my every bloody attempt.”

“Yeah, about that. I have a friend—”

“Who?”

“An associate who assists me with a select, few cases. I can’t divulge his identity. He refuses to act in an *expert witness*

capacity in most instances. But he's good."

"So, ye know who's blackmailing me." The speaker of a tiny Honda in front of the taco stand stops blaring. Everything goes quiet as I wait for Wendy's response. All I need is a name.

She gives a faint shake of her head. "Sorry. This person who is helping has been able to pinpoint everything you're saying. Not a name."

"How deep is this?"

"It's extortion, racketeering/bribery, bank fraud ... All the infractions will add up."

"Sounds like twenty-five to *feckin'* life."

She grimaces.

"*Wit* about a deid lad?" I gesture, chewing my thumbnail. "That another twenty-five, or can it be completed in tandem with the *bullshite* I didna do?"

With the second taco paused at her lips, she gasps. "Someone killed someone else and is pinning it on you too?"

"Nae. I'm a man, Wendy. I admit my *shite* ... when necessary." A *daftie* cackle escapes me, and she stares. It's times like this, I wish I could hypnotize Chevelle into believing what is bad is good and what is good is for other people, not us.

"Are you serious?"

"Lass, look at my face. This is my serious face."

"What happened, point-by-point?"

"I'd been giving it my all at work this past week. Left earlier than usual, and I was exhausted. Wanted so badly to rest my heid, but I missed my wee *wean* and my hen. I was minding something Mia had done while walking through the parking structure when a Chinese guy, I knew 'em in passing from work, came at me."

"Who?" She stops and shakes her head. We both know that the less she's aware of, the better.

I continue my story about Jiang. “He was shouting. I’m like, shut yer *geggie*, then pressed the unlock button to my ride. But he didna shut his *feckin’ geggie*—”

“Ge—?”

“It’s *mouth*. That’s what it means, sorry.” I chew on my thumbnail. “I’m *feckin’* irritated. Chevelle has to remind me to speak plainly sometimes too. Anyway, the lad had an accent. I’m told I’ve a bloody accent,” I add with a shrug. “But I paid him nae mind. Only the Chinese lad didna stop.”

“What happened next?”

“Roughed him up a bit. The one-two punch, followed by a forearm to his throat, with a quick *scalp* to his face to top ‘em off. So, he starts walking away, but then he pulls out a gun.”

With her taco discarded, Wendy nods thoughtfully.

“I took his gun before the lad could disengage the safety. Again, one shot. When I trained and was called a *nugget* by my da, he says, ye have a gun in yer hand for a reason. If ye’re not intending to use it, dinna use it!” I drop my head in contemplation of how I’m a contradiction to my clan. How I failed my da’s teachings.

“I let out a warning shot.” *At his knee*, but I don’t include that bit. “That didna penetrate through the lad’s heid.” *The next one did the trick*.

I let Wendy infer the rest, growing callus at the thought of how Jiang came at me again. The second shot, the one between his eyes, shut his *feckin’ geggie*. Before I tell Chevelle this story, I’ll need to dig deep and feel remorse.

The truth is—I feel nothing.

Wendy cuts in. “Do you know if there’s surveillance in the parking structure at your job?”

“Yep, wiped it.” I shrug, rubbing my thumb over the chipped paint on the wooden table.

Huffing, she leans back. “Noooo. I’m not a criminal attorney, Leith, but you’ve described self-defense. A video

could assist in that regard, um, without you having to verbalize too much about assaulting him first.”

“Eh, nae. I’m a MacKenzie. Video or not, I’d be in the wrong. Besides, the lad’s gone for good.” I flick the pale blue paint chip onto the sidewalk.

“Still, if something were to happen, you’d have concrete proof on your side.”

“Nae.” I shake my head.

This poor lady thinks I’m a bloody *nugget*. But ain’t nobody finding that body—least not all of it. In the wee hours of the morning, I took a boat ride to the edge of the *feckin’* earth—dropped a cement laden leg here, a cement molded arm there. Of course, the blocks weren’t identifiable. Also, Brody took a few pieces. Hands and teeth. The important *shite*. Those identifiable bits will be sprinkled in various parts of the desert on his next cross-country run for MacKenzie Freight Lines.

God forbid Chevelle ever finds out.

CHEVELLE

“OUT OF SIGHT OUT OF MIND” HAS BEEN THE DRIVING FORCE of my entire life. That was one of the opportunities afforded me by Lady. There was no way in hell she was spending my money on a shrink to get the past out of my head, so I did it myself. First, with the toys she bought me, next with endless video games.

Still, the image of my momma weighs vividly on my heart. She was a quiet person at times and asked for nothing. Flawless diamonds adorned her supple, black skin, but that spark never extended to her eyes. She had these soulful brown gems that radiated another sad love song. My dad was an extremely light-skinned man. He would rave about how the sun followed his love around, creating this rich, dark beauty until the day they crossed paths.

The two of them once offered me sweet dreams—or the beautiful nightmares of perceived happiness. I didn’t grow up in a house filled with shouting or domestic violence incidents. Momma kneaded Dad’s neck as he spilled over legal documents. I had a vanilla life. I lived on the pretty side of gentrification—private school in Chicago, piano class, stuff like that. I still stop my fingers from softly weaving a tune that won’t be heard.

Today, with Leith and Mia on their outing, I attend to the hops, a plant that helps beer retain its head of foam and keeps

it fresher. Then I work with the lavender plants, which I plan to use for my next round of brew.

When I commenced my hobby, I purchased most of the brewing essentials on the great, infinite Zon. Next day delivery was a convenient bonus. Now, I shop at specialty stores for my brewery supplies. I buy my plants from prestigious nurseries. My green thumb and brewing skills will cater to a more refined clientele. I refuse to name my pub and brewery Mia's Place without coming through.

Digging my hands into the rich soil, I let my mind drift. I wonder if I'm so blinded by love that I've neglected to see Leith drawing closer to Erika or the clan in any way? A thought enters my brain bringing me to a stop. The second it pops in my mind that he isn't working in Silicon Valley and has taken his rightful place in the family business, I groan. "Get behind me, Satan."

I dust my hands on my jeans and slide my cell phone from my pocket. Two weeks ago, I had a solo lunch at Kelly's Steakhouse. It was a weekday with not many patrons, so I sat at the bar. Lonely, I made a suggestion to the bartender, who turned out to be *Ophelia Kelly*, the owner. One thing led to another, and she asked about my brews.

I select her number from contacts. Chewing the meat of my top lip, I await her answer. Though I have her cell phone number, catching Ophelia has been extremely difficult. But I'm a friggin housewife, so there's not much to do but sit around and wait.

When she answers, I stifle my excitement.

"Oh, Chevelle," Ophelia exclaims, "I apologize for not getting back to you."

"It's alright."

"I've raved to my business partners about your APAs. Your Scotch Ale was amazing—"

As I cut in, I'm grimacing at how overly excited I am. "I just had a lot of success with a lager."

"Tell me about the flavor profile."

“It’s characterized with honey and orange notes.” I continue to identify how alluring the draft was based on Leith’s response, his slamming me on the counter. I bring my statement home with precursory words such as “bold, yet smooth and delectable.”

“Listen, sit tight for me a little while longer. I’ll juggle around a few things and connect with you by the end of next week. Then we can discuss how Mia’s Label can be incorporated with my chef’s menu and review some legal humdrum. How does that sound?”

“Great.” I happy dance inside. Working with her head chef would be amazing. I’ve read many write-ups about their award-winning dishes.

Minutes later, I hang up. Rolling my shoulders around, I murmur, “Take that, Leith. You stack cash; I can too. Okay, Chevelle, stop talking to yourself. Keep your mouth closed. You’re not telling Leith everything. This business connect is a surprise.”

Emotions catapulting like a rollercoaster, I alternate from craving my best friend to wishing Leith viewed me as an equal partner in our marriage. The best friend feeling wins out. Saying goodbye to Leith every Sunday evening never gets easier. And in a sense, that makes me the luckiest woman in the world that I’ve found someone I miss the second he’s away. Our bond is stronger than the distance between us. Because of our connection, Leith is the first person I want to call to celebrate my success. But I’ve promised myself to keep it a secret, so I need an outlet.

I dial up my old coworker, Justice. Once she answers, I ask, “You working at Michie’s tonight?”

“Nah, it’s poetry night. Got a little anger I need to get out.”

“Damn, I’m not feeling poetry.” *Share feelings, put it all on the table.* Yeah. That sounds so like me. “Also, the hub’s home for the weekend. Before you get all in your feelings, how about something funny this afternoon?”

“What, the movies?” Justice asks.

“Yup. Let’s meet at the theater with those spicy Jamaican hot wings.”

She moans. “Girl, now, you’re speaking my language. I found a coupon for the new theatre in LA if we go before four p.m.”

“Yay!” I place the iPhone on speaker and surf the Fandango app, finding a new film with my favorite comedian. I chuckle. I love a good drink before the movie to bring on the laughs. We make plans to meet a little later and hang up.

Justice and I became closer toward the end of my career when we spent long nights working at Michie’s. Between the rush crowd or when the night slowed down, those were our best chats. But in the beginning, Justice had a sour face if ever I’d seen one.

I had seniority at Michie’s, and usually, I gave the newbies a wink and a smile. Then they’d shake a martini like they were expecting a hundred-dollar tip, which just made stashing extra cash easier.

Not Justice, though. It was a job for her. Though I had to hand it to her, she was a damn good mixologist. When there are two of you, and the business is packed a hundred strong, being the only one to move consistently was enough to pull out my hair. Though she was good, Justice didn’t get a single tip for her capabilities. She never smiled. I carried her share of the tips we split.

One day, I snapped at her about how no job was ever *just* a job to me. I might have lacked a zeal before Leith, but I did my best when I put my name behind something.

Justice had gone off on me, saying she had no reason to smile. She told me about how the love of her life had committed suicide. Their life had been good. She’d done nothing but been *happy, smiling*. Justice sneered. Everything had been perfect in their relationship. Then it wasn’t. So, what did it matter if she smiled or not?

When I accidentally popped off about knowing a little something about that, Justice snapped. I guessed she wanted to

compare sob stories since I was fine, never crying about mine.

“Yeah, sure. What do ya know about grief, Miss Smiles?”

“Well, my pops blew my mom away with a shotgun, then he turned the gun on himself too.” I hadn’t meant to say those words, but it all rushed out on an exhale.

After that, Justice and I had a different kind of respect for each other, and she smiled at the patrons.



AN HOUR LATER, I’M NAVIGATING THE WINDING CURVES WHEN Justice calls me.

“Chevelle, tell me you’re getting off the freeway.”

Although I have yet to navigate the freeway, I parrot, “I’m getting off the freeway.”

“Um-hmm. My funds are too tight to pay an extra online convenience fee. I’m at the theater kiosk. Looks like there are a few left.”

“You got me?”

“I got you.”

“Good, Because I got a little something, something for you. If I’m a couple minutes late, I’m blaming it on the gift.”

She snickers. “Girl, what you got? You must love me?”

“Yeah, I love you just a little bit. I was digging in the sales bins at Anna’s Holiday.” I mention a plus-size clothing boutique I stumbled upon near my home. Preparing for a family trip a while back, I’d bought a dress for Nan, something a little more exciting than her usual attire.

“Oh, Lawd! You love me. Ain’t no such thing as the sales bins. That place is expensive. Hell, my car can’t even half get up those big hills. Thank you, Chevelle.”

“Size eighteen, right?”

“Yes, sweetie.”

“It may’ve been a few months since we connected, but I remember how you’ve dropped a few pounds.”

Again, she squeals, “Thank—”

“Shit!” I scream.

A pearl white BMW crossover pulls into the oncoming lane, attempting to cut me off. An SUV honks. The luxury car zips back at the rear of me.

Concern in her voice, Justice asks, “What’s going on?”

“Sorry, Justice,” I sigh. “Some asshole is riding my ass. Got me screaming in your ear.”

Nobody drives the speed limit in these parts, which is crazy. The roads have a lot of curves, and no one takes them seriously. The thought reminds me of how my mom would clamp my cheeks when I played too hard near the church steps. She’d say, “Angels fly because they take themselves lightly.” There was something more to her statement, and I wish I could get it back. But it’s funny how we, as humans, remember what angers us, but the most tender moments vanish swiftly.

The BMW drifts into the opposite lane, speeds up, then swings right in front of my car. Wrapped in irritation, I forget all about the deep bend, merging onto the freeway. Suddenly, the wheels scream, treading over the asphalt. My car careens toward the guardrail.

LEITH

WHEN I RETURN TO MY PARENTS' HOUSE TO PICK UP MIA, MY wee *wean* is in the center of their wooden four-poster bed. Customed-sized, the thing was huge. They had it made when we moved into this house. As I grew up, many of my *brathairs* and I piled together to watch funny movies on the *tellybox*. We had a pretty good life growing up.

Now, it looks like a tornado ran through here. The blankets are on the ground, pillows all over. There's an unidentifiable object in Mia's hand. From observing the sticky residue on her face, I decide it has to be a gnarled, soggy pb&j, which comes in a close second to her Fruit Loops mania.

When her eyes flit from the television to me, Mia brightens. "Daddy!"

I hold my hands up. "Wait, lassie, dinna—*do not move!*"

It's like watching Armageddon as a messy peanut butter *piece* falls from her hands, smearing the covers. Climbing over the discarded sandwich, Mia jolts off the bed. I'm jumped by my bairn, her sticky fingers flying everywhere. "Does this tickle, Daddy?"

"Nae, kid. *Wit's* this on yer hair?" I touch the plastic helmet covering her usual corky curls.

"Uh, I dunno." She giggles, wee hands gluing wherever they land on my arms and stomach.

My mam exits the bathroom with a large towel in hand.

“Mam? *Wit* are ye doing with my tiny human?”

Mam drapes the towel over a stuffed chair across the room. “I was ‘bout to give yer wee one a *skelpit lug* for asking me to sound like a leprechaun. I’ll have nae such talk of cruel, Irish creatures in my home, Mia.”

“*Och*, dinna let me stop ye. Beat the hag. But I’m referring to the hair,” I say as Mia gasps.

“Daddy! Don’t let Nan spank me!” Again, I’m assaulted by gluey fingers.

“Well, if ye’re being bad, sweetheart,” Mam replies.

“But it’s *funnnny!*”

“Alright, back to the hair stuff?” I cut in, pressing my palm over Mia’s mouth. Instantly, I let her go and run my gooey hand over my pant leg.

“Mommy told Nan about the uhhh ...”

“Deep conditioning, Mia,” Mam assists, smacking her on the butt. “Wash yer mouth and bring yer da a wet face towel. Leith, did ye feed the girl?”

“Aye, Mam. We had cheeseburgers for breakfast.” I narrow an eye at my wee minion as she slinks into the bathroom.

“I had the feeling this bairn ate well. Good thing she grows vertically, not horizontally like my side of the clan.” Mam picks up pillows, stripping the linen and tossing them into a much neater pile on the floor. Mia returns with a cold, wet towel for me that she hasn’t rung out.

I rub it across my forearms as Mam scolds her. “Mia, get yerself some milk to wash down yer *piece*, then I’ll rinse yer hair, yeah?”

When my lassie rushes out the room, I ask, “*Wit*’s this deep conditioning stuff?”

“*Och*, Chevelle told me she explained it to ye a *hunner* times, Leith! Were it a discussion ‘bout computers, ye would remember!” Mam whacks me with a naked pillow then tosses

it into the pile. “My wee bairn has bonny hair. I aim to keep it that way. I watched it on YouTube. Chevelle texted it to me a while back. I’ll try to find it for ye.”

“I dinna need a video to tell me anything, Mam. I have ye, and Chevelle,” I reply, starting out of her bedroom. I laugh to myself. I know how to deep condition Mia’s hair. Also, I’m a pro at taking out braids—*but my mam doesn’t need to know all of that.*

“*Wit* about when nae lass is around to help?” she asks, following me.

Moving down a hall lined with family portraits, I snicker. “Then I just push her hair around with my fingers. Fluff it, ya know?” I stop and see Mam isn’t following me. She looks distant as she stares at the photos.

“Leith, I need more bairns running around. Lots and lots of bairns! And that’s another thing. I need my bairns not to associate leprechauns with Scottish folklore.”

I disregard the bairn stuff. “When it comes to leprechauns, we’ve had this discussion *lots*, Mam. Mia just likes wee, *arseface* men.”

“Dinna make a joke out of this.” She places her hands on her hips. “Ye know what I want. Give me what I want, Leith.”

With a sigh, I shuffle down the white oak stairs. “*Och*, Brody’ll give ya a half-pint. How ‘bout that?”

“Nae.” Mam tries to keep up, breathing heavily with each step. “He hasn’t introduced neither I nor Big Brody to a respectable lass. No *half-pints* from his loins.”

I smile wickedly, stalling to let her catch up. When she’s a few steps away, I jump from the second landing of the split staircase onto the walnut wood floor. Arching a brow, I look up at her. “Camdyn, then?”

“Damn ye, Leith!” She’s huffing and puffing as I stroll past the massive dining room. “I’ll catch up to ye. If Cam brings a lassie home before a high school diploma, I’ll strangle him myself.”

I'm about twenty yards away when Mam appears at the opposite end of the spacious sitting room. Placing my hands on my hips, I joke. "Mam, guess that means I'll have to come through for ye real soon."

"Are ye saying?" Her plump cheeks alight like Christmas. Hiding a devilish smile, I wait for her to come near.

I clasp her beaming face. "Mam, I was just—"

"Is Chevelle?" She clasps her hands together.

I kiss her forehead. "Only takes once."

"Get to it, then!" She swats at me as I laugh.

We continue down the expansive corridor into the kitchen where Da stands at the end of a long island. The furnishings are darker in here, with blue cabinets and vast wood countertops. At the breakfast nook and around the area are more of my cousins. They seem to be talking business. *Shite*, I'm adamant about Mia staying unaware of clan activity.

Mindful of my wishes, Da has switched to code words. He's briefing them on *organic food* being taken from MacKenzie Freight to the east coast where the McFarlands rule. Our trucking company has transported all sorts of merchandise. Last time food was an analogy, one of my idiot cousins mentioned sweets. It sparked Mia's curiosity. My *wean's* averse to all things *organic*. So, the boring word flips around like hotcakes today.

When she reaches into the Viking refrigerator, Brody's there to scoop her up. Our clan is compiled of all lads, so every shelf is loaded. Her tiny sticky fingers trail over it all until Brody hands her a glass bottle of Martinelli's.

I listen in. It seems to be a big drug run. My cousin, Knox, the *eejit* and occasional fireman, says he'll be driving his muscle car.

"The orange '78 Challenger?" I lift a brow.

"Aye." He beams with pride. "Just restored her."

Running a hand along my chin, I muse, "Is it discreet, ye *bampot*?"

Knox runs his middle finger across his eyebrow. He has half of his usual retort out of his mouth, “the boring one,” when my elbow lifts, thumping against his thick neck. I pretend to yawn as he hacks.

“*Shite*, those muscle spasms.” I laugh.

My cousin fakes his last cough, launching from his chair. A crystal ball isn’t necessary to see him coming. Camdyn and more of my other cousins hold him back.

Da complains. I mutter how much we all love each other.

Brody cuts in. “Knox, ye and one more of yer *brathairs* follow my rig. Nae bright cars, ye *nuggets*. Now, Mia, let’s get outta here.” Brody squeezes her in his arms. “None of these *neds* can spar like yer uncle, aye?”

“Uhn-uh, Uncle Brody.” She smiles up at him. “My daddy beat all your a—!”

“Mia!” I say in unison with Da and Mam. Brody claps a palm over her silly face, and they exit the room. I rest my hands on the table and heave a sigh. My daughter will be the death of me. With the usual rowdiness out of the way, I glare at Erika then cock my head.

She rolls her eyes, following me into the hallway. Erika leans against an accent table. “I thought ye were done with me?”

I glower at her. “I am! I’m just warning ye not to piss off Chevelle again.”

“Leith, alls I was tryin’ to do was get ‘er to open up a little. She’s clan.”

“Nae, she’s not. She’s mine, *all mine*. That has nothing to do with clan talk or yer *bullshite* about us being best friends.” I glance down at my cell phone.

“Stop being a crabbit, Leith! We are the best of friends.”

There are two missed calls from the same number. When I look up to excuse myself, Erika’s face softens. I haven’t seen this look since I’d shared the last bottle of fizzy juice with Erika as we sat in the rain. Her da, Ewan McFarland, popped

her face in front of all our clans. On the lassie's fourteenth birthday, no less. Tears were in her eyes. I knew the truth even though she wouldn't admit to it. She'd leaned close. I shake the thought out of my head. The tender look remains. Though she's always dressed in leather, I often forget she's a *feckin'* lass.

"Nae, Erika. We're not *best* friends."

Erika's expression changes. A smirk is accompanied by a roll of her eyes, total sarcasm. Erika wasn't always an *arsehole*. She grew into one. But Chevelle doesn't understand that, and I'll not have my hen wondering. I'll not repeat the mistakes I made with my older *brathair*.

I regret not putting Brody in his place long ago. He was a jackass to Chevelle. But while I thought it was older *brathair nugget* behavior, since we all pretty much grew up together, I hadn't noticed how his actions hurt Chevelle until she tossed her engagement ring at me.

The thought of not having my hen in my life was the scariest thing I'd ever gone through. Also, the *bullshite* Brody tried at my bachelor party had me on a rampage. It took me a while to realize how disrespected that incident made Chevelle feel.

"Really?" Her expression changes again. The tender look returns. Erika's voice quivers. "I've known ye since we could walk. Since we all lived back home."

"Nae, Erika," I repeat myself. "I can't have ye talkin' to her like that." The truth seems to sink in hard, but I blink. The only emotion the lass will get from me.

Her green eyes shine from unfallen tears. I can see family photos from the walls in the depths of them. I can also see my impassive facial expression.

Erika points a stiff finger at herself. "But *I* can watch Chevelle and Mia when ye're in Silicon Valley? Why? Why me if I'm not yer best friend outside yer *brathairs*?"

"Erika." I tap her cheeks with my fingertips. For a fraction of a second, she lights up. The truth seems to penetrate as she

lowers her gaze. I redirect her eye contact. Mine are a pair of daggers. “Ye didna have to do it.”

The flesh along her jaw grows taut with anger. “And we call Cam, the American. Look at ye, nae bloody emotion.”

“Aye and aye,” I reply, walking away. With my point driven home, I’m about to start up the stairs when she speaks again.

“McFarland and MacKenzie clans have supported each other for over a *hunner* years, Leith. I was opening the floor for a pleasant discussion between her and I. Had she not gotten so upset—”

My phone rings from the same number as the missed calls. Leaning against the banister, I accept. Chevelle’s friend, Justice, speaks in a rush. She tells me that my wife is okay, but she was in a car crash. I’ve been smacked with a new feeling. Run over with it. A profound feeling that I’ve never felt in my entire life.

Fear.

“Where?” I ask. When Justice mentions a street near my home, I reply, “I’m on my way.”

After hanging up, my Adam’s apple lobs in my throat. Like a rising tide, fury overcomes me. I curl my hands into fists, breathing through gritted teeth. *Wit* happened? She wouldn’t jeopardize her life, driving crazy. Did my blackmailer set off this chain of events?

Erika catches my eye, an offer of help in hers.

I shake my head.

As I’ve said, I’m good at minding things. Maybe I hold grudges. Piss off my hen or my bairn, and the bridge burns down. Hurt my hen or my bairn ... well, someone just made the biggest mistake of their life.

As I make my way out of the house, I think about how “*feck* it” once was the deciding factor of every decision I made. That was before Chevelle. It’s been ages since that was

my guiding light. Maybe it's time for me to stop fighting my inner demons.

LEITH

MY OLDER *BRATHAIR*, BRODY, CATCHES ME ON THE WAY OUT OF the door.

“*Och, brathair, wit’s wrong? Ye’re peely-wally again.*” When I say nothing in response, he nudges his chin to his truck. “I’ll drive.” He knows when I’m quiet, not to test me.

Camdyn’s outside, polishing a lime green Ducati that Da forbade him to drive. He casually drops the microfiber cloth he’s using on the ground. At the last second, the bastard climbs into the back of Brody’s gray Silverado.

By the time we make it home, I’ve already spoken to Chevelle. On the phone, she seemed angrier than hurt. She said that it probably scared Justice more than anything. Since Chevelle had to talk to the highway patrol, she’d asked Justice to call Leith and let him know what happened.

Brody pulls the keys from the ignition. “This got anything to do with the deid lad?”

“Better not.” I slam the passenger door, stalking up to the entrance.

“And if it does, Leith?” Brody follows suit.

“Then I handle it,” I sneer.

My auld *brathair* has more to say, but Camdyn cuts in. “Leith said he’ll handle it. Chill, bro.”

“Shut up, American,” Brody snaps. “That’s not the clan way. The two of ya know it!”

Brody’s still hemming and hawing when I grip his collar. We issue each other a few pops, neither of us the type to back down when provoked.

Camdyn comes between us, arms locked, as he shoves our chests. He snaps, “Cool, the fuck, down!”

“I dinna have time for this!” I give my wee brathair one final shove and open the door to the house. I growl for the AI to tell me my hen’s location when she comes into view from the corner of my eye. Chevelle’s seated on the couch in the den, legs wide. She’s a *hunner* lightyears away. Nae fear, nae emotion on her face. I’m tempted to ask my wife her thoughts. Instead, my eyes roam over her body, assessing her for any damage. The thunder of my heart’s the only sound, beating so *feckin’* loud as I take inventory of her curves. I’ve tallied up how many times I’ll murder and resurrect my enemy if the *arsehole* orchestrated this. Though she appears safe, I plan to murder him a million times over.

Finally looking up to meet my eye, Chevelle places on a hesitant smile. Her voice is barely audible. “Hey, baby.”

With one look in Chevelle’s eyes, I note an unsettled look. She’s on a razor’s edge. While the rest of her has bottled up the shock, her gorgeous, molten brown gaze hasn’t. There’s nae controlling the anxious bite in my voice as I look down at her. “Who did this!”

“Baby, I’m okay. Look at me, Leith. Don’t start thinking about retaliation.”

Chevelle’s beginning to stand, but my voice booms, “*Wit?* Ye want me to walk around like everything’s good!”

It takes everything out of me to not ask what the *motherfecker* looked like. Bloody promise be damned. My true nature, my corrupt character, is coming out. While her soft voice attempts to calm me, I fall to my knees, planting myself between her thighs. My fingers brush reverently across my hen’s cheeks. I run my hands along the nape of her neck to

clutch her ponytail. I let the ferocity of my kiss atone for every single second we've been apart.

Still, I feel like I've been tossed on my *feckin'* head. Focusing on my promise of peace to my wife, I rasp, "*Wit* happened?"

"I said I'm okay, Leith."

The devil in me is momentarily revived. "*Wit* happened!"

Chevelle jumps. She's staring at me all wrong. I wonder if Chevelle's da took a rough hand to her mam a lot before killing her. Just now, I was too harsh with Chevelle, but I'll not apologize for it.

"I'm okay, baby," she groans. "Some idiot came out of nowhere." She places her head in her hands. "If Mia had been in the car?"

My flesh is on fire hearing my *wean's* name. Chevelle looks up, eyes locking on mine. Swallowing hard, I warn myself to cool it. My nostrils flare, chest expanding. Anger comes deid natural to me. Playing the part back then, I assured Chevelle I could control it. Now, not so much. I feel like a bear left in a cage for ages and just now let out and into the woods.

The air around us grows humid, muggy.

Chevelle runs a silky palm over my stubble.

"Leith, forget I said that. Look at your face, baby. I'm fine, really." She mumbles about the *nugget* at Michie's, how I flew off the handle.

If she only bloody knew.

"Ye're not fine, Chevelle," I snap.

I'd forgotten my *brathairs* accompanied me until Camdyn's voice comes from behind. "Sis, you sure that you're good?"

"She's fine." Brody clicks his tongue. "Look at the lass. She's a strong woman."

My wife offers my older *brathair* a pointed glare.

“See, Leith, ye married a fighter, a gorgeous warrioress.” He clears his throat as we all stare. “Now, ahem, we have those Dodger tickets.”

“Yup, those tickets.” Cam nods.

I shoot Brody a glare. He tosses it right back.

Chevelle takes my hand. “Baby, get up. Go have some fun with your brothers. You guys rarely get together.”

I shoot over my shoulder, “Nae. Brody, take one of yer hens.”

He runs a hand over a tuft of dark hair. “Ye want Cam to be a third wheel with me and one of my women?”

My wife pecks my lips. “Baby, go. You heard him. Save your little brother from debauchery. I’m fine.”

Camdyn sniffs. “Nice one, Chevelle. I’m not that impressionable.”

“Kiss the missus, Leith. She’ll be here when ye get home tonight.” Brody grips the back of my shirt and pulls me up.

“Alright.” I nod my head. My *brathairs* back away. I crouch back down in front of Chevelle as their footsteps recede toward the front door.

“Hen, ye were talking about staying up all night yesterday. We only have the weekends.”

“Yup. Promise you’ll wake me later and shred the sexy lingerie from my skin.” She licks her lips, palms roaming across my chest.

“Wear the red lace I love, hen. I’ll snatch it off ye right now.” Aroused, my cock stiffens in my pants.

“Yeah, I know. The lady at Vicky Secrets looked at me sideways for buying five pairs of the exact same lingerie. We may be on the last set.” She bites her bottom lip, and I taste the very same spot, placing my hand at the nape of her neck.

“Stop tempting me, Mr. MacKenzie.” Chevelle sighs, mouth pressed next to mine. “I knew that last name was the type of trouble a good girl like me doesn’t need.”

“Lass, ye got two choices. Sliding the lingerie off those hips yerself, or I shred it straight from yer dripping wet pussy.”

Her smile grows knowingly. Chevelle softens her next statement while her fingertips push me away softly. “Get behind me, Satan. Go out with your brothers. I’m doing it for Cam. Anytime he sets his iPhone aside is a win. Also, I can’t stand Brody, but, and I can’t believe I’m saying this, you should spend some time with him.”

“I dinn—”

“I’m extending the olive branch to bitch-ass-Brody—”

“Hen—”

“It’s a rare occurrence. Punish me and my big mouth later tonight.” She holds out her pinkie. I twist it into mine and press my lips to our promise. Then I’m tasting her mouth like it’ll be our last time.



OUTSIDE, IT’S STILL A SUNNY DAY. BRODY IS LEANING against his truck, and Camdyn is seated on the edge of the flagstone water fountain. Running a hand over the back of my neck, I stroll over. “The Dodgers? *Wit* was that for? I *feckin’* lied to my wife.”

“Relax, bro.” Cam gets up. “Every lie said to a beautiful woman serves its purpose. We have work to do.”

“Aye!” Brody agrees. “Dinna look at the American like that, Leith. Our wee *brathair* and I are on the same wavelength. There’s nae *feckin’* way some *ned* clipped her on accident.”

Those were my thoughts, except for the *feckin’* we have *shite* to do part. As if the Devil’s listening in on my contemplations, the son of a bitch from before tempts me with a call.

Two pairs of eyes that resemble mine cloud in confusion as I answer my phone. I look like a secretary, a *feckin’ nugget*

responding to a call in the middle of our argument.

“*Wit!*” I growl into the receiver.

“Right now, you’re angry,” the stranger says, utilizing the same automated voice. “I will tell you something, Leith. The feeling is mutual.”

I walk toward Brody’s truck, stopping at the rear. “Aye, then ye should *motherfeckin’* come see me ‘bout that instead of flapping yer *geggie*.”

“Hmmm, in a state of distress, you dismiss having graduated *summa cum laude* and resort to the savage verbiage of your people? Well, I’m acclimating myself with your choice of words. You want me to shut my mouth? I can assure you, me ‘flapping my *geggie*’ indicates how we’re still connected. Leith, you’ll want to keep me on your team.”

“Who is it?” Brody silently grits. Without saying a word, Camdyn lifts a brow in question. Both are so different but await the answer to a question that has dogged me for a while.

“Where are ye?” I ask, into the receiver. Again, putting a wee bit of distance between myself and my *brathairs*.

“We aren’t to that part yet, Leith. Stop fraternizing with *attorneys*. I’ll say it just once.”

So, he’s aware of the meeting I had with Wendy earlier?

My left hand curls around the edge of the truck bed. “Ye think a bloody attorney is the worst I can *feckin’* do to ya? I get my hands on ye, yer *feckin’* shark food!”

The call goes dead.

“Who is it?” Brody grips my shirt.

“Get in the truck.” Cam nudges his chin to the door. “Let’s fix this. Though, it might be more rational to do so farther away from your house.”

“I ...” I stop shouting instantly and pick up my phone. Did the *arsehole* call me from a phone number? I’m spitting mad on emotion. Flexing my fingers, I take a hard breath then

glance at the phone. This time a 323 number appears. “I’ll have the *arsehole’s* address in seconds.”

LEITH

I'D THREATENED TO KICK MY WEE *BRATHAIR* OUT OF THE TRUCK for his own good. Camdyn's too young to be mixed into the mess I've gotten myself in. But he claimed he'd lift a ride and catch up with us since he saw the address on my spare laptop, which I keep in the trunk of my ride. We'd dropped by our parents' house to grab it. I'd connected my cellphone to the burner laptop and used an outdated program I created at the age of nineteen to retrace the location of the call. While I never had any need for the program, it could trace a phone call within a half-block radius.

We luck out. Now, we're seated in the Silverado around the corner from a mansion in Brentwood. My enemy's home takes up an entire block.

Bill Phelps is a tech guru who made his money from investing in Google. But he's so auld I can see him sitting around cashing in on other techies' inventions. He's unmarried and has nae *weans*. *Shite* just got easy.

Brody grumbles, holding one Glock and a .22 he pulled from his ankle strap. "I ain't choosing between the two of ya, *brathairs*. Leith, ye *numpty*, let's comeback after dark with more ammo and our cousins."

"I'm the idiot?" I slap a hand to my forehead. "*Feck* Knox, Firth, James. *Feck* 'em all. *They're numpties*." A vortex of adrenaline races through my veins. I'm moments away from

reclaiming my happily ever after. “Brody, I dinna need any of our cousins. *Shite*, I dinna need ye or Cam for that matter.”

Brody snorts.

“The guns are all yours, bro.” Camdyn leans forward from the backseat to wield a sleek switchblade. “The bitch who said don’t bring a knife to a gunfight never met me.”

“I dinna need a bloody gun neither,” I grunt.

“Alright, I’ll take it. Feels good in the palm of my hand.”

I place my hand over Camdyn’s as he goes for the .22. “Cam, I’d rather ye were home.”

“Listen, you can bump heads with Brody. Not me. I’m not arguing or fighting blood. But there’s one thing you aren’t gonna do. That’s stop me from being there for one of my six brothers. That’s you, Leith.”

I groan. Why does my knucklehead *brathair* sound so wise?

Brody rubs at his beard. “Nice and civilized, American. Leith, ye’re gonna deid the *arsehole*, right?”

I let go of being stubborn. “That I am.”

“Has to be done,” Camdyn utters. He hands over three ski masks with skulls over the face. He’d filched the masks at the same gas station with the Slurpees that dominate his hand when his cell phone doesn’t.

“Does it fit?” he asks Brody as our *brathair* starts to pull down the mask.

“*Feck* ye, ye wee *bawbag*!” Brody shoves it over his head.

“Nae games. This is my *feckin’* life,” I snarl.

Seconds later, the air shifts. Our faces grow stony, serious. Brody drives over, pulling into the massive driveway. We’re out of the truck in seconds. At the double doors, my big *brathair* lifts his foot, prepared to kick down the door.

“Nae!” I stop him.

Brody opens his mouth. Camdyn cuts in, “C’mon, bro, he’s our polite brother.”

I snap out each word. “Nae, *bampot*. What if someone drives by, sees the *feckin’* door on the ground, and decides to investigate.”

With a grunt, Brody rolls his eyes.

“Touché.” Cam pushes the sleeve of his hoodie over his finger and mashes the doorbell.

I sneer at my sarcastic wee *brathair* and pound my fist on the door.

The door opens. We step in hard and quick. A servant shuffles back, tripping over his shiny shoes.

“Oft!” He lands on his *arse*. The door closes behind me, and the deadbolt engages.

I crouch down, grip the collar of the servant’s penguin suit. “Where’s Phelps?”

Camdyn taps my shoulder, finger to his lips. Brody’s flanked to the wall where the staircase winds upward. With his body against the wall, he careens his neck.

“Where the *feck* is he!” I demand.

“He’s-he’s—” The servant chokes on air.

Brody fires twice. An armed guard in a suit topples down the steps. Camdyn hurls his switchblade. The sharp tip gouges the eye of another guard, who’d started toward us from an expansive corridor across the room. He hardly gets a scream out before he sinks to the ground. *Feckin’ showoff*.

Camdyn’s running, picking up the knife, and heading down the hall. “In here, bro!”

“Watch yer *feckin’ arse*,” I warn the hothead. I let go of the servant, attempting to catch up with Camdyn. I hear the Glock double tap. Brody’s finished the job. My muscles tense at the sound of Camdyn’s .22 letting off four shots.

Down the hall, my little *brathair* is standing outside of a door punctured with holes. Another stiff in a suit sprawls on

the ground next to him. Camdyn says, “He’s not alone.”

He rubs the knife on the side of his jeans, closes it, and places it into one of his cargo pockets. In the other hand, he’s fisting the gun, ready for an order.

“Ye sure?” I ask.

From the haze of the mask, Camdyn’s eyes question me. He’s subtly offering that he and Brody could complete the mission. *Wit’s* he think, I’m a pussy?

“Nae, now stop *feckin’* asking me,” I whisper back. “How many?”

“At least two.”

I nod. “Dinna deid my lad, the stuffy *fecker* from the photo. Ye hear?”

He nods back. “Phelps is all yours.”

Heart pounding in my chest, I signal with two fingers. Brody’s leg propels forward. The double door kicks in. Gun close to his chest, Brody lets out another two rounds. Each bullet pierces the forehead of two suited guards on either side of the door. Never having a chance to use their Berettas, one man stumbles back into a pillar. An antique vase crashes to the ground. The other man slumps over the back of a chair.

Bill Phelps sits behind his desk. With shaking fingers, he’s just unlocked a gun box. I snatch the steel box from his trembling hands, slamming it across his face.

Camdyn calls our older *brathair* stingy for the two kill shots. The big brute laughs in response.

This is a *feckin’* game to them. To Bill Phelps. To my *brathairs*. To everybody but me.

I drop the bloodied box, fist flying. Nae need for questions. Once I deid this *motherfecker*, I’ll reconfigure any of the programs on his computer system. Get my squeaky-clean life back.

Bill begs, “Please ... don’t kill me.”

“*Och*, ye wanna play yer *feckin’* games, eh?” I let up. My knuckles burn from pounding his bony face. My blood-painted fist is an inch away from his blubbering mouth.

I grab him about the collar, standing to my full height. Bill Phelps’ golfing shoes dangle from the floor. His white face is bleached of color as I choke him out. “Ye scared my *feckin’* hen, *scabby wankstain!*”

“I’m sorr—”

I bring him back to the ground. The thought of living without Chevelle sends my fist reeling, pulverizing his face over and over.

I fall apart. My fists have tenderized Phelps’ face, reconfiguring the *motherfecker’s* nose. Dissatisfied, I jab my thumbs into his eyes until they’re a jellied pulp, leaving him unseeing. Soon, his cries will cease too. The MacKenzie animal my da created reigns. Blinded by rage, I grip his throat. With a sharp twist, his neck snaps. A terrifyingly delightful feeling whirls through me. This is a lifestyle I could get used to.

I glance around—a triumphant, vicious smile on my face. Call me the bloody Joker. It’s how I’m feeling.

“Aye! Ye did good, *brathair*,” Brody cheers.

Bill Phelps’ face is unidentifiable. Good, the ugly *motherfecker* got what he deserved. Rising to my feet, my chest huffs. I run my thumb along my pinkie, where I’d made a promise to my wife. A promise I will fulfill tonight and for the rest of my life. I’ll be the lad she fell for.

A small smile appears on Camdyn’s menacing face as he pulls the ski mask over his jaw. “Drinks?”

“Aye! Let’s go for a bevvy!” Brody shouts.

I nod, the elation continuing to stir through me. “Aye, I’ll buy the whole bar a bevvy. Call yer friends, American, because that’s the type of money I’ve got.”

“The rich, cocky *nugget* has returned! Let’s celebrate!” Brody exclaims.

“Oh, Leith.” The sound of an automated voice might as well have tossed me on my *feckin’* head!

Brody scratches the back of his neck. Camdyn’s eyebrows pull together.

“Take a gander at the television screen, my friend. Right behind you.”

We all do an about-face. I glance up at the ninety-inch tellybox bolted to the center of the wall. A silhouette of a man, obscured by darkness, sits behind a table.

“The MacKenzie brothers in action. Love the synergy. I’d hate to be on your bad side.”

“Who the fuck are you?” Camdyn hisses.

“Yes, the little brother. You’re ballsy like Brody. Yet, you’re often polite, and your quiet demeanor has placed the wool over the eyes of many people—your cohorts included.”

My wee *brathair’s* fingers curl under. Measuring his words, Cam says, “Okay, ass-twad, keep my name out your mouth!”

“Alright, you have a deal. Leith, I didn’t think you had it in you; however, your adaptability is refreshing. The raw aggression, lovely as well.”

The faint outline shifts as whoever beneath the cloak of darkness claps.

“Leith, will you give the honors in telling them about our new relationship?”

“Nae.” I can’t tear my eyes away from Phelps—the man I’m now aware wasn’t my nemesis. At least, he’s unable to see me in death.

“One-word answer? What happened to ‘closing my *geggie*?’ Or have we returned to the part where I talk, and you silently utilize that neglected intellect? Alright, I won’t tell them about the six mill that solidified our association.”

Around me, my *brathairs* are repeating his words as if under a hag’s spell. Six mill. *Six. Mill.*

“Shuddup.” I give them a pointed look.

On the darkened screen, the blackmailer prattles on. “As I said from the beginning, I’ll present you with several assignments as required for your ample compensation. It’s unusual that I dole out cash first. But you followed through rather swiftly, Leith.”

“So,” I clear my throat, “Who was this man to ye?”

“Good question. My business partner—ahem—ex-business partner, sought half of every dollar I acquired. You’d think we were married. Chat soon.”

White noise channels around us. Black and white glitches across the screen. Under the hard stares of my *brathairs*, I quietly vow to break every bone in my enemy’s body. This is the last time I underestimate my adversary.

CHEVELLE

HAVE YOU EVER SPENT OVER AN HOUR SURFING FOR A SHOW TO watch on Netflix, only to realize you're not in the mood? That was me almost three hours ago. By then, Justice promised to come over with a couple of movies and a bottle of Resnov Water. When I'd mentioned her car making it up the hills, we went back and forth from there. She was convinced the clunker would make it up the hill on a wing and a prayer. Me, well, I didn't want to rain on her parade. I know how many times I saw my momma pray when I was little. Hell, we both knew how that ended.

So, I lied.

A good, old fashioned headache never hurt nobody, so Justice wouldn't worry too much. Now, I'm chucking all my favorite books from *Dawn* by Octavia Butler to Paulo Coelho's *The Alchemist* for mindless smut.

For four years, I've set aside much of my life to be a mother and a wife. While I wouldn't change it for the world, times like this remind me how I've put my all into what I do. And how I'm out of practice of just doing *me*.

"I have no life," I mutter, heading into the kitchen. In a few minutes, I've set out all the ingredients for a complicated Japanese rum cocktail I created for my old employer. Michie, as well as much of his clientele, is Japanese.

It's a complex drink with toasted wood chips, digital smoke infusers, and even a cigar. While beginning the process, I imagine the smooth, full-bodied aroma of the expensive cigars Michie selected for his bar. An old, cherished memory transports me to a place that I can't forget no matter how much I've endeavored to—when my father loved us.



IN A DRESS THAT SWOOSHED AROUND LIKE A BELL CHIME, I stood at the door to the bedroom. The Eiffel Tower glowed off in the distance. I lived a pretty black princess dream. Hell, any young girl's dream.

Dad had just returned from A La Civette. The scent of tobacco lingered in the air. Momma was running through the living room of a suite in a Paris hotel, Daddy chasing her. A sheer dress adorned her skin, but she made it look classic—the pure white distinct against her supple dark skin. Barefoot without traction, she'd slip. Daddy crouched down and scooped her high in the air, kissing her.

“Did you have to steal my cellphone?” he asked her.

“No,” she replied between laughter as he used tickles as a means to grab his phone from her hands. She'd just forbade him to bring the damn thing to dinner. We were celebrating my seventh birthday.

Holding the cellphone behind him, Dad kissed her forehead.

“You don't play fair,” Momma replied.

He grabbed all the stemless pink roses from a vase, handed them to me, then dropped his cellphone in the water. I sputtered on my own laugh.

Dad winked. “Problem solved.”

“No, you didn't?” She shook her head. “Look at your father,” Momma said. “Those white folks see us acting like that downstairs. They won't know what to think!”

Dad cut her off, saying his full name as one would give a royal title. We were black royalty. He'd always said so. Money would do that for us, he said. There was no limit to the money to be made. It always seemed foreboding. He'd even said it more, as an example, when giving money away. He was a very generous man.

Dad pulled at my thick ponytail. "Now that my sweet pea is lucky number seven—"

"No luck, only God grants us another birthday," Momma replied.

"That's right, only God." He reached down, exaggerative in prayer as he tried to lift Momma and me in his arms at the same time. We all fell in a fit of giggles.

"You're so silly, Dad. You carried us both last week."

"But you're seven now; Daddy's big girl."



AS THE MEMORY FADES, I'M TORMENTED BY THE UNCERTAINTY of which pain has a hold on me. Though most people view me as a glass-half-full person while I grin and refresh their drinks, I'm secretly not. The quest to suppress my memories over the years has failed to eradicate certain feelings. Feelings like being wrapped around my father's arms or holding his memory in my heart, no matter my attempts to forget. It's as if when my parents' hearts stopped beating, mine started marching in double time.

To be honest, I'd rather erase every fond feeling of him and keep a vise grip on the bad ones. Only, the bastard never gave me a single harrowing memory. Not until it was too late. Wrought to the core, warring thoughts snake through my mind:

Momma was never there to make me chicken noodle soup to relieve a sore throat. She was never there to give me advice. I've had to tell myself to take risks, be bold, gracious, humble.

She was supposed to be my other best friend. The one who helped me try on wedding dresses and hide them from Leith.

Daddy should've been the standard to which I judged my future husband. Damn, all I saw from him was *the standard*. How I hate that he missed the Father-Daughter dance. I hate him for it. And I hate myself for not having the capacity to numb myself on Momma's behalf.

With one swipe of my palm across the island countertop, all the ingredients shatter against the marble floor. Amid the sound of a billion jagged shards fragmenting, I exhale. Dangerously sprinkled over the marble floor are the pieces of my heart that never belonged to Leith MacKenzie. I still love my father with all the broken pieces. It's a shame that I'll never tell a soul.

While grabbing the broom, the water I fought flows from my eyes freely. As I sweep, the good times and the one single nightmare that tore it all apart vanish from before my eyes. I dry my cheeks, sweeping away the tears.

"There," I tell myself, releasing a cleansing breath. I mumble the credo that's gotten me through many years of life: "I'm good."

LEITH

The sky's as black as the Earl of Hell's waistcoat when I drum my palms on the driver's side window of a Chevy Colorado. Startled awake, my cousin Firth hits the horn. As the alarming sound resonates along the still street, he instinctively wraps his grubby paws around the Glock in his lap.

I watch his incompetent *arse* heave a sigh at the sight of me. The window zips down. "*Wit the feck, Leith?*"

I point a stiff finger. "This is how ye watch *me* house, eh?"

"*Och*. First, I'm doin' ye a favor," Firth begins, running a hand along his ginger beard. "Second, I could've watched the wife while *inside* the comfort of yer home. Third, yer da came by around midnight with Mia. I didna know whether to wave or duck down in my truck."

At my wits' end, I rest my forearms on the window ledge. "Firth, did he see ya?"

"Nae."

"Then shut the *feck* up 'bout it."

Steam billows from his ears, and while he sasses me, I mind the conversation I had with Knox earlier. They envision me as a man divided between my loyalty to the clan and devotion to my wife and wee *wean*. Well, *feck* their perception. I'm not them; I'm me. Same as I told my *brathairs* tonight on the way from Phelps' home. Brody vocalized his

anger that I kept him in the dark. Camdyn took up his cellphone, saying when I was ready to tell him, he'd be there.

Him? My feckin' wee brathair. Nae, thank ye.

"Ye done?" I cut into his outburst.

"Ye auld crabbit." Firth mutters about my lack of appreciation, sifting around his jean pocket for his keys.

As I tap the roof of the truck, a nod of my head is all the 'thanks' he'll get.

He whispers into the night, "I'm gonna take a *jobby*—shit—in yer coffee next time I see ye."

"*Och*, ye're taking it there, aye?" The bloody *bawbag's* gonna *shite* in my coffee! I click my tongue, gripping the driver's side window ledge and taunt. "Here's yer *feckin' jobby*, and I raise ye a swarm of midges! Aye! I hope ye get attacked by midges next time we visit our clan back home. How 'bout that, Firth?"

Satisfied that I've won the argument, I turn and meander along the sidewalk toward the house.

The truck inches along next to me. "I wouldn't wish midges on my worst enemy. Leith, ye take that back!"

"Nae."

The engine stalls as he frets. "I'll tell Nan!"

I laugh. "Run along, *clipe*. Tell my mam everything!"

"I'm nae snitch!" Cursing the day I was born, he drives away. I chuckle to myself. A big three-hundred-pound bastard like him, scared of midges, wee flies. Well, I'm six-*feckin'*-two, and I'm afraid of 'em too. Those insects'll ruin yer life. Some countries have crocodiles. Others have tigers. In Scotland, young or auld, we run from midges. Our entire country is utterly and rightly terrified of those blood-suckin' pests.



INSIDE THE HOUSE, IT IS JUST AS DARK. COCK HARD, PALMS itching for the feel of my wife's soft body, I stroll into our bedroom.

"Chevelle," I groan, kicking one boot off after the other. "Wake up, hen. I need ya."

Now, me being me, and my wife being a wee crabby in the middle of the night, I lay it on thick. While undressing, I tell her all the things I'll do to her. My dick, her mouth. My tongue, her wet slit. Might not sound like the words they use in those books she reads, but the sound of her when I'm *feckin'* her is good enough for me.

"*Feck*, Chevelle." I climb in bed, feel across the sheets, wondering how she could be mad.

But I have a bigger problem than my wife's sometimes attitude.

She ain't here.

Cold, nauseating dread fills my veins. In a split second, I'm *up tae high doh*. Moving in overdrive, I stagger over my big feet as I climb from the bed. I shove my legs back into my jeans, then reach beneath the custom mattress for the cool steel of a .9 millimeter.

"Chevelle!" I shout, stalking past the bedroom door. "Where are ye, hen?"

I clamber across the dark living room, calling out to her and moving toward the opposite side of the house for Mia's bedroom.

"Shhhh."

At the sound, my next move is automatic. I press my forearm up and bring my opponent down. By the time I blink, Chevelle is *arse* up on the ground, her face down.

I press the gun into the back of my waistband and pull her up, pressing her close to me. "Hen, I'm sorry."

This has been the worst day of my *feckin'* life. I'm on high alert.

She slaps at my chest, trying to take a step back. “What kind of entertainment did the MacKenzie boys enjoy after the game? How drunk are you to think I’m an intruder, huh?”

“I—”

“And a gun!”

“Nae gun!”

Chevelle sighs. “Baby, I know sports will have you filled with testosterone, which in certain scenarios I don’t mind, but a gun? You’re drunk, running around. You could kill somebody!”

Already did, and I’m not satisfied. “I’m not drunk.” I snap at her for talking nonsense, eyes adjusting to the darkness.

“Ha! Not drunk, and you were out with Brody all night?”

Yup. Best to be drunk. I change my tune. “Well, I’m protectin’ my home. Hen, ya know I never get that drunk. I love ye!”

“Awe, I love you too, baby.” She pouts then proceeds to wag a finger. “But don’t have Brody signing your ticket to the doghouse. It’s ‘gun this’ and ‘pussy that’ with him! Don’t make me regret the olive branch. I will snatch that sucker right back.”

I cross my heart.

Smiling, she gestures to the light in the pantry. “Our security system is still Fort Knox. The culprit is three feet tall, Leith. It’s safe to assume she’s fallen asleep with the cereal again. I’m returning to bed. Please put the gun away before carrying your child to hers. Baby, also assume that you’ve forfeited your nightly kiss.”

“Why?”

“You know why. The gun, Leith.” She saunters away, and my eyes squeeze shut.

“Bloody *feck!*” I mouth the words, pumping my fists around in a contained silence. I didna use half the brain cells I own earlier. I grip the gun in my hand, contemplating how I

attempted to handle the *shite* the MacKenzie way and not the Leith way. That was my *motherfeekin'* problem. Not calculating my opponent's move.

Opening a drawer in the island, I place the gun among the kitchen appliance junk, the auld hand-can opener, cheddar grate, *shite* like that.

Mia stands in the pantry with the cereal container hugged to her chest, not a single crumb on her chubby caramel cheeks. Doe-eyes stare up at me. "Daddy, trouble?"

"Aye. Ye and me both, lassie."

She nods, accepting this fate. "Help me, Daddy."

Apparently, she wasn't able to get into this new contraption of a thing her mam bought.

"Why not." I open it, pour a bit of the colorful cereal into her cupped palms, then open my mouth like a dump truck. After eating some, I ask, "Mia, do ye think this would taste good in a pint?"

"Oh, grown-up juice?" She stares at me like I'm the smartest lad on planet Earth.

"Aye. Grown-up juice."

"Yeah. Very good, Daddy. Me have some too."

"Nae." I scoop her up into one arm and walk her back to bed. In my best Englishman voice, I say, "*No* waking Mum, Mia. *No. No.*"

"Aye, aye!" She giggles, objecting.

I toss her into the bed, and she bounces a few times before settling against the headboard. "Again?"

"Na—no!" Fine-tuning my dialect is a lot easier at work. Well, it was before the *shite* hit the fan. I pinch the bridge of my nose. "Say yer prayers so that God won't laugh ye outta heaven."

"Mommy says, 'God no laugh. God love.'"

"Say 'em."

She turns her tiny hand into a paw, beckoning me. “Be the leprechaun, Daddy!”

“Nae, and if yer nan hears ye saying it again, I’ll spank ye —*with a belt.*”

“Okay. Pirate Daddy!” She grips a stuffed animal in each hand, banging them together, making for a serious headache. “Pirate—”

Mouth pinched, one eye squinted, I cut off the pest. “Ye’re a wee scunner.”

“I am. I am a disgusted!” Mia dissolves into a fit of laughter.

Hand on one leg, I make exaggerated feeble movements. “Me, Captain *Skinny Malinky Longlegs*,” I say to a boisterous round of giggles while my knees find purchase on the carpet. After a few more minutes, we’ve prayed, and I head back to my room.

Inside, Chevelle isn’t crowding the middle of the bed, but her gorgeous round backside is. I slide beneath the sheets, pull my arm around her, but she feigns sleep. Her body melts better into mine when truly happy. Still, I pull my hen over to me anyway. I murmur into her ear, “Hen, I’d rather *feck* ye happy, but I’ll *feck* ye angry too.”

CHEVELLE

SECRETLY, I PICK FIGHTS WITH MY HUSBAND. I ANALYZE EVERY variable to understand how my marriage is any different from my parents' marriage. Dad made Momma so happy. I swear he had eyes just for her. The only time he touched her led to a warm embrace. His words were encouraging or uplifting. Following my thoughts of them earlier tonight, my brain is now picking us apart. When Leith climbs into bed and senses my anger, he won't understand how it's not directed at him.

While he's in the dark about my cold emotions, I relish the firmness of his touch.

His breath skirts across my cheek. His lips are so close to my earlobe that my sex clenches when he speaks. "Hen, I'd rather *feck* ye happy, but I'll *feck* ye angry too."

I know that tone. The rawness of Leith's voice, a menacing threat ribboned throughout, sends jabs of electricity along my throbbing walls. Licking my lips, I revel in the impending sanity. All I knew was happiness in my parents' love affair. But to see them fall so far, I'm just dysfunctional enough to beg for the opposite. Give me chaotic love, anarchy.

Stillling the desire in my voice, I retort, "Do your worst, Leith."

"As ye wish."

Turning around and regarding Leith isn't required. My husband lifts me like a ragdoll. My face plants in the mattress, and his hand claws around my neck. While his lips are dropping kisses along my spine, the line between indulgence and agony blurs.

Kisses fall along the erogenous zone of my spine until I measure the oxygen in my lungs. I'm reminding myself to breathe just as it all depletes to nothingness.

"Arch, now!" Leith commands while his hand curls around the back of my neck. His teeth sink into my ass, and a scream launches from my throat. His hot, wet tongue drives a pulse between my slit. His other fingers slide over the globe of my ass, applying more pressure as I arch farther. His tongue seeks my swelling clit as he feasts on me from behind.

In a tone heavy from lust, Leith snarls, "Ye want me to *feck* this pussy with my tongue 'til ye come, aye?"

Squirming and rolling my hips backward to meet his mouth, I shout, "Yes, ohhh, yessss!"

"I could make ye cum, but nae. Tonight, I'd rather make ye scream instead." His tongue writhes around my sex.

"I'm sorry," I moan, twirling my hips, offering him more of a feast.

"Too bad," Leith hisses under his breath, removing his tongue from the swollen button of flesh he'd expertly controlled.

"Leith, please," I beg, though the kink in me marvels in climbing to the highest precipice only to be denied to cum. *Oh, but when he lets me!* When Leith finally lets me cum, I'll crash land on Venus.

Though a contradiction, I beg, "I need you, Leith."

"Aye, ye do." His tone is tender as his cock takes a languid journey around my wetness.

"So, nae kiss for me, aye?" His brooding voice causes me to rain down on his erection.

The hand that was clawing into my neck twines my hair around his fist. Upon gaining leverage, my slick valley becomes his cock's speedway. The delicious percussion of his balls slapping against my clit sends a symphony of me singing his name, filling the air. "Ohhh, Leith, yesss, Leith, I love you!"

The length of him stretches me in deliberate, powerful strokes. My entire tune, demeanor, has changed. Hell, forget a cup half empty or half full. Mine is teeming, overflowing. Between my thighs is the land of milk and honey.

While I whimper a falsetto, goosebumps of arousal appear over my flesh as his heated hips slap against my ass. Fingers clutching into the sheets, I meet my husband's thrusts. I'm telling myself to shut up, but my entire body is a tell. As my walls prepare to clamp down, holding his cock hostage, I scream, "I'm about to—"

Leith's powerful dick pulls out. His fingertips stroke the slick perspiration across my hips. Now, I'm angry. I curse his name until his lips slide where his cock once loved.

"I hate you. I hate—" My emotions burgeon, love blossoms between us, and my hips begin to rock and roll, delving into the sweetness only he can offer. When he comes up for air, Leith flips me around and grapples me like an MMA fighter on the mat.

"Shit," I hiss when he thrusts into me.

Our tongues cease their wrestling as he groans, "Hen, ye will cum at my command."

"What about now?" I ask. Blood pulses through my veins in a wild, uncontrollable beat. "Let me cum now, please!"

With his skillful dick bruising deep inside of me, Leith grips a hand along my throat. "Nae. All this *arse* and hips and bloody *feckin'* attitude. I'm gonna make ye work for it."

Leith positions me all over the room, fucking me hard until the sun comes up. On the back of the lounge, on the floor. We're standing up against the wall. My leg drapes over his forearm, and my palm rests on the dresser. I cum harder and

faster each time. Even with me bouncing on his dick, straddling him at the edge of the bed, Leith is in a position of dominance. He owns the night, and he owns me.



THE EVENING BEFORE LEITH DRIVES OUT TO SILICON VALLEY for the workweek, I labor in the kitchen, creating his favorite meal. Scottish salmon lays on a mountain of mashed potatoes in the center of an aqua blue plate. For Mia, there's a tinier mountain of macaroni and cheese. She will push her side of broccoli along the circumference of her plate until we give her an ultimatum—the broccoli or the salad I also made. Forcing the Minion's hand occurs every night at dinner.

As I pour a crisp wine, I ask, "Are we still moving to the valley?"

Though I'm not observing him directly, Leith's eyes flit. A shiver of disappointment runs through me, disturbing my concentration.

"Aye, Chevelle. Just maybe next year is all. *Wit*, hen?"

After a few beats, I've swallowed the unwavering lump in my throat. Acting perplexed, I ask, "Hmm? What?"

"That's what I asked ye, lass." Holding the stemless glass of wine, he has the nerve to look compassionate about my feelings. Leith's steadfast gaze reads, "Ye can tell me anything."

"Mommy," Mia jumps in her seat. "More macaroni!"

Like a kangaroo, I'm out of my chair as Leith reprimands our daughter. "My wee *wean*, *wit* are ye supposed to say, eh?"

"*Pleaseee!*"

Beneath my husband's piercing gaze, I grab Mia's purple plastic plate. Half the contents are on the colorful placemat. At the stainless-steel range, every thought fades from my mind except for one thing—he lied to me. My husband fucking lied to my face. Mia's in the background, a worthy cheerleader,

begging for more cheesy goodness. I pluck up the wooden spoon and scoop more of the gooey mac onto her plate.

Leith gets up. His beautiful gaze searches over me. My mouth pulls in pensively. His attractive face becomes stony, challenging even as his patience ebbs. “I said, *wit*, Chevelle? What else is on yer mind? Tell me.”

“Nothing.” My strength evaporates. I’m so preoccupied with my thoughts that I continue heaping more macaroni onto Mia’s plate.

“Ya do.” He removes the wooden spoon from my hand. His thumb is at my jaw, assessing me with a gentle, possessive touch.

Though I lack the nerve to say a word, my glower speaks volumes. Sure, Leith’s told innocent white lies, like how I looked absolutely gorgeous at nine months pregnant. At the time, I’d been donning a two-piece swimsuit Justice swore I had to buy—swollen ankles and all. Or like the time he was *dying* to watch the rom-com I had asked him to watch with me on his short weekend home. And how he’d chop his own finger off if he fell asleep and snored during the said movie. The bastard owes me a few fingers.

But a big lie?

Never.

I’m a fraud. I’ll argue with Leith until all the air expires from my lungs, and death is impending. But when it really counts, I cave.

With our own personal soundtrack in the background—an impatient Mia—Leith and I stare at each other.

Chewing my lip, I huff. “Well, I thought we were gonna start searching for houses in the springtime, Leith. Then summer hit. Now, California is pretty much summer half the year, but dammit, summer’s almost over.”

I sigh. “Mia’s staring at us.” Maybe soon, I’ll wonder why I gave him the out he needed, why I didn’t demand an answer. Or why my mom pushed my father from the world’s greatest

love to wanting to kill her, then himself, and shit on little old me.

“Chevelle.”

I can hardly look into his captivating eyes. They are too damn truthful. They say all the words that we fear.

As I start past him, Leith’s firm grip wraps around my bicep. He removes the plate from my hand and plants it onto the counter. Leith’s hands drop onto my shoulders, knead, and then work their way toward the nape of my neck. My body stirs awake, desire burning through me.

Leith drops a kiss on my forehead, his mouth moving ever so slowly around my temple, cheekbone, and over to my ear. His breath tickles my ear, mouth peppering my earlobe with kisses, teeth forking through the meat of my earlobe before he speaks. “We’re using the down payment money for Mia’s Place, not the new house. How does that sound, hen?”

I study my husband, waiting on bated breath for his gaze to flit to the side a fraction of a second. After a few beats, my shoulders fall because of this instinct. I. Was. Waiting. For. My. Husband. To. Lie. To. Me.

In desperation, Leith sighs. “Ye never let me surprise ya, hen.”

Elation floods through me, contentment so strong that it sweeps me up, just about carrying me away. I jump into his embrace, arms and thighs flying around his lean, strong muscles. “You’re serious!”

His hands run along my ribs like a talented virtuoso. Intensity emanates from Leith’s eyes, and he smiles. “Ye’re happy?”

“I’ve never been so happy, baby.” My mouth collides with Leith’s, exhilaration whirling around us. For now, his words are a balm to my soul.

LEITH

BEFORE HIS TICKER FAILED HIM, MY GREAT GRANDAD DROPPED wee morsels of wisdom: Dinna just marry a lass because her pussy is lined in fairy dust. He'd been sloshed on whiskey and hadn't noticed my wee ears burn red from all of his choice words. But there were other sentiments of his that I found were worth pure gold.

Marry the one who makes ye laugh so feckin' hard ye snort. Someone ye can tell yer dark secrets to. Love ain't easy, nae, but laddie, it's worth it. And if ye're not gon listen to all I'm saying, listen to this. Make sure she's bonny when she cries too. Ye're a MacKenzie; our lassies are always crying. We're a numpty lot. Trouble follows us, or we follow trouble. Trust me, pick the bonny one.

My great grand also demanded that I not, under any circumstances, marry a *feckin'* Brit. He threatened to pull his pants down and take a *jobby* at the altar while we said, "I do."

The day I made Chevelle my hen, I knew she could be the lass I tied down for life. She had all those qualities. But on a Sunday, I *fecked* my wife, knowing she'd probably cry the second I left, and there wasn't a thing I could do about it.

Anyway, I'd right all my wrongs once I murdered the *arsehole* hiding behind his bells and whistles.

But like usual, whenever I leave, the things I hold onto are the taste of Chevelle's mouth the last time I kiss her. Mia's request for the auld pirate voice as I pinkie swear how I'll return soon. Then I kiss her tiny pinkie to complete the promise.

It's Tuesday evening, and for the past two days at work, I've played it cool in the office all day. I keep my wits about me, tapping into Jiang's login credentials. While I was searching Jiang's workplace email, I received a text from Erika. One word—*sorry*. I deleted that *shite*. She knew the drill from day one. Dinna anger my hen. In the end, I wasn't able to find any connection between Jiang and the deid man, Mr. Phelps.

Chevelle calls me when I'm wrapping up for the afternoon. "I was sort of missing cooking dinner for my husband, as I often do, but Cam's in our kitchen making dinner."

The second Camdyn went to school on Monday, he got himself suspended—beat up the first *nugget* he lay eyes on. Though he often is suspended for one thing or another, the *eejit* had done it this time to keep a close eye on my clan. He sprung the entire idea on us together—by texting Chevelle and I. He'd asked if he could stay a few nights, on account that he got into a funk with Da because of it. If he hadn't crashed so many dirt bikes and broke so many bones, I'd call the *nugget* a genius. Da never gets on him. Nae, Brody and I had to run from Mam when the school rang our home.

"Is that so?" I smile. The thought of my *brathair* becoming another factor in my deception has my rage spiking. This is all my bloody fault.

She sighs. "Whatever Camdyn's cooking, it smells divine. You're missing out."

I clear out all of Jiang's login information on the computer. "Och, ye'll have to tell me, hen."

"Hey, if it's really good, I'm sending you pictures and everything," she joshes.

“Damn, ye want me to be a jealous lad, Chevelle? Ye know I’m a jealous one.” I settle back in my seat. “I dinna give a damn if it sucks. Dinna text me the food. Ye know what *pictures* I want ya to send me.”

“Hmmm.” Her voice slides through the receiver like silk. My dick hardens as she softly adds, “Alright, I might be tempted to *text you* ... if Momma eats good tonight.”

“Naughty.” This time I smile, feeling her magnificent glow through the receiver.

“Hey, all the good stuff happens at home, Leith. Home is where your heart is, right?”

“Aye.” I finish off my chat with Chevelle, and though things won’t be right until I have her in my arms again, she seems a bit happy. After we hang up, my other half instantly torments my mind. Every moment without Chevelle is Hell on Earth. Chewing my lip, I contemplate how she and Mia are *home* to me.

“Home,” I quietly mumble. The thought expands into something more. What if Jiang has some sort of connection to himself and Phelps at home? The bastard who’s blackmailing me called Phelps his business partner. Maybe they were both silent cohorts, tapping into Infinity Corp for the blackmailer.



IN SILICON VALLEY, I RENT A ROOM FROM AN AULD HAG, Mable, who has a gait in her step. The acrid scent of cats abounds. It’s a cheap place to lay my head. I was once so fond of work that I’d go *wabbit* and sleep at my desk. Chevelle always complained I needed a good rest, and she didna worry about the “cat lady” putting the moves on me.

The first time I told her the auld bitty dropped her robe one morning and showed me her titties, my wife laughed. Then Chevelle chastised me about my delay in picking a real estate broker for our current house. Chevelle wasn’t aware I was already in the process of finding us the perfect home. She proceeded to ask me about the location of said tits. I replied

that I couldn't confirm, as *those* tits might've been sweeping the floor.

I'm in my room at Mable's with my laptop. Though I didn't peg Jiang, who's sleeping with the fishes, for one of my nemesis' henchmen, I still search for him online. Grabbing the profile photo of him on the company page, I then enlist the facial recognition software I coded ages ago for kicks.

Minutes later, I find Mr. Jiang's picture on the very social media site I created, owned by the company we work for. He's operating under an alias. The profile photo of him holding a stack of cash melds perfectly with the tag line about sugar babies.

"*Shite*, he really was an *eejit*," I murmur. He had nae friends, which is a blessing in itself. Nobody to question his disappearance. I'll have to get my hands a little dirty.



A WHILE LATER, I EXIT MY ROOM IN A HOODIE AND JEANS. THE auld hag is in the hallway. A long nightgown covers all the nooks and crannies of her lumpy *arse*. She plants her hands on those wide hips of hers. "You never leave so late at night."

"Aye," I grunt, locking my bedroom door.

Mable's tiny blue eyes flick up and down my body. "You're not in those shiny shoes and flashy suits either. Where you going this time of night?"

"Out." I move down the narrow hallway. Fat pussies meow and follow after me like their master.

"I've made cabbage and—"

"Nae, thank ye." I close the door behind me. Outside, small puffs come from my mouth in the cold night air. Stalking down the street, I open the door to my Audi. Seated inside, I start the engine. The lights flash, and she purrs for me, sweetest thing I've ever heard.

During my drive to Jiang's apartment, I concentrate on a few things. I hope my luck has changed. Mr. Jiang had no family in the US.

"Please, God, dinna let him have a roommate," I groan.

If there's no roommate, the only link to him becoming officially missing is his landlord. It's mid-month. They might not notice for a few weeks until his rent is late. Jiang wasn't a higher-up at Infinity, so the company is liable to chalk his continued absence as workplace abandonment and move another techie into his position. Silicon Valley is a bloody cold place for techies.

Getting into Jiang's place ain't easy. What I assume is a get-in, get-out situation comes to a halt after I circle the block a few times. He lives in an upscale apartment complex—lots of bloody cameras and a friggin doorman.

Though the streets are packed with cars, the only entrance to the place is a ghost town. I'm nae *eejit*. The doorman won't be recalling my face in a lineup.

Two blocks away, I swoop into a parallel spot. I tell myself, once I climb out of the Earth's mantle of a hole I dug myself into, all will be right between my wife and me. Besides, there's no such thing as *difficult* in the life of crime for a MacKenzie. I'll always be a bloody *feckin'* MacKenzie. Tonight, my luck turns for the better.

CHEVELLE

A TUFT OF STRAWBERRY BLOND HAIR IS BEFORE CAMDYN'S striking blue eyes while he flips steaks in a cast iron griddle over the Viking range. Another pot has boiled potatoes in it, and another skillet has grilled asparagus. He pauses from creating a perfect char to fiddle with his phone.

I lean against the counter, nodding at the perfect grill marks on the ribeye. "If you're supposed to be grounded, shouldn't I take your cell phone?"

"Sure." He lets the cellphone clatter from his hands, gripping the handle of the skillet. "Only, if you'd like to cause me severe irreversible trauma. Chevelle, you kinda suck at this parenting."

"What?" My bottom lip drops.

"Oh, shit. You're great with Mia. But you aren't too much older than me, so I'm gonna keep that." He nudges his chin to the iPhone. The screen is already lighting up with a new notification. "Give me the keys to your car, now that's *real* trouble."

"Hmmm, I know they call you speed demon for a reason. But you'll recall I drive a Prius, right? The only thing it's sporting is a nasty scrape on the side."

"That's why NOS was invented." He winks.

I toss the dishrag at him, then level my palm to where it meets my shoulder. “I remember when you were knee-high to a grasshopper. Now, you’re getting suspended from school. This family doesn’t need another Brody.”

He places the juicy steak onto a platter. “Shit, you will never forgive him, will you? I was, like, twelve when you tried to murder my pop’s namesake right in front of him.”

I run a hand through my hair. “Grrr, don’t remind me of that if you ever plan to get another bottle of alcohol from me.”

He crosses his fingers. “You treat me well. I’ll never mention it.”

“Speaking of sorry excuses for the male species, I thought Brody would have Leith crawling into the house drunk the other night. You mustn’t have had too much fun.”

“Yeah, sure. My brothers were fun.” Camdyn’s already fiddling with his phone, which makes me wonder how none of the food has burned.

Remembering how Leith returned home high strung, gun in hand, I ask, “Did your team lose?”

Camdyn moves his fingers across the screen of his iPhone. “Uh . . . I’m not a . . . uh, baseball fan so, nah. My team didn’t lose.”

I’ve seen the wildcard transition of Camdyn from giggling with Mia to flirting with a crowd of girls at Disneyland. But now, he’s stuttering? I give Camdyn the once-over, scrutinizing his change in demeanor.

“Speaking of going out, when’s the last time you and Leith went out?” He puts down his phone, his lean forearms resting against the counter.

Chewing my lip, I ponder. “Well, it has been a while.”

“When Leith comes home, go out. Get your . . . groove back.”

“Whatever. I can have a good time without Leith. I’m going out tonight.” While Camdyn’s mentioning how I should *wait* for Leith, I lift a brow. “Nope. You can go snitch to Leith.

Text him, tell him Chevelle's dressing up. Chevelle's going clubbing!"



HALFWAY TO THE MASTER SUITE, I HAVE JUSTICE ON FaceTime, asking if she has to work at Michie's tonight.

"That depends. How you feeling? You look like you're scheming with a side of overwhelmed."

"Eh, a little. You?"

"Chevelle, first of all, you remember me from day one. I don't ask shit that I don't mean. I'm good. If I weren't, I'd tell you. So, what is it?"

"Just missing Leith."

She doesn't respond with the usual *white people problems* since my husband works far from home. Justice asks, "Alright, is this a cognac-and-a-shoulder kind of night?"

"Did I say all of that?" I reply, head cocked. "I just want a girls' night. Can you do that?"

"Before I put all these heavenly curves into some Spanx, are we hitting up El Toritos? I have a few coupons."

"Damn, they have the best salsa. But, nah, we're going to Michie's."

"Now, why would I visit my job if I'm taking the night off? Fine ass Asian aside, Chevelle, make it *make sense*, girl."

"Because I'm making El Cheapo give us an even better discount."

CHEVELLE

THE AESTHETICS OF MICHIE'S LOUNGE ALWAYS WOWED ME. When I was younger—too young to bartend—sleazy bar managers would hire me. The second Leith came into the place, either they'd cut my hours, wondering if Nan sent me, or they'd fire me right off the bat. The underworld can be a bizarre place.

When Leith went off to MIT, I had my bartending license. I soon stumbled into Michie's. I fell in love with the fluidity. The daughter of a once high-powered Chicago attorney finally knew what she wanted to do with her life.

The day I came in, Michie stood in the shadows. Pushing a long, sleek, jet-black strand behind his ear, the bastard had the nerve to tell me he didn't hire fish outta fresh water. He even said it in a calm tone. I told him I had been bartending since I was sixteen. He snorted how I didn't look a day over twenty-one, wiggling his fingers as if that should send me along.

Now, he drums the quartz countertop. He's got a bit of salt in his pepper hair and dark eyes that smile at you. Justice and I have seized a place at the bar, though the best seats are in the shadows.

With a smooth tone, he jokes, "The two of you keep stealing cocktail umbrellas, and you're gonna find yourselves outside on those pretty little asses."

Justice and I both look at one hip and then the other before laughing with each other.

“Who’s he talking to, Justice?” I cock a brow. “I’ve got thighs as big as my dreams.”

“Humph. Can’t be me. This right here is the wam-bam combo!” she exclaims, gesturing to each of her thighs.

“Girls, we’re playing that game, eh? Justice, where should I send your last check?” He winks again. Dammit, if it were anyone but him, this flirting would have gotten old.

“I hate to do this, but,” Justice holds her hands up, “it’s all Chevelle.”

“Damn, straight under the bus,” I mutter. “It was a team effort. Thank you very much. But if your tight-fisted ass is begging to be paid back, Michie, I’ll work Justice’s next shift. Don’t pay me. Momma is damn good at stashing tips.”

Leaving the Resnov vodka, he retreats, muttering in Japanese about hiring a MacKenzie.

“That’s a no?” I lean forward, calling after him. Since I’m leaning all the way over, I think, why not?

Justice and I giggle as I grip the nozzle of a top-shelf whiskey and pour another round. A little while later, we enter the second phase of our drinking session. Round one was for laughing and shit talking. This is the one where it’s easier to open up. I wait until Michie and the other male bartender are on the opposite side of the room. Sighing, I mutter, “Leith’s keeping something from me.”

“Ohhhh, no,” Justice groans.

I appreciate having this sisterhood. Though I love my huge MacKenzie family, Justice and I fix each other’s crown without telling the world that they’re crooked.

“He’s away, and then he’s home. While he’s home, he’s far away,” I slur in contemplation.

“See, I can’t with white people. How do you—”

“Justice,” I stress.

“Have two households? I can’t.” She huffs. “Lay it on me, girl. Tell me what’s going on.”

Twirling around the amber liquid in my glass, I deliberate over the last week. “There’s this look in Leith’s eyes, and somehow, I wonder if the guy who was first and foremost my best friend will open up to me.”

“Have you asked Leith?” When I don’t answer, Justice says, “Your silence is speaking volumes, Chevelle. Honey, you have to talk to him.”

I toss the round straight to the head, then grip a bottle of alcohol and pour us another one. From my peripheral, a crew of at least ten familiar Japanese businessmen saunters inside. They work at an investment firm down the street. These guys are majorly loyal. They shine in their grey shark suits.

“Damn, we need to take a couple of bottles to their table. Just to get the tips, ya’ know?” Justice chuckles. “Alright, tell me about—” She eyes the glasses I’ve poured. The conversation about Leith and I dissolves, just like the vulnerability surrounding me. Justice snorts. “Girl, you have mastered the art of pouring a glass to the brim without it running over. But damn, are you trying to get me drunk?”

Hell, I’m trying to get me drunk. Falling in love with a crazy Scot has increased my tolerance for alcohol. “Because I know you very well, Justice. A little tipsy, and you’re good company. The thing is, I can’t stand a little tipsy. I need more. But with you, there are intervals. Good company becomes a sad love song before you’re a fun drunk.”

“Girl, bye.”

“No, really. This’ll certainly catapult us to the exciting part, right?”

We lift the glasses. The conversation I need to have with my husband will come sometime later. It’s too soon for Leith to have the seven-year itch. Count me out in that regard. I’m in it for the long haul.

Looking at the servers Michie has on rotation tonight, I giggle. “Justice, he needs help.”

Leaning toward me, she whispers, “That’s the new guy. Quinn’s handling so much. When I called in sick tonight—”

“You called in sick?” I palm my forehead. “That was the *game* Michie was talking about! I thought it was his usual petty, have the last word and walk away.”

“Heh, Michie does talk out the side of his mouth. Then he moves right on along with a serious swagger, doesn’t he?” She shrugs when I give her a pointed glower. “Well, I asked if this was a cognac-and-a-shoulder night, girl, and apparently, you needed tonight.”

“Awwww, you were looking out for me,” I blubber. *Maybe I’m the sad drunk?* I glance around the bar. “Now, I got you.” Her eyebrows pinch together, perplexed. Glancing around conspiratorially, I tell Justice, “We’re gonna help the team and recuperate some of those funds you lost out on.”

Justice hesitates. “You’ve known Michie’s surly ass longer than I have but—”

“Shhhh,” I wiggle my index finger before my mouth.

“You are drunk as fuck.” She snickers.

“I’m not.”

Justice and I sneak over to the table where the Japanese men have congregated. They offer laughter, gorgeous dark eyes, and no-limit credit cards. We create a new tab and serve them swiftly. Laughing, we settle back down, and I hand my portion of the ample tips to Justice. She attempts to return them, but I won’t have it.

Michie comes over and tops off our drinks. “I should thank you for keeping my best clientele satisfied.”

“You’re welcome,” we reply in unison.

“But so y’all asses already know, I’m charging you for this here bottle tonight.” He places the brandy on the counter next to us. I stick my tongue out as he walks away. “Saw that, Chevelle.”

“No, you didn’t.”

He backtracks. Leaning an elbow on the bar, Michie locks his leg about the ankle. Michie nudges his chin to the mirror on the wall. I cringe, realizing how tipsy I've become. Michie winks. "I'm all-knowing, girls. I'm 'Skinny Buddha.' "

"Chevelle said that," Justice blurts out as he walks away again.

"Sure did, and I own my shit!" I reply.

We fall into each other laughing. I'm not sure who initially dubbed the boss Skinny Buddha, but it was a joke made before either of us started working here. Michie's a stingy, lucky bastard. While I'm giggling about the past, Justice sours.

Damn, the sad love song phase I'd hoped to bypass has descended. Justice has a look on her face that makes me want to watch *The Color Purple*.

This is it.

We're doing it.

The downer part.

I've met every type of drunk known to man during my tenure behind the bar. They are like the Seven Dwarfs—sleepy, bashful, dopey, grumpy—there are so many kinds. Sorry to say, though, I've met my spirit sister when it comes to drinking. We are some crybaby ass drunks.

Out of the blue, she speaks. "For the last two years, I'd get this big weight on the top of my chest," she confesses, resting her hand there. "Thinking about what happened to Lance."

I stare at her, overcome by my sorrow for a young man I never knew. How could Lance take his own life? How could my father? I had never meant to tell Justice what happened to my mother or the twisted, dark fate that ended my father as well. But now, we share this pain. We share our grief.

LEITH

AT LEAST AN HOUR HAS PASSED SINCE I LEANED AGAINST A streetlamp with the hoodie over my head. A pizza delivery guy quickens his pace, eyeing me warily. His uneasiness probably has everything to do with my wearing sunglasses at night. I'm definitely not feeling particularly like the good lad I promised my wife I'd be.

Disguising my voice, I ask, "Where are you taking that?"

The guy rolls his eyes. "So, you can hack up the customers, and I get the blame?"

Being that was the last thought in my mind, I ram him against the fence. My fist bashes into his stomach. He crumples, and then I take on an English accent. If this goes south, it might as well be blamed on those Brits. Kneeling, I grip his throat with one hand, long enough to leave him passed out like a sloshed bum. "Thank you, mate."

I snatch the pizza box and the cap from his head. Ambling to the front door, I let the cap hang low over my head. With one hand in my hoodie, I lift the pizza to the doorman.

"Which apartment?"

Jiang is 4F, so I spout off, 3C, which has to be on a different floor. At the elevator, I pick the appropriate level *C*. Once off the lift on the correct floor, I shove the pizza into the trash can and hustle up the steps to level *F*.

Now comes the easy part—getting inside of Jiang’s place. The lock on the door is standard. After picking the deadbolt, I let myself inside. My eyes scan the entryway of Jiang’s apartment for an alarm. There isn’t one, which makes me think my luck has turned too much.

A half an hour later, I’ve combed through the single bedroom, even checked the bathroom. The living room is virtually untouched. I’m rifling through the kitchen drawers, finding nothing but discount coupons for takeout.

“*Feck*,” I grumble, shoveling through vouchers that lapsed years ago.

I catch the sight of the digital display on the stainless-steel refrigerator. The panel switches from grocery store items needed to a screen saver.

The image is three guys at the bow of a yacht. The angle of the camera adds an aura of invincibility around the *bampots*. Two of the *fecks* are deid, and the third one is a millionaire techie just like me. Phelps is the older gentleman who probably invested into Jiang and this here *fecktwat* fresh out of college. The *fecktwat* has a smug, all-knowing grin on his face. I’d bet every single dollar in the Grand Cayman account that I’m staring my enemy in his smarmy face.

“Bingo,” I murmur, using my iPhone to take a photo of the image. I’ll search his face later. I’m softly opening the front door when the door across from me crashes into the wall.

“Take that! And don’t you ever come back!” a woman shouts. It sounds like a bloody song.

“Okay, take yer *shite* and go,” I mutter, pulling the door closed. I let my ear rest against the wood. The guy begins an elaborate sob story.

I settle onto the ground. Leaning against the door, I tap the back of my head against the wood soundlessly while gritting my teeth. “Why can’t I catch a *feckin’* break?”

What seems like ages later, and many attempts for the guy to reenter the house, I pull my cell phone from my pocket. My eyes bug at the sight of Camdyn’s message. “Chevelle’s out.”

I call him, and he answers on the second ring. I whisper, “The *feck* ye mean my wife is *out*? Speak before I snatch off yer *baws* and shove them down yer throat!”

“Calm down, bro,” he responds tensely. “I never lie to women. Women love me. I felt bad.”

“*Feck* yer feelings, Cam. Where and—”

“First of all, everyone calls *me* the American but not living with your wife is—”

“I will *feckin*’ kill ye!” I huff. He’s my *brathair*, and that’s a bald-faced lie. I live with my wife. “Where is she?”

“You calm?”

“Aye,” I snarl.

“Well, that’s the part I’m unaware of. Mia’s asleep. I reached out to Brody, no answer, but he has the *thing*.”

Damn, the *thing*. Meeting the McFarlands on the east coast with the latest shipment is “the thing.”

“So, I called Erika—”

“Why her?”

“Alright, here’s the long story.” He huffs. “I just played the fucking secretary, Leith. James is on an East-coast run. You and Knox bump heads like crazy. Firth laughed when I mentioned your name, said something about midges.”

“He started it,” I retort, tapping the back of my head softly on the door again.

“Yeah, well, too far, bro, too fuckin far. We’ve a lot of cousins, but I stopped while I was ahead. Which brings me to another vital matter, FY fucking I, I have people to handle my shit, Leith. I’ve never worked this hard to make money for me—because I *delegate*. That’s a new term for you. Place it in your schema, learn it. Delegate, bitch.”

“Camdyn, ye hang up, I’ll really kill ya,” I warn. With ears perked, I can still hear the *numpty* lad begging his way back into the house.

My *brathair* huffs. “Shit, those were good concluding remarks, if I do say so myself.”

I roll my eyes. “So, Erika?”

He exhales deeply. “Again, another botched attempt since I’m riding solo. Long story short, Erika was driving like crazy to get here before Chevelle left and got stopped by the cops down the road. But Chevelle’s having a girls’ night; she seemed confident. I’m positive she’s safe.” I shake my head and hang up on my little *brathair*.

The shouting across the hall stops. The door closes, but I stay put, dialing my wife.

“Hey, baby,” Chevelle slurs into the phone.

“Hen, where are ye?”

“Hold on.” She sighs then argues for Michie to check on his new bartender. Another familiar voice is in the background. I presume it’s Justice who’s complaining about some bartender still needing a jigger to measure alcohol.

“Hen, get back on the phone,” I grit in a lowered voice.

“Sorry.”

Eyes sweeping across the deid *feck*’s living room, I inquire, “Who’s driving ye home, hen?”

“Not Justice.” She chuckles. “Leith, I’m drunk, not that damn drunk. Actually, I’m good drunk if you want me to FaceTime you. Unless you’re already enjoying Mable’s company.”

“Chevelle, I need ye to go back inside of Michie’s until Erika—”

“*Erika*,” she sneers. “Okay, so I was joking. Now, *you’re* joking?”

“Nae, I’m serious. Get yer *arse* back into the bar until Erika or Brody or Knox or any *feckin’* body whose last name is MacKenzie comes to pick ye and Justice up. Okay!?”

“Babe, calm down,” she purrs softly. “Justice and I are highly sophisticated winos. We’re sharing an Uber. It’s right

across the—”

Venom shoots through my veins as Chevelle shrieks.

“Hen? Chevelle!” I shout into the receiver at the top of my lungs. All my shouting is futile as I hear the cell phone crash onto a hard surface. The call goes dead.

CHEVELLE

MINUTES AGO, JUSTICE AND I SAUNTERED OUT OF THE BAR, contentedly going through the motions. The stale Long Beach seaweed air shoves itself down my lungs as I scream, stomping my feet.

“What?” Justice clings to her purse.

“It was a *rat!*” I remember when Lady and I downgraded from a luxurious apartment with a doorman in Los Angeles to the projects. Our neighbor let his python loose, and not a sexual reference, to help Lady catch mice. There were so many places I could’ve gone instead of living with her. But the freedom of not contemplating my father or mother was and still is a deciding factor.

“A rat? Damn, girl.” She places the butt of a gun back into her bag. “I don’t have a permit for this.”

At the doorway, Michie laughs, watching me reach down to pick up my cell phone. “I would give the two of you a ride home, but you talked too much shit about the new guy. If he doesn’t come back tomorrow, I’m gonna... .” He runs a sharp hand past his throat, lips in a tense snarl.

Justice grunts. “Oh, shut up, Michie. You love to threaten.”

“Is a threat the extent of what I do?” He cocks a brow.

I glower at my cracked cell phone and almost have an itch to pitch it at his handsome face.

“How much you paying that guy?” Justice asks. “Fresh out of bartending school or did he—”

“Oye, Chevelle was fresh behind the ears when I gave her a chance.” Michie points a stiff finger at me.

With the facial recognition not working, I hold the phone to my side and return my attention to him. “First of all, don’t include me. I only talk shit with a bottle of alcohol in hand. Second, the sexual tension between the two of you is—”

“Chevelle,” Justice whispers through gritted teeth.

A panty wetter beam is on Michie’s face as he steps back into the bar.

I smile wickedly as the blood rushes beneath Justice’s skin. For someone who once had a perpetual angry face, she can be pretty shy.

I flick my wrist. “I get it. You’re never gonna love again. Michie is a stingy bastard. All the smiling and winking he does, I’m sure he can’t be too stingy where it counts.”

“Chevelle,” she says again. This time her voice pitches in a shy gasp.

“You at a loss for words?” I cock a brow.

“Yes!”

“Save it for a poetry line.” Laughing, I stroll across the street with Justice following. Just as we step onto the curb, our Uber ride drives away.

Cutting my hands through the air, I call out, “Hey, wait!”

Justice screams an obscenity then huffs. “Crap, he probably thought we might not hold our damn cookies.”

“Ye could always try again.” A Scottish voice calls from behind us. “Show ‘em how ye came prepared with wee baggies for yer boke.”

Eyes rolling, I turn around. Approximately five yards down, my sworn enemy for life, Brody MacKenzie, leans against a burnt-orange Cutlass.

Justice glances past the few parallel cars separating the distance from the guy I'll hate until the end of time and me. She whispers, "You know him?"

"Aye, she's known me since those cheeks were softer, and those bonny brown eyes not so angry, too." The burly beast glances me up and down, moving with purpose toward us. "Look at ye, Chevelle, dressed up nicely, wee one. Who is the lass?"

"Thanks," I mutter. Though we haven't been on the same page since I was fourteen, I slink an arm around Brody in an apathetic hug. Quietly, I mumble how Justice isn't interested before sharing her name.

"*Piuthar bheag*," he calls me little sister, "all the bonny lasses *love* me."

"Not this one," Justice responds with a sickly-sweet smile.

"*Och*, give me a few. I'll teach ye how, sweetheart."

"Hmmm." I cut in. The feel-good buzz wears thin. "I doubt it. Why are you here anyway, Brody?"

"Funny thing, I got a message from Cam 'bout girls' night out. My *brathair* had ye catching an Uber."

"I'm confused. Wouldn't you want me on the bus that topples off the edge of the Earth? Or abducted and sold into sex trafficking, so that you could have your brother back?"

With an attractive, yet smug smile, Brody pats my cheek. "*Och*, I forgot about that sense of humor, Chevelle. But nay, ye're a MacKenzie *already*. Nae getting rid of ye."

I'm trying so hard not to roll my eyes when Brody pins Justice with his gaze. "And, Justice, I dinna mind riding yer titties. *Och*, I mean, giving ye a ride home. I'm a simple guy. Only gas or *arse* is required."

"Brody!" I gasp. "I swear, I will knock out your overgrown ass!"

"Oh no, I got this." Justice steps up to him, stroking her finger over his well-groomed beard. "Here, I thought all those

muscles were filled with air so you could look at yourself while picking up bony bitches.”

“Nae.” His intense eyes drag over her slowly. “I love a challenge. All the women in my bed have *good meat* on their bones. I’ll do the work, bounce ye up and down on my cock, just to hear ye scream my name.”

Justice is already stalking off the curb when Brody’s fingertips graze her shoulder. “Alright, sweetheart, first ride’s free.”

Something transfers between them as she looks back at him. The dirty dog I’ve seen on many occasions disappears. A respectable mask descends, softening his chiseled features and mollifying the lustful rage in his sea-blue eyes. He removes his hand from her shoulder. “My mam would beat my *arse* for letting ye ride home with a stranger. Ye’re Chevelle’s friend, right?”

“Let’s take the *free* ride, Justice.” With a soft, firm voice, I assert, “Trust me. Brody won’t try a thing. Leith lit into his ass the last time the two of us had a problem.”

Justice hesitates. I cock my head. A few minutes later, she settles into the backseat with a frown on her face. I’m so wrapped up in aggravation with Brody MacKenzie that I’ve long forgotten my call with Leith when my cell phone broke.



NOBODY SPEAKS DURING THE AWKWARD, SILENT RIDE. OLDIES play at a low volume. Brody pulls up to a dingy apartment complex with a beach theme. A streetlamp flickers as Justice mumbles her appreciation and gets out.

“Give me a second,” I tell Brody.

Letting his powerful arm fall over the back of the passenger seat, he nods.

I climb out of the car, following Justice a little way up the sidewalk. From the weakened streetlamp, I discern the hesitance on her face.

“Sorry about that. Brody favors half-naked hoes and has no accountability.”

Shaking her head, Justice replies, “Humph. Just because he’s built out of brick doesn’t mean every woman wants to jump his bones.”

Brody is a sore spot for me. I strive for a relationship with everyone in Leith’s family, but Brody got under my skin since day one and lived there. He’s a repulsive, egotistical ass. Though I’m far from amused by the beefcake, I try to keep the conversation light by teasing. “Oh, you like him!”

“Chevelle, flirting with Michie is the highlight of my night. Your brother-in-law is a looker too. You gotta keep them on their toes. But no. I’m good doing me.”

Chewing my lip, I start to back away.

“Wait,” Justice calls after me. “There was something I wanted to say to you.”

My eyebrows lift, and I toy with a chandelier earring.

“I’m so proud that you’re making moves with Ms. Kelly,” Justice says. I was keeping the surprise for Leith, but I’d told her of my plans with Ophelia Kelly so that I wouldn’t bust. “That will get you busy. But you put your all into Leith. I have no desire to ever be wrapped up into a man again—don’t need to, don’t want to. Now, I want the two of you to ride it out until you get your golden anniversary, but scale back a little, girl.”

She holds up her index finger and thumb. “Just a little. I only tell you these things because you looked out for me when I started at Michie’s.”

“A little.” I offer a faint smile, finally backing away as she struts to the gate of her building.

I suppose I had challenged Justice when reminding her what smiling felt like after she shared Lance’s suicide. I felt she loved him madly, and I never even met them together.

But she has no idea of my obsession with Leith. How long I’ve loved him. How long I’ve clung to him like the first good

thing that belonged wholly to me since the death of my parents.

Sliding into the passenger seat, I close the door and fold my arms. “Thanks for the ride. But keep your eyes off my friends. There’s no fun to be had for you there. Got that?”

“Chev—”

“Don’t, Brody. Last time you encouraged Leith to have a bit of *fun*, I ...” I bite down my pride, wishing I had responded differently. I threw Leith’s engagement ring at him, ended us in half a second. But it took less than a fraction of that same second for me to see myself becoming my father. Wanting to fight, to kill, because of how hard I loved.

I bit my tongue. Leith had never cheated, though his older brother had dangled temptation in his face.

“Ever since we met, Brody, you had one hoe on your arm for you, and on the other arm, you had a hoe for your brother. You’ve chilled out since we married, but I promise you, Brody MacKenzie, unless it’s a new day, you’re still a cheating—”

Shoving the car into gear, he speeds away. “It’s not cheating if I’ve made nae promises, girl.”

“Blow your sordid philosophy out your ass. I fight for my friends—period.” And I probably should add how I’d fight for me, but my anger has receded. This asshole didn’t just take my husband to a strip club or invite a handful of strippers to a private bachelor party. No. He ordered *high-class call girls* so that Leith could have a last fuck. I will hate Brody MacKenzie until my dying breath.

CHEVELLE

HALF THE DAY FADES AWAY BEFORE I ROLL OVER IN BED. MY cell phone chirps on the nightstand. Evidently, charging the darn thing jump-started it. Fractures web across half the screen. I read a stream of texts on my phone from Camdyn saying Mia begged to go to the park. He sent a horde of one-line messages. At the sight of a text where he asked to use my car, my eyes bug out. He then sent a screenshot of Mia's hair in two stiff ponytails. Visualizing a raggedy part in the back of her head, I cackle.

“My poor baby.”

I continue to read a few wink emojis and prayer emojis about borrowing my car before he says they walked.

“Gawd, this boy loves his phone.”

After a quick shower, I'm wearing a loose-fitting gray dress that hides my shape and falls to my calves. Moisturizer is my only form of makeup. I massage the cream into my cheeks, walking through the house. I can remember my mother had a vanity, expensive makeup overflowing, yet she never looked any prettier than the days she forwent the glamor.

In the kitchen, I stop at the Keurig, pressing a few buttons for specialty coffee.

“Look at ye, wearing that ugly *arse* muumuu. I oughta snatch it off ye and take a match to it,” a familiar voice gripes.

Lips curved into a smile, the excess fabric of my dress whirls with me as I turn around. I gaze into the eyes that reflect my very own love story. The invisible thread that tethers us together, no matter how far or near, tugs at my soul. Struggling to contain my excitement, I quietly exclaim, “You’re here!”

He nods.

“What are you doing here?” I murmur. A sharp strain suddenly stretches across my chest, and I’m missing him like crazy. This can’t be real. It’s midweek, not Friday, when I spend an hour in the mirror, waiting forever for my husband to return. Though I never craved attention until the single second that I savored Leith’s, I’m gutted in half by emotion. The emotion of falling in love with Leith MacKenzie every single time my eyes land on his. For the most part, I compress the fierce love I have for him. Leith seems to read my mind when he speaks.

“Okay, lass, this is an illusion then.” He moves his palms in front of the gorgeous marbling of his sharp jaw. “A holographic image of Leith MacKenzie who, by the way, is still infuriated that he misses his hen while in Silicon Valley.”

Crimson firecrackers erupt in my heart. I laugh. “Shut up, Leith.”

“Holographic Leith’s not preset to take orders, lass. But ye could probably get ‘em to shut up the good auld fashion way.”

My walls squeeze together in delicious torment as my husband descends on me, tall and broad-shouldered. Instead of cowering, I grin at his threat.

“My dick. Yer mouth, hen.”

Rising to my tippy toes, I brush my lips across his in a slow, drawn-out kiss while my heartbeat rages against his chest. The instant I draw back from Leith, I sigh, fighting the addiction to touch him again. The pulsating drumbeat of my sex causes dark, wayward visions to flash across my eyes.

“Your dick, my mouth? I assumed that’s how we silence me, Leith. You’re more reserved when all my honey is in *your*

mouth. Now, stop being crass. Cam might return with Mia at any time.”

“*Och.*” His voice is gruff, dropping in tenor and epitomizing sex itself. “I better *feck* ye so good ye scream at the top of yer lungs. The American’s a smart one. Cam will know to turn about when he hears ye.”

Drowned by undeniable desire, I lick my lips. “Sounds like a challenge. You’ll make me scream, hmmm?”

His hands drop along my curves, fingertips gliding at my sides. “So, hen, with the big *arse* mouth, ye gonna stop me now?”

I shake my head no, as he peppers my neck with kisses. Caught in the rapture of him, we let our reality crash down around us. The only thing left is Leith and I. Moans are coaxed from my mouth by his soft, teasing lips. My flesh aches for my husband as his fingers manipulate and love on me.

“Leith, I need you so bad right now,” I murmur in his mouth. “But be good, baby. Please take this challenge to the bedroom.”

The gravel of his “nae” vibrates across my flesh, sending goosebumps on the rise. My husband yanks me into his arms and onto the counter. The material pools around my thighs. Damn, this dress isn’t cute at all, yet the soft cotton calls to me when Leith’s away.

“Hey, I’m being sweet as pie right now, Leith.”

“So sweet.” His fingers move along the inside of my thigh, weakening my tenacity. Vulnerable, I clamp my legs together, hiding the sticky arousal. My walls squeeze into a sharp Kegel, alleviating the agony of need. Leith grips my knees with one hand, exerting enough power to pull them apart while claiming the curve of my left breast with his teeth.

“No, Leith!” I squirm.

“Ye’re my wife. Make no mistake about it. Yer body was no longer yer own when we married. Ye’re all mine.” He stuffs his torturous fingers inside of my swollen sex, curving upward

expertly to fuck with my g-spot. I'm moaning, conflicted by the thought of us being found out and heady with desire.

"Dinna make a move," he orders, "aye." His teeth chomp near my cheek, and my sex vacuums all the delicious friction it has made.

"No." I clamp my legs together and place a palm over my eyes. "Not looking at you right now, Leith. Screwing while we have company? Mia stumbles around slowly, and she's loud, but we won't get away with this."

"I've been away for days." He grabs my hands and slides them into his pants. Breath catching in my throat, my fingers glide across the smooth, rigidity of his thick cock. I laugh as he argues about "blue baws."

"I regret to inform you and your balls—"

"Okay," Leith groans, swooping me up in his arms. The empty coffee mug I left out shatters on the tile.

"We have to clean that up."

"Nae." He runs his fingers along my ribs. In giddy delight, I laugh and attempt some sort of composed response as Leith runs through the house with me in his arms. I always thought I married the hot Scot.

Nope. Leith MacKenzie is hot as hell, but he's also one crazy Scot.

"Wait, wait, baby!" I moan when Leith plants me on the edge of the bed. His hand reaches beneath my dress, pressing my abdomen where tiny butterflies have fluttered away. "The door."

He glances around. "Nae! Ye asked for the bedroom."

"I know, but please."

"Yer mouth will be the judge while I *feck* the defiance outta ye." Our eyes connect. His aquamarine irises glower, so striking and intimidating. Clairvoyant, I read his mind and toss a few daggers his way when he touches the hem of my clothing. "Hen, ye're too gorgeous for the likes of this."

Leith's hands ghost over my ass and hips as he shreds the dress from my flesh. His eyes darken in desire.

"Touch me," I beg.

Standing behind me, he cups my breast in his hand. He's hardly touched me, and a symphony of moans vibrate from my body. His mouth captures my own as his other fingers slip into my panties, teasing and tantalizing my dripping wet slit.

"Ye stay soaked for me, hen. That's why I love ye madly." Leith coaxes a delicate orgasm from my mouth as his fingers smooth over my pearl, round and round in a leisurely fashion.

All thought fades except for one thing—*this is love*.

This unexplainable feeling, this drug weakens my knees so that I'm leaning back into Leith.

"Please, don't stop," I groan as he removes his hand from my sex.

"Nae, Chevelle, I won't stop until ye beg me to. But ye will savor this moment," Leith declares, spinning me around. His lips skim over my cheekbone, causing me to shiver. With one hand, he shoves his shirt off. My fingers fall to the smooth muscles of his chest. My palms run over the strength of them, missing the feel of snuggling close, which will be the perfect ending to this lovemaking.

LEITH

AYE, THE SIGHT OF MY WIFE'S NAKED BODY FILCHES MY breath. After recovering from the impact of her gorgeous body, I warn myself not to lose control, to *feck* her slowly. Gauging from the tension in her body, she needs to be made love to.

Using my feet to kick out of my pants, I draw my mouth back to her breasts. My tongue circles around the hardened bulb before sucking it into my fervent mouth. Chevelle's fingers run through my hair as my hands explore the bends and curves of her lush body. Sucking her nipple deep into my mouth, I scrape my teeth lightly across the soft flesh of her breast. The only thought running through my mind is worshiping my wife, reminding her why she became my prize. I may *feck* up on occasion—a whole heap of *feck* ups right about now—but she's under my spell.

She moans in ecstasy, voice heavy with lust. I'm about to grip her waist, lifting her to carry her to bed, when Chevelle's fingers slide along my boxers.

“Hen,” I groan against her diamond nipple. Impatient, she tugs at my underwear as she slides down to the ground on her knees. Lifting her lovely face, she slides out her tongue and catches a drop of precum at the tip of my dick. My toes clutch under when her lips engulf the swollen head. Chevelle's moan sends vibrations through my shaft and down to my *baws*.

Aware of what she's doing to me, Chevelle kneads my heavy sack, plunging her wet, hot mouth around my hardness.

"Right there." My order comes out harsh and guttural. Hips thrust as I *feck* her bonny face.

I feel like her mouth is trying to dominate my hard cock. Her suction is amazing.

"*Feckin' Hell!*" I swear, holding her deep, exploding in her mouth. Thick creamy cum streams to the back of her throat. Clamping my *arse*, Chevelle bobs her head, addicted to the lengthy jet of my seed.

I grip her arm, yanking her to her feet. My hands slip under her rump, and I nudge my nose to the sweet column of her neck. I nip and lick the tender area. Voice gone and thick like gravel, I rasp, "My turn."

Chevelle's soft curves shift as she squeals.

Face planted in her sex, I descend to my knees, laying my treasure at the edge of our bed. My tongue flicks expertly, searching and finding her sweet spot in less than a second. I squeeze the fat, silky flesh of her *arse* and bring my wife to a quick orgasm. Her sugary liquid gushes into my mouth. My wife loses control, writhing around. Her hands fly to my head, holding me hostage. With my mouth planted against Chevelle's cunt, nose against her clit, I focus on her throbbing walls.

My mouth curves at one edge. I lean back on my haunches. A glow spans across Chevelle's brown skin. She tosses her hands over her head, eyes closed, moaning in approval.

"Give me a minute, hen," I growl, beating my hardening cock. My tongue wars against her pussy as I tell my dick to man the *feck* up. *Bless her the way she just blessed ye.*

My recharged cock springs to life. I lay Chevelle back on the bed. My muscular frame is all over her soft body as my erection slithers into her heat.

"Leith," Chevelle pants, fingernails raking my back and shoulders. Her legs drape over my hips, locking me in. Waves of pleasure break like the ocean over us as I rock into her. In a

surge, my cock dominates her sex, revved like a supercar. But I torture us together with languid, powerful thrusts. Each drive sends her tits jiggling in my *feckin'* face.

Gasps and cries fill my ears. Chevelle's erotic moans compel me to thrust harder, but I keep steady, *feckin'* her just right. While her velvety pussy milks my cock, I hold her tight, showering her with kisses. From her cheeks to her neck to the elevation of her breasts, there's no place on her body off-limits. Chevelle is wholly mine.



SOMETIME LATER, WE HOLD EACH OTHER IN BED. CHEVELLE murmurs, "You came home."

"Ye said that already, hen. Why are ye so shocked?" I reply. *Shite*, she's shocked? My life flashed before me when Chevelle screamed on the phone. It wasn't until I landed at Long Beach airport that I got a message from Brody. I had no idea the bastard still remembered where she once worked. He'd mumbled something about attempting to be a better brother-in-law when he let Knox and Firth head the McFarland mission.

"Ye can't be surprised, hen. I'd do anything for ye."

"Yeah, but all the spontaneous stuff ended when we had Mia, or when we were married." Chevelle's finger roams across my chest. "Damn, that sounds bad. We're only three years into this, and it's kind of like a bull ride that I don't want to get off. I'm so happy you came. You must've driven all night."

"Nae. I took a red-eye. Paid a man a thousand dollars for his seat. After I heard ye scream, I tried desperately to get a hold of ye. Had no control, hen."

"I'm sorry—"

"Nae, must be me who has it all wrong, Chevelle. Leaving ye during the week. That'll change soon. I may not get it right

the first or second time, but I know what's most important to a man. That's his hen. Ye, baby."

"Awe, Leith." She snuggles close to my chest. "You're so good to me."

"Ye deserve the *feckin'* best. I've to be an example for Mia. Ye've seen that crazy girl?"

Smiling, Chevelle pops my bicep. "Call my baby a hag, and I'm going to rough you up."

"*Shite*, crazy as she is, our parenting has to stick to the lassie once she's ready to settle down. A standup guy will nae stop showing his woman how much she means, even after he has her."

Chevelle's lips pull in pensively. "Love that frame of mind. Nevertheless, hmmm, you just mentioned our half-pint settling down."

I roll my eyes. "*Och!* Generalized statement."

"Of course," she teases. "Leith, mind the look on your face before I follow through with fighting you."

Chevelle makes use of an imaginary crystal ball, tormenting me. She struggles against me. With a firm grip on her waist, my teeth sink into the meat of her shoulder before she can protest.

"*Stop. It's true. Leith, stop!*"

In a flash, I've mounted my wife, pinning her arms above her head. Mouth muffled against her warm skin, I order, "Say Mia's still my bairn."

"Mia will grow into a beautiful wom—Ouch!" I bite her lip. "Damn, Leith, Mia will continue as your baby for a while now."

Soft ridges etch Chevelle's skin where I left my mark. Thrumming my fingers through her hair, I press my lips over the blemish.

Devilishly seductive eyes pierce through me. "You're an asshole, Leith MacKenzie."

“Nae, it’s arsehole, *arsehole*. Hen, work on yer diction.” My fingers slide her locks over the still furrowed area. “Okay, *feck* it. I said it. I meant it. Now, dinna remind me of it ‘til Mia’s thirty, forty, maybe forty-three. That’s when I’ve the guts to let her look at laddies.”

“She won’t be looking at boys at forty years old, Leith.” Chevelle reaches up to run a hand along my face. Momentarily, she closes her eyes, pulling in a steady breath.

I sit back on my *arse* beside her. “What is it, hen?”

A glow slowly breaks across Chevelle’s face. “Just contemplating your words. You’re such a good father.”

That’s not wit ye’re contemplating. “That’s a good thing, aye?” I catch her gaze with mine, firm and steady. My mouth pulls rigid. I wonder at how challenging, on occasion, it’s been to weed through my wife’s brain.

“Yeah, a good thing,” Chevelle says, just when I’m prepared to dig and pry. Her trembling voice breaks into a million wee pieces. “B-but w-when you m-mention us as a good example for Mia.”

“*Och.*” I have the sudden inclination to pull her close. I fold her in my arms, resting my chin atop her head. For a long moment, I pacify my wife’s soul while holding her just like this. Touching my lips to hers briefly, I probe for more. “Ye never mention yer parents, Chevelle.”

“*No,*” she whispers so low, the word falls almost short of reaching me. My Chevelle opened up to me in many ways, but it wasn’t until after our first time that she brought up her parents.

The woman who raised her needed to be kicked under a dank jail cell for not obtaining the help Chevelle needed as a child. Her father’s actions were the catalyst for much heartbreak, and it’s still an unresolved fissure in my wife’s heart. The heart in my chest drops. Then I cave. “Ye gotta let me in, hen. I’ve adored ye too long for this. Nae keeping me at arm’s length.”

CHEVELLE

ON THE NIGHT OF MIA'S FIRST BIRTHDAY, MY HEART FILLED TO the brim watching Leith adore our daughter. Later that night, I articulated my thoughts about my parents—the most in-depth conversation I've had about them since their death. Leith learned how my mom was the choir instructor at a Baptist church. I included foreshadowing information first, such as how the pastor was unmarried. Even at the age of eight, I understood how there's a popularity contest at certain churches to snag and marry a pastor, but obviously, Mom was already married. In an out of body experience, I explained the dynamics of the night Daddy claimed Momma's life. I just couldn't divulge how it made me feel, how it broke me.

When Leith tried to dig deeper, I threatened him, and we stopped. Simple as that. He's a good man, and he offered to be there for me. His attempts reminded me of how I was once grateful for Lady's negligence. That bitch never sought therapy or any other services to support me.

Now, Leith's encouraging me to let him in. Years ago, he dismantled the walls surrounding my heart. Yet, when his tender love and affection built them up again, I added a few illusions, not quite offering him all the tools necessary to get fully in.

"My father was an attorney," I say, sharing nothing new. My heart thrashes against my ribs. Who speaks ill of the dead?

My dad's not in the position to defend himself. *Who defended your Momma against him, huh?*

Leith's tone penetrates the anxiety spiraling through my spirit. "Ye can do this, Chevelle."

While tethered on the cliff of uncertainty, I nod, dissecting where to begin. I work my way back as if my father's misdeeds are something I have to remind myself of constantly. Something that will keep me from sympathizing and missing him more.

The heavy weight Justice often admits to overwhelming her crushes down on my chest now. Am I sharing too much? Leith's my safe space when the world has me down. But *this* is *my* realm, not the empire which once included my blood. The rage I could feel, the anger that was dormant inside my father, feels like it's written all over my face. Yet, Leith still looks at me with eyes brimming in love.

I recount the part that once turned my heart black, calcified as stone. "All I know is, my parents seemed so happy."

At first, my voice trails off. I clam up. Anxiety builds. I swallow the lump in my throat, and for the first time, I modify my attempt. My eyes find Leith's encouraging ones. I'll never forget how it feels when his arms encircle me as if reading my thoughts. His hand glides the length of my shoulders. The warm touch penetrates the haze of anxiety, soothing me.

I'm sure that I married a man who found me in a billion tiny pieces and can truly put me together again. He's not just my new life, but the anchor to mollify the old one too. Breathing deep, I start over. "My parents seemed happy, like *us*, Leith. That part scares the shit out of me, baby."

My husband's hands draw over my shoulders again, kneading softly. His knuckles sweep along my cheekbones. The blazing resolve in his eyes silently opposes how our marriages compare. He continues to listen intently.

"They didn't have money problems. Somebody always had their hands outstretched when it came to my dad. Momma would feed them, and Dad would give them a loan, without an

expectation of having it returned. I never saw my parents argue.” I shake my head. “Hell, *we* argue.”

“Arguing is healthy, hen.”

Though I agree, Leith’s words break the trance of my further exposing my past. “It hurts just thinking of them, babe.” I suffocate on each word, gulping in vast quantities of air. Nerves on edge, I concentrate hard and can hear the sound of Mia begging for something. “Mia and Cam are back.”

“They’ll wait. Talk to me, hen,” Leith’s voice holds a compassionate, firm edge. All the curling into an illusory ball on my part has become a thing of the past. “Yer da made a mistake.”

“Mistake my ass. That’s ...” My teeth claim my tongue, biting down hard. At the sound of footsteps, the intake of air I hadn’t realized constricted my throat evaporates. “A catastrophe.”

“See, hen. Ye gotta stop bloody suppressing it. Promise ye’ll tell me more later.” He squeezes me in his arms, kissing the top of my head as Mia’s voice grows, coming near. “Promise me?”

“I promise.”

Leith drops another kiss on the crown of my head before embracing me again. Before he lets me go, Mia has jumped into the bed, and I’m softly chiding her for wearing outside clothes on my feather duvet.

While my husband and I double-team our daughter in a tickle fight, I envision the person others see in me. At Michie’s, my greatest attributes are how warm, welcoming, and *sharing*, I am. The open book. Except, most are in the dark as to how I’ve curated the pages. I’d hate to think I’ve done the same in my love life, so I mentally prepare myself to tell Leith more later.



EARLIER TODAY, CAMDYN LEFT WITH A BOTTLE OF ALCOHOL. Leith decides to turn his day at home into an extended weekend. His concern now is the short-term parking where he left his car instead of long-term. He makes a few calls, seeing if he can have it moved.

While placed on hold, he stalks back and forth in front of the television as I sit on the couch. He mutters, “*Feck*, the short-term’s gonna tear me a new one every day I dinna pick her up.”

Arms folded, head cocked, I retort, “First, not *her*. That car’s not your woman. I am.”

“But she’s hen number two.”

“So, then your *Chevelle SS* is hen three?” I laugh as he kneels and nudges his nose into my neck.

“Nae. Ye’re Queen Hen, my Chevy is hen one, and my Audi is hen two.”

“Spoiled brat.” I push at his chiseled chest, though addicted to the zany man between my thighs. “Hey, I’ll need to drive my namesake this week. The body shop is finally fixing my car. Don’t you have a coworker that can get the Audi out of the lot?”

“Nae.”

“Sheesh. What have I told you about associates at work? I bet none of them were as insufferable as Justice when she started on the job. She gave life to the mad black woman stereotype before people even knew why she was angry.”

“I dinna need any friends, Chevelle.”

“Um-Hmmm. I bet all you tech types have your nose glued to a computer screen. Ask your Silicon Valley roomy.”

“Nae.”

“I’m sure if you rub cocoa butter onto one of Ms. Mable’s tits—”

He’s up on his feet in seconds. “Ugh, Chevelle, boke! What kind of *nugget* d’ye take me for, touching her auld tits?”

I'm supposed to be the funny one. Ye're cruel, lass."

"Interest Ms. Mable in picking up your ride for a month's supply of cat food. Surely that's cheaper than leaving *hen two* in the short-term parking until Monday."

"I'll—*Och*, Mia!"

Our prankster daughter darts into the living room. There is a smudge of chocolate across her lips.

"Where'd you get that candy?" I ask, climbing to my feet.

She giggles about Camdyn giving it to her before he took off.

"See what I deal with when you're gone?" I retort as we watch her zip around the open area, darting around furniture.

Leith nudges his chin to me. "Ye take left. I've right."

"You're headed to the tub right now, Mia!" I call after her.

Our daughter chuckles. Her curly hair jostles in the air as she slips beneath a glass table, sliding on the marble floor. My heart lurches into my throat as she jumps up. She has the MacKenzie invincibility complex. I cringe as Leith jumps over the same table a nanosecond later.

"You're gonna kill her," I mumble, seeing how Mia, giggling, is oblivious to any danger. Two crazy Scots run around the house. One caramel-hued with chocolate paw prints getting everywhere, the other issuing threats in Gaelic that only they can understand.

Mia zooms by. Her footsie socks garner traction. Or perhaps her Guardian angels are giving her a lift and preventing a bruised bottom every time she turns and zips past her father.

Finally, I gasp, arms raised. "Leith, you're not even making an attempt! FYI, you're just as incorrigible."

He winks from across the room, setting up our child to run straight to me. At the last second, I embrace Mia, lifting her high.

"Nooo!" she screeches. "The goblin's got me!"

“Goblin, my ass! Child, this is a team effort.” I plant a kiss on her forehead. “Mommy and Daddy married just so we could ...”

Dry air creeps into my throat. All perception terminates. An image of my parents chasing after me deafens my daughter’s cheerful giggles. Damn, this was why I never brought them up in the past. If my memories were a sequence of cardboard boxes, all of theirs should’ve gone to the crematory.

Unaware, Leith hooks an arm around a wiggling Mia. He grips my cheek with the other hand and kisses my puckered lips.

“My ace,” he calls me as our daughter postures vomiting induced by our actions.

“Kissing, yuck!” she exclaims.

“Chocolate all over your hair and mouth, Mia, yuck!” I groan, following them to her en suite bathroom.

“Play Disney music now!” Mia orders the smart system.

“Lower,” I call out. “Kid, just because it’s computerized doesn’t give you the right to exercise such a bossy tone.”

“Aw, Mommy!”

Wagging a finger, I reprimand, “Don’t make it a habit. Got that?”

Leith places our daughter into the center of her huge bathtub, then glances down at the smeared chocolate on his shirt. Tufts of dark blond hair stick straight up on the top of his head as he removes his shirt.

“Hen, I’m gonna go sweet talk Mrs. Mable about getting my car out the lot.” Before he leaves, my husband says, “Scrub the tiny hag—”

“Leith, I just asked our daughter to change her tone. You’re using words that—”

“That about sums it up.” He grabs my face, grazing his lips across mine. “Get bonny for me. And then I’ll take the two of

ye to dinner.”

He’s out the door, and Mia returns to her giggling while climbing over the empty ledge. Chocolate smears along the white porcelain. Determined to clean it later, I turn the knobs until warm water is pooling into the tub.

“Oh, Mia. Why’re you laughing?” I cock an eyebrow, tossing the pineapple loofah into the tub as it fills with water.

“Daddy’s funny.”

“Mhmm, if you were aware of the meaning of ‘hag,’ you wouldn’t—”

“Means witch. I’m a witch.” She starts toward me, arms raised, chocolate-covered fingers stretched out like a zombie. Cackling, I help her out of her clothes and into the tub.

Despite my past, I wouldn’t change my present. Every kiss, every hug, even the arguments with Leith that my brain blows out of proportion, I’d keep them all. Because that just means my husband will fight with and *for* me.

LEITH

“SO, YE’RE SAYING MY AUDI R8 IS NO LONGER ...” AT THE sound of Chevelle and Mia’s laughter floating near, I quicken my steps onto the balcony. I roar into the phone, “It’s an R8, worth almost two-hundred *feckin’* thousand dollars! Where. Is. My. Car?”

“Sir, if you’re going to cuss—”

“Nae, I’m gonna sue.” *But I’d prefer wrapping my fingers around yer feckin’ throat and squeezing the life outta ye!*

“Sue, my ass. The car was picked up about twenty minutes ago by someone from Infinity Corp. The man had a written document claiming the vehicle was company property. Take your matters up with them.”

The call goes dead. The blood in my veins is hotter than a fat wench’s tits after a night of bad *diddy-rides*. I remember the day I took the car off the lot. Chevelle jokingly asked if I still loved her the same. *Nobody but me paid for that ride.*

Seething, I grip the dark blonde hair from the crown of my head. “What the bloody *feck!*?”

Alright, this is another tactic of the *ned*, another show of his *baw* size! Silently, I calculate my next move. He’s operating under the guise that I’m totally in the dark. Although I haven’t searched for the yacht photo, I’m confident Jiang’s associate is the right lad. Initially, I’d wanted to hold that bit of

knowledge for the next time the *arsehole* tricked me into a mission.

But as I've said, we're talking Hen Two, my Audi. I dinna *feckin'* play with my rides. Striding through the house, I step into my office and go straight to the computer. I link my iPhone to my laptop to upload the screenshot I took of the refrigerator picture. In less than a minute, the mystery that's plagued me for months has been solved.

Douglas Yates and I have one thing in common. We attended MIT, the same alma mater. Like many *eejits* of the time, he was expelled for racial statements made on Twitter. After which, Phelps, who had previously acknowledged Yates in public, must've become a silent partner with him. It seems Yates is a wee, disgruntled *fecker*.

Though his address is unlisted, I dial Yates, and it goes straight to voicemail. Keyed up, I throw all my cards on the table and snarl into the receiver. "Listen here, ye—"

"Baby, are you talking to Mable?"

"Aye." Biting my lip, I stop hunching over my laptop and shove on a smile. Chevelle appears in the doorway, wearing a silky blue slip dress that has my dick twitching, despite my predicament.

Effortlessly, I press the off button with my thumb while continuing to talk. "Mable, all ye gotta do is go to the short-term parking lot at the airport. I'm emailing them my driver's license and a short statement. They know yer coming."

Feck, my wife's still standing there.

I continue the charade. "Mhmm ... mhmmm ... aye. Cat food and a new cathouse. Nice doing business with ye." I make like I'm hanging up before adding, "Hag."

Chevelle shakes her head, laughing, oblivious to my deception. "Cathouse?"

Feck, I hate myself for this. "Aye. Cathouse. Like doghouse for cats, lass. Be glad ye'll never be in such a predicament."

Leaning against the doorframe, she smiles. “Thank you for snatching me off the market. Anyway, I believe they’re called *cat trees*. So, would it have been cheaper to leave the car in the lot for five days or?”

I rise from the computer chair and round the desk, finishing her question. “Be exploited by an auld biddy with sweaty *tits*?”

“Leith, my self-esteem might take a hit soon. We discuss your roommate’s breasts *way* too much.” She grins, fisting her breasts in her hands. “I don’t have much of these.”

“*Och*, but ye got all that *arse*. Still, I like these.” I reach down, replacing one of her hands with my own, and give her neck a wee nibble. “Nae. I’m gonna take my two sweethearts to dinner. When we return, and Mia falls asleep, I’ll correct any concerns ye have about these sweet, round tits.”

Chevelle kisses me again, mumbling about makeup as she leaves the room. The warm smile on my face fades as I stomp back over to the laptop to find my car. *My feckin’ dream car*. LoJack has been disabled. Aye, I should be more concerned about the DNA evidence in the trunk. But I’m not. My enemy has his sins, and I’ll find them out.

LEITH

I'M STILL HOTTER THAN DEEP-FRIED TATTIES WHEN THE HOST escorts us through an outdoor seafood restaurant. We stop at a white linen table with a real candle and all the adornments my lasses love. The ocean wind feathers through Chevelle's hair as I help her into a seat.

The maître d', who knows our family by name, adds a booster seat to Mia's chair. On the table, he places crayons and a coloring book.

While Mia leans against the banister, looking out into the water, I crouch down to her level. "Hag, dinna forget to be on yer best behavior."

"Daddy, I saw something."

"Hmmm," I glance across the darkening sea, already aware this is a setup.

"Pirate's ship!" She shouts.

"*Och*, Mia! Ye're too loud." For once, I'm reprimanding her before my wife can. Actually, Chevelle isn't saying a word when I wrestle our daughter away from the railing. Chevelle's eyes are glued to an auld, black couple. They're staring at her, too. I give them the once over, though I can't place either of their faces. The lad's a suit and tie type, while his mate dresses like my mam.

I'm planting Mia's behind into the booster seat when the couple stands. I've settled across from Mia, looping an arm over Chevelle, when I realize the couple is heading toward us and not just a view of the ocean.

"Mr. and Mrs. Nix." Chevelle smiles, moonlight hitting her tear-filled eyes.

The lass clasps her hands together. "Carla Anderson, I thought—"

"That's not my mommy's name," Mia cuts in.

"*Wheesht, shhh!*" I cut my hand through the air. Though I'm at a loss for much of Chevelle's past, I understand my wife's reason to continue disassociating herself with her parents. The bitch who raised her was just as bad as the man she once called Da.

Chevelle introduces the couple as members of a Baptist church in Chicago. The wife says how they still attend the church. Tension slows the conversation and cuts down the smiles between them.

"We have to keep in touch," Mrs. Nix's eyes warm over like hot chocolate.

"Sure," Chevelle removes her phone from her tiny clutch. They exchange numbers, except my wife alters the one she gives them. I catch her eye, knowing it was on purpose. When they leave, Mia has a quizzical look on her face.

"Are they grandma and—"

"Nae, Mia," I sigh. "Da and yer mam will talk to ye about it later."

Mia's bottom lip curls under. "Awww, I wish they *was* my grandma and grandpa. Get more gifts!"

"No, sweetheart. They're a bit older than my—" Chevelle's voice has dropped in volume with each word. Clearing her throat, she continues, "Than my parents would've been."

The candlelight flickers across our daughter's curious gaze. "You got parents, Mommy?"

“Mia,” I reply, “everyone has parents.”

“It’s okay, Leith. The conversation was bound to come up one day. Yes, honey, everyone has parents.”

“Where, Mommy?” Mia glances around.

“My momma’s in heaven, though Dad went straight to Hell.”

Our lassie’s eyes grow round. She sucks in a lung full of air. I never thought I’d see the day Mia was speechless, but she gawks at the two of us. Mam sprang *Heaven* and *Hell* on Mia a while back. I can honestly say I’d never argued with Mam until that very second. The muscles beneath my jaw ribbon. I’m stuck between the rainbows and butterfly worldview I prefer for our daughter and the nightmare tormenting my wife.

“Sorry,” Chevelle murmurs, conscious of my wishes not to introduce such a topic to her.

“We make the rules together, hen,” I reply, grazing her earlobe with my lips. A fissure separates the love I have for my wife and the hurt she refuses to share.

The server arrives. Recalling my threats, Mia has zipped her lips. Normally, they have a routine where Mia asks about the daily special. She just gets too excited, is all.

I nod to the waiter. “Mia, ask yer questions.”

With one last look at her mom, Mia diverts to a prim tone. “What’s on the menu today, doc?”

“Well, Ms. MacKenzie ...”

As they commence the usual exchange, my little beautiful lassie blossoms, giggling about the word *halibut*.

I take that as my cue to return to Chevelle. “We need to talk later, hen.”

She whispers back, “Shouting and fucking-talking or, talking *talking*? Take into consideration my apology, Leith. Our daughter’s nosy, I slipped up.”

I reach an arm over her shoulder and make like I’m fluffing her hair. “Chevelle, ye and I are the showrunners of

that there wee *wean*. So, nae need to apologize. As far as a slipup, I'll support ye, be a bloody repeat offender, hen—*tonight with me.*”

Lifting a glass of wine, Chevelle hides a contrite grin. “About the Heaven and Hell debate? Leith, your parents are religious. Apparently, my super awesome, attentive father had a similar conviction, and seeing how Momma chose a preacher man to—”

“Much as I'd love to have this discussion with ye, not here, hen.” Clearing my throat, I listen as Mia and the waiter discuss which red wine is best with the ridiculous priced entrée she won't be having anyway. “Ye wanna open up? Good. Ye're my best friend. Ye will share with me tonight. *Believe that.*”

“What happened to *hen*?” Chevelle has no right biting her lip as she argues. Incensed, I reach over and bite it too.

My teeth sink into her soft flesh, and her body deflates against me. I whisper, “Ye happened.” Then I cut into Mia's chatter since the waiter's polite way of humoring her will come out of my pockets later.



AT HOME, IN A JOINT EFFORT, WE RALLY OUR CURIOUS LASSIE to bed. The raw energy Mia exerted while out, combined with the dessert she consumed, has her tearing through the house. Sometime much later, Chevelle and I are out beneath the stars. Chevelle sits at the edge of the pool, dangling her feet into the heated water. I remove my loafers and pull up the legs of my britches while settling beside her.

“Ye know, if I wore my kilt everywhere, this *shite* would be a lot easier.”

“Oh, so it has come to this?” She arches a brow, the turquoise water reflecting in her dark eyes. “Same old jokes?”

Exhaling, I rub the bridge of my nose. “*Shite*, I've told ye before, hen, I'm bound to resort to an auld joke or two over our lifetime. And my kilt ones are the best.”

“They were some best sellers back in the day. Now, you’re grown-man sexy, so I’ll only tell you this once.” She pauses for effect. “You pull that kilt out in the bedroom anytime you like, not during outings. Some ladies might see those toned, nicely tanned legs—unlike any other white guy I know—and try to steal you from me.”

I scoop an arm around her waist. Her *arse* brushes over the Tuscany travertine, gliding closer to me. “*Och*, women are always trying to steal me from ye.”

“They are.” Chevelle’s mouth hitches at each end. “But those legs. You go from ten to the sexiest man in the stratosphere. I’m telling you, Leith. I’d have to pull out the gun you bought me for my twenty-second birthday.”

It’s nice, laughing with my wife, my best friend. Our connection spans almost our entire lives. Chevelle tenses, grasping how I’m about to segue this conversation.

“Hen, beautiful, queen of my *feckin’* life,” I murmur. “Ye mind *wit* my great grand told me?”

“About not marrying a British woman?”

When I stare at her, she sighs, mumbling, “Alright, I know where you’re headed. Lovers *accept* each other’s past, *support* each other’s present, and *encourage* ... or maybe it was *love* each other’s future.”

“So then tell me, Chevelle—”

“Not hen?”

“Nae,” I respond. “Just plain, auld, *feckin’* Chevelle for now. How are we in a relationship while ye’re hiding yer past? How can I support ye right now? How can I encourage—”

“Leith, calm down.”

“This is my calm face,” I gesture and add, “that’s yer Crabbit Chevelle face, hen.”

Her hands falter over her face before dragging down. “Honestly, I tell you everything. Most of the time.”

“*Och*, *most* of the time.” I snort.

“Everything that matters.”

Again, I repeat her words in a pant. “Bloody hell, Chevelle.”

She deflates into my shoulder and stays there for a moment. “I’m sorry, baby, I hadn’t meant to be defensive.”

Running my hands through her hair, I note, “Hen, I’ve loved ye too long for ye to drop that bomb about yer parents, and then to sprinkle bits over the last fifteen *feckin’* years! My soulmate should... .” *Should tell me everything.* Condemned by my own lies, I trail off, watching the steam rise from the pool.

“You’ve always been my peace, Leith. That should count for what’s important.”

“Nae, this here’s the part where I apologize because I’ll not mince my words. Chevelle, yer strong.” I turn, the water sloshing up to my ankles. Framing her velvety cheeks in my calloused hands, I declare, “Ye picked the wrong man if ye didna want me to fight for ye, hen. I’m a loud *arsehole*. That’s how I show my love.”

“Okay, baby. Calm—”

“Nae, Chevelle. *Feck* calming down. Yer love is insanity to me. I’ll not be some *daftie eejit*. I strive for the best for ye. Ye’re gorgeous inside and out. I adore everything about ya. There’s no need being *put together* twenty-four seven, love.”

From the look of horror on her face, we aren’t in agreement. “You’re always here for me, Leith. You’re my peace. My sanity. My rock. Where’s this coming from?”

“I’m proud to be yer husband. But something’s gotta give here. This *shite* still affects ye, baby. Let me in so that I can understand ye, encourage and support ye.”

“It’s not—”

“I’m invested in ye, Chevelle.”

Our entire conversation seems to have fallen on its head. For a couple of beats, Chevelle says nothing. Then she explodes.

“I don’t want to remember!” Her voice breaks into a raw rasp of a sob. “Why would you do this to me, Leith? You say I should turn this *nothing* into something, but have I done anything wrong? I’m a good mom. Yes, you’re a wonderful husband. I thought we were perfect together. You’re nothing like ... like ...”

I’m a *feckin’* sucker. I spoke to her about therapy before. *Shite*, I even offered her pot so we could get stoned together and hash it out. One thing led to lots of other things. She’s too bloody gorgeous. Her tears are my weakness. The sight of them makes me wanna boke the filet mignon and whiskey. I grip Chevelle by the waist, and we go plunging into the heated pool.

CHEVELLE

MOMENTS AGO, I'D BITTEN MY LIP TO STOP THE PAIN OF THE past from falling like hot tears down my face. Now, warm water churns around us, gentle and cleansing through my soul. All the words I should've said dried up in my throat, as usual. Same occurrence, a hundred times over. I condemn myself for my faults in our relationship. We're the epitome of the power exchange between man and woman: I've become his weakness, and he is my strength. Leith's only mistake is his difficulty in prying open the shell I keep locked on the smallest fragment of my heart that never belonged to him in the first place. The part of my heart reserved for first love as presented by my father and mother.

Leith's gaze lowers to my lips for just a second. I can tell he's second-guessing the fighter in him, the one who demands answers.

"Make love to me," I rasp, pushing the hair from Leith's eyes, which have grown dark as fiery cobalt. He presses his lips to my mouth, making my heart flutter. A genuine warmth suffuses his features as he groans, deepening the kiss.

My dress drags me down into the water. Leith grips at the chiffon material. "Leith!" The sopping blue rag floats away, leaving me in my panties and bra.

"Nae complaining." Hunger pulses through his aura. His jaw clinches, division evident. He covets more of me, all of

me. For now, he'll submit to that single part of my heart that always belonged to him in the first place. And with this submission, he'll rage like a caged animal.

Leith encircles a hand around my waist. Water stirs swiftly into tiny bubbles, tickling my flesh as he brings me flush to him. Our lips seal, his forceful, dominating mine with reckless abandon. While Leith's urgent touch sears and claims my curves, my hands drift over his shoulders. My tongue surrenders to his, not fighting or warring him as usual. His jaw scrapes my skin in delicious friction. He is war, commanding. I'm peace, yielding. My sex jumps and squeezes, easing the friction.

The trance-induced way he kisses me causes a surreal balm to flood my soul, all the way to my spirit. Every once in a while, Leith's kiss becomes a new experience. The taste of his tongue, twirling around mine, cannot be branded as sweet. It's a kiss of passion. Of a man denied.

"Mmmm." I'm left dizzy, smiling.

"I love ye, Chevelle," Leith declares.

With oxygen stammering through my chest, I reply, "I love you with all of me, Leith."

As he unbuttons his shirt, I ogle him, exposing each tanned pec. I push my tits together, and a jagged breath escapes his sexy mouth. In response, his fingers fumble over a button. I arch a brow, unclasping the latch of my bra, and dangle it like a tassel over my index finger. He's only halfway finished the button down.

"You could be diddy-riding my breasts."

"When I get out of my pants," he says, lust marring his gruff tone. "I'm gonna lick and love those titties the way they're meant—"

I grip his designer linen shirt, ready to rip it off his athletic frame. Except, the execution I anticipated falters as the shirt's threading holds steady.

"This is my favorite, lass!" Leith gasps.

“Seems fair since you’re always ripping off my clothes.” My eyes warn of his impending doom if he doesn’t help me. Hiding half a smile, Leith places my hands over his, assisting with my shredding him out of the shirt.

He moves like a merman, getting out of his pants. I float closer, and Leith tightens an arm around my waist. “Now, I’m gonna have to torture ye for yer insolence.”

My pulse flutters, fingertips following the muscular V-shape groove of his hips. “Do your worst.”

Leith cups my face with his hands, sealing my request with a kiss that would threaten to knock me off my feet were I not already floating. The expert movements of his tongue tantalize gasps from my throat until the world disappears, and only the two of us exist tonight. It’s like two lovers’ first kiss, and I’m lucky enough to feel this pleasure every time he’s near. He kisses me so long that it takes a few moments to realize he’s pulled away.

Leith dunks down into the water and pushes my panties to the side, baring my valley to his mouth. Fire sparks inside me as his tongue laps, and his hands cup me tight.

“Oh my, oh my ...” My heart skips a few beats. Vision to the sky, the stars become an infinite blur as waves of pleasure increase, each one crashing more intensely than the last. “Oh, I can’t—can’t breathe.”

Can he breathe? He’s eating like it’s a holiday feast, so I assume he’s fine. Leith has backed me against the colorful tile steps. I attempt to clutch at the blue-green glass tile, coming quicker than I ever have.

Leith breaks the surface. My eyes drink my fill of him, liking all that I’m seeing. Breathless, I examine tiny specks of water sliding down his biceps. I tread water, bearing him, pumping his dick in my hands.

“Nae, hen. Ye asked me to make love to ya,” he groans, fortitude draining. Leith removes my hand from his sex. His mouth meets my neck, fingers teasing and circling my tingling

nub. I buck my hips, gasping as his dick takes over where his fingertips just worshipped.

I wrap my legs around him. His arousal sinks through my resistance.

“Chevelle, *feck*, I’ll never get used to this.” He sits there, inside my wet walls, letting us get used to the wonderful stretch. “How do ye bless me so? Ye stay so tight for me.” His declaration ends in a growl that leaves my body trembling around him as he starts to move.

First slowly, so deliberate, so torturous that I’m tempted to pull out my hair and his. I hiss, “Leith, you’re killing me.”

He grinds into my pussy, pulls out slowly, then strokes all the way to the hilt, repeating it all over again. The speed is picking up. Leith anchors my hips with his hands, prompting me to move in tandem, matching his strokes.

“Don’t stop!” I shiver.

“Nae, hen, never.” He pounds. The water rages around us, the bubbles swishing as I claw his back and anchor myself into him. We’re surrounded by water, but the wildfire of ecstasy within us is unquenched. Leith hits the spot, detonating an orgasm that has me exploding in his arms.

My husband pumps viciously inside of me, again and again. I stare in awe at my hot Scottish husband, aware he’s ready to cum, every muscle corded and chiseled in marble. He bites down on my neck, cussing hard, fucking harder. The pain sends my pussy working like a vice, milking him for all he’s worth.

CHEVELLE

AFTER GETTING OUT OF THE POOL, LEITH AND I SHOWER. IT wasn't until we were eighteen that I opened Leith's eyes to ethnic hair care. He can take down braids faster than me now. He is lying in bed when I get in wearing a silk scarf over my deep conditioned and blow-dried hair.

I press my shoulder against his much larger, toned one. "You should've fallen asleep by now. Looks like something's on your mind."

"Ye." His arms encircle me, and we cuddle together.

"Alright," I sigh. "We left off our discussion about my parents with your notion of how important parenting should be. And it is. We're good to Mia."

"Aye."

Damn, I chew my lip. Leith's one-word responses are getting me nowhere fast. "Baby, I tell you everything that's important to me. Though you keep a level of disconnect with your clan and their dealings, I understand how important family is to you."

"Then ye should know this is me being here for ye." He gestures. "Fifteen years. Wasn't 'til my mam spoke to ye about yer adoptive mother—"

"Don't call that bitch my—"

“And offered to murder said bitch for ye that ye shared about yer past, and not much. Most I know comes from an internet search.”

“Okay, well, forgive me for declining Nan’s offer to assassinate her.”

“Should’ve. Ye clearly got enough anger in ya—”

“I don’t.”

“*Och*, Crabbit Chevelle.”

Though I attempt my best glower, arguing with Leith has never been my strong suit. His charming accent penetrates my defenses.

The sexual tension between us is increasing. Not just for me, but for Leith, too. I can tell from the way he hangs his head, running a hand through his hair. “Chevelle, *Feck* this. I’m not *feckin’* ye right now. I’m angry.”

“You’re angry?” My long lashes lift, and I gaze at him through innocent eyes and with a pout to my lips.

“Jesus, save me!”

I laugh, captivated by my ability to play him.

Leith’s finger wags in my direction. Before he can speak, I wrestle with the sheets and sigh. “Okay, baby. I’m so sorry. For the most part, my parents are out of sight, out of mind. I detest the—*lady*—who raised me. Nevertheless, we had one thing straight with each other.”

“What?”

“Not to discuss what my father did—not to—” I stop and take a breath. “She didn’t send me to therapy. That would have been another dollar out of her pocket. She didn’t require much of me.”

“Ye assume that’s a good thing? Someone who doesn’t challenge ya?”

I shrug. Leith’s parents have so many levels. They’re pillars of their community and send home financial support to the MacKenzie clan in Scotland. Nan can out drink them all

but reserves such carefree behavior for grand celebrations. She can also snatch a gun from her purse, which she did, and set the damn thing on the table in front of me while discussing Lady.

It wasn't until after I turned eighteen and worried about tuition that I learned the true reason Lady chose not to drop my ass off in foster care.

There was more money.

There's always more money when opportunities seem to be in your favor.

At the age of eighteen, I should've acquired the remainder of my family's trust. Nope. I was bartending, under the table due to my age, smiling, having drink therapy, and my nose in a textbook for a bachelor's in hospitality when Nan asked my forgiveness for being nosey and looking into her suspicions.

Lady had taken almost a hundred grand from me on my birthday while I'd been celebrating with the MacKenzies. By then, she and I hadn't set eyes on each other for months. Lady had papers and forged my signature. Nan wielded her gun, looked me in the eye, and said it was only fitting she die.

I'll never know why I declined the offer. It was almost three months later when the MacKenzies found Lady and less than half of my inheritance.

"I could have stayed with the Nix, Leith," I say out of the blue. "There were so many families willing to take me in. All of them came from the same church."

There's a questioning glint in his eye.

"Because of my mom and the pastor. That bastard never admitted to adultery—to being a fucking man whore. Lady told me all about it."

"*Och*, Chevelle, I'm aware. Forget the bloody pastor. The Nix couple looked like good people. Anybody would have been better."

"Okay then. We weren't always poor. The lady and I had money in the beginning. I was some dumb, conceited child.

Instead of overeating the pain away, we spent like crazy. I suppose that makes me sound reckless.”

“Nae, hen, ye were a kid.” He nods. “That bitch took advantage of ye. She should’ve known better.”

“Humph, she *knew* alright. Everyone has a button. That lady pushed mine. The manipulative witch only had to say, ‘if you go with the Nix or the Jones, they’re gonna take you to church and mention your father.’ ” My voice cracks. “Or talking about what my dad did, how he got his money. ‘Where do you think all the money came from,’ she’d say. Or how the people he *helped* weren’t in need. That he wasn’t benevolent.”

Leith’s palm smooths over the heated, jaded flesh of my cheeks. “Ye got this, Chevelle.”

“All she had to do was say my father’s name. I was done for.” My shoulders fall, defeated. “I’d recall how I felt when this one officer came to our beautiful home in Chicago.” I pause, licking my lips. “People remember feelings. I know I’ll get mad at you for something, and it’s the emotion that holds me—not even the action.”

His calloused hand slides around, and his knuckles are threading over my tears.

“She’d say *his* name.” As I begin to pour out old emotions, Leith’s attentive gaze never leaves mine. “And I’d remember the cop and the look on his face. He reminded me that my life was over. Had I lived with the Nix family, that feeling would’ve been a daily occurrence. So, I was a stupid kid, slapped a Band-Aid over my heart. It was the only way to write the narrative of my life without getting caught up in the past. I sacrificed a little to keep my sanity.”

Silently, Leith nods. His eyes fix on something off in the distance as he mulls over what I’ve told him. Finally, Leith presses his lips over my tears then exhales. “Hen, ye need to conquer yer past. I see ye’re getting restless. Can we talk about this again in a *hunner* years from now?”

Through the haze of tears, I smile, adoring his accent.

“Good. For now, I do understand yer perspective as best as I can without walking in yer shoes. Ultimately, yer decisions led ye to me.”

A ghost of a smile nudges the edges of my lips. “Same year I found out she had spent the money, well, the money designated for raising me as a kid.”

Leith holds me tighter, his skin burning in a rage he won’t admit to. I know there’s a difference between the man that he is and the one he could’ve been.

He wasn’t all that funny when we met. Truth be told, my ultimatum to make Leith live a peaceful lifestyle created this. It was either go funny or *go postal*. As I said, the MacKenzies can be civilized, but they’re a loyal, cutthroat bunch. So, when I saw Leith beat down a bully who spoke out of turn about his accent, I had a taste of his abilities.

He was almost expelled, but Nan put on her Sunday best and showed the principal a different side of the MacKenzies. The good side.

Since Leith became the funny guy and vowed never to kill, never to commit a crime unless provoked, I decide to gulp down my embarrassment about my family and speak a little more.

“He did the unforgivable, baby. I grew up—till the age of eight or nine—not being spanked. I set my eyes on something pretty. It then belonged to me.”

I cling a little tighter to Leith and continue.

“My mom was a housewife. The damn house was so huge she had a maid. She could spend her time baking cookies for any event I had at school. Or cooking meals for less fortunate women and children at a shelter in Chicago. Or inviting the congregation over for Sunday dinner. There was nothing she ever wanted for ...”

LEITH

SUNLIGHT FILTERS THROUGH THE BLINDS, PULLING ME FROM A restless sleep. My heart's torn over the disappearance of Hen Two and my jaded Queen Hen. I hadn't a moment to search for the *arsehole* last night. Although, I heard more stories from Chevelle about her parents than we ever had our entire relationship. She talked until the wee hours of the morning.

With eyes closed, I slink from the bed. Running my knuckles over my mouth, I pray that I'm headed in the direction of the bathroom.

Half asleep, I've pissed, washed up, and I'm brushing my teeth while leaning against the doorframe. At the sound of the doorbell, one of my eyes peels open.

"The doorbell rang, babe," Chevelle grouses.

I take a few steps into the bathroom, spit out the foam, and rinse my mouth out. "It's too early."

She yawns, sneaking a peek at me. "But you're up."

"I'm not up. This is an ill—"

"Illusion Leith is about to get his ass kicked by Sleepy Momma." She reaches for my pillow, hurling it at me. The darn thing tumbles to the ground too soon, landing a yard off course. "Remember last night when we discussed overused jokes?"

“*Och*, that hurt.” I cock a smile, noting that although Chevelle’s eyes are closed, she has hidden a smile of her own.

“I’ve heard enough from you, Illusion Leith. However, you are permitted to use that term when coming home from work early.”

Now, I’m dodging her pillow. “Ye gotta have principles, hen. Some *bampot* comes to the door in the wee hours of the morning—”

“It’s probably past eleven. Please stop being so infuriating, baby.”

“Okay.”

“Thank you.” She rolls over, face down, *arse* in the air. Now, I’m wide awake. I reach for one of her fluffy missiles and slaughter that *arse* real quick.

“Hey!” Chevelle gasps on air.

“Just giving ye back yer pillow, hen.”

“I’ll remember that,” I can hear her saying as I exit the bedroom. Out of the windows to the west, I can see colorful dots along the choppy surf. Surfers catch the morning waves. The doorbell rings again, just as I near it.

Upon pulling the door open, I glare at the lad in a courier suit and cap. He asks for my signature, and I’m astonished when he says for me to sign for the car.

“What the bloody ...” I stalk past the *eejit* across the fragmented stone. On the street is a sixteen-wheeler, with dream cars, mine included. My custom paint job, my rims, my precious!

“Can you sign here?”

I sign for the car. The courier goes to the truck’s cab, does a few tricks, and the ramp lowers. A few minutes later, my car is on the street.

“Oh, and Mr. MacKenzie, Mr. Yates said to give you one quick message.” He pulls an envelope from a clipboard and hands it over.

“I’m not tipping ye.” I flick my wrist, shooing him away. Upon opening the paper, I see a short statement scrawled across the page.

Thank me.

The cocky *fecker* even included a cellphone number. In the house, I head to the kitchen and into the pantry, where my lassie goes to sneak fruit loops. Crumbs on the otherwise spotless marble floor indicate how she’s been here recently. I pull my cell phone out to ring Yates. Presuming the phone number I’m calling is his—and not smoke and mirrors as it had been—I decide that I should use a burner app. It’s a little handier than blocking my cellphone number. I’ll leave a vague message. The bastard’ll know it’s me.

This time my voice grows steely as I snarl, “Ye’re not gonna bloody *feckin’* answer me. What’s the meaning of these moves? Huh? Show how big yer *baws* are? My wife didna—” I clamp my mouth, fuming.

Okay, Leith, why would ye mention Chevelle? Aye, to show yer *baws* are clipped!

Sounding more professional, I continue. “We both know what ye’re up to. I’m not recruitable. I *feckin’* quit!”

Stepping out of the pantry, I roll my taut shoulders around. I quit, and he’s bloody *feckin’* deid! Exhaling deep, I smile revitalized. I can’t go around saying he’s deid, so my new mantra is I quit.

I move around the kitchen. I put sausages in the oven and start cutting tatties for hash browns. As I mix pancake batter, I mumble, “I quit,” ever so often. The *shite* feels good.

“My husband’s not a quitter,” Chevelle says. When I turn around, she’s leaning against the wall. “You were seventeen when you butt dialed me—”

“I didna butt dial ye.”

“Okay, called me drunk during my shift at Taco Bell, harping about how ‘I’m nae quitter’ as you and Brody drank each other under the table with whiskey from the throes of the all-powerful, great loch—”

I cut in and correct her about the auld drinking fable.

“So, the whiskey was strong.” She purses her lips. “Then your little brother drove you home.”

“Camdyn wasn’t too bad. He was six, eh, seven, but we survived.”

“So, what are you quitting?”

“Drugs.” I shrug.

“Oh, no.” She wiggles her finger, sexy lips pursed. “You married the boring chick: no illegal substances, no money laundering, no murder. Hell, no rich boy shit, for instance, snorting coke. No murder—I feel the need to repeat that for some reason.”

Coughing, I give my chest a few slaps. The cough turns into a laugh of sorts as she tells me whatever it is will work out.



LATE IN THE AFTERNOON, I ARRIVE AT MACKENZIE FREIGHT’S headquarters in Dominguez Hills. Too paranoid to drive the Audi, I left it at home. Chevelle had asked how hen one got there, and I told her I hired a service to ship my Audi home. Still *up tae high doh*, I slam the door to my Chevy when one of the truckers shakes his head.

“Leith, you’re the flashy MacKenzie. Still, don’t you go disrespecting the classic.”

I lift my middle finger as the trucker laughs and start for the loading dock. I’m back peddling when I notice the sight of my da instead of Brody.

He’s parallel to the ground and sliding from beneath a few gadgets.

Da glances up at me. “Well, ye’re walking about like this is a dreich day.”

“Nae,” I reply, adding a smile since it’s too late to retreat. “Just thinking is all.”

“Tell me about it, son.” He wipes his soiled hands on the back of his jeans and proceeds to get up.

Da stands at my height, looking me straight in the eye. Bloody *feckin’* great. Our last conversation comes to mind—his admiration for my hustle—or lack thereof. I disregard his question with one of my own. “Where’s Brody?”

He places his hand on my shoulder. “No matter how old ye are, Leith, Ye’re my bairn. I was braggin’ on ye the other day. But if I’m too auld to understand—”

I cut him off, feeling worse than a *ned* after a silly infraction. “It’s not that, Da.”

“Then I’ll tell ye something. There’s a difference between smarts and wisdom. May not have much of the former when it comes to ye and Cam.” He continues to grumble about my *brathair*, who I assume hasn’t been home since his suspension.

Dammit, Cam. He’d texted me yesterday saying he’d be back on Monday to watch the girls. The *nugget* had the audacity to ask how long he should get suspended this time, or if I prefer, he gets expelled until all my troubles were sorted out.

When I responded that his services weren’t blooded needed, he stopped replying.

With the auld lad still gabbing off, I cut in. “Da—”

“Nae, all I’m tryin’ to say is, *whit’s fur ye’ll no go by ye!*”

At Da’s statement about what will be will be, I feel bad for not bringing my issue to him ages ago. He’s always said I can come to him for anything. But we’re in two different fields. We *were*. My issues should revolve around programming and deciphering code, not murder and mayhem.

“Da ... I ...”

“Awright, ya wee *bawbag!*”

We turn around to see Brody wearing a light blue plastic suit, tied up with duct tape at his ankles and wrists. He's in full-on rampage gear—gloves, paper slippers, and a cap on his head—finished off by goggles over his eyes.

The brute clips my shoulder hard, a not-so-subtle warning to shut my *geggie*. “Ye’re late, Leith.”

As my brows pinch together in confusion, there’s a flash in Brody’s eyes. Silently, he turns away from Da and me, heading into the cinderblock building.

With nothing left to say to my da, I follow after him. *Shite*, I’m a pure mess for not coming clean about the weasel blackmailing me.

I glance Brody up and down. The *eejit* looks like a walking *feckin’* condom. Though he’s in a dirty business, only a wee bit of blood sprinkles his sleeves.

When we all lived in the old apartment, and Da still depended on Erika’s father, Ewan McFarland, for the dirtiest, lowest paying assignments, we were dirt poor. We only had our names and the Devil streak in our blood to get a job done. Da’s form of bonding, turning us laddies into lads, included dismemberment. We had a brilliant time watching and learning which bones were the easiest to break.

Brody opens the door to the office. I stifle a sneeze. Layers of dust are on desks and leather-bound books.

“Why not tell me ye were busy, Brody?” I ask as he moves the tin desk aside to reveal a staircase leading down into a basement.

“Texted ya.”

“When, Brody?” I remove my phone as I hustle down the cement steps. There’s one lightbulb dangling above the eight-by-eight room.

“Eh, a minute ago.” Brody stands before a table slab, strewn with body parts. I count at least three femurs. He picks up a hacksaw from a cart of goodies. “Listen, Da’s a bit sour about me sending Knox to Boston. Ye know the *arse* barely passed the test for his CDL. Da’s in his feelings about Cam.

Which leaves ye, Da's knight and shining armor, wee *baws* and all—”

“Wee my *arse*.”

He slams the saw between a kneecap, slicing through all the cartilage, and grits his teeth. “Wee. Now's not the time, Leith.”

“Then dinna mention my big *baws*.” I fold my arms. He's half right. Now isn't the time.

Brody glowers up at me, eyes exaggerated by the goggles. “What I'm saying is all this *shite* is yer fault. Me not going on the run like normal. Cam staying with his friends, and the *fecker* playing ye for a fiddle. *All yer fault, bawbag*.”

“I'll silence my own enemies.”

“Let's pause this chat and come back to it after we pick up the American.”

“Where's Cam? Why are ye set on including him? He's a teen, a *feckin' laddie*, Brody!”

My big *brathair* rolls his eyes. “*He sent me* an address. So, ye tell Camdyn—a MacKenzie—once and for all that ‘ye dinna need him,’ aye?”

LEITH

AN HOUR LATER, BRODY AND I PULL INTO PAID PARKING AT the beach. Toward the back few rows, there seems to be some sort of Harley Davidson convention. Women in skimpy bikinis swish from side to side as boys posing as men chat and show off their rides. A *bawbag* convention is what it is.

“Look at the American.” Brody shakes his head.

I shift gears and stall in the center of the lane, seeing how the girls are vying for attention. They keep sauntering into the way. Across from us, Camdyn looks like the king of the *neds*, seated on a matte black motorcycle with a crowd around him.

“Wit’s with all those tattoos?” I gesture to his arms.

“Aye, we took the *nugget* to get his first tat. It sparked an addiction.”

“I stopped count at the third one. Where the *feck* did the rest come from? He’ll never get a job.”

“Ye got a *feckin*’ job.”

“I dinna have *all those* tattoos, either.”

“Let’s just say the boy is the *feckin*’ president of his crew.”

“MC?” I cock a brow.

“Nae. Leith, the American’s an all-around businessman.” While my eyes battle Brody to continue, he sniffs. “Ye got yer

secrets. Ask Camdyn. He'll share. It's rather genius."

I start to ask Brody to spill already, but he'll repeat himself. I make a mental note to do just that and ask Cam myself when our wee *brathair* notices us.

With a backpack over one shoulder, he shakes hands with one of the other teens. As he's heading over, every few steps, a girl stops him for attention.

"Look at those tits, that *arse*—the American's living my life," Brody groans, watching them.

"*Feck* inquiring about Camdyn's activities, we need to buy 'em a lifetime-supply of protection at this rate."

"Heh. Mam'll take a knife to his throat for getting any, auld bitch pregnant." Brody climbs out of the Chevelle SS. Camdyn lifts the passenger seat, then slides into the backseat. As I drive away, I narrow an eye at the *neds* he's kept close to him.

"You look like the po-po, Leith." Camdyn jokes.

"Dinna let those *laddies* get ye into trouble."

"I'm almost eighteen, bro. I assure you, nobody can force me to do anything against my fucking will." He shifts around in the back. "Anyway, that's rich coming from a guy who needs help fighting some nerd—"

I press the breaks, nudging my chin to the wind. "Get the *feck* out."

Camdyn snorts. "Nah, I'll pass. Besides, I've finished shit talking. We good?"

After a few beats, I navigate around more *arses* in string bikinis toward the parking lot exit. I bring them up to speed with the little I've learned about Douglas Yates. "I have a few things goin'. I need to draw Yates out. That *arsehole* has so many bloody back door—"

Brody chokes on an inhale. "Back door?"

"Not *that* back door. Fuck off." Camdyn explains, "It's computer lingo."

“Sounds like *American* talk to me.”

“*Wheesht!*” I growl for them to be quiet while merging into traffic on Pacific Coast Highway. “Ye think that I dinna want the two of ya in my business for the clan’s sake? Nae! Ye bloody can’t shut the *feck* up. We never get along.”

Camdyn groans. “What do you mean?”

“Aye, Leith. We get along well enough,” Brody says.

I sniff. “Brody, ye and I are good over a pint. Cam, if ye’re not playing immortal behind a sports car or a motorcycle, then ye’re at my house, using my pool to *feck* a new girl. I’m an Airbnb for ye.”

“You’re right.” Camdyn claps my shoulder. “We don’t engage in the shit that brothers engage in. Let’s do this. Let’s bond.”

“Nae. Ye’re my *brathairs*,” Brody says, leaning against the door so that he can get a better look at the two of us. “*We’re MacKenzie clan. We’re bound.*”

Chin high, I wait for Brody to finish rationalizing things. Camdyn gives him the same look. In the end, our older *brathair* frowns in agreement.

“Alright.” He shuts his *geggie* for a second. “We haven’t had a simple conversation without arguing in a few months.”

“Try years, *bawbag!*” I sneer, picking up speed after a red light. “That shoddy bachelor party ye had for me, Brody. We’ve not been close since then. Ye almost cost me my wife!”

“Yup, that happened,” Cam offers. “Brody, you’ve gotta learn to finesse our sis.”

Brody mutters. “Chevelle won’t even let me call her that.”

“Sob story.” Rubbing his hands together, Camdyn says, “Back to the matter at hand. Should we head to the woods with beers and fishing rods for a male-bonding experience?”

“Nae,” I say, “Stop being sarcastic.”

“So what? I’m conveying how juvenile this all sounds. I prefer a macabre connection. Correct me if I’m wrong. We

were on the same wavelength killing those guys the other day, right?”

I roll my eyes. “*Feck* ye, Cam. We’re not *bawbags* clapping each other’s backs over my issues!”

“Then let me have at ‘em,” Brody avows. “I’ll chop the *ned* up, feed him to the sharks for ye. Then ye tell Chevelle to get off my *feckin’ baws* about my mistake. Aye!”

“First of all,” my eyes track from the road to glower at him, “Yates’ death certificate has my name all over it. Second, it’s complicated.” *I still need to find him.*

“*Och*, see,” Brody gripes. “That’s what Da prides in ye. The complicated part. Our world isn’t complicated. There’s black, and there’s white. Kill or *feckin’* be killed. Leith, ye’re the golden boy. Let it stay that way. Give me an address—”

“Yeah, give it to *us*,” Camdyn chimes in.

“This is bigger than me, ye two *numpty arse nuggets*,” I bark. “Yates has infiltrated Infinity Corp.”

Brody asks, “That a bank?”

“Nae.”

Camdyn asks, “Safe or lockbox?”

“Nae. It’s the company I work for.”

Our big *brathair* hisses, “*Shite*, next time ye say infiltrated, let it matter, such as putting money in my pockets.”

“Listen, *eejit*. I think he’s created some sort of system to filch customers’ identities in a multimillion-dollar program. A program that has my name on it!”

“*Wit* can this system do?” Brody waves a hand, interested in more.

“If I’m right, identity theft, for starters. Gather SSNs. It can, eh,” I think of a simple term for him, “act like an eagle eye on a guy’s computer. Access the camera without proper requests. That *fecker* can do anything!”

Running a finger along his eyebrow, he asks, “*Och*, I like the sound of that. Are we gonna dump him? Take over the scheme? Why’re ya looking at me like that. Keep yer eyes on the road, Leith. The American’s the shitty driver.”

“Fuck you,” Camdyn says from the back.

“Aye, *fleck* yerself,” Brody taunts. “Now, Leith, dinna tell me ye want to lock ‘em up, throw away the key.”

“Something like that,” I respond, distracted by the thought of finding Yates.

“Alright, the chit chat’s been lovely, boys,” Camdyn interjects. “We know who he is. Let’s kill him.”

Without a word, I zip into the fast-food line at In-n-Out. A few moments later, I fess up. “We’ve got to find him first.”

Brody clucks. “Ye haven’t ...”

“Nae,” I grumble, edging forward behind a utility truck.

“Why not?”

“He’s a hacker. Ye think the *nugget’s* sitting ‘round somewhere waiting for—”

Camdyn bellows from behind me, “Hack his ass back!”

“Aye,” Brody agrees.

Removing my hands from the steering wheel, I gesture. “I’m nae hacker. I’m a programmer.”

“*Wit’s* that mean?” Brody asks.

“He lacks creativity and speed,” Camdyn says.

“*Sook* my *baws*, *brathair*.”

“Woah,” he adds. “That wasn’t a dig, Leith. That’s just what they do. I know. Some people have lawyers on their team. I have a hacker on speed dial.”

“Why?” I ask.

Ignoring me, Camdyn retorts, “The two of you are so sensitive, reading between the lines like a pack of women,

which leads to the fighting. Programming is contemplative. That's a positive trait. Does this bode well for your feelings?"

I narrow my eyes and silently edge forward again. Brody blinks still perplexed over our conversation. Our older *brathair* takes the defensive now, beginning another dispute. I explain that a programmer isn't meant to be a hacker, but a hacker can program and code. "However, a programmer has the most expertise—"

"Doesn't sound like it to me," Brody sniffs.

"Shut yer *gub*, listen," I say. Brody shuts his mouth and listens.

After I attempt to share how a hacker exploits bugs and uses alterations, Brody stops rubbing his beard. Eyes narrowed in determination, he suggests, "Okay, we smoke him out the good auld fashion way."

Camdyn piggybacks off his statement. "What are his hobbies? That's how we find him, then kill him. Case closed."

"I can't just kill him!" I grit. *The asshole screwed with my application. I need to make sure he can't frame me before his final breath.* But because I've wasted oxygen explaining so much, I dinna feel like sharing this now. At the panel, I squash our discussion by ordering three cheeseburgers and fries.

As I'm maneuvering up a few paces, Brody snorts. "Aye, Chevelle got to ye."

"The *feck* is wrong with being a standup citizen?" I demand, leaning my elbow on the windowsill to scowl at him.

"One, ye put a lad in a cement block and let him plummet to the ocean floor. Two, and ye may have forgotten, there's the other man *ya* murdered. So, ye're nae standup citizen, Leith."

"Lost my heid for a second. Won't happen again."

"Three, ye're a MacKenzie," Brody says.

"I'm more than just a MacKenzie."

"Nae, ye can do all yer technology stuff, get into Yates' heid. In the end, ye're a bloody *feckin'* MacKenzie, Leith.

Handling our own *shite* is what we do. But because Da views ye as the poster boy in the family, I dinna mind if we continue to oblige him. I'm yer big *brathair*. Ye and me will get this done."

CHEVELLE

I HAVE A RECURRING NIGHT TERROR WHERE LEITH HAS LEFT Mia and me to shack up with Erika McFarland at our old place. I confront him while hoisting our daughter in my arms. The dream ends like a petty daytime talk show where I fight her over him. It casts a shadow over my entire day. I feel like I'm moving through sludge. Every gesture and attempt comes with great effort. I've showered and dressed, but the saying "woke up on the wrong side of the bed" applies to my day.

Before Leith left for Silicon Valley, I clung tight to him, and then Mia attached herself to his leg. Neither of us was willing to let go. My eccentric little daughter and I seem to be holding on to him for dear life. He promised to be home soon.

Ironically, his version of soon had always been Friday until I went out with Justice, and I almost broke my phone. I consider taking a hammer to my iPhone while meandering toward Mia's bedroom.

I lean against the doorframe, watching Camdyn seated wide-legged at Mia's tiny teatime table. Due to my side profile of his tattooed arm, Camdyn resembles the dangerous, destructive heartthrob on a teenie bopper television show until he smiles at her. His tone is warm and affectionate while thanking her for a rose-pink play cup.

Noticing me, Mia waves. "Hi, Mommy; bye, Mommy."

“Good morning.” Camdyn lifts his chin, then returns his attention to Mia. “Woah, little minion, is that any way to talk to your Mom?”

Mia pouts, stumbling over her attempt at an explanation of how our weekdays transpire.

“Yes, little girl. We have a routine,” I murmur. “Last week, we took a break since your uncle was on *vacation* from school. Clearly, you’ll be smarter than him by the time he returns.”

He rolls his vibrant blue eyes. “I’ll have you know that my 4.3 GPA precedes me. Tell me about this routine. I’m willing to do anything to get me out of these tiny chairs. Next, I’ll be in makeup.”

“Aw, Uncle Cam.”

“What? That face paint stuff itches. Just being honest.” He pops up from the chair, stretching out. “I can help today. Chevelle, you look like—”

“I dare you to say it.”

Lifting a brow, he mutters, “Dare me to state facts?”

“Cam, don’t make me call Nan.”

He gives a look that implies he hasn’t been afraid of his mom in years. “Listen, this should be my last suspension. I have a feeling I’ll be turning over a new leaf soon enough. But this doesn’t look like your day.”

I sigh heavily. The weight on my shoulders lifts, only to settle in more substantial than before. I gesture to the reading nook in the corner where there are bean bags and a toddler-sized bookshelf. “Cam, we have flashcards with sight words that I go over with her. Followed by reading time, then playdough.”

As my role has become obsolete with an uncle around, I head back to my bedroom and glance at my new cellphone. A missed call from Ophelia Kelly would be awesome right about now.

CHEVELLE

LATER THAT NIGHT, AFTER COOKING DINNER, I SHOWER FOR the second time today. While applying lotion, I contemplate wearing lingerie. This has been a watch-paint-dry sort of day, and I've made a conscious effort to change it.

The black lace stretches across my breasts and at intricate intervals along my hips, with a tiny triangular area covering my sex.

"Damn, I feel good, look amazing too," I murmur. Lying in bed with my body curved, I arch my back and lift my phone away from me to capture a full shot of my figure, then send it to Leith.

He texts back: *Did ye set the alarm?*

"Really? No, 'hey, gorgeous'? I am going to kill you," I mutter. Smirking, I contemplate a counterattack. My husband loves riling me up. So, for a few seconds, I sit, feathers plucked.

"Okay, something witty but not too rude," I mumble to myself. Should I send a GIF? Something funny or petty? I'm chewing my lip in search of a witty retort when the cell phone pings again with an image of a cluttered nightstand. In the center of the photo sits a glass of whiskey and a bottle of lotion.

While shaking my head, a soft giggle drifts from my lips as I imagine my husband. I'm flattered by his crazy, dirty version of a compliment. Whiskey to drink and lotion to jack himself off with.

Another text comes through: *Say ye locked up, hen. Then we can proceed.*

Gawd, I love this man. Funny, horny, and always placing our safety first. A laugh bubbles from the pit of my stomach. Happiness spreads through me at the speed of light. I felt like a rock was lodged in my throat all day, not now.

With a wicked smile, my thumbs tap across the cell phone screen: *Yes. Your heart is safe, baby. It's my turn to go first.*

A few beats later, the screen displays his next message: *No warmups, Chevelle. I dinna want to hear that yer skin is silky soft. Say something about yer pussy.*

Slapping a palm against my forehead, I giggle a horny teenager laugh through my lips. "Alright, you nasty Scot," I mutter to myself, rolling my shoulders. About half a year ago, we stumbled into new territory. I'd texted Leith a screenshot of a book cover from my favorite smut author. He'd texted something surprisingly arousing for a man who likes to fuck hard once he arrives home. Nevertheless, his initiative sparked an erotic text session between us.

While circling my fingers across my clit, I text him, I imagine tasting the whiskey from your lips.

Not blinking a single time, I watch the screen, awaiting his response. It goes and goes, then stops. Dopamine shoots through my bloodstream the second his message transmits: *I grab yer arse with one hand, bringing it up on my lap. With the other, I'd help guide yer wee fingers into yer soaking pussy. Yer silky soft fingers feckin' ya. Mine dip inside to stretch ye wider, feckin' ya deep.*

A pang of desire scorches through me. The heat is so strong I force myself to breathe, to focus. I type: *I bite your lip at the rough treatment of us preparing my pussy for you. I'm so wet that my love for you drips down our fingers.*

Leith replies: *Ye'll know rough, hen, when I replace our fingers with my dick. My hands gripping ye tight, forcing ye to take my cock. All at once. Not slow. No games, baby. My dick drives deep, banging yer cunt in.*

Shit, I pause to breathe, my sex imploding. Penetration is essential. Holding the phone in one hand, I flick my jumpy clit. My fingers type away: *I'm moaning, calling your name, loving the raw aggression and stamina. Your hips thrust. You fuck me like a man deprived of all sanity. Each drive forces your cock so deep that I leave a trail of hickeys and bites on your neck. A small relief from the pain.*

FaceTime lights up. Giggling softly, I press the accept button. A profile of my husband appears. His strong muscles are rigid, as if he's at the pinnacle of restraint.

As he talks, I'm mesmerized by his lips. "Okay, I know ye like this *shite* because it compares to reading a *feckin'* book, but I'm whacking my cock with one hand."

I almost start to laugh until the glorious sight of Leith's dick comes into focus. His hand is moving rapidly over the thick flesh, so taut and veiny. Delicious chaos swirls around us, even though we're hundreds of miles away from each other.

"More lotion," I pant. "My pussy is way wetter than that."

"*Feck, Chevelle.*" His hand moves in lengthy strokes, and I silently envy it. The sounds of a barbarian permeate the silence between us. Hypnotized by his movements, I forget that sexing myself is an option too. My breathing becomes labored like his.

"Slow," I groan, biting my lip. "Slow, baby, for me."

"Nae! Can't!"

"Slow ... please." I hold the phone out showing my legs spread wide, pressing my fingers into my dripping wet folds.

In a deep voice, Leith utters, "Be a good little *feck* toy and flick yer clit."

Moving the iPhone to my non-dominant hand, I obey. The delicate hub of nerves in my nub is sending shockwaves throughout my core. Writhing, vocabulary stilted, I cry, “Ohhhh, ohhh, ohhh!”

He picks up speed. I’m climbing over the edge, freefalling into nirvana. Leith’s vigor intensifies as a look of sheer bliss crosses my face.

“It ain’t fair!” He fists his dick harder. Again, I beg him to slow down, too greedy for the final chapter. For him to come undone and the night to end.

“Slow, Leith. My lips wrap around you, tongue teasing and flicking as I work you down *slowly*.”

“Hmmm,” he groans in a tone I can’t resist.

“My tonsils vibrate across—”

“I’m gonna cum,” He threatens. “Ye do that thing with yer gorgeous mouth and tonsils.”

I pant. Just his one word, “cum,” has sent my body shattering. I grunt a second orgasm. Leith’s powerful hips jerk. The full force of him working his cock has me drinking down the pool of lust in my mouth. Hot, searing seed goes flying. Leith drops the phone, breath ragged. My head kisses the pillow.

“Chevelle.” He breathes my name, his handsome face coming into view. Dark blonde tufts of hair fall into his wild eyes.

“I miss you already.” I pant, bottom lip curled.

While running his forearm across his face, Leith mutters, “Damn, I need to go wash my hands. Hen, when I get home.”

The muscles play at his square jaw, a subtle promise of the next beautiful lie I’ll agree to. For instance, we’ll purchase a home in Silicon Valley.

“I’ll be waiting for you.” I smile, loving every inch of my husband, deception and all.

“Sleep well, hen.”

“Goodnight, my crazy Scot.”

We hang up.

Ten minutes later, I’ve cleaned up and changed into more appropriate pajamas for the lonely night.

In the dark, I curl into a ball on Leith’s side of the bed, clutching his pillow. His faint woodsy, masculine scent curls around me. I draw in a deep breath, ceasing the torment of my parents. Was Momma impassive while wrapped in Daddy’s arms but longing for the preacher? Was my dad blindsided, or had he marinated in fury until he hit a final boiling point?

The screen of my phone illuminates the darkness with notifications. “Stop the madness,” I grouse. Stirring into a seated position, I grab the iPhone from the nightstand. Ten missed calls—all from Michie.

Just as I’m about to try his number, the cell phone lights up again. I answer his call immediately. “Hey, you okay?”

“Finally, you answer. I was beginning to assume Leith had blocked me from calling you since your night with Justice. I should’ve waited to make sure the Uber would pick you up. She told me you all got a ride from some guy you hate.”

“What else she tell you, Michie? Or do you still know who’s at the top of my shit list?”

He laughs softly. “That brother’s been the pinnacle of your arguments over all the years I’ve known you, Chevelle. The only reason I’d miss your smile on occasion.”

“You mean the customers,” I advise.

“Sure. But since we’ve broached the topic of your husband. Should I have reached out to Leith prior to calling you?”

With an exasperated huff, I settle against the custom headboard. “Excuse me?”

He sighs. “For permission. Since you’ve answered to his every command after you married your high school sweetheart out of the blue.”

“*Not* out of the blue.” I clear my throat.

“That’s what you say, although, you were singing a different tune when you called it off. Now that I’ve had the last word on that topic, I need you, Chevelle.”

“What’s Skinny Buddha need from me?”

He scoffs. “I addressed your insults the other night.”

I stifle a yawn with my finger then reply, “Wait a minute? Where’s the incivility? The comeback? You really, really need me. Say it.”

He laughs.

“No, really, Michie. Grovel while you’re at it.”

He laughs harder. “I’ll take a katana through my chest over pleading. Listen, Justice is off tonight, exhausted from spending the day moving out. I’m down a guy.”

“What happened to the noob?”

“I’m glad you mentioned that, beautiful. That asshole never returned. A certain *model citizen* and her crony got into his head.”

Fluffing my pillow, I snort. “Whatever, I explained how to count shots, so he’d be more productive than using a jigger. Should’ve taken my advice.”

“I know.”

“Michie, a bartender who can’t count a shot is throwing away money—”

“Dammit, Chevelle, whose name is on the front of the bar?”

“I was only saying. Besides, if you’re not gonna beg, then I’m gonna preach.” I smile sweetly as Michie reverts to Japanese.

He grumbles, “I have the misfortune of being busy on the slowest night of the week and rubbing Buddha’s belly isn’t doing the trick. *So, ask your husband if—*”

“No, and yes!” I snap, climbing out of bed and meandering toward the door.

“To which, Chevelle?” he demands.

“No, as in I am a grown-ass woman. Lastly, Chevelle to the rescue.” I chuckle, walking across the hall to the guest bedroom. The lights are off—no faint iPhone glow. Camdyn must’ve fallen asleep already. In the receiver, I reply, “Michie, give me an hour.”

Once we hang up, I decide to text Camdyn a quick apology for signing him up for daycare duty. He’ll get the message the moment he awakens. While returning to our bedroom, I tap the phone in my palm. Should I *tell* Leith I’m helping Michie tonight?

“Eh, nah.” I think wiser of it. I open Leith’s top drawer to grab the keys to the Chevelle SS, which also holds the gun box for the pink .380 that I’ll never have to use.

LEITH

HOW CAN A LAD BE SO MUCH IN LOVE WITH A LASS AND SUCH a *feckin'* liar? I never thought it so, not 'til recently. So as not to give Chevelle something to worry about, I left home Sunday evening and made like I was heading to the Valley when I've been less than a half-hour away. I'm in Long Beach at the house I bought for us before heading off to MIT. Erika is on our clan run, in one of the cars following Knox to Boston again.

When Chevelle called, I kept the phone focused on me, best I could. But the rickety nightstand resembles the one at Ms. Mable's. She seemed to be none the wiser. From the outside looking in, I bet I look like a *feckin'* pussy, hiding out. Nae. It couldn't be the furthest thing from the truth. The attorney, Wendy, said she'd have something to give me in a few days. Besides, Yates hasn't responded to any of my ranting messages. The bastard's aim is beyond me.

I checked the security cams on the house right after Chevelle and I got off the phone. Now, I stop myself from doing it again.

She's safe. My wee one's safe. Sweet dreams to the lot of them. Besides, Camdyn's there. After the argument my *brathairs* and I had, I realize it's been a while since I depended on anyone but myself.

Bottles of energy drinks are cluttered around. Seated against the headboard with my laptop, I crack my knuckles. As a programmer, not a hacker, I focus on my experiences, working in reverse through the breach in the application I created.

In the wee hours of the night, I've uncovered the conspiracy when I see a text from Wendy asking me to call her first thing in the morning. About as antsy as an army of midges, I ring her up. "What news do ye have?"

"Mr. MacKenzie, let's meet tomorrow. I have lots to discuss with you *in person*."

Detecting her concern, I say, "This is a secure line."

She stalls. "You sure?"

"Positive." I run my index finger around my thumb, concentrating on the attorney.

"Alright then, the guy I told you about, my associate, scrubbed information and found the digital print like a hound. Now, you pretty much have that covered. So, if this were a regular ol' fraud situation, I'd come into play."

I stop moving, fingers clutched under so that the skin stretches across my knuckles. "What are ye telling me, lass?"

"So far, he's revealed two scenarios. The one you initially reached out about, which was sexting and or uploaded videos being leveraged for blackmail. Also, the AI, so-called Significant Other, is being used to extort money and gifts. A hacker who goes by the name—"

"WhistleTips69. Real name Douglas Yates."

"How do you—?"

"I know the *bampot's* full name. He *fecked* over my programming. The app is compromising all the information on a user's device." I briefly share the information I stumbled upon this evening. "So, as ye found out, he's gathering incriminating info, blackmailing 'em," I groan.

"That's not all."

“What is it, lass?”

“My guy spent almost a week with no sleep on this. Then he sat on the truth for days.” Wendy pauses. “Leith, people are dying. But he couldn’t find a solid connection between Yates to any of the departed. Yates has rock-solid alibis during every murder. Hell, half the time he’s vacationing on a different continent. He has no affiliation to any hired hitmen or otherwise capable sources.”

“Not like my clan,” I add, commenting on the elephant in the room.

“Nope. No mob or gang connections. My guy searched the dark web. No transactions or requests for a hired hit. My associate even reached out to a prominent hitman organization.”

Running my tongue over my teeth, I contemplate how Jiang got it in his head that we were enemies. “The *arsehole* could be pawning one *partner* off on the other.”

“My associate did notice how certain persons with a particular background, such as yourself, were also targeted. The list was inconsequential in comparison to the wealthy demographic that he targeted. Those men also died—freak accidents—one after another.”

Feck. Had her mate shared this information sooner, Douglas Yates would already be a deid duck. This is all the information I gathered tonight. Still, I’ve a nagging feeling. “Wendy, what was the timeframe between each man’s death?”

“Ummm, roughly four to six months.” She sucks on air. “There’s a correlation between the location of the men and—”

“The rich *fecks* targeted for blackmailing?”

“Yeah, how’d you know?”

Phelps runs across my mind. He knew I was coming. Jiang was caught off guard—probably thought I intended to blackmail the three of them. Or perhaps he stumbled upon his good friends’, Yates and Phelps, real plans.

But Phelps was fully aware that his time was up. He and Yates had *fecked* over more wealthy *nuggets*, making use of the same scheme. A scenario comes together. Once an unlucky bastard with loose morals finishes his assignments in a given area, the help gets terminated. *This is Douglas Yates' last hurrah. Has to be.* Why else cut down his partner? This time, though, Yates picked the wrong *motherfecker*.

CHEVELLE

FOR THE LAST TWO HOURS, I'VE WORKED IN TANDEM BESIDE Quinn, a bartender hired after I found out I was pregnant. Justice and she hired on at roughly the same time.

"How are you killing it with all the heavy hitters tonight? Is it the stilettos?" Quinn asks, then heads over to the blender.

"Nope." I grin. Coming of age surrounded by Lady's fakery, I can slap a smile on my face even while dying inside. Tonight, I'm genuinely happy, though. Sexting my husband adds a year to my lifespan. Besides, I look good, donning my favorite red pumps, jeans stretching across all my hips and ass.

I hand two Fire Bombs over to a patron, who's squeezed on the opposite side of the counter. Moving in tandem with Quinn on this round, I reply, "I'm Chevelle the Charmer."

"Nice!" Quinn squeals, hoisting a tray of colorful slushies.

Michie lifts two martini shakers in each hand, biceps pumping them. "When we slow down, Quinn, I'll tell you how the Charmer and I served a thousand in one night."

"Wasn't a thousand," I reply, lining up ten shot glasses. Two ounces of vodka splash perfectly into each one as the nozzle zooms by.

"Was a thousand, Quinn. *I'm the big boss.* I say it was a thousand."

I lift the tray of shots and head to a table filled with frat boys.

One grabs my arm, offering to double the padding in my bra. I grab the back of his hair. The bouncer near the door grits his teeth, starting to stride over when I catch his eye. I shake my head.

Hand on hip, I ask the handsy bastard, “You see the ring?”

“Shit, sweetheart, that’s bigger than the ones in Cracker Jack boxes from my childhood.”

“Why do you think I’d leave my established and ...” I lean close. My palm falls provocatively onto his shoulder as I whisper the next part in his ear. “Well-endowed husband for you? Last name’s MacKenzie, by the way. Haven’t heard of them? Look them up before you react.”

His muscles stiffen beneath my touch, indicative of his awareness. The jackass crowd of friends surrounding the table whoop, eager to catch our sidebar discussion. The patrons who were wary of the slight shift in the atmosphere take a new interest in the heated flush creeping over his neck. The little bastard is silently calling me out of my name as the soft kneading of my hand shifts into an iron hold.

I’m damn near kissing his ear when I add, “Just say ‘I’ll keep that in mind, Queen.’”

“I’ll ... uh ... keep that in mind, ahem, gorgeous.” He winks as I sashay away.

“Lucky bastard,” one says.

“Me next!”

Behind the bar, Quinn pauses. “Wow, Justice told me how well you handle the younger, raucous crowd.”

I take a dishrag to the counter. “The ones who confuse this place for their very own members-only club.”

Her head drops back in defeat. “By this time of night, I’m liable to speak my mind.”

“She did,” Michie cuts in.

“Yeah, right,” she quips.

“Quinn, I’ll give you a pointer so that you can finesse the guy in the thousand-dollar pair of shoes.” I gesture toward an elder gentleman strolling inside, wearing a cobalt blue suit. The stream of orders has stalled, creating a perfect opportunity. With our code of ethics as bartenders, Quinn should take this round.

Quinn nods. Michie discreetly shakes his head no. So far tonight, he’d been approachable. Now, money flashes in his eyes. I glean how he’s aiming toward an economic approach. “Chevelle, handle it. Quinn, you’ll watch her superpower from afar.”

Mr. Big Money sits in an alcove where business deals occur, or lovers hide away. Quinn has taken an order, but her eyes are on me, as are Michie’s. With a smile, I head over and introduce myself to the mark, sharing tonight’s specialty cocktail.

A suave aura emits from Mr. Big Money—from the silver glint of his eyes to his dapper goatee. “Whiskey. Best ye have, hen, dinna concern me with the price.”

Shocked, I inhale deeply. “My husband calls me hen.”

“Seems like a smart lad. Is he—”

“Scottish, yes.” I grin, adding, “He’s from a wee, beautiful island up north.”

While I explain where, Mr. Big Money rubs his jaw. He mentions a community, which reminds me of one of our vacations.

“Hmmm, is that an hour east from Glasgow?” I ask, capable of gauging a location relative to the popular city.

“Aye. Ye visited us then?”

“Well, sort of passed through. We visit my husband’s clan once or twice a year since we were married. Each time, we’ll drive in a different direction, see the sights. I’ll grab your drink.”

I get behind the bar, and Michie comes close. “That’s big money.”

“I have eyes,” I reply, gesturing to the blue label bottle of whiskey.

“Then you realize it’s smooth sailing from here on out. So, Chevelle, you can give him the same attention and care that you once gave the others in the past.”

I look up at him. Sometimes Michie acts like he’ll die for a dollar, though he has money. The home he lives in is gorgeous. The car he drives, sleek. “Listen, more people are coming in. We’re too busy for the ‘big money’ challenge.”

“No, Quinn and I are busy.” He corners me. “Grab the bottle, sit. Don’t stop pouring, beautiful.”

“Michie.” I sigh.

“What? Your beauty comes naturally, Chevelle. Call this your break.”

“That’s a friggin violation!”

“Not at all. You had a break already. Hop to it, girl.”

With a bit of attitude, I grab a whiskey glass. “I’m assisting *you*, Skinny Buddha. Put some respect on my name.”

He drops a hand on my shoulder. “Correction, it is *I* who’s helping *you*, beautiful. Consider this a lesson for the bar you wish to one day own.”

I glower a long moment and something unreadable washes over his features. If Michie’s head weren’t so far up his ass, I wouldn’t have days of wasting away, waiting for Ophelia Kelly to call. I’d launch Mia’s Label here. Well, once I’ve tweaked a few things. But Michie is not obligated to support me, nor has he offered.

“Remember the last rich asshole I shot the breeze with? He got the wrong idea.” *And Leith tried to murder the guy.*

“Chevelle, listen.” Michie extends a hand again. This time, I dip my cold shoulder out of his reach. I snatch an orange peel and light the tip of it on fire.

There's a flicker of sorrow in his eyes. "I had no idea you were pregnant at the time."

I lift the tray. "I'll do it. He seems harmless."

"Only if you feel comfortable," he adds. There's a stark contrast in his tone to his usual retort.

The big money scenario unfolds a tad differently than before, which was encouraging someone to buy a bottle. Now, shots are a bar manager's cream and sugar.

Standing before the Scot, I pour and smile. My eyes roam over his angular jaw and his thick bevy of dark curls. He looks up and catches me staring. It's all part of the process.

"Ye have gorgeous eyes, lassie," he says, and I know his choice of lassie as opposed to lass is meant to be respectful and not a line. "I'd love for ye to tell me about Scotland through yer eyes."

Hmmm. I stand corrected. I cock a brow.

He runs his thumb across a wedding band, and my eyebrow lifts.

"Isn't a day that goes by that I dinna miss my bonny Mary."

"May she rest in peace." I settle across from Mr. Big Money. He drinks. I talk, and I pour some more, keeping a running tab of his shots.

After a while, he says, "What I wouldn't do for a frothy pint."

"Now, you're speaking my language. Or my husband's rather."

"Ye said the two of ya return to his home biannually?" When I nod, he continues. "With running the business, I haven't a moment to wink when *wabbit*. Can't mind the last time I visited home. Nae other place brews a pint so good."

"I know, I ..." *Damn, now I feel like I'm double gaming him.* The guy has already bought the equivalent of two blue label bottles.

He cocks a brow.

I glance back at Michie, who never offered to feature my draft. “I brew my own. In the beginning, my husband was very stern. Otherwise, Leith’s not that type of guy, but botch a brew, and he calls mutiny.”

“So?”

“I’m tinkering a bit, enjoying the craft.” I shrug.

The older man claps his hands together. “Ye seem modest, hen. Ye know, during our entire chat, I never got yer name. They call me Edward Dorsey.”

There’s a gold nugget ring on his finger when I shake his firm hand. “Nice to meet you, Edward. I’m Chevelle MacKenzie.”

Edward doesn’t give any inclination that my last name has been a source of fear or contention.

While we chat, I press the away button on my cell phone, sight unseen. When the caller tries again, the edges of my lips furrow upward. “Sorry, I should take this.”

Edward nods.

Eager to answer, I power walk toward the rear of the bar. Since the calls keep coming in succession, I take two steps out the back door. I answer Camdyn on the third ring.

“Hey, Cam, is everything okay?”

“I’m so sorry to call—”

“Don’t apologize. I signed you up for babysitting duty without even asking.”

“Mia’s woke, crying. Says she wants you or Fruit Loops.”

“Dammit, she ate the last bowl this morning.” I groan. “Give Mia the phone so that I can threaten her.”

“Can’t do that. I’m her favorite uncle. She won’t sprout warts like a gremlin if I feed her this late, right? I’ll Instacart it.”

Amused, I reply, “You guys are so wrapped around her tiny pinkie, it’s a shame. Yeah, Instacart if you can. When it gets there, just give her five Fruit Loops. No more.”

“Five? If we’re being honest here, Mia’ll weasel me out of at least two bowls.” He begins to whisper, “I don’t have it in me to spank her.”

“Threaten to pop her hand.”

“But her hands are so—”

“Save it. Leith has already told me. Mia uses those little hands to sneak around all the time. I’m on my way. I’ll probably arrive when the sugar rush kicks in. Bye.”

When I turn around, Michie leans against the door, a half-smile on his attractive face.

“Don’t start no shit with me. Did I even get a tip after that lengthy therapy sesh?”

The smile blossoms across his full lips. “I’m the one who should be reprimanding you, Chevelle—”

“First of all, I’m a grown-ass woman. Second, I’m a mother.”

“I get it, damn.” He places an envelope in my hand. “Trouble brewing in paradise?”

“No,” I snap, sauntering inside the breakroom. “I’m happy. Leith’s happy. We’re all elated.”

Ignoring me, he says in a low pitch, “Why, oh why didn’t I steal you from him when you broke up years ago?”

“Michie, look on the wall. What does it say beneath, and I quote, ‘No cellphone out on the floor’?”

His chuckle is a mellow, aged bourbon. “‘No workplace romances on or off the floor.’ I distinctly recall your attempt to hawk Justice off on me the other night.”

“I’m heading home.” I pat the envelope in my hand.

“One more thing. The guy left his card. Says he’d like to invest.”

“In my label?” I gush.

“In you.” Michie holds the business card between his fingers. As I reach for it, he smiles mischievously and pulls the card close to his chest. My uncertain expression reflects vividly in his wicked eyes. “Come back tomorrow night, Chevelle. Work for *me* again.”

LEITH

THE NEXT AFTERNOON, I'VE TAKEN A BREAK FROM SEARCHING out Douglas Yates by grabbing lunch from In-n-Out. At the wooden table that sits in my auld, wee kitchen, I'm about to knuckle down when Chevelle calls. Shutting my laptop, I gulp down the crispy fries and wash it all down with the whiskey I've been nursing.

Closing my eyes, I heave a guilty sigh, then answer. "Hey, hen."

She's gabbing my ear off about something, and for the life of me, I can hardly focus. I'm in the middle of living a *feckin'* lie. Placing the iPhone on speaker, I set it next to my laptop. My head falls back. I offer an "uhuh" or a thoughtful "ohh" every once in a while as a good husband would. Oil stains splotch the ceiling. The light fixture I never got around to cleaning after Chevelle's *hunner* complaints has ten more layers of dust.

"Baby, the second you come home, I'll tell you."

"Nae. Tell me now." I lick my lips. "I could use a surprise."

"Now, how is that a surprise if I tell you? Hey, I don't hear other nerds debating wizards and sorcery in the background."

"Other nerds?" I cock a brow, shoveling more crisp fries into my mouth.

“Leith, there’s something I haven’t told you,” she whispers in a conspiratorial tone.

Feeling the warm smile in her voice, I settle my restless bones. Powering up my laptop, I ask, “*Wit’s* that?”

“You’re a computer geek, a nerd. So, are you at the office?”

“Hmmm.” I glance around me. The auld fridge still has some of the vacation magnets from when we backpacked through Europe. I tell a white lie out of the lot of extra devious ones. “I’m home.”

“Home?” she shrieks. “Leith, *this* is home, not Mable’s place.”

“*Och*, hen.” With my fingers hovering over the keyboard, I pause from typing and groan. “That’s not what I meant.”

“I know, baby. Uh ...I have to take this call.”

“Chevelle—”

“I’m good.”

I settle back on the wooden chair. “Hen, when I come home this weekend, we’ll start the search for a spot for Mia’s Place. How ‘bout that?”

“Sounds great. Thank you, baby. But I honestly need to click over. Love ya. Bye.”

I pick up the phone, but Chevelle’s alluring voice is no longer on the opposite side of the speaker. She’s disconnected the call. For a couple of beats, I contemplate calling her *arse* back. Nae, *Leith*, yer *just feeling guilty*. *She’s not mad*. Either way, I let my hen motivate me to find Douglas Yates. I’m closer to him than a fly on a hairy cow.

“Yer deid,” I mutter, getting to work. My fingers move across the keyboard while I run several analytical scripts. Yates’ll be the last *arsehole* I murder, and I’m gonna savor every moment of his screaming. His death will purge the clan life I’ve denied myself of for years.



I'D FOUND DOUGLAS YATES' HIDEAWAY A COUPLE OF HOURS ago. All this time, the bastard made like he had other goons on his team. Nae, it's just as Wendy and I suspected. He weasels others into doing his dirty work for him. The last guy he set in his crosshairs was a rookie cop. The lad died mysteriously, right before the little *shite* reached out to me.

A few months before Yates started screwing with me, he moved into a seedy apartment in Panorama City. Hasn't left since. Uber Eats and grocery runs are all completed under the name Tip Whistler. I dinna know where the hell he came up with the name, but it coincides with his hacker handle Whistletips69.

Fake plates are screwed onto the bumper of my Audi. I've parked two blocks away from his place. Crumpled stucco apartment buildings line every direction. It would've been less conspicuous to drive my Chevelle SS, but Chevelle's car finally went in for the nasty scrape on its side. I'm pulling on a ski mask when I get a call. Since Camdyn has relentlessly texted for updates, I press the away button sight unseen. Too late, I notice it was my wife.

“*Och*, Chevelle.”

My hen will think I've blatantly ignored her call. I'm 'bout as deid as this *arsehole's* gonna be. While placing on gloves, I tell myself, “Soon as I'm done with this *fecker*, I'll head home.”

I further rationalize how I'll be the good man Chevelle married by surprising her this weekend with a chartered jet to the Valley. We'll look at a property for her brewery and reach out to a few realtors about a condo.

Nodding my head at how I'll whisk her off her feet, I call Cam, turning the volume up on the radio to hear him better.

“How's my wee clan?”

“Good. Chevelle’s asleep. Mia’s nodding off. I think I’ll hit the sack too.”

“I’m *wabbit*, myself. I plan to have a wee bit of fun with the package. Bring ‘em to my place in Long Beach.”

“Woah, bro, you offering me a therapy sesh?”

I grunt at his choice of analogy for torture. “If that’s what ye call it now, then aye. I’ve been plagued for three entire months, Cam. So, ye, Brody, and me can bond just like ye lot suggested. Call our big *brathair* and tell ‘em to get some good whiskey.”

“But I’ll be here,” Camdyn groans.

“Just for the night. Then ye can have at ‘em while I take my lassies on a quick getaway. When I return, American, it’s all bonding, aye?”

“Alright, sounds good to me. For now, I’ll keep the fam safe.”

I click my tongue and hang up.



WITH A BACKPACK OVER MY SHOULDERS, I GRIP THE TOP OF A cinder block fence, climbing over with ease. In the darkness, I try to discern how my boot has gotten caught in the pillow of a faded blue plastic pool lounge.

“*Shite*,” I mumble, untangling myself from the lounge and silently laying it to the side. I stalk past a dilapidated pool, reeking of stagnant water. A community barbecue pit is off to one side. My eyes scan across an area where wee *weans* have left their toys scattered about. I take the stairs toward the rear of the apartment building up to the second level. As I start down the pathway, the streetlights are off in the distance. Management has placed no value on the safety of their tenants. My eyes adjust to the darkness.

Inside my gloves, my palms are slick with anticipation. I reach in my back jean pocket for a lockpick and make quick

work of the locks. Upon opening the door, I step to the left, silently pushing the door closed while clearing each corner. I distinguish an old futon in the darkness, but much of the wee room is empty space.

A faint glow comes from down the hall. I grab a cell phone charger from the wall and wrap each end of the cord around my knuckles. Down the hall, the sniveling *ned*, sounding like his *baws* have yet to drop, is presumably on the phone. There are a few short breaks during his conversation.

“Out since mid-last week. I was wondering—”

In a split second, I’ve scanned the single bedroom. Yates’ back is to me as he sits at a cheap, wooden desk. I slide the cord down to his neck, yanking him back. The light weight is lifted from the chair, feet dangling as I choke him against my chest.

His tiny shoulders lift a mile high when I snarl into his ear, “Awright, *bawbag*. Ye know me! I ken ya too, now.”



TEN MINUTES LATER, YATES’ BELLY IS ON THE MATTED carpet, zip ties binding his wrists behind him. I’ve secured zip ties on each of his ankles. On my knees, I search my backpack for a third zip tie to loop ’round through the ties along his ankles and link them together. He grouses awake.

“Scream, I dare ya,” I threaten. I’d planned this evening meticulously, but the duct tape for his mouth must still be in my trunk. *Feck*. I’ve nae idea what happened to it.

Blood trails from Yates’ bruised lips, leaching into the already soiled carpet. He hacks. “Leith, use that noggin on your shoulders. Release me. Let’s discuss a new agreement.”

“Now that ye’re in a predicament, aye? Ye wanna negotiate with a *feckin’ eejit* like me?”

Biting his eyes shut, he groans, “I’ve never referred to you as an idiot. I indicated that your impulsive nature—”

“Just stop,” I laugh. Sitting on my haunches, I fold my arms. “Look at ye and look at me, ye *daftie nugget*.”

“Daft? I’ve made millions in the past couple of years. With my intellect and your familial connections—”

“I’m ‘bout done listening to ya! Had it up to here,” I leverage a hand forehead high, “with that *feckin’ gub* of yers. Stop talkin’!”

“My IQ is—”

“Off the *feckin’* charts?” I chortle, reaching into the backpack for the zip tie that will bring his ankles together. *Damn, where is it?*

“You don’t want to do this, Leith.”

“Aye? What I really, really want is to clip yer tongue out and stuff it up yer *arsehole*. And I’m gonna do it soon. Then, when ye’re gargling on yer own blood, *these here* eejit *fists* will batter ye until ye choke to death!”

I grip him about the throat. “Then, and only then, will I be fully satisfied. *Wit?* Ye have nothing to say?”

“You-you’re mak-making a grave mis-mistake.”

I’m still searching through my backpack. I checked all my materials three times. I grip a switchblade in hand, motioning to his tongue.

Yates shouts, “Whispertips69, initiate failsafe!”

The air shifts. What resembled a toy airplane on the desk jets upward. The power of it slices the air—*swoosh*. Bullets rip from the drone. The drywall around me shreds. I scramble to the side of the dresser near the door.

“Ye’re a deid man, Douglas!” I snatch the Glock from the back of my waistband.

The front of the wooden dresser shatters from gunfire. The drone comes into view.

“*Shite!*” I grit out, gaze narrowed. I double tap. Standing, I aim the gun for the drone. The other hand stays pressed on the blood leaking from my ribs. Warm viscous liquid spills over

my fingers. I've been shot. Can't be much of a bullet, though, maybe a .22 caliber. *Feckin'* bullet is still wedged inside me.

I let off a shot. Yates isn't on the ground. He's used a glass fragment to cut the zip tie from his wrists. Since I hadn't secured his ankles, the bloody snake has got free. A wild glint shines in his eyes. There's at least one last card up his sleeve. He wiggles his cellphone.

"Ye have a ringer in yer hand. This right here is a *feckin'* Glock, *numpty nugget*." I laugh.

A loud cackle grates my eardrums. Yates stumbles toward the only window in his bedroom. "This is my territory. Look at those wires, Leith. I'll grant you one last chance to calm down."

"Or *wit*?" I taunt.

"I'll blow us up before I let you ruin the empire I've created!"

CHEVELLE

TONIGHT'S BECOMING SHITTIER BY THE SECOND. I'M HORNIER than I've ever been in my entire life. To make matters worse, with Leith so far away, I have a big ass mouth. This afternoon, I bit my tongue from sharing my conversation with Ophelia Kelly with him. She was the surprise. Mia's Label would be taking flight. She'd called ecstatic about us finally working together. Leith had been my first thought upon hanging up. I called him around lunch, eager to celebrate.

In the end, I settled for tempting him with a surprise. Let's hope he has the same opinion of my new connection. Although, it reads more like a secret that Leith may or may not be happy about.

For instance, yesterday. Working for Michie made me feel crappy. The dick attempted to manipulate me by way of those gorgeous eyes. He knows Leith's adamant that I not bartend. *Why did I help him out?*

But tonight, I'm on the phone with Ophelia for a second time. I'd been on pins and needles for almost two weeks. While standing on the balcony with a robe wrapped around me, I perceive the difference between now and earlier. The excitement that *was* in her voice could now be likened with the dark, gloomy sea.

"I apologize for calling so late, Chevelle."

“No worries,” I reply, sensing that my dreams are about to shatter. No, my visions are in a rocket that I’m not flying to the moon. *Damn, Leith, I need you right about now.*

He’s my happy.

Justice strongly suggested that I expand my horizons, but there’s the stubborn girl in me who fell in love with him ages ago. The same girl who was denied her father.

“So, how can I help you tonight?” I ask. Ophelia had been all ecstatic earlier, and I laid on the charm, discussing the uniqueness of Mia’s Label. The air seems to shift as I await her reason to call a second time tonight.

“I must ask,” she pauses, hesitantly, “are you affiliated with *those* MacKenzies? Your husband *is* black, right?”

“No.” I pause on suspended hope. “The love of my life, father of my child, he’s a proud Scot and a proud MacKenzie. I am too. Although,” I cringe at the unnecessary clause, “we don’t dabble in certain familial hobbies.”

“I’m sorry, Chevelle. This isn’t going to wor—”

“I’m sure that it won’t. Good night.” Shaking, I try Leith’s number. It rings once. Then I’m greeted by his voicemail. “Did my husband just press the away button?”

Eyelid twitching, I contemplate all the ways he’ll pay for this. Leith has a habit of mumbling responses when on the computer, which is exactly how he acted on our call around lunchtime. But to totally disregard me?

“Okay. Maybe he’s busy. Don’t be rash, Chevelle,” I tell myself.

There’s scientific proof that thinking about a glass of wine helps people relax. I imagine pouring myself a tall, generous glass of Chianti that tastes as rich as sun-drenched Sangiovese grapes.

“Forget Ophelia,” I tell myself. “What’s meant to be will be.”

Five minutes later, I open a bottle, allowing it a chance to breathe and the complexities of the wine to develop. I need

this wine like air tonight so that I can keep from letting my mind wander.

Seated at the travertine ledge of the bathtub, I run the hot water. After a while, the tub is brimming with sudsy water. I pour myself a glass and lean back with a sigh.

I inhale the flavors of sour cherry, coffee, and balsamic. The profile resonates around me, and I imagine Leith and me in Italy's Chianti hills, wandering through a vineyard. *He's at home. I mean, he's at Mable's, probably went to sleep early.*

I'm about to take my first sip when my cell phone rings. I glance at the unfamiliar number.

"I don't feel like being bothered." Wiping my sudsy hand on a plush towel, I press ignore and place the phone on silent.

Just as I'm placing the glass to my lips, it rings again. Sighing, I reluctantly answer. "Hello?"

A man with an effeminate voice says, "Hi, am I speaking with the wife of Leith MacKenzie?"

"Yes." I cock a brow.

"I'm a coworker of his. He's been out since mid-last week. I was wondering—"

"No, he was out mid-last week." I cut the stranger off, on guard. Though pondering why I'm sharing my husband's business, I assert, "Leith returned at the beginning of this week. Whatever game you're playing—"

Click.

"What the fuck is going on?" I mumble to myself. My thumb hovers over my husband's contact. I think about how he pressed the away button on me. Setting my phone down, I take a deep breath and a deeper drink from my wine glass. My thoughts are all over the place as I try to relax. The water grows cold, and my wine glass empties. I step out, wrapping a bath sheet around me. I pace, unable to finish my afterbath rituals.

Investigator senses tingling, I open an app and press the Find my iPhone button. Seconds later, malice burns my core at

the sight of Leith's location.

LEITH

CALLING YATES' BLUFF, I SQUEEZE THE TRIGGER. IN TWO quick steps, I'm back in the hallway. The little *shite* thought he was so smart. The explosion radius in his bedroom isn't that wide. I've been in more peril *shite*-faced during a bonfire on my clan land. A heat sucks into the hallway. The blast exerts less power than a string of M-80 fireworks. I'll be surprised if my eyebrows singed off.

When I climb up from the ground, there's nae burnt *nugget* on the bedroom floor.

"*Feck!*" I glance out the window. Yates is clambering up from the ground, ankle twisted. He skedaddles aff into the dark.

I start to take a shot. Yates weaves toward the street, garnering more attention. Working my way back through the apartment, I take another exit route.



FIVE MINUTES LATER, I'M EASING INTO MY CAR. SIRENS SOUND in the distance as I place a hand over the deep graze along my side where a bullet almost got the better of me. Blood trickles along my ribs. With a huff, I determine that I should head to the home I once lived in.

I ring up Camdyn while shifting into gear. “Run me an update.”

“Everything’s good. The girls are sleeping.” His voice rings with excitement. “You got that motherfucker?”

With one hand on the steering wheel and the other over the wound, I snarl, “Nae. Slipped through my fingers. Last *feckin’* time, though. Keep my family safe for me, Cam.”

“I got you, bro.”

“This ends tonight.” I clip each word, then mash the end call button.



AT THE WEE HOUSE I BOUGHT FOR CHEVELLE AND ME, I decide that, after I clean myself up, it’s time to come clean to Chevelle. I’ll just tell her what I’ve been up to and that I’m gonna kill this one lad before we return to our vows. Simple enough. I remove my shirt, letting it fall along the scuffed wood floor in the hallway. I search the cupboards for a needle and thread. I dinna want to scare Chevelle while I resemble a *feckin’ ned*. I’ll take a quick shower, clean up, and then head home. Since I’m confident Yates is a one-lad circus, I doubt he’ll reach out to the cops. He probably found another rock to hide under. It would be nice if that rock overturned a couple of four-leaf clovers, and the greedy bastard just runs off with the money he’d filched from Phelps.

Though I’m determined to wash and sew myself up quickly, I decide another person watching my lasses is a good thing. I ring Firth.

While the water in these rusted pipes is getting hot, I wait for his answer.

“Firth, I need a favor,” I order, chewing on a Tylenol.

In a cool tone, he asks, “*Wit?*”

Clearly, he’s still not over the midges. “Head to my house. Right now.”

“Nae. I’m following my *brathair*.”

“Erika and James were supposed to follow ‘em. *Och, feck* it.” I hang up. I’m digging through the hall closet for a towel when my cousin Blythe answers. He agrees to check in on the house. While I trust Camdyn to keep my wee clan safe, I need to stay on guard.

I leave Chevelle a short text that I’ll be home soon. Climbing into the shower, I wash off the blood and glare at the wee wound. Three minutes later, I wrap a towel around me and sit on the bathroom counter. I’m looping the string for the stitches when there’s movement at the front door. Clutching the towel in one hand, I grab my gun, hop down, and move along the hallway. The front door, located near the refrigerator, opens. The redhead I’ve ignored strolls in.

“*Och*, Erika?”

“Aye, Leith is back!” She raises her arms with a silly smile on her face. “I had to see this *shite* with my own eyes. Ye’re one of us now! Not afraid to get down and dirty.”

I ignore her. “*Wit* are ye doin’ here, lass? Ye’re supposed to be following Knox.”

“Eh, and visit my da? *Feck* that.” She leaves the door wide open, coming closer to me. Eyeing my rib, she mumbles, “*Shite*, that’s gonna leave a scar. Ya need help?”

“Nae. I got it.” I head to the bathroom to grab the needle and thread.

When I return to the kitchen, she gestures with her hands. “Are ye still hot ‘bout Chevelle and me?”

“Nae. Just need to make myself look more presentable. Then I’m headed home.”

Her eyebrows pinch together. “Home? But Brody told me we were celebrating yer accomp—”

“*Little* Brody needs to shut his *feckin’* *geggie*! I’m guessing he’s telling ya the wrong information. I had the *eejit* I’m looking for trapped. I’ll get ‘em again. Party’s postponed.”

Erika places a brown-paper bag on the counter. “Hmmm, so Chevelle’s seeing things the clan way.”

I ignore her question. With my back against the cupboards, I hold my towel together with one hand. The other hand presses against the countertop, and I hoist myself onto the ledge.

Rolling her eyes, Erika stalks to the door she’d left open in her surprise.

“Erika, leave the screen door open. It’s one of those nights, ya know?”

“Aye.” She clicks her tongue, walking back to the cupboard. I grab a few glasses as she removes vodka from the bag. “When Brody told me tonight, I was halfway to the state border. Turned around. Knox and Firth got a couple of good *heids* on their shoulders. So, I told myself I’ll see to this. My da can give me a black eye for not being there.”

“Ewan still hounding ya?” I take the bottle from her hand. The dull ache in my side intensifies as I let the liquid run down my wound.

“Yeah.” She frowns and nods, setting up our glasses as I hand the bottle over. “A wee bit. Better now that I’m under Big Brody and Nan’s wings.”

“Aye, he likes to keep an eye on his good friends.” I pull the needle through my skin, getting to work.

“Sheesh, Leith, that was an underhanded statement.”

I give her a pointed look. “McFarlands have to make sure us MacKenzies are in order. We’re *feckin’* dogs. There I said it. Wasn’t being sly, Erika. But if ye *feckin’* need blunt, there ya go.”

“Hmmm.” She hands over my cup then takes a generous sip of her own. “Aye, right. I was the sly one. That’s the game I had to play with yer wife.”

“Did ya?” If I weren’t dealing with searing pain in my side, I’d laugh. Getting the bullet out while in the shower had proven a lot more difficult than I thought.

“Chevelle’s so wrapped up in ya that she didna see the eyes I have for her. She really is a bonny lass.”

“*My bonny lass, Erika.*”

“Aye.” She offers a wry smile. “And very entertaining when she’s a crabbit.”

I nod. “Bloody beautiful when furious.” *I wonder how beautiful she’ll look tonight when I tell her.* “I need to hurry up. Blythe is on the way.”

Erika’s still harping on about how Chevelle is standoffish and how they were supposed to talk and become sisters when my cell phone rings. At the sight of the attorney’s name, I order Erika, “*Wheesht!*”

Into the receiver, I mutter, “Wendy, I doubted ye’d call unless—”

“Leith!” There’s a strangled gulp. Wendy’s fragile voice disappears. At the sound of a struggle for oxygen, my eyes darken.

“*Shite,*” I mumble. I run a hand over my face. Erika’s green eyes widen while we listen as the life gets choked out of Wendy. Glass crashes. Erika’s shoulders jump.

Vehemently, I take a breath. It’s Yates. It has to be. I mutter, “I’m so *feckin’* sorry.” *I got her into this.*

“Who?” Erika mouths.

I speak up. “Douglas, I know ye can *feckin’* hear me. Sick bastard—”

A notification chimes. FaceTime. Unknown like it had when I first encountered Yates. A niggling feeling churns in the pit of my stomach. Wendy’s as good as deid now, so I accept the call.

On the screen, Yates is in darkness again, but no purposeful setup like when I had murdered Phelps.

The outline of a potted palm tree rustles behind him. He wheezes through his nose while talking, “All I wanted to do was make a friend in you, Mr. MacKenzie. Your lack of

appreciation disgusts me. Now that we know I'm a one-man show, I'd like to bring something to your attention since you refuse to listen."

He moves, and the automatic lights in the driveway of *my* home come into view. Those are the expensive palm trees I purchased for curb appeal and privacy.

My rage ebbs. Paralytic fear for my wee *wean* and hen grows in the pit of my stomach. Knuckling down on the former and not the latter, I order, "*Wit* the *feck* are ye doing at my house?"

"Couldn't very well be two places at once, Mr. MacKenzie."

"I'm gonna gut ye, rip yer spine out!" I threaten in a restrained, grave tone,

"Seeing how I couldn't play God. I hired one of those run-of-the-mill thugs for the attorney. This was your idea. You and Wendy's when you chatted last night and determined I had never spent money on a hired hit. Well, I'm done being frugal."

I measure my breath, watching him walk along the path. The water fountain is in the background. The garage comes into view, then the entire length of my home as he ambles with a pained gait.

"Now, Wendy was a non-factor. But the wife. The kid. The brother you all call The American. Well, they are important to you—"

"Ye watch the next thing coming out of yer mouth, Yates, or ye're deid a *hunner* times over. And ye should already assume that when I caught ya, I was already planning to kill ya! Now, ye're so deid, so *feckin'* deid!"

"Dead? Heh, I feel revitalized—save for my ankle." He strolls toward the street, only to stop on the lawn of the neighbors opposite us. "I've spent the last ten minutes placing bombs along the perimeter of your house. I'll say, times up. In five, four, three, two."

Yates flips the camera. A loud explosion rings out. The FaceTime frames a fury of red and orange flames gnashing at each other. Glass and other fragments sprinkle across the fragmented stone. Hyperventilating, I stare at the phone. Erika has me in her arms.

“I’m so sorry.”

CHEVELLE

THE BOTTLE OF CHIANTI CRASHES. LEGS WOBBLING, I STARE into the kitchen window of our old house. Tears prick my eyes, collecting and threatening to rain down my cheeks. The vision fades, blurring into a prism of Leiths and Erikas.

There are suddenly a hundred tiny, fragmented images of them in my tear-streaked eyes as I stare into a window right in front of the sink. Leith bought the home before heading off to grad school. Said it would be a place where I could go, not have to worry about rent or rooming with a stranger.

He'd goaded me until I made use of his credit card to buy curtains. Do all the little things that made his house *our* home. My old lilac curtains frame the area where I once made countless meals—*frames the two of them together*.

Justice was right.

It never penetrated until this precise second.

I've built my life around Leith.

The dam breaks.

Hot tears flood my cheeks.

I built my life around a motherfucking MacKenzie. At least my mother probably had the blinders on until the last second. She never saw Dad as the bad guy. Ever since I've known Leith, he's been the bad guy. He *reset* a bully's jaw,

pulverized another one. *He's the fucking bully!* Hell, his entire family are bad guys. His family is filled with murdering, lawless bastards.

I feel myself crumbling onto the cracked sidewalk next to my bottle of wine, which I grabbed as a security blanket as I left the house. A part of me, I guess, knew I'd need a drink soon. Now that my suspicions are confirmed, it's the last thing I want. Someone's arms are around me, scooping me up. Something else shatters against the concrete.

"*Wit* are ye doing, girl?"

I glance over at Brody, numb to his strong arms, holding me close. *My nemesis*. I almost nuzzle into his strong, warm, welcoming body. Leith always smells so good. Brody does too. But I glance down. He's dropped two *BevMo!* bags. A holiday's worth of alcohol has crashed onto the walkway.

I slap his face. That smug beard of his cushions most of the blow. Still, he regards me in confusion. "*Wit* the—"

"You were here, celebrating!" I glance at the fragments of bottles. There's a lot more than my Chianti. There's a fifth of Resnov Water and a gallon of gin and other bits that didn't have half a chance of making it.

"*Wit?*" He reaches toward my tear-streaked face.

"You, Leith, *Erika!*" I point to the kitchen window where Erika's arms are wrapped around my husband. My view stops at his shoulders. Yet, it doesn't appear he's wearing a shirt.

Brody attempts to manipulate my torn feelings with his handsome face stained in confusion. Brody wraps me in his arms. "*Och*, that's not *wit* it looks like."

I try pushing at the brick, but he won't move. Blinded by fury, I kick, scream, and hit.

My teeth sink into the mass of muscle at his bicep.

Brody yelps. "*Feck!* Chevelle, *wit* the hell?"

Desperate as a caged bird, I bite down again. Brody stops holding me, putting space between myself and his muscular body by gripping my arm instead. "Wait, lass!"

“No! I’ve always hated you. This has your name all over it. So, how long have you brothers been sharing her?”

“I’ll explain if ye stop biting me, aye?” Brody grabs my face, bringing me into a bear hug. With his calloused palm against my mouth, I struggle. “Chevelle, we met when ye were a lassie. Right?”

When he stops applying pressure to my mouth, I wrestle in his arms. “I hate you, Brody! Abhor you!”

“I’ve nae idea *wit’s* going—”

“Okay, then answer one question for me. A long time ago,” my tone fractures into a segment of inaudible sobs, “Brody, you hired prostitutes—”

“High-class escorts.” He slowly surrenders each word in an attempt to place a Band-Aid over a gunshot wound.

“Whatever,” I retort through gritted teeth. “After Leith beat you down, you came to me, tossing a sorry ass apology. You told me that the ladies were just a joke. Did you hire professional whores to fuck my future-husband as ‘just a joke?’ ”

Several disconcerting beats pass between us.

“Your lack of response speaks volumes. Nevertheless, tonight, you’re Benevolent Brody. Let me tell *you* something. My daddy murdered my mom!” I glare into his eyes as he calmly attempts to subdue me. “She was a cheating whore, just like him.” I point toward Leith in the window. “You don’t let me go, I’ll- I’ll serve the same treatment to Leith!”

“Well, I’ll not release ya until ye calm the *feck* down,” Brody grumbles in Gaelic. A split-second later, humanity spreads across his chiseled features. “Okay! The truth, eh?”

“Yes!” I gasp.

“I missed my *brathair!*”

“We friggin grew up together, Brody. I always had such a good relationship with Cam. Then when your little brothers started popping up, Jamie, Lachlan, all of them, too! But never you, so that’s a lie.” With one arm loose, I attempt to shove

Brody. But his hands are all over me, pulling me back into a bear hug.

“Ye weren’t cl ... Ye weren’t—” Brody stumbles over his attempt to explain. This time, he’s spared a response when Leith shouts my name from somewhere behind us.

Brody and I stop tussling as I glare at my husband through the window. An unreadable expression burns across his jaw. My gaze flickers back to my enemy. “Haven’t you hurt me enough, Brody MacKenzie?”

His marbled face crumples with shame. The brawny bastard lowers his ropy arms, backing off. “Ye have a right to hate me, Chevelle, but ...”

A cry bubbles up through my throat as I scurry to the Chevelle SS. I’m in my car when Leith sprints out the front door, clutching a towel around his waist. I wipe my tears and put the key in the ignition as his palms slap at the window.

“Hen, wait!” Leith jumps back as I drive away.

A snarling tone echoes in my ear.

Kill him.

I love Leith, madly. “I can’t see him with someone else,” I mutter.

I drive straight through a stop sign. I can’t return home, not now. I can’t stomach the sight of Mia’s face. Last call for alcohol isn’t for another two hours. I drive aimlessly, long past the mandatory bar closing time. Faint light furrows across the dark sky when I pull up to a gated community. I realize the trouble I’m getting myself into. And I don’t care.

“Least I didn’t become my father just now,” I snort—no jealous rampage for me. My index finger jabs the buttons for Michie’s house. I expect no response, but the Devil is always prepared to tempt you.

His voice blares through the speaker. “Who is it?”

“Michie? You’re home.”

“Damn, Chevelle. Give me a sec.” The gate creeps open at a foreboding snail’s pace. But I don’t want to care, and Michie has given me a good reason not to in the past. He’s attractive, older. Funny like Leith, but so unlike my husband—a sardonic humor.

Rows of homes are on either side. I pull into the driveway, and I sit in the car, hands on the steering wheel. The cool morning air caresses my heated, tear-stained face.

Michie is dressed in a V-neck and a pair of cotton pants that should be illegal. He leans against the driver’s side door. His captivating eyes see straight through me. In his dreamy Japanese accent, he says, “So, everything’s perfect?”

I offer a broken, hardly audible, “No.”

LEITH

“YE *LET HER LEAVE!*” I’M NAKED AS THE DAY I WAS *FECKIN’* born. The towel around my waist fell when I ran after my beloved wife and my dream car. Fists heavy at my sides, I turn toward my *brathair*. In a second, I’ve assessed the scene. The clutter of alcohol on the ground. Her undying revulsion of Brody. She probably saw Erika comforting me through the window. *Shite!*

“Ye let my wife skedaddle aff?” With each word, I step toward him. “Ye wee *Bawbag*.”

“Shut—”

“Nae, actually, ye’re a big. *Feckin’*. Pathetic. Idiot!”

“Get outta my face, Leith,” Brody mutters, running a hand over his beard. “Go put on some tighty-whities or something. Ye’re a bleeding spectacle! This isn’t a drunken night on clan land.”

Aye, I’m a sight. Something in me broke. The sequence of events evades me now. I can’t remember more than a minute ago. A half-hour ago. Yesterday. I’m drowning in the thought of my wife *leaving me*. Whatever occurred before is nae concern of mine. Not now. My heart just fled the scene, and someone’ll pay. Brody’ll pay.

I grip my older *brathair’s* flannel with one hand, fist ready to clobber him.

“She hates me, Leith. I couldn’t—”

“Chevelle *hates* ye? Ye *feckin’* *eejit*, she hates *me!*” My arm hammers through the air, slicing so hard it *swooshes*.

Brody deflects the punch that should’ve knocked him on his *arse*. I’ll admit, too much bloody passion and emotion went into that hook. Nae strategy. Nae hit the *feckin’* target.

He shoves me back a few paces. “Leith, yer wife wants to kill ya right ‘bout now. Slaughter ye! Calm down, *brathair*.”

“Leith, ye should be happy,” Erika softly suggests.

“*Wit’s* with the two of ye?” Brody laughs. “I dinna mean the hugging, but why should he be happy? I’m missing something.”

While Brody’s query has caught him off guard, I bullrush him into the grass. *Bingo*. This is how one takes down a bloody *Gruffalo*. My knees clobber into his abdomen. I’ve let off a fury of punches when Erika grips my throat from behind.

“Calm down, Leith!”

I twist, bringing her down too. Erika tumbles over as my hook slides across Brody’s jaw. My *brathair* grapples me, flipping us.

Shite. The wind knocks outta me. Brody’s forearm rests against my throat. I breathe in grass, looking into the smoggy sky. There are fewer stars here.

Still subduing me with his massive forearm, Brody asks, “Now, that I have yer attention. *Wit* in the hell is going on?”

“It’s bad.” Erika shudders.

Aye, now I recall the severity of the moment. An exhale strangles out of me. I close my eyes, concentrating on one day in particular. Chevelle, Mia, and I were on the shore. Laughter rang out as they poured sand on me. They said they were creating a merman. Took them so *feckin’* long, but I didna have a care in the world. Now, one’s gone, and the other’ll hate me ‘til the end of time.

“Leith, talk to me.” Brody removes his arms, settling onto the grass.

I open my eyes, stay there, lying on the *feckin’* ground. Tiny insects crawl over my *baws*. I choke on emotion. “*Brathair*, I made a big mistake. A bloody catastrophe. My house—”

“We dinna have time, Leith,” Erika speaks up. “Yer wound is bleeding. We need to slap some duct tape on it. Nae time for proper treatment, mate. Go get dressed. Focus on yer resources now.”

She waves my cellphone in her hand.

“Nae,” I whisper in an almost catatonic state. Anybody driving by tonight’ll assume I’ve met my match in meth.

“*Wit* are ye doing, Erika?” Brody asks.

“Ringing Chevelle. Someone’s gotta tell her to return! Little Brody, phone Big Brody this second! The two of ye must go see him. Ye can’t just give up, Leith!”

With a grunt, Brody pushes onto his knees, standing slowly. “Why do we need to go see Da?”

“Because—”

“Wheesht!” I cut her off, coming to a seated position. Erika regards me like I’ve *feckin’* lost my *shite*, off my entire head! Nae. That Leith who lay on the grass like a dandelion is nae more. Douglas Yates had one thing right. I’d let feeling reign.

Nae *more mistakes, Leith. Be the MacKenzie lad ye were meant to.* I kip-up into a standing position. Warm blood trickles down my abdomen.

I stride toward Brody, grip his shoulder, and look him deid in the bloody eye. “Yates blew up my house. I will kill him. If it’s the only thing I ever do, *brathair*, it’s kill him. Ye with me?”

Staring at me in horror, Brody asks, “*Wit* of Mia and Cam?”

I reach down, shoving the clumps of grass away from my *baws*. In a detached tone, I snarl, “We need to focus, Brody. Are ye *feekin’* with me or nae? Erika, nae answer?”

She sighs. “Chevelle ignored me, turned off her phone, too.”

“In case she’s not goin’ home,” I wriggle my jaw, “ye go to Michie’s, Erika. They’re still open a few more hours. *Feck* ye, Brody. Go on, proceed standing around like a pussy. I’ll handle this myself.”

CHEVELLE

MICHIE'S HOME IS A COUPLING OF ANCIENT AND MODERN. RICE paper walls divide an otherwise spacious living area. There are samurai swords all around, and like a kid in the candy store, my fingers itch to touch one. Only now, I'm feeling too good to get up. My buzz has elevated, lifted off, and I have no desire to come back down.

"Stop staring at me." I pour myself another drink. Michie is seated next to me, elbow on the sleek marble of his wet bar. Head in his hand, he blatantly stares. His gaze drops to my lips every so often. So far, I've avoided the itch we both have by knocking back another shot.

"You are so beautiful when you cry," he mumbles. "I sit here, telling myself that your misery is my fortune."

I wave a hand at him. "Whatever, Michie."

"Hmmm ... can I call you Little One?"

I lift the glass bottle, poised like a baseball bat. "You want this bottle against the side of your head?"

His laugh is about as light as the Chianti I smashed earlier. "You're still young, still hopeful. In need of a Daddy."

Disregarding the lust swirling around him, I murmur, "All my dreams are dead, Michie."

“No, beautiful.” His voice is a hypnotic moan. His gaze drinks me in once more. “You’re the one who said your dreams were as big as those curvaceous thighs. Are you, what, a size larger than you were when you came stalking into my bar the first time? You were skinny then.”

When I don’t respond, he reaches over, close enough for me to sniff his cologne. A fresh onslaught of tears well up in my eyes.

I secretly sniffed Leith back when we were young.

Michie’s so close his lips almost brush against mine as he pours me another round.

Michie groans. “Indeed, those legs have a little more meat. I want you all the same. No. More now. The two of us know I never had feelings for Justice. Never for a young woman. I like my women aged, like a fine wine. Until you.”

His breath teases across my lips, urging me to close the split-hair space between us.

“Michie, then maybe you should do something about those feelings of yours.” I stare at him. The anticipation and shame tremble through me. Gawd, I hate what I have become. What’s worse in my genetic makeup? Being my father’s daughter? Or having Mother’s wandering eye?

Michie runs a finger along the side of my cheekbone as if mapping the very contour of it. “The first and last time I tasted that mouth of yours, you were angry with Leith. You slapped me.”

He mentions the time I broke up with Leith after Brody facilitated the sleaziest bachelor party ever. I was broken, had let down my guard. We were closing the bar, and I’d taken a few shots while Michie counted out the till. It was one kiss. I was weak. And Michie was warm and so much older. I’d been so afraid of my history, of what heredity could do to my mind. Possibly create in me a kindred spirit to my father. Love someone enough to murder them. I knew then that I loved Leith too hard. Too much. Perhaps, that’s why I let Michie steal a kiss that night to answer the question. But I’d realized

my mistake as his lips touched mine. I slapped him and escaped the bar. I buried my fleeting attraction for him. Then I found out I was pregnant.

The dark arousal lifts from Michie's face. "You can't even get *him* out of your mind."

Michie starts to move. I grab his arm. Arising, I plant myself in front of him. My palms rest against the wet bar at his back, locking him in. Now, I could toy with his emotions, prey on his arousal. But I'm a chickenshit incapable of crossing the line.

Michie clamps a hand around the back of my neck. "You pursue your desires, Chevelle. Had you stalled on the day we met, it would've been our first and last encounter. So, be that resolute, young lady. What do you want?"

"I want ..." My hands clamp the edges of the countertop. Though I've boxed in Michie, why am *I* trapped? I feel like I'm crying tears of lighter fluid and setting them on fire. *I want you*. Damn, my lips refuse to speak the words. Why not? *You know why not, Chevelle*.

A sigh rides through his abdominals. We're so close. The muscles in his body move against mine. The expired air from his breath dashes across my lips.

"You and *I* would've made the perfect team, Chevelle. But you can't trade one bad guy for another. It hurt to my fucking core that I couldn't invest in you."

"Invest in me?" I press at his chest, suddenly angered by Michie's reluctance to support my brewery.

When I start to move away, he advances on me, imprisoning me. "Yes! Invest in you, Chevelle. That's all I've wanted to do since I saw the dynamic way you interact with people."

"Oh, just let me go," I grumble.

"Listen to me, Chevelle! I craved the thought of investing in you. To take you from him. To be the focus of your love, to cultivate your strengths similar to how I've done at work."

I cork a brow. “But you’re a bad guy too? All I’m surrounded by are assholes?”

“The yakuza own my name, Chevelle. They own me. So, I can’t have you. And you still love your husband. Tell me you don’t!”

“Yup. I love him, and I love hard.” I poise my hand into a gun. “You got a burner I can borrow, Michie?”

“No, sweetheart.” His hand glides to the small of my back. “There’s something else I have for you—a promise. The next time I see you, my friend, it will be because you’d like me to claim you. You’re a beautiful, bittersweet reminder of what I gave up many moons ago. But if you ever return, I will refuse to let you go, no matter the cost.”

LEITH

THERE WERE COPS AND FIRE TRUCKS ALL OVER THE SCENE when I arrived home at five a.m. I couldn't even turn down my own *feckin'* street. Now, I'm seated in my Audi parallel parked in front of my parents' home. I'm not sure how I drove here. Had I got on the freeway? Stopped at red lights? How the *feck* did I get here?

The past claws at my mind. Guilt threatens never to let me go.

I was fourteen. Camdyn was a wee fecker, had a few missing teeth too. He'd been crying. Brody had broken his water gun—told him to man up. I grabbed Cam's cheeks, telling him how we were gonna beat up Little Brody. My brathair was cursing up a storm in his squeaky voice, shocked about how we called 'em Little Brody. He said our brathair was huge. That was the first and last time I ever saw him full of doubt.

I remember saying, "Do ye trust me, Cam?"

Though he was a dark, broody nugget, Camdyn's cheeks burned red. He shouted, "Yes!"

"Are we gonna bring that numpty down?"

"Yes!"

"That's right! It's me and ye, brathair, who can stand against us?"

That sequence of events fades. Another memory commands my attention.

Chevelle was a wreck, cried about this and about that. She suffered from a bit of postpartum depression in the beginning, but every month in our bairn's first year, we celebrated a birthday. Chevelle had a four-month-old Mia in her arms, tears streaming down her cheeks while holding the lassie's palm in her hand.

"She won't stop growing!" Chevelle cried.

"Hen, aren't ye amazed watching our bairn grow? When Mia rolled over the other day, ye were crying happy. Now, sad tears run down yer face."

Chevelle babbled, hugging Mia tighter. "It's the best and worst feeling in the world. She'll leave one day."

"Aye, she will. For now, we've the privilege of caring for this wee girl. We'll do a good job givin' her roots, hen. But Mam always says, 'We've gotta give her wings, too.'"

An ache stretches across my knuckles. Fisting the steering wheel, I continue to stare into oblivion. Different moments over the years flit through my mind in a sequence of still frames. I told my wee *brathair* that it was him and me. I told my wife that we would teach our daughter to fly.

Incapable of shedding a tear, I press my knuckles to my lips. My pride ruined my marriage. My pride stole my *feckin'* kid *brathair*. My pride murdered my bairn.

Brody pops the driver's side window.

"Get out," he demands through gritted teeth.

My lifeless gaze slides to him. I turn, staring straight ahead again.

Another thump lands on the window. "Leith, look at me! I'll not do this *shite* without ye. Ye're my- ye're my *brathair*. We have to tell Mam and Da that their beloved first *grand* and their *son* are ... I'm not doing it without ye."

It's like my body is being fractured into two. One wants to go kneel at my parents' feet to tell them I failed my clan. The

other is ready to be the man I should've been from day one. I place my keys in the ignition, but Brody's Silverado has blocked me into the spot.

"Leith!" Brody roars. "Lachlan is *watching* us through the window. Yer other little *brathair*—"

I'm just about to toggle the shift to reverse when a loud, scraping sound assaults my ears.

"Get out of the car!"

Through the driver side mirror, my wife wields a samurai sword. Legs wide, she brings the blade down over the trunk of my sportscar. *Pop!* The rear end of the Audi tilts to the left as a back tire deflates.

Chevelle screams, "I'm over internalizing my emotions, cheater! Your Audi is hen number two, huh? How much do you love—"

"Chevelle," Brody holds his hands out. "Let's all talk."

With duct tape constricting my abdominals beneath a t-shirt riddled with holes, I shove the door open. I grit my teeth to the pain and say, "I got this, *brathair*."

"Yes, let Leith dig his grave," Chevelle tells him.

"Chevelle?" Mam calls from the double doors. "*Wit* are ye doing, sweetie?"

"I'm contemplating if I'm gonna murder your son or just chop off his dick! Sorry for the choice word, Nan." Chevelle smiles.

"Hen, stop!" I demand as the blade swipes for my knees. I jump back, the tape holding firm to my wound. "*Stop now!*"

"Stop? Very effective, simple word. *Stop* acting like a crazed lunatic?" Tears gleam in her eyes while she brandishes the sword like a baseball bat. "How about I *stop* loving you!"

"Chevelle!" I bark. "Put that *feckin'* thing down! Nae, this isn't simple. I'm 'bout to tell ya the hardest thing I've ever had to say. After that, do with me as ye wish."

A cry curdles in her throat. At her rear, Brody's glower warns how my cryptic statement doubled as an admission of guilt.

My parents, wee *brathairs*, and a few younger male cousins come out, all staring on in shock. Brody eases back. Each time he comes forward to grab Chevelle from the rear, the air dices between them.

"Sweetheart, I've nae idea my son's actions," Big Brody calls out. Mam places a hand on Da's shoulder. With a dogged, sincere purse of her lips, she steps down the cobblestone pathway.

"Sweetie, how about ye and I make a pot of tea?"

"Nan, I love you, but ..." Chevelle's tear-stained eyes track across us all, first to me. What I'd not give to hold her. Her gaze shifts to my clan. She fists the handle downward in momentary defeat. The tip of the sword pokes into the grass. "Nan, I want my life back. To not believe in Leith."

"I'm so sorry." I exhale, yearning for her touch.

"Let's leave the lads here, love," Mam coos. "Tell me more about it."

"Mam, I *fecked* up. Hen," I stare at her, unable to find the words. "I *fecked* up bloody bad. Mia—"

The sword is out of the ground, and Chevelle places the blade against my chest. "Mia's not a viable excuse, Leith."

"Honey," Mam whispers.

I lift a hand, stalling Mam's attempts. The tip pierces me, making a shallow cut. Save for the warm trickle of blood, I feel nothing. "Hen, ye've gotta listen to me."

"Chevelle, please," Mam gasps.

Clearing the lump in my throat, I say, "I deserve for my wife to place that right through my heart, I do. But before we get to that part, ye'll want to sit down. I must tell ye something."

"*Och, brathair.*" Brody grabs harshly at his beard.

Mam pats Chevelle's shoulder. "Chevelle, I've seen the love the two of ye have for each other. I'll not believe it has come to this."

In Gaelic, Brody refers to my wife as *sister*. In a not-so-subtle warning, the blade cuts through the air, silencing him. He places his fists at his side, mouth molded into a frown.

"Right here is where ye should stab me, Chevelle." I thump my fingers against my heart. "My actions warrant it, hen. First, I've gotta be a man, tell ya what happened."

While lifting my eyes to the sky, I punch a hand at my chest. The time has come to tell my wife the horror that became our sweet bairn. Everyone's waiting for the news from this *bampot*, Leith MacKenzie. I abandoned my clan, gave my wife happiness, and snatched it away. Just as I set my mouth to speak, a sleek black Lexus skids to a stop at the end of the driveway.

Camdyn jumps out of the two-door sports car. He looks exhausted. He runs his tattooed forearm across his jaw, regarding our parents. "Mom, please don't fucking kill me."

Taken aback by the change in events, Mam stares at him.

"Ye're ..." I run a shaky hand over my hair. "Ye're alive!"

But nobody acknowledges my shocked exchange except Brody. Camdyn considers Mam's lack of response as a means to grovel.

His tattooed arms fly around her. "I drove sixty-five, even in a seventy zone. I promise. If anyone says this ride is stolen, it's not. Some bitch stole it from a friend of mine. Punish me, if you must, just don't kill me, Mom ... Mom?"

While Camdyn runs his hands over Mam's plump cheeks, Brody claps Camdyn's. He pulls Camdyn away from Mam, eyes widened. "*Bawbag*. Ye're alive!"

He kisses our wee *brathair's* forehead, praising God. As the family glances and talks amongst themselves, I sour.

"And Mia?" I ask him. "Where the *fleck* is my *nighean!*" God, dinna let her have been home alone!

Camdyn forks a hand through his blond hair. The sun shines down, accenting the reddish highlights similar to mine. He chews his lip. “Well, I was gonna say she’s home, but I just drove by. That shit’s no longer there, bro! Don’t kill the messenger.”

“Did she—”

“Mia’s asleep—in the backseat. My phone was stolen. At the McDonald’s, we had to grab and go. It’s been a shitty night, but again, I didn’t speed. Mom, you have my word.” Rubbing his arm, Camdyn asks, his faint accent appearing, “So, Leith, what the *feck* happened to ya house?”

“Cam, ye’re in a whole heap of trouble once I figure this out.” Mam gestures between us all.

“What are you talking about?” Chevelle’s head tilts. “You had my daughter in a stolen car. Cam, I thought better of you.”

“I’m sor—”

“No. Just help me get her out of the *stolen vehicle*, please.” Chevelle juts her chin. “We’re leaving.”

Camdyn’s nodding to my wife when a two-door sports car stalls in the street. Erika makes the same grand exit from the driver’s side. The dark circles beneath her eyes fade for a fraction of a second. “Mia! Cam!”

My wife sneers, “Don’t say my child’s name, bitch.”

“Damn, they still hate each other,” Cam mutters under his breath.

In a few short strides, I’m at the Lexus. I open the door, press a handle to fold the front seat forward, and watch my sleeping daughter. A soft sprinkling of freckles coats her cheeks. Her curly hair is beautiful chaos, and there are crumbs on the corners of her mouth. My heart swells. I tell myself that I can go on being the only man in the world who will never hurt my wee *wean*. That she’ll one day grow up to be a gorgeous woman—and I may have to kill a few more men—but I’ll be the one who never breaks her heart.

“Move, Leith.” Chevelle pushes at my side. “You and Erika can make some replacements. This one’s mine.”

“Nae!” I snatch the sword, tossing it into the grass. With a firm clasp of both her arms, I yank her to me. “Listen to me good, hen. *Wit* ye’re not gonna do is take my bairn from me. When ye’re calm, we’ll talk.”

“Calm.” She struggles against my stiff arm. “Don’t touch me. I hate you.”

“Okay. Ye can hate me now.” I let her go. She smacks my back as I reach into the backseat.

“Chev—” Erika starts, only to be cut off by Chevelle.

“Are you speaking to me, home-wrecker?”

“She’s not, okay?!” I cut in.”

“*Och*,” Mam comes between us all. The women shout at each other. Mia cries out from the backseat.

Camdyn cocks his thumb. “I’ll grab the tiny human. So, none of you confuse my niece for a rag doll.”

CHEVELLE

THE ENTIRE WORLD IS FILLED WITH BROKEN PEOPLE, ME included. Ashamed of myself, tears cloud my gaze as I watch Camdyn unstrap the three-year-old from the car seat. Mia rouses awake, her chin on his shoulder. Camdyn's back is to me.

"Mommy?" Mia's cerulean gems glow. I can hardly glance her way. It's just like my dream. The light in my eyes dies because of a man who has the same gorgeous eyes as our daughter's.

She wiggles in Camdyn's arms as he heads over to me. My best effort at a smile fails. I place her on my hip.

Camdyn mutters in my ear, "Sis, I'm not sure how my bro fucked up. If this argument is about me taking Mia, I'm so sorry."

"I'm not angry with you, Cam," I murmur.

"Will you guys go in the house? Hash it out?"

I shake my head, then press kisses to Mia's neck as she wiggles about in my arms, happy after a grumpy wake-up.

"Cam, I'm going—" It was on the tip of my tongue to say "home." Mia jolts in my arm. I stop her from face-planting in the grass in her attempt to climb down my hip.

"Daddy!" Mia shouts. "Daddy's here!"

I'm usually Mia's hero, but her dad is a rockstar, a superhero, and now, I'm chopped liver as she uses me to climb down like the cat tree Leith purchased for Mable. Or was he ever at his old roommate's home? The last few days flit through my mind, warped by the sound of gunshots.

Why gunshots?

I haven't heard them since my dad took a shotgun to Mom and a closed casket was necessary for both of them.

Come to think of it. Mia was moving faster before. In slow motion, she's running over to her dad, who is apparently trying to make some sense of this fiasco to his mom. Camdyn springs toward Mia, covering her entire body.

Erika lunges for me, gun in hand.

She's gonna kill—

My body falls backward with her on top of me. I tumble into the grass. One of her hands shields my face while the other aims to the street. Gaze narrowed, Erika licks her lips and squeezes the trigger.

My eyes widen. *Someone's shooting at us! Shooting at us all!*

Erika yells. Though I can't hear her voice over the fireworks, her mouth enunciates every word. "Chevelle, stay down!"

Her body clambers over mine as the sound of more gunfire rips through the morning. It's hardly seven a.m. Who's this angry at seven a.m.? Who else is shooting?

I look up at Erika's face. Tiny lines crease near her tensed mouth. With her teeth gritted, she stops shooting, but the firefight hasn't finished. Warm, sticky blood seeps through my shirt.

"You're bleeding!" I stutter.

"Aye," she hisses, then slumps on top of me.

A spray of bullets rain through the sky. Erika's body is heavy atop of mine. *Oh, God, she's dead.* I press against her

shoulders but can't move. Part of me is afraid. The other half is frantically using all of my might to move Erika.

Brody lifts Erika from me. I couldn't push her over, but he's shooting with one hand and hefting her with the other at the same time as Leith descends on me.

He holds my cheek in the palm of his hand. Somehow, I've forgotten how my life imploded last night. The fissure in the center of my heart, which smashed into a bazillion fragments, seems ages ago.

Life as we know it shatters around us. Leith looks me deep in the eyes. His words warm my heart. "I'm not gonna let anything happen to ye, hen."

His mouth mops over mine in a kiss as bitter as dry vermouth, quenching my need for courage.

Maternal instinct kicking in, I ask, "Where's Mia?"

"Safe. My other *brathairs* took her around the side of the house."

A puff of grass and sod smacks the side of my face. That was a bullet. A bullet almost hit me!

He looks away from me, shooting a gun I hadn't noticed was in his hand. Then the caring man I love returns. "Yer turn, Chevelle. Mia needs us."

It feels like a century passes as Leith and I crawl with him half masking my body and still shooting.

At the side of the house, I lean against the brick wall, next to the same beautiful trellises Leith once used to sneak me up to his room. Nan would let me spend the night, just not in his room. Suddenly, Leith's sincere face fades from before me. A thousand thoughts roam through my mind, namely one contradictory to the last. *I* never saw Dad slay Mom nor himself. I never saw either of their dead bodies.

"Ye're okay, hen." Leith's hand presses the center of my chest, drawing me toward the present. "Catch yer breath."

"I—" With my chest pressed against his, I gulp on air,

Leith loops an arm around me. “Stay here with me. Nae thinking about them now.”

He doesn’t have to say *their* names aloud for me to nod in agreement.



TIME SWIRLS TUMULTUOUSLY AROUND US. SOMEONE HANDED me a bottle of water that I have yet to open. The liquid has grown tepid in my fisted palm. I lean against the grand pillar that leads into a dark sitting room. The area has the aesthetics of a cigar lounge—leather scented and furnished with dark wood.

A blue suit leads the pack of uniformed police officers. Big Brody’s presence dwarfs what I’ve always felt was a humongous seat as he takes on a wide-legged stance. At his side, Nan’s a quiet but equally imposing figure. She drops a subtle hand on his shoulder, yet her attempts fail at calming the beast I never knew him to be.

Nan always dishes out the punishments, even to the youngest MacKenzie brothers. Now, Big Brody is the silent presence we all fear.

“Do ye need anything, Brody?” the suit asks.

“I need new sons.” His eyes are a dark pit of rage, flashing to Leith, Little Brody, then Camdyn. “I have seven of ‘em. Ye’re most welcome to the eldest three.”

Nan sighs. “My love—”

“*Wheesht!*” He tells his wife, slamming a hand on her thigh.

Leith speaks up. “Da, I’m a *feckin’* man. I’ll admit, This is all my—”

A cold glare descends on Leith. My husband’s broad shoulders fall, and inside my chest, my heart caves to the same extent. Sighing, he runs a hand over his face.

Stay. I warn myself. Don’t go to him. Don’t comfort him.

“Well,” the cop says, “my men will examine the scene awhile. This is a respectable neighborhood ya live in, MacKenzie. We’ll give the illusion that we’re conducting a thorough investigation. Nevertheless, if ye or yer sons fail at apprehending the culprit... .”

Teeth gritted, Big Brody says, “I will fix this. *Not them*. Ye have my word. I will personally handle this.”

The suit nods. “With all due respect, if this were an election year, my hands would be tied. Ye have seventy-two hours to provide an update. Good day to ye all.”

He stands and addresses Leith’s mom in a sincere tone. “Nan. My men will be on yer lot for a few hours, securing the scene. We have an image to uphold. I apologize for the unnecessary trouble.”

Nan assumes her position of power by letting him take her hand. “Aye. Yer support is greatly appreciated.”

The detective heads out of the room as another of Leith’s cousins asks, “How’s Erika?”

Forking my bottom lip through my teeth, I wait for an answer. I’ve got a niggling feeling that I should push past the jealousy. She did throw herself on me during a shootout.

Nan glances at her phone and shakes her head.

“I’ll heid to the hospital,” Blythe says. “Someone should be there. Unless ye have other orders for me, Nan.”

“Nae. Go sit, twiddle yer *feckin’* fingers.” Big Brody clicks his tongue. “Take these two *eejits* with ye.” He points to Little Brody and Leith. “Because I’ll be fixing this myself. Get nae peace!”

Two? I glance around. When had Camdyn disappeared?

“Perfect idea, Blythe.” Nan claps him into a hug. “We’ll be needing to display a show of loyalty to the McFarlands. Ewan’s very own daughter is my clan, too. I’ll need to be updated periodically. Dinna send word to Erika’s da. Not until she’s stable. *Och*, Lord, let the wee girl be stable.”

Like a mother hen, Nan comes toward me to pull me into a hug.

The past few days return, and I flinch.

“Ye’re a wee bit frightened, Chevelle.”

“I’m sorry, Nan.” A weak, appreciative smile flits past my face. “I truly hope Erika’s alright. I’m gonna head out ... Mia and I.”

“*Och*, ye’re my heart, Chevelle. Ye and Mia. Ye’re safe here.” Nan sighs. “If ye feel obliged to go, go. But for safety purposes, allow me to send someone just to keep watch.”

I’ve always told myself that the life the MacKenzies led would be the reason I didn’t get too close to them. The ebb and flow of my emotions and my love for them all probably makes me seem like a bitch. But this very moment is what I’ve always been afraid of.

I smile at the woman who taught me more than Lady, who knew me longer than my own momma and gave me more hugs too. Throat tight, I can hardly get the words out. “Whatever just happened, Mia and I are not a part of it. I’m sorry, Nan. But I need to figure out a few things. Clearly, there’s a crisis here, too. So, we should go.”

“I made a mistake, Chevelle!” Leith collects me up, embracing me tightly. His warmth threatens the chill that’s crept into my heart. In an even, smooth tone, he adds, “All I’ve done was to try to protect ye. I made a bloody mistake.”

My stomach tightens. The concern weighing at the pit of my stomach for Erika frays. “This mistake. Does Erika know all about it?” As the words exit my mouth, I’m kicking myself on the inside. *Really? Is that important right now, Chevelle?*

“Not much, hen.”

Leith’s response hits me like a tsunami. He trusted *her* over me. Justice cautioned me against falling so deep with the man I already married. Over a decade and a half, and I’m staring at an alluring mask. “Yup. Not your best friend, I guess. Feel like denying it again, huh?”

“Chevelle—”

“No! Every year, while you were in Scotland for summers and the holiday seasons, I would be at home with my *mom*.” I grit my teeth on the unnecessary title. “I spent every single second waiting for you. Low and behold, you had your second best friend, a second girlfr—”

“*Och, shite.*” Leith grits his teeth, muttering in Gaelic.

“Erika kissed you!”

“We were fourteen, Chevelle. It was her birthday. Her father—”

“Is a McFarland. Perfect for your family,” I snap.

“Ya know what? Mam always offered to take ye to Scotland when we were kids. She asked for a letter a *hunner* times. Would’ve got it notarized to take ye on the *feckin’* plane. She asked yer mam—”

“Not my—” I bite my tongue. “I know, baby. But I had no idea there was an Erika until ...” Until I had fifty-five pounds of baby weight all over my body. “Leith, you kept her from me. Then I found out the two of you shared a kiss.”

“It was nae big deal. A *feckin’* peck! I felt sorry for her, and stop looking at me like that, Chevelle! I told ye that she knew about ya from day one. Ye thought of me every second, when I was away, well I *feckin’* talked ‘bout ya until I saw yer gorgeous face again. So, by the time I came home, I dinna think about Erika. I thought about my hen.”

“Your hen,” my voice fades. Why am I tormenting my husband? I’m sure Erika fell in love with him when they were children. She has eyes, and I have an Eros, Phalia, Ludus, Agape, Mania—definitely a manic love for my husband. I huff. “You’re supposed to be mine, Leith.”

“My word stands, Chevelle. Ye’re mine.” Frustrated, Leith clasps my shoulders. The restrained strength, the determination in his eyes begs me to give him a chance.

All I want to do is cave, love him hard, per the usual. Coldness creeps into my heart. I tell myself to use his

connection to Erika as my sole reason to guard my heart. “Whatever, Leith. I’m not discussing this in the presence of your parents.”

I stalk out of the sitting room. The towering ceilings make every word echo as I tell Leith, “Go away so I can think!”

“*Wit’s* the matter with the two of ye?” Nan asks. Damn, she’s following us.

Leith and I shout contradictory words. While he’s hot on my heels, his mother’s pursuing the two of us.

I’ve made it to the row of guest rooms on the opposite side of the living room.

Leith stops. “Mam, I’ll handle this.”

I open the door to the guest room across the way, twisting the knob’s lock. I slam the door right in Leith’s face.

“Leave me alone!” I shout. *Great.* Childish antics. Now, I’m the one locked in a room.

LEITH

“CHEVELLE!” I SHOUT, SLAPPING AN OPEN PALM AGAINST THE wood. After a few beats, I lean against the door and mumble a silent apology. There’s nary a peep on the opposite side of the door. I head off toward my fifteen-year-old *brathair*’s, Jamie, room.

Camdyn is standing in the hallway, leaning against the door. He’s running the flame of a lighter along the length of a joint.

“The *feck* are ye doing?”

“Open your eyes, bro. Can’t you see I need some chill?” He sniffs. “I’m preparing it for later if you want in. This ain’t cheap shit.”

I roll my shoulders, unable to deny the truth in his logic.

“By the way, Dad hates us?”

“Da hates me. Ye, not so much. Give him time to cool down.”

“Nah, I acknowledge my faults. Same goes for you. Except in your case, it’s called being noble. And *that shit* has gotten us into *this shit*.”

“*Och, feckin’* philosophy from my wee *brathair*.”

“I can’t stand that word *wee*. Ain’t nothing *wee* about me. Need references? Ask all the cute bitches at my school,” he

says as I open the door to Jamie's room.

"Bitches. I can't stand that word," I counter, closing Jamie's door in his face, or perhaps not. Cam's already walking away.

On the edge of the bed, Mia lies on her stomach, propped up on her elbows. Cartoons have replaced her tears with a sloppy smile. My youngest *brathair*, Jake, laughs with her. Thirteen-year-old Lachlan looks up gloomily.

"Everything's fine," I mutter.

"Is Erika dead?" Lachlan whispers.

"She ain't dead," Jamie cuts in.

"Nae. She's strong." I start to rustle his hair. When he doesn't stop me, much as he's been doing recently, I finish by pulling him into a hug.

"Everything'll work out." I wink, punching his chest softly. "Be tough."

Da must not have taken Lachlan under his wing yet. I crouch down in front of Mia.

"That was so much fun, Daddy. Uncle Cam jumped me, and then we army crawled around! I've never—"

"*Wheesht!*" I snarl. Her excitement's infuriating.

While Mia's bottom lip trembles, tears as fresh as the water in the loch gleam across her face.

"*Och*, lassie, forgive yer da." I grip her face. "Ye did good, listened to yer auld uncle. But when ye hear a sound like tha ..." I pause. The words jumble in my throat. Da taught me how to respond in a firefight. My wee *brathairs* all acted accordingly, too. Still, one can never be prepared. This was something I never wanted for my *weans*. And not because of Chevelle, we were in harmony in this regard.

"Ye will never hear that sound again," I assure her. "But ye did good, Mia."

I plant my lips on her forehead. "Listen to all yer uncles."

She nods.

“Tell me if yer mam decides to,” I clear my throat, “leave with ye.”

“Okay, Daddy.”

Settling back on my haunches, I give my girl my biggest smile. “Hey, where’s Da’s heart?”

Wiping the fallen tears from her eyes, Mia points to her stomach.

“Dinna be *daftie*, my heart is right here with yers.”

“I know.” She giggles.



BRODY PACES THE RUNNER RUG OUTSIDE OF THE DRAWING room when I return. When I give him a quizzical look, he responds, “Da kicked me out. Said he’s handling all our problems.”

“*Feck, brathair*, I’m—”

“Nae, this happens sometimes. I’m just glad not to be solo this round.” He folds his beefy arms. “So, ye dinna have any idea where the *arsehole* is?”

“I could.” I rub my hands together, contemplating how I cracked Yates’ code. “Could be minutes or longer. But I’d rather show Da that I’m nae *feck* up.”

I grip the door handle and enter. Da’s moving the phone from his ear. Mam regards him as if waiting for him to share a bit of news. I stare at my father with intense resolve. “I’ll fix this.”

His gaze rolls away from mine.

“Big Brody,” Nan says.

Silence.

“*Brody. Boy.*” She clips each word.

At that, he regards her with a furious expression. “I’ve seventy-two hours to speak with the head of the Roman family.”

My hand slides across the back of my neck in confusion. “Da, I dinna know anything about—”

“Nae! I suspect ye ken nothing about nothing!”

“I know nothing about nothing? Da, am nae *feckin’* bairn,” I say slowly.

“Leith, yer tone,” Mam says.

“I’ve the utmost respect for my clan and my Da. But I’ll fix this. Got myself into it, I’ll get myself out of it.”

Da places his steepled sausage fingers to his lips. “Look me in the eye. Tell me, is Chevelle aware of the Roman family?”

“Nae,” I reply. “The man who did this is Douglas Yates. All I have to do is track him. I did it before, and I can do it again.”

“Track him?” Da laughs. “Like a bloodhound, aye?”

“Yates?” Mam mumbles.

I glower at Da’s sardonic sneer. “The *bawbag* who shot at us. He must’ve hired these Romans. He did the same to Wendy, an attorney.” I clear my throat since it doesn’t matter. “I had him before. I’ll find him again.”

“Ye did it before?” Da’s voice bellows. “So, ye’re telling me some deid *ned* caused this catastrophe? Shot my house, shot at yer *brathairs*, yer wife, yer ma, yer bairn, aye! *Shot Erika*. Because ye made him suffer excruciating pain, *and ya took his life!* He’s a ghost come to torment ye from the depths of hell?”

“Aye! I had him.” Sniffing, I admit, “He got away. My mistake.”

Da lets his head fall back. He laughs. “Aye. Yer mistake. Yer a six *feckin’* foot mistake.”

That hurts like tiny jabs to the heart with a paring knife. I roll my eyes. *Wit the feck* else can I do?

Mam hisses, “Big Brody!”

“*Wit?*” he booms. “These *shites* came from my *feckin’ baws*. Today, I’m nae longer proud to say it.”

I hang my head, running a hand along the back of my neck.

Da taunts, “Leith, this fellow who eluded ye. Now, he’s a *clan* problem. Though, the *bampot’s* not the lad I’m looking for. As I’ve said, I need to be having a meeting with the Romans. One of the oldest families from Italy, a supposed good friend of mine, just executed a hit on us—er, a warning of sorts—if you’d like to get technical.”

Brody grunts. “A warning?”

“Any of ye deid? Nae, son. Were it not a warning, I’d be scraping my boys off me perfectly mowed lawn! Dinna get me started on the look on my granddaughter’s face because then I’d fight that Roman all the way down to hell!”

“Love, make nae statements about a place ye rather not end up.” Mam clasps her cross pendant, gesturing for me to sit.

I exhale, sinking into the stuffed sofa across from them. I close my eyes, listening to Mam.

“Clearly, Brody, our son has more issues than what we have been made aware of.”

“Mam,” my older *brathair* says, just entering the room. “We’re sure it’s Yates. He’s a tricky bastard. Can’t be the Romans.” I look to Brody and assume he’s been listening at the door.

“I’ll find him,” I vow. “Bring him for clan reckoning.” *Like I should have done from day one.*

“Aye, my sons,” Mam encourages, “together ye will find this Yates lad. Our clan was blessed in numbers. We are the perfect mix of chaos and love. I’ll not doubt our capabilities. Neither one of ye are a lad apart from yer clan. Aye?”

While Brody and I agree, Da's a silent force.

Mam concludes the fuzzy speech, yet her eyes are cemented in tortured thoughts. "Once ye've made Douglas Yates comfortable, Leith, I'd love to meet him before his last breath."

"I will." I stand. It's time to pull off the *feckin'* duct tape and stitch myself up.

"Yer father and I will handle the Romans for Chevelle."

For Chevelle? Wit? Instantly, I'm rendered speechless. On a pair of weak legs, my *arse* finds the seat. My gaze tracks between my parents. Mam has reclaimed her affectionate demeanor since mentioning Yates' death. Even Da does not regard me with utter shame, but he's not looking my way at all. Something's wrong.

"*Wit* are ye talking 'bout?" I demand. "My wife has nothing to do with this."

Da tosses a daggered gaze in my direction. "She may very well have nothing to do with the Yates fellow who slipped through yer fingers. But our darling daughter-in-law, whom we love and will always protect, has everything to do with the warning we just received."

Mam runs a hand along Da's jaw. "That's not fair, Big Brody. Those were her father's sins that angered the Romans. Years after his death, though, I can't make *heids* or tails of it. But aye, we will right the wrongs of Chevelle's father."

CHEVELLE

NOT HEARING A SOUND, I SLIP OUT OF THE GUEST BEDROOM. I make my way upstairs, meandering along the hallway. Memories of whispering with Leith and the sound of my heartbeat when he snuck me into his old bedroom flood my thoughts. How could he set fire to our happiness? The thought of him with Erika runs deeper than I can even discern. It's a visceral, toxic fear.

For the thousandth time, my mind toys with how my momma missed opportunities to leave Daddy. She could have saved her own life, my misery too.

I move swiftly down the hall and knock on Jamie's door. He opens it and greets me with a hug. Since he's unaware of my sneaking around, I step inside, pulling the door closed behind me.

I'm attacked with hugs by all of Leith's brothers. Lachlan and Rory are on the verge of tears. Nine-year-old Jake, who's the youngest, has a bottom lip that won't stop trembling.

"C'mon, Jake, you're okay." I kiss the top of his head. "You did good, keeping your niece safe."

Jamie begins to mutter, "He didn't do any—"

I give him a wink as Mia jostles herself up my leg. I reach down, one arm around her, pulling her up. She's so tiny and soft that I gulp down the fear of losing her.

“You mean so much to me.” I glance at them all. “You’re all such good kids. I love you boys so much.”

“Are ya leaving my brother?” Jamie asks.

Not sure. I shake my head and settle onto the computer chair at the desk and pull out my phone.

I never had a sister, but Justice has weaseled herself into a similar role. I try her number but have to leave a voicemail. Reluctantly, I apologize for how I haven’t reached out since her move, then chicken-out of telling her why I called.

Chewing my lip, I watch the children. Jamie’s morose eyes keep looking at me for confirmation that all’s well.

I can’t walk away from Leith today, no matter how momentarily satisfying it would be to hurt him—because hurt people *hurt people*. I can’t cry here because if he sees even the faintest puffiness or red-rimmed eyes, I’ll break.

“Did you guys eat breakfast?” I ask. Though mixing a drink centers me, and I doubt I’ll ever be sane again, I decide cooking could do the same.

“No,” Jake cuts in. “We eat at school.”

Rory says, “I think class started already, though.”

Mia brags, “I had McDonalds.”

Her declaration breeds a riot amongst the brothers. Laughing, I have to calm them all down. Funny how food invokes such positive emotions.

“What about pancakes?” I place on the same smile I’d give patrons at the bar. I could be half-dead inside and pop a grin on my face.

“Uh, yeah!” Mia and Jake say in unison.

As I stifle a yawn, I’m getting orders for various kinds of cereal. Jamie, the eldest of the bunch, wants a ham and cheese omelet. I consent to everyone’s personal order like I’m the cook at your run-of-the-mill diner. A distraction will help us all.



“WE NEED TO TALK,” LEITH ORDERS. IT’S ALMOST TWO HOURS later because some pancakes required chocolate chips, others nuts. Lachlan, who’s allergic to nuts, wanted oatmeal. So, now, I’m shoving another pot that had oatmeal into the sink.

“Chevelle, I need ye to be reasonable.”

“Let’s not go there, Leith.” I toss the wooden spoon into the sudsy water as well. Seeing red, I dare to glower at his handsome face. “We’ve been married for four years. I’ve never loved anyone but you. Never even crossed my mind to fuck someone else *until* early this morning.”

Blood rushes in my ears, pounding erratically. Leith regards me like I stabbed him in the back with a knife and had the audacity to turn the motherfucker 360 degrees.

I catch a case of whiplash as Leith scoops me up over his shoulder.

“Put me down!” I yell.

“*Wit* will ya do?”

“I’ll kill you!” I snarl, ass in the air.

Beneath my stomach, muscles in Leith’s shoulder smooth over as he laughs. “*Och*, we’re in this bloody predicament because of yer not wanting me to kill—ouch! *Feck*, ye bit!”

I bite him again. Leith drops me onto the couch. Nan shoos the kids out of the area. Shamefully, I wait for the little ones to scurry out of the room before proceeding with my tantrum.

“I don’t want to be here. You doing your family business got bullets flying at my ass!” I fold my arms. “When everyone’s ready to act civilized, I’m getting a divorce.”

“Divorce?” All the rage funnels into him, bottled up tight. Licking his thick lips, Leith smiles down at me. “Nae, Chevelle. Very amusing and dramatic, though. Never gonna happen.”

“Too bad.”

“As ye said, I never loved anyone but ya. I’ll not love another lass in this lifetime.”

Rolling my eyes, I remind him of what I also said about fucking someone else.

“Did ye?” At his sides, Leith’s large fists look like anchors fit for a cruise liner.

“Should have. I should catch up with you. How many times—”

“Chevelle, stop being childish. Ye dinna know what ye’re talking about.”

“Who’s all sleeping with Erika, huh?” *What hurts worse?* Is it his cheating or his family’s deception? Or the fact that I’m capable of digging deep down into my father’s roots—the obsessive, killer love.

“Preposterous!” Nan cuts in. She’s returned to the room now, and one hand rests on her wide hip. I feel as if she tried to give us a moment. Behind her, my sworn enemy, Brody, starts heading toward the kitchen but stops.

“Erika has a key to the house,” I retort. “Comes and goes. Nan, maybe you should watch her with Big Brody?”

At my insinuation, Nan purses her lips, huffing through her nostrils. A few beats pass before she cautions, “Chevelle, I’ve the mind to give ye a skelping like ye’re my wee *wean*.”

In shame, I lower my gaze. *Could I just be jealous that Erika melds into a family I was afraid to love?* I haven’t reflected on that thought for a second when Brody cuts in. “Erika’s *my* woman!”

He and Leith exchange glances.

Mere seconds ago, I was ready to toss the *drama queen* crown. Now, I sense deception and cackle. “Hmmm, last night, you were ready to play mediator. Today, you’re the same old lying ass, Brody.”

Leith exhales heavily. “Nae, Erika has no interest in any of us.”

“Yeah.” I choke on a sob. “Lie to my face, huh?”

“Chevelle, sweetheart,” Nan says, “he may have made a few mistakes as of recent, but neither he nor Brody have slept with the lass. I can assure ya. Our Erika has a funny way about her. She’s got an eye for her own.” The blank look on my face prompts Nan to add, “She’s gay, sweetheart.”

“How’d ya know?” Brody asks.

“I know just about all there is, except for the Yates lad. Nevertheless, I’ll acquaint myself with him, from innards to bone matter soon enough. Chevelle, Erika just has a problem with how detached ye are with the clan.”

I rear back as if slapped. “What does that mean?” *Damn, I’m so on the defense.* I wish I can take back my words. Nan’s patience is only going to last so long. I stop and think about what’s been said so far. Erika’s sexual orientation. Erika worried about my attachment to the clan. I groan, inwardly. It makes perfect sense. Hell, I was having this epiphany before Brody decided to jump in and cover for Erika. I am detached from the clan. It’s what I’ve always done—love them from a distance. Erika moved to California and melded in instantly, became part of the clan. She belonged in a way I didn’t, and it hurt. But the driving factor behind the madness controlling me is how my family was already destroyed. There’s no way I’d survive losing another one. And there were and are so many ways I could lose them. It’s the nature of their business.

“*Och*, I have nary a problem with her decision. To each their own, but she’s her da’s *wean*. Speaking of which, Erika’s da, Ewan, isn’t aware of her sexual preferences. He *never* will, at least, not from the lips of a MacKenzie.”

The tone of Nan’s voice implies that this is the final time we will discuss Erika’s love interests. She levels me with a serious, empathetic stare.

“Sweetheart, now, I advise you and Leith go have a private discussion about a few matters. Mind yer sweet Mia before

making any rash decisions.”

LEITH

MAM'S SUGGESTION MUST'VE GONE OVER CHEVELLE'S HEAD. My wife saunters toward my old bedroom. She's already turned the lock on the knob. The door collides with my foot when I place it in the open space.

"*Feck!*" I grit as she attempts to slam the door with my foot in it. I move my foot and almost have my hand through the door when it slams again.

"Let me in, Chevelle! Ye hear me, hen?" After my *feckin'* da made me feel like *shite*, I spent hours tracking down Yates' location. I'd wanted to focus on the boom my parents dropped about the Romans, but Da's words were all I ever needed. The fuel. The drive. I'll not be a humiliation to him any longer. I found Yates and gave his current position to my clan.

I've started to fix one wrong. Now, for the other one, which is the most important to me. I pummel the sides of my fists into the wood. "I will break the bloody door down!"

"Just stop," she groans. "You won't even give me a moment to deal!"

"Nae, I won't!" Call me selfish, but Chevelle's not grappling with *shite*. She'll get lost in her *feckin'* head, and I'll not have it. My shoulder slams into the door. Twice is all it needs for the doorframe to fracture. I reach my arm inside, unlock the knob, and enter. When I try to close the door, it

slams to the ground. Grumbling, I pick it up and place it against the frame.

Seated at the edge of the bed, Chevelle silently eyes me. I give a huff of defeat.

“You’re a *barbarian*.” She emphasizes the last word, disgust heavy in her tone.

“Would’ve been better for you and me to come to those terms sooner.” Heading over, I dip my head to look her square in the eye. “There’s a man who—”

“Save it.”

“*Who blackmailed—*”

“Oh, was he blackmailing you about your affair with Erika? Well, you didn’t have to worry about that. My eyes didn’t lie.” Her warm brown gaze is dazzling in a torrent of tears. “I’m exhausted. May I have some time alone? Please, Leith.”

“Not until we see eye to eye. Ye saw nothing. It was out of context, and you turned it into something.” Wriggling my jaw, I go in for the kill. Aye, her statement about wanting to screw someone else might as well have done me in. “Who’s the *fecker*?”

She stutters. “I was just—”

“Who!” I bark.

“Michie,” Chevelle mutters, caressing her throat. “I was angry. That’s all.”

I close my eyes slowly, letting the gravity of her words pull me under. The riptide snatches my heart out. I had suspicions that Michie wanted my hen. But I knew Chevelle loved me. She was mine. I’d never have guessed that she had feelings for him too. All this time, I thought I was a lucky *nugget*. Nae, that deid *feck*, Jiang, he was lucky. At least he was molded in cement. I’m a million miles under the ocean. My heart’s *feckin’* shark food.

Nodding, I rationalize, “Okay, so I’ll kill him.”

“No.”

“Nae?” My eyebrow lifts. A million ways that Michie can die cease from running through my mind. “Whaddaya mean, nae?”

“He’s got a cranky demeanor, but he’s *honest*. He doesn’t lie to me. Besides, nothing happened. No harming him.”

I’m on her in seconds, my hand about her throat. The soft thump quickens beneath my thumb. “That *arsehole* touch *my* pussy?”

“I can’t bre—”

“Did that *motherfeckin’ bawbag* touch what belongs to me?” I stop constricting her airway for a faint second.

“No!” Chevelle gasps.

My hands clutch her cheeks, puckering that precious mouth of hers. “Did he give these lips a smooch?”

I press my mouth to hers. They’re coloring a deeper shade merlot by the second. Bonny, big tears are in her eyes. My Grand’ was right. I’ve never seen a sight so beautiful, and I murmur that bit of truth. “God must’ve taken a long holiday when He created ye. I love ye so much.”

“Lei ... Lei ...”

“I love ye, so I’m about to make things right between us,” I assure her. “The bastard who ruined what we have is on his way to us, Chevelle. Took almost two hours, but I found him. A call was made throughout the clan. The closest lad in his general vicinity was dispatched to grab the *motherfecker*.”

“Shut up.”

“Nae, I’m telling ye the clan way. *Shite* gets handled when I’m not running like a lone wolf. I’m a MacKenzie, Chevelle. Ye too. For too long ye’ve denied me of my right to—”

“Then leave me!”

My teeth sink into Chevelle’s bottom lip. While she assaults me with slaps, my fingers run the length of her ribs, down to the curve of her hip. I bring my hands back up over

her flat stomach to her breasts, clutching the heavenly globes. She once fed my bairn, gave my wee *wean* all the nourishment she needed. All the while, Chevelle's begging me to *leave* her.

I press a kiss where my teeth embedded her plush mouth. "Ye and I'll never leave each other. It's impossible. We're one. My heart is in yer chest, lass. So, I'm deid without ye."

"Are you—you're trying to kill me!" She gasps for air. "Like my dad did my mom."

"Maybe I thought about it for a split second." A hard dose of silence fills the space between us. My soft sigh breaks the stifling stillness. "But nae, yer da didna murder yer mam, nor did he turn the gun on himself. They were murdered, Chevelle."

CHEVELLE

I HEAR A HEART-WRENCHING TONE THAT'S FOREIGN EVEN TO me. It's not until my lungs ache that I realize I'm screaming at the top of my lungs. I'd threatened my husband to leave me, to divorce me. Now, I'm broke down, telling him to take back his lies.

I call him everything under the sun, even a leprechaun. It's like a possession has seized me. "You're a lying, cheating bastard. Don't you ever tell me that. My daddy killed ..."

My throat is so raw it cracks. In the back of my mind, I consider why I'm fighting the man I love over this? Why would I honestly accept that Dad murdered Momma? Because, if what Leith says is true, it would explain why half my body, my heart and soul, still cling to Dad's soul, still senses a profound goodness. *But that isn't there, right?* Lady told me, over and over. My dad killed my mom because he loved her too much. And my mom cheated, but she never left. Her dependency on my father was her cage.

"He didna do it!" Leith's voice is hard gravel, weighing heavy on my mind. "Mam told me."

"I just asked you for a moment, Leith. Get off and leave me alone."

The full weight of him is off me in a second. I gulp in air. My sore throat is so dry I hack. He stalks into the en suite

bathroom then returns with a stainless-steel cup of tap water. Ignoring his attempt, I sit against the wall, my legs pulled up to my chest.

“He loved yer mam just as ye mind it.”

The fabrication flies from my mouth. “I do not remember that.”

“Heh, all ye mind is his love for yer mam. Think back. Did yer da ever raise a hand to hit her? Have a harsh word for yer mam?”

“No. But men are deceptive.” Our eyes link.

Leith’s cerulean eyes glow like burning embers of guilt.

“I’d appreciate time to digest our new normal, Leith.”

My husband settles on the edge of the bed next to me. When I clamber to my feet, his huge hand commands my thigh, clamps down. In a low pitch, he orders, “Chevelle, the longer ye sit and simmer alone, ye’ll be the spiteful wee girl who was denied everything she ever loved—yer family.”

“Let me—”

“Nae!” His savage clinch causes me to pant. “I’d like to say the day I met ye, ya had a new family. Ya had a clan. But ye were too stubborn for them all. I’ll just settle for the truth. For years, I’ve been yer family. Mia’s yer family. Ye’ll not be ruining *us* by stewing in resentment.”

By now, my fingernails are clawing Leith’s forearm, counteracting his grip on my femur. “Resentment my ass. I trusted in you!”

“Okay, I’ll begin with Yates.”

A sharp sting streaks across the surface of my leg when Leith lets up. He encircles his arm around my waist, locking us hip to hip. I start to push off the bed but consent with a twisted mouth. Running is useless.

As if obliged, he pats my leg. “When ye’re ready, I’ll tell ya how I’m aware yer da and mam were murdered together.

Unless ye want to refute it, say ya saw it? Like ye saw me cheating?”

Seconds pass. When I refuse to dispute either subject, Leith shares how he came home with a dead coworker, murdered a computer tech, and let Yates slip out of his grasp.

At the part where Yates manipulated Leith into believing we’d died, I lower my gaze.

“Then ye arrived at the auld house,” he concludes.

“Oh, you’re done? What happened to Yates is on his way here?” My gut clinches at the sad truth of just who we are. Big Brody created his sons for destruction, my husband included, and I’ve always been a toxic mistake waiting to implode. We’ve had our fair share of beautiful wars in the past. This one’s different. If I don’t yield, I sense this will be the very one that breaks us. Yet, I can’t shut myself up. *Damn you, Lady, counseling instead of toys would’ve come in handy right now.*

The flats of my palms shove against my husband’s chest challenging him. “So, Leith, someone from the clan went to wrangle Yates up like a damn hog and will drop him at your feet!” *Then you’ll do something lawless. You will become that, and one day, I’ll lose you to jail or death—like my father.*

“Aye!” Leith’s piercing blue eyes are a forewarning of the ruthless antics his enemy will come to know. He climbs on top of me. I’m strong, but I’m no match for my husband as his mouth devours mine.

“Stop.”

“Okay,” he groans, with his thick, Scottish accent. His mouth lands against my neck, marking me with gentle sucking bites. “My, sweet Crabbit Chevelle, ye may know how good yer pussy tastes after I drink ye down then kiss yer mouth. But ye dinna know how good revenge tastes.”

His mouth draws against mine. Our tongues pick up where we left off, fighting each other. I run my fingers through the crown of Leith’s hair, massage at his scalp, groaning and caressing. Seconds later, a heaviness weighs my chest. With a

paranoid start, I yank at Leith's hair. "Did that mafioso scene where Yates was taken unfold before or after your father ...?" *Oh, gawd, Chevelle, shut up already.* But we aren't supposed to be this type of people. We're good people. Only one thing separates us from my parents' mistakes—not letting a single sin into our life.

"I've had it up to here with ye!" Leith levels a hard hand above his head. With a furious snarl, my husband settles back on the bed, locking us side by side again. A sympathetic chord elicits from my soul to that of my soul mate. Leith carried a heavy burden, all alone, when assuming Mia was dead. This is the nightmare Leith attempted to share when I sharpened the blade on his Audi. Then Big Brody lobbed his insults too. I offer a silent apology.

Leith regards me through the eyes he once had when we were kids. He made a mistake, and he wanted to make things right. Though I'll love him for the rest of my life, he confided in Erika. That hurts. I need time to let that go.

Keeping my gaze low, I mumble, "I have a headache."

Leith stands and leaves the room. Gripped by the story, I'm still seated at the edge of the bed a few minutes later. Leith hands me two Tylenol, then places the bottle before his open mouth to crunch on a few more of them. I almost ask what he needs them for, but thinking about the shoot-out and Big Brody's hostility, it makes sense he has a headache, too. While he repositions the broken door, this time leaning it against the frame, I down my pills with the stale cup of water.

"I'm *wabbit*." Leith yawns, settling on the edge of the bed beside me. His hand reaches for mine, but my palm isn't to be found. I've slid it into my jean pocket. "Okay, that's the game ye want to play?"

"I need a moment," I grit out.

With a scoff, Leith repositions himself, lying down. His head plants in my lap, arm scooped around me, locking me in place.

Against the headboard, I grit out, "I'll bite you again."

An azure gaze that takes my breath away opens for a fraction of a moment, and he warns, “Do it.”

I run a hand over my throat, still throbbing from the pressure he applied. My eyes burn as another bout of hot, fiery tears start to fall. Leith groans about how he hasn’t slept in ages.

Don’t sleep, I tell myself. *Don’t dream*. Like Leith, last night’s rest eluded me. But still, I won’t sleep. Though I only heard the gunshots all those years ago, vivid nightmares have filled in the gaps, showing me what was unseen. By avoiding sleep, I will keep that night from unfolding in my dreams.



SOMETIME LATER, I HEAR A KNOCK. MY FIRST SIGHT IS Leith’s effervescent eyes. He’s smiling. Both of us are lost in a familiar, pleasant past. Star-crossed, teen lovers who snuck to bed together. I moan, snuggling against him. The present reappears when the door slams to the ground. Leith untangles from me, a gun in his hand.

“*Och, feck*. I just woke up.” He rubs his eyes.

Brody eyes me, then his brother, and says, “The snake is here.”

“Code words still?” I ask.

Exasperated, Brody snarls, “Chevelle, ye’re still riding my *baws!*?”

Leith bellows, “Get out! Dinna talk to my wife—”

Brody gestures to where the door handle should exist, huffs, then strolls away. Leith starts to pull me into him, and I turn my head. Recent events crumble down around us.

“*Wit?* Ye was just hugging me. Stop being dramatic.”

I push at Leith’s chest. “I was asleep. Besides, you’ve spent God knows how long with your antics. I can’t have a moment?”

“Not unless I say so, hen.” With a predatory smile, Leith’s lips descend on mine. I turn my face to the side, denying his tender touch. His breath caresses my neck, heated. His strong body radiates against mine. Detesting the desire, I implore myself not to focus on my arousal, already spiraling out of control.

“Everything ye know, I taught ya, and ye never complained before. Shall we?” His brutal fingertips slide the length of my throat, locking into place. “If it’s yer fetish, I’m willing to switch up a few things, my bonny *feck* toy.”

His mouth is too damn close, and my sex stirs for him, relishing in the dirty talk. In a monotonous tone, I say, “I still want a divorce. If you’re intent on being a murderer li-like my ...” *The man who created me.* “Then I want nothing to do with you, Leith.”

“He didna. But yer da was on to something. Ye shared how he loved yer mam so madly. How ya never saw him hurt her. Well, I won’t hurt ye, Chevelle. I’ll bloody *feckin’* die for ye. I’m also willing to murder anyone ye have eyes for, including yer auld boss before I ever let ya go.”

Through gritted teeth, I declare, “You can’t keep me.”

Leith’s tongue teases the curve of my mouth. When I don’t concede, his teeth grind into my bottom lip with enough force to grind bone. A whimper escapes my lips, but his tongue tosses the sound right back into a sweet, cruel oblivion as he assaults my mouth.

The kiss is ravenous. Possessive. Defiant. Pure torture. Leith’s kiss cuts through my tenacious shield, piercing my soul and spirit. When he speaks, I have to hunker down and concentrate to recall our argument. “Of course, I can keep ye, Chevelle. I’m a make money kind of man, so it’d be no problem at all to keep ye locked up. That’s not a joke, sweetheart; that’s a bloody *feckin’* promise.”

His thumb caresses the hollow of my throat. When I attempt to deny him again, his light, affectionate touch tightens. I snarl, “What about Mia?”

“Ye’re Mia’s mam. Caring for her is yer job.”

“So, she’ll see me locked up?”

“Give me a little time to think about that.” He jumps off the bed. “The snake is Douglas Yates, by the way.”

I toss a defiant, “Who cares?”

Leith’s shoulders lift. “Well, I’m still telling ye. Nae more secrets between my lovely wife and me.”

Curling into a ball in the bed, I toss over my shoulder, “Stop being ornery. Give me a friggin minute, Leith!”

“Nae. I’m being transparent, hen. I need ya to get outta yer *feckin’* heid! Ye’re so wrapped up in the past. I’m Mia’s father, not yers! That’s the issue, aye? Ye’re scared I’ll leave one day, disappear?”

The audacity of it all! I offer a few blinks in response. Leith’s thick chest softly collapses in relief of hitting the nail on the head. *My abandonment*. More tender this time, he adds, “And if ya wanna see it that way, wanna believe the lies, then aye, I’m a murderer like yer da, but—”

“But?” I catch his gaze, swallowing a boulder of unease. “What makes you different from *him*?”

Leith’s voice drops to a poignant whisper, twining a gruff that’s as rough and soft as satin. “I’ll not ever let ye go.”

Internally, I’m shaking like a leaf. Our love scares the ever-loving daylights outta me. The desire I have for him. The fear of him leaving or dying. The fear of what my love could do to him.

“Just so ye’re not wondering, my Crabbit Chevelle, the moment I leave ye, I’m gonna torture Yates until his last breath. While I do, I’ll figure out the dynamics of us because there will forever be ye and me—*together*. Nae more silly vows.”

I chuckle. “Silly? Being law-abiding is silly?”

“Being someone other than I am, that’s silly!”

At the bass in Leith’s voice, I turn around and regard him.

“I’m a MacKenzie, Chevelle! And another thing, I’m pretty good at troubleshooting with blood on my hands.”

Looking like a stranger I’ve never met, Leith steps over the wooden door on the ground and stalks from the room. I grind my teeth. Leith MacKenzie was right about one thing. My father’s eyes were drowning in love for my momma. After all these years of reflection, had I gotten it wrong? If so, I’ve tormented my husband in vain for years. And if Daddy hadn’t murdered Momma, who killed them and why?

LEITH

FOR AGES, I'VE DENIED MYSELF CERTAIN BASIC RIGHTS AS A MacKenzie, which I'll nae longer abstain from. Chevelle once called me the Funny Scot. Now, the Savage Scot has taken his reign. My inner beast's unbridled. I'm in the basement of my parents' home. Yates was brought to us on his knees. A cousin of mine who lives in San Bernardino found him at a private airport. He'd made use of one of those offshore accounts to pay a crooked pilot for a flight out of the country. That's how I found him, following the money.

The wee *fecker* was in the hangar, ready to board when my cousin arrived. Had I been working alone, that *scabby wankstain* would've fled.

Now, Yates is no longer capable of screaming, not that his cries had any bearing. These impenetrable vaulted walls hold ghastly secrets.

Blood drips from the tip of the steel hammer fisted in my hand. The broken skin at the wee lad's knees and legs reveals fractured bone from where the hammer has mauled him. The MacKenzie clan ain't just henchmen. Our da enlightened us on a few things, from current to historical forms of defeating an opponent. Brody and I read how English prisoners were tortured in Edinburgh as authorized by the Stuart monarchy. It had never been useful information, but I never had a taste for vengeance either. It's gone down very sweetly as of tonight.

I nudge Yates' feeble, sweat-stained chin with the hammer. "So, ye planned to use me to kill yer friends, Douglas? I was yer last step before leaving the country with the money ye stole from Phelps? I noticed that the scheming the two of ye had done through Infinity Corp stalled since the last *nugget* who ye blackmailed died."

A couple of beats pass before his head shifts side to side. In a curdled voice, he denies my assumption.

"So, what?" I snarl. "Was I to die the same way? In some seemingly freak accident, aye? Was I the last part of the puzzle? Ye use me to kill Phelps then run off into the sunset? Ye're not just a wee *bawbag*. Nae, ye're a coward!"

In a huff of exhaustion, Yates' eyelids fall.

"Nae?" I tap him with the flat of the hammer. "Wakey, wakey, mate."

I'm placing my thumb against the faint pulse at his neck when I hear footsteps. Brody appears at the farthest side of the room. "Damn, thought ye were Cam," I say.

"*Wit*, yer mate die? Mam won't appreciate that."

"Nae, not deid. Aye, I remember the skelping she gave Da the last time someone almost croaked under this roof."

Pawing at his beard, Brody looks over my work, nodding slowly. "Knew ye had it in ya. Now, did ye tell Chevelle the shootout was all her fault?"

"Nae!" I wag the hammer in his face. "Try me. Ye will find yerself on a *feckin'* slab next to this *ned*."

I sense my big *brathair* has more questions. Instead, Brody plucks up a utility knife, "May I?"

"He's all yers." I gesture. "*Wit's* yer plan?"

"I'll put a smile on yer mates' face. A nice Glasgow smile." Brody lifts the edges of Yates' mouth, creating a gnarly grin. When the *bampot* grouses awake, Brody says, "Simmer down, wee *wean*. They call me the surgeon. I'm bloody good at this."

At Brody's signal, I grip the top of Yates' cranium and his chin, holding him steady. The *nugget's* eyes widen. The sleep he sought is nowhere to be found. Brody finesses the tip of the blade against the corner of his mouth. My biceps bulge while I hold steady. Blood sprays over my hands. Brody makes quick work with the laceration, arching the knife until he's left a gaping scar in the shape of a smile. The *eejit* begins coughing on his own blood. I grab Yates' shoulder and shove him over until he's on his side.

"Easy does it," I sneer, giving his back a few hard slaps.

Brody tosses the knife onto the cart of doom and gloom. "*Wit* d'ye make of Mam's story?"

I sigh. "'Bout how Chevelle's da's business associate offed 'em?"

"Nae, Leith. Why? *Why* did her father's so-called good friend kill him and his wife? Was her da no better than us? Is that why she didna want ye in the family business?"

I gesture toward the sniveling *bawbag*, who's curled into a ball. He might as well be sucking his *feckin'* thumb. "Once this *arsehole's* ticker caves in, I'll be rectifying that, too."

"But Da is fixing the relationship with the Romans."

"So, what! I've hurt ..." I glance down. There's a level of vulnerability when mentioning my wife to anyone. I run a serrated blade across Yates' side, creating a series of tiny nicks. "I've hurt her so much. I'll *feckin'* die trying to figure it out."

Brody slams a hand on the tray. "But ye said Chevelle isn't interested in the truth."

"Too bad. We never had a lie between us before I met this *ned*," I growl, pricking Yates again. "This is my time to purge, Brody. Ye never gave a *feck* about Chevelle's feelings before. Dinna start now. My wife just met a new me a couple of hours ago. One she'll learn to love."

CHEVELLE

DESPITE MY STRUGGLE TO FLEE, I'D SLEPT IN LEITH'S ARMS. Still fatigued, I roused awake thirty minutes ago. I've showered and wear Leith's old PE sweats and a shirt. I head along the upstairs corridor to check on Mia and her cousins. The double doors to Leith's parents' room are open. Nan's nestled in the center of the bed, propped up by a throng of pillows. A forlorn cloud masks her face as she stares aimlessly at the television.

When she makes eye contact with me at the doorway, the morning's foolish events play through my mind. I wave a tentative hand. "Hey, Nan, can I talk to you for a second?"

Clearly stressed about Big Brody, the edges of her mouth fray in a tiny smile. "Get in. The sheets are clean, promise. I can't attest to how they'll be after Big Brody returns from his negotiating."

I climb into the firm padding of the bed. "I can't sleep."

"I remember a time when I couldn't sleep either. I'd get no peace, ear to the door, listening to the two of ye giggling."

A flush ascends my neck. "Leith and I never—"

"I know. I always harped. Nae disrespecting my house. Chevelle, I meant nae disrespecting ye, dear. Ye was a young lassie, with no mam—not to say ye didna have a good heid. And ye had the biggest stars in yer eyes for my son."

When Nan shares how Leith had the same mesmerized look, I swallow a boulder. I'm not quite prepared for a trip down memory lane, at least, not in the topic of my love story.

I change the subject. "I apologize for fighting in your home and on your lawn. And for threatening your son's life... for a series of actions that I'm not proud of. I was blindingly angry. I can't recall everything."

"The two of ye made a list of blunders today." Nan waves me away, laughing so hard her buxom shoulders shake. "Dinna worry so much. I've threatened Big Brody's life a *hunner* times."

"Ohhh."

"Ye're brightening my mood. I have work to do, but I sort of expected ye to come see me before I went down to meet ya know who."

I stifle my emotions about what's occurring in the family basement.

"They never die here, sweetheart. I'm keen about them disappearing in one of the boys' trunks before expelling their last breath. Nae ghost stories in this home."

"Okay," I murmur, still shocked.

Nan runs a hand over my tense shoulder. "Or are ya contemplating yer own ghost story? The one ye can't quite wrap yer brain around."

"He didn't kill my momma." I hesitate.

"Nae. Sweetheart. He didna. Now, I'm gonna mention Erika again."

I'm stone to her touch.

"Erika honestly just likes to push us all. Wants us to own our beliefs." Nan pats my shoulder. "Leith would never hurt ya."

"I know." My cell phone rings, although I focus on Nan while pressing the away button.

“I didna tell Erika the reason ye’re skittish around clan activities—yer parents and all. But she senses these things. Then she fights us to shed what we’ve hidden. That’s what a clan does. Support each other. But I shielded ye like my own *wean*.”

Fighting the imaginary vice around my throat, I gasp, “Why?”

“Years ago, I sat ya down, shared how yer adoptive mam continued to keep ya on account that ye’d come into money. I thought either ye had forgiven her, which makes ye an even bigger person than us all, or ye just weren’t ready. How I prayed it was the former.” The glow of the television screen softens Nan’s face and an otherwise daunting discussion. “Had ye told me it was the latter, I know in my heart of hearts that I would’ve not honored yer decision to spare her life. I would have killed her myself. Anyway, yer life had been hard enough. I didna think ye needed more pushin’. So, I protected ye as much as I could.”

I play with a lock of hair, missing Leith fiercely, and missing my parents with all of me. Missing the connection that I could’ve had with Nan all these years. Leith’s mother has been wonderful, but there was always a thin barrier between us.

“I’m lost, Nan. Leith’s always there for me.”

“When I fell in love with Big Brody, I pushed him away too. He was ruthless—a different breed than what was ingrained in me as a child.”

“What happened?”

“He was persistent. I was too fat to outrun him.” She grips the meat on her thighs.

I laugh so hard that tears slide down my cheeks.

“Big Brody showed me a side of him nae other had ever seen. So, I fell hard. Love changed me.”

I ponder her words for a moment. That’s the scary part of falling so hard. Justice suggested the opposite. I’m assuming the same scenario occurred for her and Lance.

She fell too hard.

My father fell too hard.

All I recall are times of elation between my parents, and I can't refute the love he had for her. So, he fell, smack down on his ass, in love. But what came next for them if my memories are tainted? I need time to think. Though I've slept most of the day, I faux yawn and excuse myself from the room.

Walking toward Jamie's room, I check my iPhone for the missed call. Justice left a voicemail. I listen.

"Hey, Chevelle, Justice here. I left town. I told myself not to call, but then when you left your message, I felt so bad."

Mia comes scurrying out of the doorway, rushing toward me with such energy I'm knocked back a few paces. Though unsettled, I'm still attempting to listen to the voicemail.

"Mommy, Uncle Cam ordered us pizza! Now, he's downstairs playing with Daddy."

"Okay, baby." *Why would Justice leave town?*

"Mommy, I said—"

The message ends, lacking further explanation. I run my hand over Mia's silky tresses. The unruly corks bounce back. "Listen, Mommy's worried about Justice." I try calling her number.

"Your friend?" Mia jumps along the elaborate design in the runner carpet.

"Yes, honey." I huff as the call goes to voicemail. Justice's voice sounded troubled. I redial the number.

"Mommy, I said, Jake and I bothered Cam so much he ordered pizza! And a pizza cookie with choc—"

"Shhhh!" The call connects. "Justice, are you okay?"

"I should be asking you the same." Her reply is her usual witty retort.

"I'm fine."

“Well, I tried you early this morning. I swear I thought I’d never hear your voice again.”

“Where are you?” I ask.

“There was something I didn’t tell you about me, Chevelle.”

Playing with the crown molding on the bedroom door, I find myself focused on her words. Call it intuition, but I can tell something is wrong, and Justice has become very important to me.

“I kept telling myself to leave it alone. Then you called, sounding so distraught. Now I feel like a bitch, bringing you into my—”

“Justice, where are you?”

“Some creepy hick town in New Mexico.” She’s muttering about having made another mistake when I cut her off.

“Tell me where you are exactly. Give me your address.”

“Eh, it’s not safe.”

I feel a pang of disappointment and reply, “Justice, I would never hurt—”

“Girl, Nah, I’m sorry. I mean, I know what family you married into. But I have,” she pauses, trepidation shades her voice, “someone bad. He’s been lurking around. Michie confirmed it last night. I’m not coming back.”

“Still, send your location.” I soften my tone.

“Mommy?” Mia jumps onto the balls of her feet, pulling at my ratty shirt.

“Shhh, Mia!” I reprimand, returning my attention to the cellphone. “Justice, I’m not getting off the phone until you share it.”

“Girl, this town is so raggedy I can’t use the internet while on the phone. There isn’t even wi-fi.”

“Alright, send it as soon as you get off. If you don’t, I’m calling you back, sis.”

There's a tremor in her voice when she responds, "Okay, sis."

I stare at the phone on the same lungful of oxygen when Justice's iPhone status is shared. I kiss a frowning Mia on the forehead and tell her that I have to go.



SILENTLY, I GRAB MY PURSE AND KEYS AND PULL INTO A jacket. When I close the front door behind me, the knob locks.

I waver the second I turn toward the road, sucking on a chilly inhale of air.

"There's no boogeyman with a Glock in hand," I mutter to myself, heading toward the Chevelle SS. Damn, I'm gonna burn through crazy gas traveling to New Mexico. My key jiggles into the door handle when a familiar masculine and very Scottish voice snarls, "Where ya think ye're goin', lass?"

At the threatening tone, I drop the keys. Closing my eyes for a split second, I bite a retort. I start to snatch the keys from the ground when Brody does it for me. He places them in his pocket.

"Don't make me kick your ass," I snarl.

"I miss the auld Chevelle who pinned me with lethal, bonny brown eyes but kept her mouth shut."

"It's a new day. I have somewhere to be."

Brody arches a brow. I place my hand on my hip, prepared to wait him out. I'd say there's a five o'clock shadow on his face, but he's always sporting a beard. Now, he's got tired, dark moons beneath his eyes. He smells good, though. He must've come from a shower.

Brody mutters, "Was on my way to sleep when I heard yer mate's sob story."

"Oh, so that's why you're wearing your best pair of jeans?" *And a flannel that's giving off brawny vibes,* but I refuse to say that.

“I’m going with ya.”

“No.”

“Me or Leith?” He leans an elbow against the Chevy. “Who should accompany ye? The one ye love to hate or the one ye hate to love?”

Fingers flexing, I cease the sudden need to slap the smirk off his face. “Why?”

“I dinna trust that bitch.”

In a few steps, I’m glaring up into his intimidating face. “Call my friend a bitch again.”

“Relax, wee one. As much as I’d like to screw her, we can’t trust her.”

I glance around. The street has reclaimed its peaceful, serene nature. Except, there’s this muscle-bound asshole. “*Little Brody*, what do you mean?”

“When ye drove off like a bat outta Hell, I tried yer friend. This morning, before meeting Leith here, I tried ya again there—at yer friend’s—since ye’d taken the Chevelle SS. And we couldn’t use LoJack.”

“So what?”

“I asked a fella in the same complex we dropped her off at. He said she’d moved.”

I arch a brow, not humoring him with a response. She moved the other day. However, I discerned from our conversation that it had something to do with the person she’s running from.

“The girl moved days ago. Where was she between then and now when she claims to have fled town?”

I lift my hands in exasperation. Brody holds out a set of keys.

“Hey, these aren’t—”

“They’re to my Silverado. Like I said the other night, Chevelle, I’m a different guy.”

“Sure.”

“Ye are my clan. I’ll be keeping ye safe, whether ye agree or nae.” Without warning, Brody tosses the keys to his truck toward me. I fumble to catch them before they hit me in the shoulder. “Also, lass, I’m gonna get a little shut-eye. Wake me when we pass the California state line.”

LEITH

IT IS THE WEE MORNING HOURS. YATES HAS CRIED, PLEADED, spun a greater web of deceit, and dropped what he assumes is another revelation that'll keep him alive.

“So, ye’re telling me,” I point a knife at him, “that ye thought I could be yer new business partner. That me, my clan, could come work for ye?”

“Yes.” He speaks in slow, labored pants. “The rookie cop—he was an accident. Shouldn’t have died. He had a family full of cops—all crooked. Then I searched your background. You have a big clan, Leith. Consider the opportunity.”

“*Bullshite*. Ye’re not a ‘shake a man’s hand’ type of pal. Ye’re a *daftie*, wee *bawbag*. Ye *fecked* over Phelps! *Wit* was Jiang accusing me of? That *shite* has yer name written all over it!”

“Phelps was ... cheating me, Le-Leith.” His eyes can hardly stay open. “Jiang was a little anxious. Listen, he was a good enough friend. Nevertheless—”

I wave a knife before his nose. “Get to the point!”

Yates gulps. “Okay! Phelps was only a benefactor. Jiang and I did everything. Phelps demanded the same piece of the fucking pie, Leith.”

“Eh, I dinna give a *feck* ‘bout yer schemin’ with the two of ‘em. Tell me why Jiang came after *me*.”

“You saw that guy, Leith. He was high-strung.” Yates takes on a tone like we’re auld mates. “A little birdy—*me*, if you’re not catching my drift—dropped him a short line. Let him think that you were on to him. Although I said Jiang was a good guy, he was also a liability. Thank you for that favor.”

I nod, aware that he’s ready to shove the *feckin’* banana in the tailpipe. *So, Yates thinks I’m a nugget?* That I was a pawn on a chessboard—one he can move.

“See,” he smiles weakly, “the two of us work well together. You helped me get rid of a nervous nut who could have blown a multi-billion-dollar operation. I got your Audi back for you. I gave you money. That’s just the start of two geniuses like us rubbing elbows. Now that’s settled, we can continue—”

“Yer scheme through Infinity Corp?” I lift a brow. “While everyone has evidence pointed at them. Everyone but ye.”

“No.” His tongue dips out over the dried blood from his lips. Irritation flashes in his eyes, but the lad’s smart enough to not sing an auld tune. Little sarcastic *fecker*. “Leith, I already said, Jiang and I were not above implication. *Remember*, Phelps was the only one with a billion degrees of separation. Jiang was a good guy. Had it not been for his paranoia, we’d be the three musketeers. Me, you, Jiang. But the two of us, along with your brothers—”

Clasping his hair, I lift him until he opens his eyes. “Look at me, bitch. Ye ran my wife off the road, and then ye tried to murder her and my daughter!”

“I just told Phelps to scare her,” he blubbers. “She wasn’t hurt. And th-they were-weren’t home. I was angry.”

“Aye. I did yer dirty work gettin’ rid of yer *friends*. Ye threatened my wife and bairn. *I’m* angry.”

I’m about to toss his spirit into the depths of Hell for another round and resurrect him with adrenaline again when I hear a crunch. I’d been so focused on Yates. I look up.

Camdyn takes another bite of his apple, regarding us with slight interest. My *brathair* tosses me a brand-new bottle of

pain reliever then addresses Yates. “Heard you had an IQ that’s off the charts.”

“Please help,” Yates groans.

“That’s my aim. I help people.” My *brathair* takes another bite of apple. “For another, eh, three days of life, you tell me what dangerous compound is in Apple se—”

“Amygdalin,” Yates shouts, spit and blood flying from his lips. “Apple seeds degrade into hydrogen cyanide.”

Camdyn sighs. “Damn, that’s correct.”

I’m washing down the handful of pills while Camdyn offers to play another game with my victim.

“So, geek, the next step is a history lesson,” my *brathair* says. “Scottish history, namely torture devices. I’ll up the fucking ante. This one is for a month. How would you like to live another thirty days?”

“Please,” Yates groans.

“Name the device used in my home country centuries ago. A victim’s leg was placed in this steel contraption. Wood was hammered between the gadget and the asshole’s leg, breaking and crushing bones. Name that device for your life, geek. Say the wrong word, and I’ll kill ya myself.”

Yates hesitates, eyes peeled open. “Spanish boot.”

“Let’s keep going.” Camdyn rubs his hands together.

“Was I—”

“Yes, you were granted thirty more days of torture, my friend.” Camdyn pats Yates’ shoulder. “But three questions are mandatory. Then I’ll weasel Leith into having a heart and let bygones be bygones. Because I, for one, would hate to prolong death. Life is such a beautiful thing.”

The *nugget* gives a scared nod.

“Same torture device, The Boot, was used by certain criminals in the 1600s. A stone-cold killer,” Camdyn says, as if a game-show host, “by the name of Patrick Roy MacGregor

went around causing mayhem. This was a beloved of his. What year was he captured!”

“Uh ... Uh ...”

“1600s.” My *brathair* offers a hint, finishing off his apple.

“Sixteen-sixty ...”

“Keep it coming,” Camdyn encourages in a deceptively supportive tone.

“Five. 1665.”

Grabbing a tuft of his hair, Camdyn groans. “Daaaamn, friend, you were so close. So close. 1667.”

“But ...”

The kind smile on Camdyn’s face fades, leaving a vicious scowl. “Even if I had the authority to let you go, I’m not the nice one. He is.” Camdyn claps my shoulder. “Brother, will you let him go?”

I laugh at the *nugget’s* mind games, shaking my head. “Ye done gabbing *aff*, Cam?”

“Proceed, big brother. The geek is a fucking idiot.” My *brathair* grabs Yates by his mouth and nose. Yates’ air is constricted, then he’s relieved, in quick, sadistic successions. Camdyn’s forearms strain while he smothers Yates again. “Next time you look into *my personal business*, you little cunt—Wait, what am I saying? Won’t be a next time.”

“That’ll do, Cam.” I place a hand on his shoulder as Yates fades.

The placid look on Camdyn’s face evaporates. Smiling, he cocks his head to Yates. “I’m gonna cut the geek’s foot off. Go do some illegal gambling. If it’s as lucky as a rabbit’s foot, may I have the other?”



HOURS LATER, A SLIVER OF SUN PEEKS THROUGH THE SEALED basement windows. I find it hard to imagine that I’d ever hate

one person so much. The *arsehole* has deprived me of sleep, forced me to kill, and manipulated my relationship with Chevelle into a steaming pile of *shite*. Or maybe all my attempts to follow Chevelle's contingencies did us in. *Och, feck it*. I admit I wanted to show my clan I was a man apart from them, a successful lad.

"Aye, the truth is somewhere in the middle," I mutter. Tipping back a bottle of beer, I take a long swallow. I grab a searing skillet and place it over Yates' wound.

"Can't have ya bleeding out," I bark as he whimpers, too weak from all the howling he'd done earlier. After Camdyn's twisted game of Jeopardy, Yates had sobbed enough to fill a loch. I'd asked my *brathair* about his *business*, and he would only assure me it was considered legal, depending on who ye asked.

There's the sound of a key in the lock. We all have one, so I wait as the doorknob turns and the door opens. Mam smiles, holding a piping hot mug of coffee. "How's yer wound?"

"Good." I kiss her cheek, taking the coffee. She'd stitched me up like a wee bairn late last night before she'd gone to bed.

Mam nods. "That's my boy. *Wit* time did Cam disappear on ya?"

"A while back. Made like he was ordering folks in a billion-dollar boardroom. The American is a weird *nugget*." *Wit the feck is my little brathair up to?*

"*Och*, stop calling my bairn that."

"A *nugget*?"

"*The American*. Jackass. Stop calling Cam the American." She winks. "He's a sneaky one."

Aye, there'll be nae snitching on Camdyn by asking Mam about his affairs.

Mam sips her own coffee. "How are ye and the missus faring?"

Instantly, I contemplate how Chevelle stole my heart, all in a matter of seconds. I'd wanted her at first sight. I played those

video games just to see if I could get her off my mind. I was supposed to end up with a Scottish girl. At least, I never saw any of our clan in any interracial relationships. Then when that *motherfecker* showed his *baws*, Chevelle became mine. I had claimed her to keep her safe.

Is she still mine?

“Well, she hasn’t left,” I mutter. My *wee wean* was supposed to sell her out if Chevelle decided to leave.

“*Och*, ye’re talking nonsense.”

Yates is rousing awake. She runs a hand over his clammy cheek. “Oh, my Gawd! What have they done to ye?” Her face is drenched in concern.

“Help.” A dose of relief floods across his face until Mam laughs. The same wicked spirit that Camdyn has comes from our Mam. They feed on that split-second look of relief on the faces of their prey. Probably get a kick out of the aftereffects as well. A cry bubbles out of Yates before he breaks down again.

“My bairns had a wee spot of fun, but Nan is gon’ take care of ye right. Leith, get yerself a nap. When ye wake, the lad will have finally wished for death.”

As I start toward the door, Mam’s muttering how her boys have “played nice.”

“I’ll call ye when I need him finished,” Mam calls after me. She always tells Da or little Brody not to murder anyone underneath her roof. I guess the same rules apply to her too.



MY BRAIN’S SHUTDOWN. I’M WHEELING INTO MY AULD ROOM where Chevelle and I slept midday yesterday when I see the bed is empty. My eyes peel open to see if she’s still here.

Wishful *feckin’* thinking. The shutters are open, and the morning sun streams into the empty room.

Stay awake. I tell myself, “Find her. Apologize, get on yer *feckin’* knees and beg.” My mind starts considering a candlelight dinner for two on some far off, tropical island when someone wee jumps on my back. I realize I hadn’t followed through with searching for my wife when I roll over and end up on the floor.

Mia’s knees go into my stomach. She uses my chest and abdomen like a bouncy house. “Daddy, I want Fruit Loops!”

In the time it takes me to form a response, I hear myself snore, and Mia continues to use my abs like a playground.

“Where’s yer mam?” I croak.

“She left us.” This particular use of my body, like an inflatable fun house, sends her wee knees into my *baws*.

“Oh, *shite*,” I groan, voice dry. With my face planted into the carpet, I determine that it’s okay to stay here. My bairn put me down permanently.

While my *baws* pulsate in pain, I struggle to find the words. “Ye’re killin’ me, Mia! Find yer mam.”

“I said Mommy’s gone. Uncle Jamie said she no come back. I asked Uncle Lachlan and Uncle Rory. They said she no come back too. They made me and Jake cry.”

I lurch into a seated position. “Yer mam would never leave ... *us*.” I probably should have been more specific and said “ye,” but I’m being hopeful. “Mummy went for a walk. When did she go?”

“Before pizza came.”

“Ye had pizza for breakfast?” I yawn. “Then why are ye bothering me about Fruit Loops?”

I’m about to commence with the pirate monologue when she says, “Last night.” I pull Mia down into my lap on the ground. “Daddy’s gonna brush his teeth. Take a shower, go to the store, and buy Fruit Loops. But can ye be so kind, please, to give Daddy a moment? A wee moment to do all these things for ye?”

“Yeah!”

“Then skedaddle.”

“Thank you, Daddy.” Smiling, she climbs up, runs off, and trips on nothing in particular. In five, four, three, I go through the motions.

I jump up, go into the en suite bathroom, close the door, and pull the cellphone from my jeans. Sucking it up, I phone Chevelle. It rings and rings, then goes to voicemail.

“Beautiful, my queen, my heart, ye have a right to be angry with me. Come ... home ...” *Feck*, we dinna have a home to come to. “And be angry. I refuse to let one mistake—work-related, no cheating, none whatsoever—ruin what we have. Ye gave me a bonny wee, wee, wee lassie. Mia needs us.” I grovel on and on like this until the message is interrupted with a query about needing more time.

“Aye, more time!” I slam the cellphone into the wall, transitioning into phase two. I go into full paranoia panic mode.

If Chevelle’s not here, then where is she?

Is she with Michie?

“*Och*, we’ll *feckin’* see about that.”

CHEVELLE

A SWELTERING SUN SHINES DOWN WHEN WE REACH THE DRIVE-through town Justice fled to. I've turned a twelve-hour drive to New Mexico into an eight-hour sprint and still didn't have time to let Leith's mess percolate. The town is miles away from any interstate freeways and an hour past Albuquerque. The main street has a McDonald's, so we meet her there.

"Thanks, but don't embarrass me," I say as Brody holds the door open.

"*Och*, quit acting like a bitch."

"Call me—"

"I said *acting*, Chevelle. I've never called ye out by name—can't say the same for ye. Get yer ears checked, sweetheart."

Pawing at his beard, Brody walks on. The McDonald's has a playhouse in the rear. Many of the patrons are scattered close to the play area exit. Justice is in a corner booth, away from the action. She doesn't look ready to grace an ultra-curvy chick magazine, not like usual. She's wearing sweatpants and an old purple Prince shirt with enough holes in it to signify how much it's been loved over the years.

"Sweetcakes," Brody nods to Justice, sliding into the booth.

"You brought—" She starts to rise.

“Brody won’t say a damn word, Justice. Come here.”

Pursing her lips, she climbs from the booth. We hug, and a fresh wave of tears flood my eyes. I’d silently cried all the way here. When I stopped for gas, Brody bought and pumped. Without a word, we changed places, and he drove. I thought there’d be no more tears, but a torrent streams down my cheeks.

“There’s something I have to tell you,” Justice says as we settle in the booth together.

“Come clean, girl.” Brody settles back. There’s a faint show of gun handle. Justice bristles. “Relax, I wasn’t implying anything. This is an open carry state.”

“Brody, I already have enough regrets because of you. Shut up.”

“How’d the two of you make this drive?” Justice lifts a brow.

“*Wit?*” Brody sniffs. “Dinna get off-topic. Tell us what ye have to tell us. Ye work for the Romans.”

Romans? I arch a brow at his accusation. *What is he going on about?*

“Listen here!” Justice points a finger at Brody. “I will stick a pin in those biceps and laugh as they deflate. You steroid popping—”

“*Och, yeah?*” He chuckles. “I’ll still let ye grab the beard while ye ride my di . . .”

Oil ceases mixing with water. Brody clears his throat. A family walks toward an open booth behind us. Justice starts up, but I’m sitting on the outside. Thank God for small blessings.

“Justice, *he* can go across the room if you’d like. Talk to me.”

Staring at Brody, I seal the threat. That’s when I notice a flash of concern before he glances down, mouth tight. The fire in Justice’s eyes is gone. I doubt they stopped bickering for the sake of keeping it PG around children.

“Doesn’t matter anymore, Chevelle. I need to get something off my chest.”

“What happened, honey?” I empathize.

“When you gave me your half of the money from the Japanese guys, it reminded me how there are good people in the world.”

“*Wit* the two of ye do for these men... .” Brody trails off. He purses his lips again as if suddenly realizing I hadn’t cheated on Leith. This time, appearing more human and apologetic than ever, he says, “Please continue, Justice.”

“Then I had most of the money sent to Marcus LeRoux.”

“Heh. Small-time drug dealer in Boston,” Brody rolls those vibrant blue eyes that remind me so much of Leith.

“How do you know Marcus?” Justice asks.

He tosses back a question of his own. “*Wit?* He yer lover?”

“No!” she rages. “How dare you?”

“How dare I? Too bad, I was hoping ye would say, ‘*Feck* me, Brody.’ But if ye’re paying off an old habit, I could talk to some auld friends for Chevelle’s sake. Done deal.” He shrugs. I wonder if he’s referring to the McFarlands.

Justice glares at him. “I hate that bastard. Hate drugs and anyone that has anything to do with them.”

“Yep.” Brody rolls his eyes.

“Lance was ...”

White noise fuses in my ears for a second. I had never thought of *why* Justice and I share a connection. Now, though, it hits me. We loved men who took their love away from us. To learn my father may not have ... My abdomen expands as I take a cleansing breath.

“Lance had the most beautiful voice. Sang in the choir, same church Marcus’ mom attends. Marcus got his hooks into Lance, changed his style. Went to secular music, which was fine by me. I miss R&B, ya know?”

“Yeah,” The edges of my mouth tip sympathetically while Justice’s eyes reflect the past.

“Long story short, Lance changed. Marcus gave Lance drugs to take the edge off. He OD’d once on drugs. The first time, I think it was an accident. But one more time is all it took. And that wasn’t an accident. Everything, it was all too much for him. His note—”

A dam breaks. Her hands fan even more heated tears.

“I’m so sorry,” I murmur, rubbing her back.

Brody looks to me for an answer. After a lifetime of numbing my pain, I feel like a sham for patting her. Brody makes a hasty exit from the booth, only to return a few moments later, having retrieved a couple of napkins.

“I’m okay,” Justice’s voice wobbles. With a faint smile, she takes his offering.

“Ye’re, uh,” he clears his throat, “gonna have to tie it all together for me, for us. Why are ye running from the guy?”

I’m too engrossed with concern for Justice to reach over and take a hand to Brody’s forehead. *Does he have a fever?* Damn, we’re in a ghost town, an ideal backdrop for a zombie apocalypse movie, and this bastard’s already soulless.

Justice snuffles, continuing her story. “Marcus said he’d spent so much money setting the foundation for the *new, improved* Lance. He said *I* did this. I nagged Lance—guilt-tripped him. Marcus demanded that I give him a hundred grand for him *priming* the city for Lance, money spent on promos. The drug dealer turned producer had mismanaged it all.”

I suck on air. “Sounds like a creep.”

“Turns out, I underestimated Marcus. He’s more than a creep.”

“*Wit* he do, Justice?” Brody asks.

“Well, I didn’t take Marcus’ threats seriously until he roughed up my dad. My dad told me to leave, and he’d try to pay him. My parents dug into their 401k.”

“When was this? How long have you been without your family?” I murmur. “For four years, you haven’t ...”

I remember one time I’d asked Justice what her plans were for the holidays. I assumed my last name was the reason she politely shrugged me off.

“Little over five years. I still owe him about twenty grand. The odd jobs I’ve taken aren’t much help. My parents are robbing Peter to pay Paul.”

“Ye dinna owe him another dollar,” Brody declares. “How’d he find ye now?”

“This time?” she mutters.

“Where all have ye been?”

“A bunch of places. New York was my last, longest stop before meeting you and Michie,” Justice says. “After we served those guys, like I said, I took the money to Western Union. My father got worried that Marcus found me again. So, I moved.”

“Where were you this entire time?” I inquire in a warm tone. “Michie said—”

“A woman’s shelter.” Justice continues to talk without giving us a moment to digest her words. “I recouped some funds on tips, then decided it was time to start over.”

Brody mumbles something inaudible.

Running a vulnerable hand along her forearm, she adds, “I had a tiny studio. Not much to move that can’t fit in the backseat of my Accord. Don’t worry about me, Chevelle.”

“That’s impossible,” I mutter, thoughts pulling me in a thousand directions. How can I help Justice? I haven’t a pillow or a bed to give her. Hell, the clothes on my back aren’t mine either. “We’ll figure—”

“Ye’re coming with us,” Brody orders.

For the first time in our toxic relationship, I’m not targeting Brody’s jugular after he wipes the floor with my heart.



A LITTLE WHILE LATER, BRODY'S TRANSFERRING JUSTICE'S items from the trunk of her Honda to the bed of his truck. With each move, the weight at the bumper redistributes, moving inches away from the asphalt.

Her voice appears to be choked up. I gauge what she's saying by the movements of her mouth: "Thank you."

As we watch, I lock elbows with Justice. "Things will be okay."

When my cell phone rings, I slip it from my pocket for a quick glance. "That's one of Mia's other uncles. With our current series of unfortunate events, I'd better take this."

She nods before I step away a few paces.

"Hey, Cam? Please tell me things are ..." At a loss for words, I lift my shoulders. "Tell me things are the same or better even."

"Nah, can't do that. I think you're gonna want to unblock Leith's cell phone number. He's got the katana that was sticking out of the back of his Audi."

"What?"

"Yeah, he took the katana and bolted."

"I haven't the slightest idea why the damn sword set him off," I snort.

"Apparently, Mia told him you left them, and then he got all suspicious. He's going after some guy named Michie."

"Oh shit." I groan.

"Yeah, oh shit. I told Leith that I doubt you're there. But on the off chance that you are—"

"I'm in New Mexico!" I exclaim. "Listen, Cam, I'm calling your brother now. If he doesn't answer me, I need you to blow up his phone too. Where's Big Brody or Nan?"

“Why? Ya know, I’m supposed to be Team Leith. But you never turned off my favorite cartoons when I was little.”

“Cam, wait—”

“Just a heads up, sis. Leith’ll probably chop the guy’s head off. Very quick and efficient.”

I dish out each word slowly. “You guys can’t go around killing people!”

“*You guys?* You’ve seen this innocent face,” he says.

“Cam, I’m pretty sure you’re smiling right now with that charming voice. You’re sneaky. Cut the bull. Anyway, let me spell this out. Michie’s mixed up with the yakuza.”

“This a fucking movie?” he growls.

“Could be. Help a sister out.”

“I’ll do my best.” The call ends.

In half a second, I’ve unblocked Leith. I press the button as a tumbleweed rolls past me.

While FaceTiming Leith, I call Brody over. He holds up a double-sized duffle bag with a sardonic glower.

“Brody, get your ass over here, *please*.”

My husband’s older brother strides leisurely as the call continues to trill and then disconnect. I’m on a third attempt while explaining to Brody Leith’s motivation. His response is in tandem with Camdyn’s then he glances me up and down.

“Well, my *brathair* must have a reason to go after the lad? Seeing how ye must’ve run straight to the *arsehole*’s arms after Leith’s and Erika’s innocent hug? Why’d the guy give ye a wee sword, *piuthar bheag*?”

Again, my nemesis calls me ‘little sister’ while shooting a pair of paranoid daggers my way.

“I didn’t cheat on Leith. Now, listen, asshole!” I give Brody the same spiel as I did Camdyn, mentioning the yakuza. Brody’s tone changes.

A fuzzy image shows up on the FaceTime screen. Leith is leaning back in the Chevelle SS. He's one handed the steering wheel while his red-rimmed eyes glare at me. A slight stubble shadows his face, around his lips.

My heart crumbles into tiny pieces at the sight of him.

“*Wit*, Chevelle?”

“Baby, pull over. Talk to me.”

“We’re done talking, aye? Now, it’s time for me to step into my destiny. Be the man who gets *shite* done.” His voice thunders, picking up speed, each word cracking with venom. “The man *whose wife follows orders*: keep my house clean, teach my daughter how to be a lass, *shite* like that. Not a disobedient hen who *fecks* some *arsehole* who only wants to use ye.” *What? Follows order?* I can’t understand Leith. Realization hits me. He probably never slept last night.

“Baby, I’m not with Michie. I’m with Brody. You need sleep,” I beg. “You’re not thinking straight. You’re tired. When I get back—”

“Nae.” His striking gaze slides from the windshield to me.

“Baby, please keep your eyes on the road,” I implore him.

Instead of complying, Leith grapples me with his gaze. “Nae, I invested too much in this relationship. Ye married the *bawbag* who’ll never, *ever*, let ye go!”

My mouth pulls in, pensive. “You know good and damn well that you didn’t marry the woman who follows orders, nor did you marry the one who steps out on her family, Leith. *I feel nothing for Michie*. Stop it. Go home. You’re sleep-deprived.”

The car kicks into high gear. “Hen, ye know I’d die for ye, but today, I’d rather come out the victor with this nice wee sword of yers. See ye soon, love.”

LEITH

THERE'S BANGING ON THE DOOR TO MY AULD BEDROOM. Before I slept like the deid, I'd positioned my dresser against the broken door. I made myself a makeshift barricade. Nobody's gonna play break Leith's *baws* while he tries to get a few winks in. I'm not gonna run around with no brain in my head. My wife shouts to open up. The door moves a fraction of an inch. It leans on the dresser.

"Please, Leith." She has softened her tone. *Thought so.*

I rub my eyes, get up, and move the dresser away. The bedroom door falls. Chevelle gestures as if she's trying to stop it in the last second. With a sigh, she shrugs her shoulders.

My eyes roam over her body. Then I head back to the bed. "Ye look tired."

"You look like shit, Leith. What have you—?"

"A well-rested piece of *shite*, hen." I lie on my back. Smiling, I stitch my fingers together behind my head. "And happy too."

Fingers shaking, Chevelle picks up the sword I left discarded on the middle of the floor and gasps. Blood dribbles across the blade, pooling on the wooden floor.

I glower into her widened eyes. "*Wit* are ye gonna do with that?"

Her fingers shake. “Did you—?”

“Did ye love him?” I snarl.

“No!” She drops it, and the blade clatters on the floor. “I was in love with a crazy, funny, ridiculously handsome Scot—my entire life.”

“Ye *were*?” My eyebrow lifts in contemplation.

“I *am*,” she ruffles her hair, “so, in love with you it hurts. It took these past few days to put it all in perspective. To see how I have planted you at the center of my life, Leith.”

“*Bullshite*, ye never stopped holding out. Can’t even tell me yer feelings about yer parents!”

She comes toward me, and I stiff-arm her back, firm, solid. “Stay over there, Chevelle. I dinna need ye in my heid anymore.” I stop short of blaming my wife for everything, not shutting Jiang’s *gub* with the first shot then hiding his death. *Everything*.

Chevelle stands back, and I look up at her with a smug smile from my comfortable position in bed. “Yer da loved yer mam. Ye gave me some half-baked crap that ye love me too much, or ye’re afraid to let me in or love me. I can’t make *heids* or tails with ye, lass.”

“So, what then?” She strangles on her words. “Leith, you’ve been ...”

Chevelle comes toward me. Again, my forearm stretches, halting her approach.

She gasps. “Baby, *you’ve* kept secrets! Serious secrets. But *I’m* the one who broke this marriage? We’re done?”

CHEVELLE

THE SOULMATE WHO PLACED A SYMBOL OF FOREVER ON MY finger warps into a monster. I'm running on empty. All I can think about is the added trouble he's brought to our family because of his ego.

Did he murder Michie?

I stalk out of Leith's old bedroom and toward the closest balcony glass doors. Hardly sliding it closed behind me, I call Michie.

With the faint taste of copper, I wait, heartbeat in my throat, for him to answer. I'm not concerned for my old boss. But if Leith murdered Michie, and Michie truly has ties with the yakuza, then that's another can of worms opened at a feast already full of the poison that Yates dealt us.

The phone clicks. "Michie?" I breathe, needing full confirmation.

My old boss sounds pleased. "Beautiful, I'm glad to hear your voice—"

"Michie, I—"

"Listen, I can hear it in your tone. The other night won't happen again."

"No, never." I heave a sigh of relief.

“If you’re willing, and your husband as well, of course, let me still support your quest to own your own business, Chevelle. You come to my place. I’ll make you bar manager. We’ll be the dynamic team again, slowly open you up for—”

“While you taught me a lot, I’ll have to decline. Goodbye.” I hang up, prepared to close that chapter of my life for good.

“Oh, thank God,” I murmur. The family I married into has a notion that they’re invincible. However, I’m not sure how that extends to other crime organizations.

I lean against the railing, gasping on the breeze. Anxiety rushes through my bloodstream at the thought of how I drove like mad to get to Justice. Then I drove like the hounds of Hell were chasing me back here—for nothing. My knuckles blanch as I grip the railing and slink down into a crouched position, stifling a sob.

My sweet, loving Leith has vanished. This was my concern, has always been one of my concerns. I worried that by embracing his MacKenzie side that he’d be lost to me—just like my father. But I’d always based those feelings on what Lady had told me. And now, well now, I don’t know. I don’t know what’s true anymore. My cheeks puff out air. I can do this. When Leith’s ready to talk this out, I’ll be there.

I stand up, spine erect, and follow the sound of voices. Little Brody and Justice have arrived. I’d left Brody, practically stole his truck. They’d had to drive back in Justice’s broke down car.

They’re in the foyer downstairs. Snubbing me, Mia scampers by, calling for her uncle. Brody drops the bags in his hands, and she runs into his arms.

“Wee wean!” Leith calls to her while descending the stairs. His broad shoulders fill out a sweater. I almost smirk as Leith receives the same treatment that I did. Mia sucks her thumb, resting in Brody’s arms.

Mia’s tiny voice pitches in excitement. “Justice! Are you my new auntie?”

“Hey, Mia, long time no see.”

“So, are you my *new* auntie?” Mia asks.

“Sweetheart, ye have nae aunties yet.” Leith grips her under one arm, lifting her away from Brody, spinning her around.

“I do, Daddy. Uncle Brody always gives me a new auntie. Then they give me gifts too.” She uses her father’s body like a jungle gym without regard for her safety. “Justice, where’s my gift?”

While I stare down at them from the top of the stairs, I watch a small smile press along the edges of Justice’s mouth. “Sorry, Mia. I wish I had a gift for you. But I’m not one of your uncle’s ... ahem ... I’m not your new auntie.”

“Chevelle,” Nan calls from behind me.

“Nan,” I give her a one-armed hug, and we head down the stairs. “My friend Justice—”

“Mam, Justice Flowers can stay in my auld room, or I can take her home,” Brody says. “If she goes home, I’m not sure when I’ll return here. Given the circumstances, it’s best she stays here. Under our protection.”

A peach blush creeps up Justice’s throat. She says, “I don’t want to put you out—”

“*Och*, sweetheart.” Nan hugs her. “My son has apparently spoken for the both of us. Ye’re under *our* protection, Justice.”

I blink. Wow, I had already been feeling awkward about asking, though I intended to. I guess my worry was unnecessary.

Nan gestures toward the expansive stairs. “Justice, I’ll show ye to a guest room.”

“Nae,” Brody says. “I’ve got it. Chevelle’s scrawny legs can’t lift these bags anyways.”

I step to the side. “I’m sorry I left you both.”

“That’s okay.” Justice hugs me. “I can’t thank you enough.”

I parrot Brody's sentiments as he retorts for her not to thank me. Rolling my eyes, I add, "I think we both know what it feels like to have a sister now."

I start to follow them upstairs when, through the front doors, Big Brody can be seen coming up the pathway. A sharp suit cleans up his usual lumberjack look.

"Chevelle, Leith." Little Brody clicks his tongue. From my peripheral, my husband ceases his retreat, places Mia down, and smacks her bottom.

After Big Brody enters, Nan's all over him. I lower my gaze. Leith forks a hand through his hair. His eyes shine up at mine—lethal, livid, and strikingly beautiful.

I stop myself from the sharp intake of air. This is the part where he'd say, "Take a picture, hen."

Between kisses and laughs, Big Brody exclaims, "The two of ye meet me in my study. I'll be there."

Nan adds, "Go wait for him."

Without hesitating, Leith follows the order like an obedient soldier. I doubt Big Brody will let Nan out of his sight, or maybe it's the other way around. But at least someone's getting some this evening. With the sound of laughter to my rear and a stark present before me, I head to the study.

Leith's seated on the couch, muscles stretching beneath his jeans. One ropy arm rests lazily over the headrest. I take a seat at the desk.

"Leith—"

"Ye gave up on us already, right? I'm just *feckin'* catching up."

"Too late! I spent seventeen—"

"Seventeen hours in labor. Aye." He runs the back of his hand along his bristled jaw and lush lips. "I had yer pussy first, too. Mind that. Took almost all yer good years—isn't that *wit* women like ye say? Someone took all yer good years?"

With teeth clenched, I snarl, "I hate—"

“Yer still gorgeous. Got a couple of years left and a tight cunt too. So, shut yer *gub*, complain to someone who gives half a *feck*.”

The room is filled with a suffocating silence. If I ever shed another tear for this motherfucker, I’ll blow my brains out with the same twelve-gauge shotgun my father may or may not have done himself in with.

The minute hand on the glossy, wooden clock moves a quarter before Big Brody strides in. There are red marks on his neck where his linen shirt survived. Some buttons popped off for good.

He’s grumbling about food. “Son, Chevelle. Ye’re over here, and ye’re all the *feckin’* way over there.”

“Get to it, Da.” Leith laughs.

Big Brody snorts, claiming the seat across from me. “Hon, if I had it in me to give words of wisdom tonight, I would. Start fresh tomorrow, aye?”

“Sure,” I manage to reply.

“But promise me, nae going to bed angry at this rascal. Nan lives by that saying.”

Leith laughs. “Go to bed angry? That’s all she knows, Da.”

“Leith,” he reprimands in a short tone.

“Big Brody, did my father kill himself and my mother?” I say the words I’ve always dreaded out loud.

His lips pull together, sympathetically. “Nae, Chevelle. He was innocent.”

“What happened?”

Big Brody’s eyes land on Leith, imploring his son to sit next to me. Worry knits his eyebrows at my husband’s lack of response.

I seize the moment. “Thanks, but I’ll handle the truth without anyone holding my hand.”

Exasperated, Big Brody slams a hand onto the desk. “Son, get yer *arse* over here!”

“Forgive me, *Brody Boy*,” Leith sneers, “but my *feckin’* days are running together. Was it twenty-four, thirty-six hours, or something like that when ye told yer detective friend that ye was needing three new sons—one to replace yer namesake, one for the American, and one for me? *Wit* son? Huh? All yer boys, three of them, or the whole lot of ‘em are bairns, aye?”

Big Brody shouts, “Get out!”

I glance back. My husband fists a bottle of whiskey, downing the venom like water. “Nae, Da. I’m staying, love me a good story.” He places his boots on the table, legs locked about the ankle.

Lips trembling, I sit straight forward. “Please, just tell me what you know, Big Brody.”

The muscles in the older man’s jaw constrict. He softens his tone. “Chevelle, do ya mind a man name, Fausto DeCastillo?”

Uncle Fausto? “Yes, I remember him. I thought he’d take me, ahem, instead of my adoptive mother.”

“Adoptive... .” Leith’s voice breaks into fragments of quiet laughter. He swigs more alcohol. “That’s another thing, Chevelle’s a scary one. Angry at the *arsehole* who showed her nothing but love and forgive—”

“Shut up!” I’ve had about as much as I can take from Leith.

“Nae. The bitch who adopted ye could be deid. But ye forgive the wrong *feckers*.” Slowly, he drunkenly spews venom. “I’d place my hands around her neck, like so—” Now, he’s just being a dick.

“Aye, and choke the lass,” his father rushes, annoyed. “Leith, mind yer manners if ye have any love for yer mam!”

“I do.”

Big Brody’s fingers curl under. His chest expands, then compresses a few beats. “Fausto grew up with yer da. They

did everything but pass the bar exam together. Fausto attended a shitty law school while yer da graduated from a prestigious university.”

A fond memory creeps into my mind. Uncle Fausto was always coming around. Like Mia demanded presents from her new *aunties*, I always expected and received gifts from Uncle Fausto.

“Fausto made a friend in the Roman family. Then he got unlucky, was about to do hard time. Went to yer da, a prominent do-right attorney who worked his way up at Levine & Sons Law Firm—the best of the best. But even while working for Levine, yer da took the cases for blue-collared workers. It led to some big money. Pissed off gentrification owners.”

“I remember.” I nod, still too numb to appreciate my father’s legacy.

“When Fausto went to him for legal aid, yer da said he wasn’t a criminal attorney. But even if he were, he wouldn’t touch a *feck* up like that.”

“Hmmm,” I reply.

“Fausto got off somehow. He was still yer da’s friend.”

“Sure. My father was always someone’s friend,” I mutter, recalling one hand after the other, palm empty but opened wide for the fruits of *Dad’s* labor.

“Fausto became jealous. He went back to the Romans and made like yer da was speaking to the DA against him.”

I gasp.

“The night they were murdered. Someone else was there.”

“Was it them? Did the Romans ...” I stutter. “What do we do about them?”

“Them?” He gives a pointed look. “Nothing. Him. *We kill him.*”

“But he—”

“Chevelle,” Big Brody begins. “Nae Roman was at the house when yer parents were murdered. Additionally, Frank Roman himself said he couldn’t stand Fausto, but the little *shite* married into the family. Fausto’s a widower. Frank only consented to Fausto’s request the other day out of respect for his departed cousin.”

Fury tightens my chest. “And La—that lady who raised me?”

“Overdosed, sweetheart. It was she and Fausto who planned and executed the entire plan of revenge on yer da. If she were alive, I would have—”

“Then only Fausto.” My words fly out, echoing in my own ears. “What about my dad’s business. He was a good lawyer. He helped people?”

“Aye. Lots of people. He was a good man, Chevelle. That woman lied to you.”

I pull in air and hold it. My every action has been contrary to the bull I’ve preached all my life. I blamed Dad for everything. I placed him in a box, craving any negative thought that could help me hate him more, which was a feat all on its own. I thought the worst of him. I thought the worst of myself, of my DNA.

I stand from the chair, too energized to stay put. “But those fucks shot at my *daughter*—your granddaughter—all of your family!”

Big Brody holds up a hand. “*Our* family, Chevelle. Ye’re a member of this clan whether ye’re feeling up to it today or not. We’d take a bullet for ya, sweetheart.”

Literally. I was their target. If not for Erika, I’d be dead.

“Leith!” Big Brody’s anger resonates in his voice.

“He doesn’t give a damn about me anymore, Big Brody.” I gulp down my pride, look him in the eye. “Thank you. From the bottom of my heart, I appreciate this.” *But the truth is worse than the lie I’ve lived with my entire life!*

LEITH

EYES CLOSED, I RUN A HAND OVER MY FACE. I'M AN *arsehole*. Chevelle pushed me to it. She called that *nugget* the second she stepped out of the room with me. She put Michie over our love, so I stuck a knife into her heart and let the blade sit there a while.

When Chevelle rushes past me to the door, my father curses me.

I twirl the nozzle of the whiskey between my palms, watching the swoosh of the amber liquid.

“Leith!”

Tossing the bottle on the cushion next to me, I regard him in irritation. “*Wit the feck* should I do, Da?”

“Go after her.”

The notion makes sense, given the circumstances. But he’s not aware of the full situation. He can’t possibly understand.

“Leith.”

“That’s my name, and yers is Brody MacKenzie the Fourth if ye forgot.” I pluck the whisky up, open it, grip the neck of the bottle, and press it to my lips. The burn soothes my soul.

“I always forgot how much of a *daftie nugget* ye were. Only smart on a piece of paper. Chevelle was the best thing to

ever happen to ye. I guess I'd better get to praying that she continues to be that thing too."

"Pray good and hard, Da. G'night." I salute him, tuning out his stream of curses as I leave.



FOR THE NEXT HOUR, I COOK THE WEE *WEANS'* DINNER. MY four youngest *brathairs* are gloomy as I pray with them and Mia. My bairn isn't begging for my leprechaun voice. It takes a while to figure out that she's jaded over Justice and not getting a gift.

As the kid said, she expected a gift from any female associated with Brody. I wonder what my daughter will think when she learns her princess room is a pile of ash and rubble?

Heaving a sigh, I run a hand through Mia's silky curls. "Ye want to go home?" I ask her since I'm not talking with Chevelle anytime soon.

"No, Daddy. I love slumber parties."

I press my lips to both her chubby cheeks, smile, then head out of the kitchen. Thank God for small blessings. This is a slumber party for my wee *wean*.

I send a text message to Blythe, who took all the bits of scrap that once made up Douglas Yates from MacKenzie Freight. I'd taken the *nugget* to the small room at my parents' business and chopped the techie to wee pieces with the katana earlier. Once Blythe responds, I take a deep breath. *It's time*. I begin to search my parents' large home for Chevelle.

Half an hour later, I find her out back on a lounger. The blue water from the pool reflects across her sleeping face. My pace stops. Hands in my pockets, I expel one last breath, staring at a woman I miss with all of me. She's but a foot away, yet so very *feckin'* far off. I'll not chance waking my wife by moving her. I dinna have it in me for another spat.

Michie's alive. Wit *kind of pussy are ye, Leith? He should be deid!*

Aye, kill him and watch her mourn. That's like shoving a grenade down my throat and hoping for the best.

I won't wake her. My inner turmoil plays on repeat. I feel like I've stared at Chevelle for ages when I retrieve a throw blanket from the couch in the den.

With a light touch, I place the blanket over her magnificent body, framing her face.

I take a few paces to the wrought iron hearth and light it up. Before I realize, I'm seated on the lounge beside Chevelle, honed into the rise and fall of her chest, the subtle sound of her exhales. She's sleeping peacefully. She's slumbering like a woman in love. She's dreaming of ...

Leith, ye nugget.

"I screwed up so bad," I mutter. There's no discounting that fact. But out of all the moves I made, they were to appease her, at least, I tell myself so. Except, my actions took her love away, only to grant it to another man.



OVER THE NIGHT, I'VE TOSSED AND TURNED, LONGER THAN IT took the last ember to burn into ash. It was a cold *feckin'* night. I wake up before Chevelle. Yawning, I place my palm parallel to her cheek, a fraction away from touching her smooth brown skin. Heat radiates from her. Good, the knit blanket has kept her warm.

I head into the house, strolling toward the stairs, when Camdyn's aggravated voice comes from the kitchen. "Bitch, I will kill you."

I eye him, back to me on his iPhone. There's no surprise in that. Does my wee *brathair* moonlight as a shoddy stockbroker? I could be wrong—probably wrong.

The sneaky bastard senses me and kills the call, turning around. I arch a brow asking, "Do I wanna know?"

“Probably not,” he quips, running a hand over a canvas of angry arm tats.

I cross my arms. “Ye’re not calling a female a bitch, though, are ya?”

Camdyn rolls his eyes as he removes a mug from the Keurig. “No, it’s her ex.”

“Then I definitely dinna wanna know. Fighting over—”

Cam’s thumb runs over his eyebrow. “Fuck you, Leith. It’s rare for a female to be worth fighting over. Not to say that I’m ___”

“Fighting for her?” I offer.

He sips the black coffee then mutters, “First off, fighting is refreshing. I thought you learned that after letting go of my sis’s unnecessary ass contingencies. Second, keep your shitty ass opinion to yourself.”

I stare at the wild card. There’s no making heads or tails of Camdyn. Chevelle may be a bit silly, but she was right. I *was* the funny Scott. Brody’s the whore. Cam’s not easily typecast. Not sure if this is a big *brathair* giving little *brathair* advice moment or not, I shrug. “Fighting, refreshing. Okay, American.”

“Bullshit, yesterday you went chop suey on the hacker guy. I do appreciate a good pun, bro. But before that, you were fighting for a woman, am I correct?”

I blink a few times. Okay, so there *is* a girl. Well, in Camdyn’s case, there’s always a girl. A new one every time Cam opens his mouth. “So, what’s the girl’s name?”

Daggers flash in Camdyn’s eyes for a mere second. He then sighs, changing the subject. “Damn, Leith, don’t tell me you and Chevelle are still out?”

It’s on the tip of my tongue to ask *wit* the boy laced in his pot. But now, my heart’s *feckin’* bleeding. So, I dinna toss a question of my own at him.

Camdyn slides onto a stool at the island. “Chevelle’s the best thing to ever happen to ya.”

“Ye saying that for my sake, or so I dinna call ye out on yer own *bullshite*?”

With a snort, Camdyn places the mug on the wooden counter then counts off his fingers. “First, Chevelle slips me bottles of the good shit to pay for gas when I’m at your house and need a ride.”

“So, she enables yer alcoholism? That’s how she’s the best thing to ever happen to me?”

“Fuck you very much, Leith,” he grouses in a tone of appreciation. “Two, she’s a good mom, not refuting that?”

I shrug, placing my own Keurig pod into the coffee maker.

“Three, her ass is fat.”

With my back to him, I take a few steps over to the wooden slab, resting my hand on a butcher knife.

“Facts, bro. Be glad I’m not a liar.”

A smile breaks across my face.

Camdyn continues, “I was ten years old, watching that fat ___”

The blade *chings*, moving swiftly from its sheath. I turn around with the knife in my hand. But Da’s strolling into the kitchen.

Camdyn regards him with a cool nod. Clearly, he’s grounded. Da doubles down on the American’s demeanor, tossing the frown straight to me. I grunt a greeting, dropping the knife back into the slot.

“Tonight, ye’re gonna kill Fausto DeCastillo,” Da orders. “That’ll fix things.”

I lift my shoulders. It’s the MacKenzie way. Although, I doubt our tried-and-true method will send Chevelle sprinting back into my arms.

“Why now?” I use the brains I’d long forgotten in this vengeful world. This very question could’ve stopped me from playing Yates’s bitch and killing his associates for him.

“Frank Roman shared that Fausto believed Chevelle was out for him. Said it seemed bizarre that she would be. However, Frank fed into the dimwit’s paranoia. I didn’t inquire further last night. Chevelle was upset. Leith, ye’ll ask her. And ye will be comforting to her as ye say it!”

A comfort and support to my wife? Not possible. She’ll not allow it. I remove my mug from the Keurig and inhale the aroma. “Tell her *wit*?”

“Tell yer *wife* her adoptive mother and Fausto executed the entire scenario. The Romans just helped them score the correct paper necessary to redirect Chevelle’s inheritance, seeing as Fausto is a useless attorney. It was the woman who added a note saying the father couldn’t live without the mam. Made it seem like the mother had been unfaithful. It was all false, Leith.”

I mask the grit of my mouth by sipping the coffee.

“That’s messed up,” Camdyn shakes his head.

“Aye,” I finally speak. “Fausto dies tonight. I’ll bring my wife his heid on a plate.”

I turn toward the French doors to the pool area. Chevelle’s there. The tears in her eyes are enough to break even me. Brilliant, sparkly tears. So beautiful. So broken. If I weren’t in shock from her overhearing the conversation, I’d be floored by her response.

CHEVELLE

IF I WEREN'T DROP DEAD TIRED, I'D IMAGINE LOVE reflecting in Leith's eyes when he glances my way. But I have one certainty, that bitch Lady lied about *every last detail*.

No preacher. No cheating. No obsessive love that ended in a murder-suicide. Just murder. Dogged determination flushes through my veins. I snap. "Not necessary, Leith, I already made up my mind. DeCastillo's death has my name on it."

"Nae." His tone is low, not lethal like yesterday, though.

"Excuse me?" I square my shoulders. I'm ready for a fight today. Big Brody looks prepared to curse Leith's existence, but my husband throws a palm on the island. Instead of going around the lengthy countertop, he goes over it.

He's in front of me in a flash. His hands are a salve to my soul as they run along my cheeks. "Nae, hen. I've *fecked* up! Let me do this for ye."

Leith's passion slams into me with the force of each word. In trepidation, my eyebrows pull together. All the dreams of Leith leaving me in the past paled compared to his actions yesterday.

"Let me do this, love." He clasps me, enveloping me in arms that have kept me safe since I can remember. The first soothing touch since my father. The last soothing touch I'll ever beg for before I die. Lifting my face, Leith gazes into my

eyes. His breath teases across my cheeks. “I’ll ask yer forgiveness later, hen. I’ll give ye all the time ye were begging for, and I’ll not expect anything from ye in return. *Let me. Please.*”

“No. I can do this.”

Fury runs along Leith’s jaw. He contains it, bites his tongue, and says, “This isn’t you, Chevelle.”

Last night, I couldn’t fully comprehend the story told to me. A blush of shame creeps over my face as I turn to Big Brody. After the shooting, I’d assumed Mia and I had gotten caught up in their mafia drama. I’d even said as much. I’d been wrong. This was my drama, and *I* had brought it down on *them* with Erika paying the highest price, trying to save me. The muscles in my back become rigid as I box my shoulders and address Big Brody. “I truly appreciate your help. Please tell me everything you know about Fausto. Last night, I was in shock. Now, I’d like to know where he’s been. What’s he been up to? How did I spook him?”

“Ye’re welcome.” Big Brody settles onto a stool next to Camdyn.

The older man’s gaze connects with Leith. At first, I assume it’s a kind gesture of inclusion. Then I see the look of empathy I avoided in the past. Even Camdyn wears a similar mask.

“Ye sure?” Leith asks.

“Yes!” I give a flustered pant. “Nan will tell me if you won’t.”

“Eh, she has a point,” Camdyn says.

“Alright.” Leith’s father shrugs. “Fausto’s a car sales manager in Tarzana. He . . .”



AN HOUR LATER, I’VE HARASSED MIA AND SOFTLY manhandled her after her half-assed attempt to brush her teeth.

I'm sighing while exiting the bathroom when Justice opens the door to Leith's older brother's bedroom.

Though hurting inside, I slide on the smile that has benefited me in a bartending capacity. "So, did Brody back up that big mouth of his with even bigger guns?"

She laughs while waving me off. "Girl, I'll probably never know if he can lift a size eighteen on repeat. I ... uh ..."

"Just kidding." I smile, noticing the elusive jaded flash across her face. Five years later, and Justice's emotions go bonkers. That's the way the mind works. Happy one second, contemplating someone you miss in the next. With a wave of my hand, I change the subject. "I kind of ditched you in New Mexico, didn't I?"

"Yeah." Justice nods. "However, it's kind of a funny story."

"What, I'll beat—"

Chuckling, she shakes her head. "Gotcha! Brody was a gentleman during our long drive."

"Oh, thank God. Leith and I have to handle a few things. Then we're heading home." I tell the tiny, white lie, determined not to spook Justice or worry her about our current lack of a home.

Shoving a hand through her braids, Justice casts her eyes downward. "Alright, girl, tell me to stay away from him. Tell me that the years I've spent lonely have made me susceptible to any old Tom, Dick, and Harry."

"So, you're asking me if I approve or not?"

A flame of hope sparks in her eyes. "Do you? No, you don't. It's evident. You can't approve."

"Yup, that's right. I refuse to condone any love connection between you and *that*."

I'm half-joking, and Justice laughs all the way back to Brody's room. An arm slides around my waist, and I'm yanked into my husband's old bedroom. As I stand back, arms folded, Leith picks up the door.

“Wow, how the mighty have fallen. You had artificial intelligence locking doors and a secure smart house.”

“Did it before, I can do it again, hen.” He grunts, using the dresser as support once more. When done, Leith’s searing gaze bleeds through my soul. “Ye’re not a murderer, hen.”

I shrug. “I married one.”

“If I could go back in time and fix this mess.” Leith’s hands tense as he gestures.

“You can’t.”

“I dinna give a *feck* about changing *my* ways.” He runs a dominating hand along my rib, depositing me against the wall. “However, I’ll do this for ya. I’ll kill Fausto.”

I can hardly meet his commanding façade. “No.”

“Then what?” He slaps a hand on the wall, closing the gap of my possible escape route. “Ye run off with Michie, aye?”

Hands heavy at my sides, I groan. “No! I drove one hundred and fifteen miles per hour, Leith. Thought of not getting gas just to get back to you.”

His eyebrows stitch in confusion.

“Leith, you may not kill everyone! You don’t have the right to.”

His palm drops on my shoulder, manipulating the tender flesh. “Ye mean I can’t off the bastard ye’re in lo—”

“I’m in love with *you*, Leith MacKenzie. Michie is mixed up in his own shit—*yakuza* shit—okay? I was trying to save *your* stupid ass.”

Time warps. My husband’s lean body depresses. His lengthy limbs stretch. Relief glints from his attractive face. His calloused hand soothes my cheek, lips descending on mine.

Leith sighs, “Ye were ...”

“Mad, yes.” I groan between tasting his lips. “You lied.”

“I apologized.”

“So? I needed a moment.”

A yelp flies from my mouth when my husband's teeth clamp down, hard. "Damn you, Leith. I was about to apologize, too."

"Why?" He inquires, tongue slithering over the hurt he caused.

"I'm not now."

"Should I force ye, hen?" Leith catches my bottom lip between his teeth, trigger ready to execute his threat. He's so intimidating as his palms tantalize up and down the length of my ribs.

When Leith starts to speak, my thumb plays along his lips. I reach up, touch my mouth to his. "Shhh, baby. I can't do this thing called life without you."

My fingers get lost in Leith's pants as he grips my ass, grinding his dick against the inside of my thigh. Stifling a gasp, I groan against his lips.

Leith shoves the crappy shirt up over my chest, pressing kisses along the flesh of my belly button. He looks up, noticing my facial expression hasn't changed, and he groans. "*Och*, I miss the days when we *fecked* first, then hashed it out."

"Me too." His hair runs through my fingers as I alternate from trying to yank him up and shove him toward my sex.

Leith hikes a thigh over his shoulder. "I thought we were gonna talk and *feck*? Make it a mood?"

Wilting against the wall, I sigh. Hedonism pushes us to a tilting point. "Sounds so good. However, we've never had such a long-lasting argument, Leith. We should discuss it first."

"*Och*, ye're right." Leith stands to his full height. "Wish we still had our best-friend superpowers."

He cocks half a smile, yet the surface area of my skin comes alive. I miss this—the giddy feeling taking flight in my chest.

“Shhhh, we mustn’t speak of our powers out loud.” I encourage him, a full beaming smile spreading across my lips. “We just need to sharpen our powers again.”

Leith backs off as I hold out my hand. He groans.

“Excuse me.” I glance at my awaiting hand, then at him. “We went to a national video game convention, tenth round out of thousands, all on a single handshake.”

Laughing, Leith takes my hand, and we complete the old gesture. He then sits back against the headboard.

“Get over here, lass.”

“Okay, ass.” I saunter over, sexy as possible under the circumstances, and settle onto his lap. My knuckles caress the taut stone of his cheek. “Alright, let me apologize, baby. I was mad at you until I realized the mistake I made.”

His brow lifts. “That’s not an apology, hen.”

“Oh, just listen. I’m sorry from the bottom of my heart for creating so many extra hurdles for you. My shortcomings caused you more trouble in your attempts to fix problems. Also, for your clan. Your family has been mine for ages, and I was an idiot to believe that I could always keep the rest of the MacKenzies at arm’s length.”

“Anything else?”

“Nope. I’m done. Erika’s off the table. My claws were extended when you confided in her instead of me. Though, I am kinda indebted to her now.”

“I regret that. Though in my defense, I didna tell Erika much. Just to watch ye and Mia. That’s all. I promise. Oh, and to buy concrete. But she didna know what it was for. I’m sorry.” He burrows his face in my neck, nudging me with kisses. “Nearly killed me last night when Da told ye the story.”

I feather my fingers through Leith’s hair. I press kisses on the crown of his head. “We were a hot mess last night. Although, when you came outside to sleep beside me—as I pretended to snore—I expected you to climb into the same

lounge chair. Thanks for the blanket, but I was still pretty cold, yet too petty to admit it.”

We stare at each other. Our lust dissolves into laughter. Warmth spreads over me, making me feel light and nostalgic as butterflies catch flight in my soul. Just as I’m settling in Leith’s arms, he says, “I’m killing Fausto for ye tonight, Chevelle. Nae stopping me.”

Squaring my shoulders, I reply, “My mind is made up. Fausto dies by my hands only. Support me on this, please?”

LEITH

WITH THE SILLY, AULD-SCHOOL HANDSHAKE MY WIFE THOUGHT up for us, I conclude the wee lie. Chevelle *can* murder Fausto. Does she have it in her? Nae. She's plagued by bad dreams of her parents' murders and holds it all in.

Though I'll be the one to terminate that *arsehole*, I frame her cheeks in my hands. "Okay, Chevelle. I taught ye how to use a gun for a reason."

She thanks me with a soft kiss. "Tonight, after it's done, baby, I want you."

"But we're here right now," I groan against her lips.

"Nevertheless, I need this rage resolved." Chevelle chokes up. "Why did I let that bitch slip through my fingers, Leith? Why?"

"Ye're not that person." I huff, brushing the tears from my wife's face with my knuckles. *Ye never will be.*

"I will tonight," she sobs.

Nae, hen. "Then I'll support ye." Staring into Chevelle's glittering eyes, I'll right one mistake from the past. Though her adoptive mother is deid, I'm gonna kill Fausto DeCastillo myself. It'll be the last time I sever our vow.



THIS EVENING WE'RE SEATED IN FRONT OF MY LAPTOP IN DA'S office. I've grilled Chevelle on Fausto's schedule. The constant social media updates and his penchant for a routine made it effortless to piece together his comings and goings. Though I've hassled Chevelle, she hasn't failed any response, telling me how *we* will be ready in his home.

I've grabbed our tea and settle back in the chair next to her. I hand her a navy-blue mug.

"Thanks." She places it on the desk, taking my hands. "Stop testing me, Leith. I've passed with flying colors. I am ready."

"Aye, ye're on the ball." I gulp the black tea. "Drink yer tea, hen. It'll keep ye up."

Holding her mug to her lips, Chevelle whimpers. "Gawd, I could use a bath right now. Babe, what will we do about our home?"

With a groan, Chevelle sips the tea. My gaze bounces over her. I tell myself not to stare as she drinks. I wait a few beats before speaking. "Ye're just now asking?"

"Every time I had a moment to contemplate it, there was another metaphorical *fire*."

"Dinna concern yerself, hen." I place my index finger at the bottom of her mug, helping her tip back the rest of it. My wife seems ready to protest, so I add, "Not tonight. Focus on Fausto. Our biggest advantage right now is watching Disney+. When this is all over, I'll have made everything right."

"Awe!" Chevelle loops her arms around me. They become heavier by the second. The drug from her tea kicks into high gear. "You're the best, Leith."

"Yup, I'm the best," I repeat her words. Smiling, I dinna feel the slightest pang of guilt while my drunken wife hugs me.

Chevelle prattles on in a drugged, lethargic tone. “You love to handle everything. I’m so glad you’re my alpha. Remember when I had an attitude, while reading about the dom?”

“Mhmmm.” I’m ignoring her while focusing on the screen. In a few minutes, I’ll have compromised the security system at Fausto’s condo.

Chevelle slurs, “This is calming tea. I should’ve made us a few shots. Fireballs. Our home’s on fire. I think you should take a few shots from between my legs. I’m ready for sex now.”

“Nae, hen.” I stop her shabby attempt to pull at my shirt. I’m switching the screens on my laptop when Fausto pops up. He’s on a *live* social media feed at a cigar lounge.

Chevelle’s clinging to me. The sound of her purr stiffens my cock. I bite her lip, returning to my task.

“Leith, I love taking body shots off your abs. You have the most beautyyy-ful abs. Hayyy, I know that lady.”

When I think Chevelle is about to go under, she plasters an index finger against the computer screen. Fausto’s showing off his bitch as she lifts a hand, displaying what looks like a cubic zirconia to me.

Again, Chevelle babbles, “I know her.”

“What do ye mean, hen?” I grab my wife, rattle her shoulders. Chevelle’s entire weight leans into me, yet she’s so tiny in my arms.

I read over the image description: Drinks with fiancée.

I click into the linked profile of a forty-something blond, whose name I can’t recollect my wife ever mentioning. What sort of relationship does Chevelle have with the woman?

Say they’re friends—good friends—will Chevelle feel guilt for murdering the woman’s fiancé?

The door bursts open, in walks my *brathairs*, Brody and Camdyn. The younger one is in a black leather jacket and gloves—the *feckin’* works. The oldest looks like he hasn’t gotten the memo in sweats and house shoes.

“The *feck* are ye two doing?” I ask.

Camdyn rubs his hands together. “Mom said she’s proud of the three of us. I haven’t been home this many days straight in half a year. We’re bonding. Tonight, we’re off to bond again.”

Brody cracks his neck. “And I’ve not killed someone in a week, Leith. So, let’s *bond*.”

“From the looks of it, he hasn’t fucked the friend either.” Cam rolls his eyes while Brody roars how Justice is *none of his business*.

“Speaking of friends ...” I hold a slumbering Chevelle to my chest, speculating her relationship with Fausto’s bitch. “Once Chevelle awakens, I’ve gotta ask her about this woman.”

Brody snaps. “*Och*, allow me. I’ll go grab a bucket of ice water.”

“Bro, that’s petty as fuck. Oh, but that’s payback for the cockblock?” Camdyn’s eyebrow lifts. “I’ll admit, you’ve been trying to apologize to Chevelle for ages. Now, she’ll feel your ice-cold wrath?”

Brody’s chest inflates. “*Feck* ye.”

Unflinching, our *brathair* retorts, “No, thank you. I could have a different bitch *fucking* me every night. Far as I recall, you could too, Brody. Now, Chevelle blocked all that pussy, eh?”

Brody rolls his eyes. “Ye done?”

“Almost,” Camdyn laughs, stepping closer to him. “Fat girls have super ... soft ... wet ... cunts. So, I understand missing what you can’t have.”

Brody starts to take his turn when I snarl, “*Wheesht!* Do the two of ye see where this is goin’, aye? Shut yer *gubs!*”

The American sneers. “Hello, Leith! I’m defending *your wife*.”

“Get out,” I say to them both. “Still bickering like auld hags!”

Brody gestures toward Chevelle. “How’s Nosey Nora sleeping through it? Dinna say—”

“Aye, I gave her a little something.” I clear my throat.

“Benadryl,” Camdyn advises. “My idea. So, I’m chopping Fausto into tiny pieces with the sword this time. I made five grand in online gambling with the geek’s foot. I want two of the Italian’s feet. My playlist is ready.”

Brody glowers. “Cam, ye told him to drug *his* wife.”

“Lesser of two evils, bro.”

“Really?” Our big *brathair* crosses his arms. I tune out their arguing while searching the fiancée’s social profile for more information.

“What the fuck is with the holier than thou act, Brody?” Camdyn sniffs. “You all forgot what it feels like to live in a house with fifty kid brothers? Not me, so cut the *pussy whisperer* act.”

Though only half-listening, I chuckle. “*Och*, that was a good one.”

Even Brody laughs. It takes a while for our laughter to die down. I mutter, “This is new.”

“What?” Brody hikes a brow.

“We’re evolving.” Camdyn nods.

“Aye.” Brody and I join him, nodding in agreement.

After one last laugh, I rub Chevelle’s back. “Fun’s over, *bawbags*. I’ve changed my mind about killing Fausto. I’ll support my hen’s decision and see who this woman is first.”

“I ain’t happy, but I trust your instincts.” Camdyn shrugs. He lifts the sword. “This is mine now, though.”

After he takes his leave, I ask, “So, Brody, ye’re smitten with Justice?”

He grooms his beard as if in thought. “I appreciate the challenge.”

“That ain’t the question I asked ya. But, aye, the challenge. Same reason I became addicted to Chevelle. All my life, a new hurdle.” I hug my wife closer in my arms while observing Brody from my peripheral. I can’t gauge his feelings. But I never thought I’d see the day he appreciated the female race more than when their legs were spread wide for him.

I click my tongue. “Ye know, if ya *feck* over her heart, my wife’s gonna hate ye ... more than she does.”

Brody wriggles his jaw. “One day, I’m gonna tell Chevelle how I pointed her out to ye. We were standing down the hall.”

I chuckle. “Watching her lovely *arse* while she picked up fallen textbooks.”

“I had football practice, so ye had Mam buy ya a gaming console. Learned to play right quick—all those little things. Yeah, I probably would’ve *fecked* her once.”

“Brody,” I growl, holding Chevelle closer.

“Nae, all I’m saying is my sister-in-law picked the right MacKenzie. Ya think I can be more like ye, little *brathair*?”

“Nae.” I shake my head. “But I feel privileged that ye asked.”

Brody’s frown fades into a grin. “Aye, probably not. Ye’re welcome. Might as well add, I’m gonna crack that friend of yer wife’s. Cam’s right—my dick loves fat cunts. Just so ya know, I’m good with Chevelle hating me.”

CHEVELLE

I CAN'T SEE AN INCH IN FRONT OF ME WHEN SUDDENLY, I'M wide awake. My mind is muddled with an array of recollections. I focus on my surroundings. Something feels familiar. I reach an arm above me, rubbing my thumb along the headboard. As I suspected, my thumbprint edges over the L heart C initials gouged into the wood. How did I get into Leith's old bed?

I groan, "Baby?"

"*Och*, hen, ye okay?" He responds in a groggy voice. Hot skin envelopes me in an embrace that brings my soul alive. Then it hits me.

"We were snooping around Fausto's info, and then you drugged me!"

"I—"

"With Benadryl." Palms against his chest, I shove with all my might.

Leith reaches over and flicks on the light. "How'd ya know?"

"Oh, how do I know? I fell asleep slowly." Smiling, I climb on top of Leith. I'm careful to plant my thighs along his hips, giving his sore abdomen room. *Shot*. Another thing I'd not known about—hadn't even listened to when he tried to tell

me. An addition to the things I feel guilty about. “Leith MacKenzie, you’re about to get your ass cussed out.”

“Ya know, yer mouth is good for it, but ye could always —”

“Wrap my lips around your dick?”

“Aye.”

I press my mouth over his, then let my teeth descend into the thickness of his bottom lip until he sucks in hard for air.

Tightening my thighs around his waist, I become his tormentor again.

“Hen, dinna be angry with me.” He reaches up, fingers furrowed in my tresses.

My mouth kisses, and then my teeth bite, loving and hurting the taut skin down his chest. “I can’t believe I talked about how much I love these abs.”

“Ye’re gonna make me laugh.” Leith’s chest compresses. He holds a hand over a cloth covering part of his stomach. Carefully, I run my hand along the sharp ridges of him. Gawd, he is a beautiful sight. All of him. I work my way down to Leith’s glorious cock.

“Ye gonna be a good hen, aye?”

“Baby, why must you ask, when you already know the answer,” I reply, coming out of my shirt.

“I did it for ye,” he tries.

“You sure did.” While Leith’s eyes track my movements, I run a hand over my belly button and up my stomach until I’m cupping my breasts. “I’m on top, Leith. Momma’s playing dirty.”

“Chevelle,” he manages my name, “be good to me.”

“Like the show?” I continue to run my hands over my stomach and breasts.

“Love the *feckin’* show,” he groans, reaching over for more pain relievers. “But I’ve to remind ye, ye *love me.*”

“Sure. Now, what do you prefer, these lips around your dick or my breasts?” It’s a trick question. The greedy bastard wants both.

Aware of his plight, Leith starts to fist his own cock. My hands roam his chest, and my tongue tangles with his. When my husband is shivering with desire, I order, “Keep your hands at your sides, Leith.”

My palms glide over the strained crests of his abdominals as my nipples trail down. Once my breasts are in position around his cock, I rub them up and down the length of him, lips teasing his head.

Leith’s head falls back. His throat vibrates. Leith gives an addicted groan. “*Och*, Chevelle, I love ye so much. Stop torturing me.”

“Torture? I thought only my mouth brought you torture.” Biting my lip, I continue my ascent. My breasts hug his girth, moving back and forth. I slobber at the crown of him, tweaking my nipples. I work his cock between my soft melons until my husband is calling my name. My folds wish to worship the smooth skin over his hard flesh. Though I’m in agony, I’m fully aware that my treasure won’t be savoring him tonight. Nope. Not at all. Leith’s losing the sliver of control he had. At that precise second, I deny the bastard the release he hungers for. It serves him right.

LEITH

A GODFORSAKEN PRESSURE STRANGLES MY *BAWS*. I’LL NOT wish this curse on my worst enemy. I’d bloody rather be stabbed than have Chevelle’s miraculous lips flee my dick. Groaning from deep down in my chest, I ask my wife, “Why. The. *Feck*. Did ye stop?”

“Oh, I love the sound of your voice. I’m so wet for you, baby. But you drugged me.”

“Ye absolved me.” I gasp, mopping my lips across her chest. “Yer kisses were so compassionate, so forgiving.”

“Did I?”

“*Och*, maybe nae.” I shrug. “My turn now.”

“Leith, I’m not sleeping with you after you drug—”

I pull Chevelle beneath me and bind her wrists in one motion. While my tongue tangles with my wife’s, I clamp her face, ceasing all her attempts to run. In a frenzy, I nip and bite her neck.

At her shiver of a cry, I groan, “Ye love it when I *feck* ye, Chevelle.” I can’t slow the *feck* down, can’t stop the fever she sparked in us. My hands cup her *arse*, and I push her legs wide, planting my face there.

“Ye said I drugged ye? Nae, this is a drug, my drug.” I inhale the sugary scent of her.

“Ohhh ... Leith,” she cries out as my tongue plows into her sex. “I’m still angry, damn! Oh, baby!”

“Aye, ye’re bloody elated!” My skilled fingers caress Chevelle’s clit. I look up with fascination from between her thighs. *Feck* the dull ache from my gun wound.

“Leith, baby, stop. I’m ... angry. Please let me be angry.” Her face is gorgeous, erotic, sexy, maddening, and indeed, bloody *feckin’* angered all at once.

“Ye’re happy,” I demand, lowering my head to her sex.

With her walls tightening around my tongue, the renewed urgency of having her pushes me to the edge. I flip until I’m on my back, and Chevelle is on top, *arse* and hips straddling my entire face. My tongue pushes farther into her, kissing fiercely.

Chevelle’s hips move, rocking against me as my biceps pump her, thrusting her shuddering cunt over my tongue. With every stroke of my mouth along the drug lined walls of her sex, my bristled jaw scrapes softly between her thighs. Chevelle grows weak, swaying with me until she unleashes a river of honey.

“Yesss! Yesss ...” her cries are drowned out by her body rocking orgasm. I grip Chevelle about the waist and bring her trembling body down over mine.

“Oh, baby, I love you so much,” she murmurs. “Give me a second. I’ll die if you’re not inside of me.”

I kiss her mouth. “That’s the sweetest taste I’ve ever had, love.”

“Leith ...” Her soft hand glides down over my hardened cock. I place my hand over hers, kissing her again. “Mmmm, hen. Put those panties back on. When we’re done with this, I’m gonna have ye, all of ye.”

“Ohhh,” she groans.

“Now that ye tortured me enough.”

Her swollen breasts tremble. “I take it back. Not fair.”

My knuckles follow the soft crease of her frown. I kiss her again. “Chevelle, later, I promise. Sweetheart, tell me, who the *feck* is the bitch next to Fausto? Tell me ye’re not gonna be lenient with Fausto on account that she’s yer friend.”

“No, Leith. I think she may be the reason Fausto became spooked and reached out to the Romans. Her name is Ophelia Kelly, and if it’s true, I’ll kill that bitch with my bare hands.”

CHEVELLE

LAST NIGHT, I SHARED EVERY ASPECT OF MY RELATIONSHIP with Ophelia Kelly. Mostly, about how Ophelia, owner of Kelly's Steakhouse, strung me along for the last two weeks.

Now, we've climbed into the Chevelle SS, having abandoned his precious import in his parents' garage. The Audi appears fit for a scene in a Jurassic Park spinoff with all the slashes on its rear. As Leith drives, I murmur my apologies.

"*Och*, hen, ye will make it up to me. Wontcha?"

"Eh," I begin, glancing at the green signs on the freeway overpass. "I suppose that was your dream car. I'll get a job, work doubles, and buy you a new Audi in ten years or so."

"New Audi?" Mia asks from the backseat. "Get me one too!"

Leith and I share a glance. She *had* a bright pink Audi convertible for her third birthday.

Leith nods. "Aye. Da will get his wee bairn anything she'd like."

I glance through the rearview window, shaking my head.

He toggles the gears. "When she sees where *home* is, I'll have lots to pay for."

Truer words have never been spoken. Ten minutes later, we arrive at our first home. Leith reaches into the rear, helping our daughter fiddle with the booster seat straps. With inquisitive eyes, Mia inspects the one-story home.

“What is this?” She asks him as I walk toward Justice’s Honda. My friend has stopped parallel to the curb. Brody’s truck pulls in right behind her, the rear sticking out into the neighbor’s driveway. I glare. He glares back, then reverses and parks along the next stretch of sidewalk on the opposite side of our neighbor’s house.

“So,” Justice chews her lip, sliding out of her car. “I remember this place from when we first squashed our beef. I don’t want to put you out of your house.”

“But if it were the house on the beach, you’d be singing a different story?” I place my hand on my hips then beam brightly. “Girl. It might not have the square footage we’ve grown accustomed to, but there are three bedrooms, one of which has your name on it—however long you need.”

Justice hesitates. I take her arm, pulling. “C’mon.”

We get nowhere as she stays put. “Chevelle. I’m tired of running.”

“You’re not running. You have a job you love.” I cock my head. “We had this chat over breakfast already. Jamie even made a good point. We’re like sisters.”

My reflection becomes evident in her shining, tear-filled gaze.

“So, *wit’s* it gonna be?” my sworn enemy says from behind us. Brody grips my shoulders. The bastard massages then squeezes hard. “Ye’re staying with my *sister* or with me?”

“It wouldn’t be appropriate,” she tells him.

“*Wit* isn’t appropriate? Yer sexy, thick body in this wee house?”

I feel like I’m behind on a few things. Justice isn’t looking at Brody, nor has she attempted to bite his head off, spit it out, nor stomp on it.

I reach up, pinching the back of his hands.

“Ye did this,” he whispers in my ear, letting me go.

“I did what?” I snarl. My lips fall into a smile. *Poisoned my friend against you* is written all over my face.

“I should really just go.” Justice shifts. “Apparently, I’m no longer on the run. I could return home.”

“How’ll ye get there?” Brody’s raging blue eyes lock onto her.

“Same way I made it to New Mexico.” Justice replies. Her tone lacks the bite I’ve grown accustomed to. What am I missing between the two of them?

I start with a threat. “Brody, if you—”

Brody cuts me off, moving in front of me as if they’re having a sidebar discussion. “Yer car was running hot, Justice. Was it not? Ye think I’ll let ye drive this piece o’ *shite*? Try me.”

I wait a few beats, watching Justice from the corner of my eye as Leith disappears into the house with Mia. Justice let a man have the last word? Who the hell snatched my girl’s body? This isn’t the Justice I know.

I place a hand on my hip and round in front of him on the sidewalk. “Then you’ll help fix her car, Fix-It Felix MacKenzie. Can’t you do everything?”

After the heaping dose of sarcasm, I regard my friend with a warm touch. “Justice, I’m not saying I want you to leave. You were on your feet here. And you can do it again. But Brody can—”

“Aye, I’ll help ye fix yer car. Might take me a while.”

I roll my eyes and start to bite my tongue. I walk a few paces away from them and cock my head to Brody. At first, he regards me like a worrisome flea. After a grunt, he strolls over.

There’s a flash of a smile on Justice’s face when I hide myself behind his larger frame. I look up at him, finger-wagging. “We need to get a few things straight here.”

“*Wit?*”

“You have feelings for Justice.”

Silence.

“Whatever, Brody. Hurt her—”

“*Wit?* Ye’ll fight me? Ye’ve been in my ear for years now. But,” his hands rest on top of his head, “I’ll try not to hurt—”

“No,” I snarl. Clearing my throat, I lower my voice again. “Justice doesn’t deserve the bad guy. That’s all I’m trying to say. Please don’t be that guy around her.”

“We’ve not even *feck*—grrr ...” He wriggles his tensed jaw. “Okay. Ye win. Ye’re clan. I can compromise. I’ll not be the bad lad, *Chevelle*.”

I’m not afforded a second to scrutinize Brody. Mia falls out of the doorway.

“That could be yer room,” Leith’s saying as she scampers down the porch steps.

“Mommy!” She runs along the cracked path toward me, flying into my arms. The tables have turned. I’m receiving the premium treatment Leith usually benefits from.

“What’s wrong, honey?” I run a thumb over her trembling chin.

“Dad told me all my pretty stuff is gone. My princess bed!” Hot tears wash along Mia’s cheeks as I hold her to my neck.

“Baby, let’s go get some Fruit Loops.”

Mia pouts. “Fru-fruit loops?”

“Yes, honey. Uncle Brody and *Auntie* Justice are going to watch you for a little while. They have lots and lots of Fruit Loops.”

“Okay ...” Mia manages to stammer.

Leith grabs the coveted box of cereal from the trunk of the *Chevelle* SS and hands it to Brody. “*Chevelle* and I need to go to the police department. I have all the documents needed to

show we were vacationing out of the country when our home went up in flames.”

Justice takes Mia from my arms. In a high-pitched voice, she exclaims, “Let’s go eat Fruit Loops, sweetie! Tell me the type of toys you want to decorate this room of yours.”

“Toys? Sure,” Mia exclaims as Leith and I watch them start along the path. “Auntie Justice, show me your room too, okay? Mommy says you live with us, here. We decorate your room, too. Daddy’s rich. Daddy will buy us anything!”

Brody interjects. “Leith will nae buy Auntie Justice—”

“Brody!” Justice groans.

Standing at the end of the driveway, I watch as the front door closes. “Sounds like she’s back.” *Chew his head off, girl.*

“What?” Leith regards me with a raised brow.

“Justice. It’s nothing.”

“My *brathair*’s attracted to yer friend.” Leith engulfs my hands with his own. “Ye will give him a chance. If not for me, for her. Justice looks at him, ye know.”

“Brody’s fine as hell. Of course, she looks at him.” I’ve darted halfway around the Chevelle SS when Leith reaches me. He spins me around, pinning me to the door.

His tensed jaw is bound with envy. “Say it again.”

Your brother is fine as hell, but I hate him. “No,” I laugh. “I’ve learned my lesson.”

“Too bad. I’ve yet to start teaching ye.”

“Hello, I complimented your brother. I dubbed him Bitch Ass Brody for the first two years of our marriage. This is an improvement.”

“Ye still refer to him as such on occasion, hen. And I detest that. Yer mouth is too bonny for it.” He opens the passenger door for me. On guard, I grin while sliding inside.

When Leith rounds the car to get in, I speak. “Back to business. How are we so sure we’ll be in the clear? We could

be headed straight to jail.”

“I took a move outta Yate’s playbook.”

“Who?”

“Douglas, hen.” He gestures. “The *arsehole* who I hacked into wee, unidentifiable pieces, Chevelle. I was *feckin’* dedicated.”

“Skip the graphics, please,” I say, snipping each word.

“*Wit?* Nobody’s finding him. Besides, I tapped into the database used for the fire department. The investigation at our home was unofficially closed as a gas leak, pending a discussion with the homeowners.”

“That was quick thinking, your telling Hilda to watch the house, Leith. But you must’ve almost given her a heart attack when you said Mia didn’t go with us.”

“Had to,” Leith replies, reversing the car. “She may have recalled seeing someone the day of the fire. So, hen, ye won’t slip up on us?”

“Nope. This will be practice for this weekend.”

My husband’s fingers glide through my own. He doesn’t have to ask me. My small smile signifies how I’ll be ready to kill Fausto and Ophelia Kelly.

LEITH

IN THE PAST, I WAS WRAPPED UP IN GIVING MY WEE *WEAN* AND wife the best and went too far. My Mia sees me as a walking piggy bank. A year ago, her bragging rights would have proven that I was successful apart from my clan. That just made me a particularly *numpty nugget*. Now, I've learned the error of my ways. I'll meet my wife in the middle and raise our bairn to have a good head on her shoulders.

But tonight, we live like the kings we were meant to be. Like the MacKenzies before we depended on the McFarlands, which was over a *hunner* years ago. I paid for a grand event, glittery smoke and mirrors, which'll be hosted at Mam's and Chevelle's favorite restaurant. I'd rented out an entire room, and my clan will eat like David I, the greatest king of Scots.

In a teal bespoke suit, I glance at Chevelle through the dresser mirror. She's surrounded by all the bonny *shite* meant to adorn her body. A pink silk dress falls along the curves of her lower back and *arse*. From the reflection in the mirror, I see diamonds straight from Tiffany's sparkle in her ears. She drops a dangly necklace that skims along the swell of her breasts, reaching behind her to clasp it.

"I remember the first time you stood there staring at me, Leith." Chevelle lets me take the necklace from her hands. "You were so crazy."

While latching it, I ask, "*Och*, I'm sane now?"

“You *are*, Leith. You are so crazy. But we were twenty. We had driven past here on our way to my old apartment. You had me believe that we were sneaking into an open house.”

“Dinna remind me of it.”

“The open house or my old apartment?” She giggles.

I give her *the* look. Through the mirror’s reflection, Chevelle’s a breathtakingly beautiful sight. My fingertips trail over her shoulders, placing kisses on every inch of her exposed skin. As my hands glide over her curves, her breathing increases. I sink my teeth into the pulse at her neck.

“Ouch!” Chevelle hisses.

I lick the area where I just applied hurt, and she melts into my erection. “The apartment, hen. Dropping ye off and returning to MIT—that had me off my *feckin’* heid.”

Chevelle’s hands press onto mine as I squeeze at her breasts. She kisses my knuckles, saying, “Well, you atoned for it, Leith. You bought this tiny-ass house.”

“I thought ye favored this home over the other one?”

She smiles. “Eh, in comparison to the monstrosity that’s now in ashes, yes. Besides, it was only tiny when I was lost in my thoughts while you were in Massachusetts.”

Plastering my hips against her *arse*, I nip at her neck. “Now that we’re not wanted for arson, I might let ye help me pick out our next home.”

“Really?” Chevelle wiggles away from my hold then turns around. Huge, shocked brown eyes lock onto mine. “That would be amazing, you bossy bastard.”

“Hah.”

“Anyway, back to you looking in the mirror at me. We had snuck into the *closed* open house, made love on what I thought was a model bed. You were looking at me. I wish I knew what you were thinking.”

“I mind,” I reply.

Her tiny hands swat at my chest. “Leith, that was a long time ago.”

With a smirk, I add, “I walked over to ya, placed my arms around ye like so.”

I can hear her heart pounding in her chest. Those luscious lips part while my precious wife waits for me to continue. “Hen, I dropped my lips on yer bare shoulder. Ye were complaining.”

“Someone had to be nervous about the realtor returning from lunch,” she breathes. “Didn’t cross my mind that you’d bought the place, and there was no open house.”

“Though the two of us needed ye to get outta yer heid, hen, I enjoyed that moment. I told ye to give me a few so that I could *feck* ye again.”

The reflection of her beams back at me. “Woah, you do remember.”

“How could I not, Chevelle? I mind all there is about ye.”

“So, then,” she sucks on air, as if breathless, “what did you think?”

“About how I wanted to make you smile all the time. Thinking ye were a drug, and how I’d be a fool to leave ye and return to college. Thinking I better marry this girl soon, control her, keep her, make her mine forever.”

I’m all over her, dominating her scent, her warm skin, her love. I pull her into a fiery kiss while hitching her leg over my hip. My wife moans against my lips.

“No,” she groans. “This is not a good time for me to get lost in the moment, Leith.”

“Now is the best time.” I encircle her in my arms. She sinks into me, then pushes back, regarding me with mischievous eyes.

“Leith, are you ready to star in our very own video game?”

I give her a lame look, and her chuckle is almost infectious.

“Babe, soften up. We’re about to sneak away from a party at my favorite restaurant tonight. Do some covert shit.”

“I could... .” I begin. There would never come a day when I’d not want to protect my wife.

“Nope. Though I could see Brody and Camdyn jumping at the chance to accompany you, this is my deal. Now, I could treat you the way you were treating them at first?”

A mask of confusion descends over my face.

“Cam filled me in on a few things. They were trying to help.”

“So, ye’d treat me like I treated them?” Just the thought makes me shake my head. “Nae.”

“Okay, so we do this together.” She holds out her hand. I complain about the cheesy handshake, and then we follow through with it.

LEITH

TWO HOURS LATER, WE'RE IN A RESTAURANT PERCHED ON THE ledge of a cliff with the ocean as our backdrop. The MacKenzie clan mills around a long table. My parents should arrive soon. Erika was released from the hospital yesterday afternoon. She kept changing her mind about attending.

I grab the blue label whiskey from a server, tell her we'll need more bottles, and gesture to Brody and Camdyn. One of the servers asks Camdyn for his ID. He pulls out his wallet and flashes a top-of-the-line forgery, and Brody places his arm over my shoulder. "Dinna be a *feckin' clipe*," he whispers.

"First off, I'm nae snitch," I say.

The three of us head toward the floor to ceiling windows. Bright lights are off in the distance of the ocean, a yacht party.

I divvy up the drinks, saying, "I dinna believe the three of us will ever stop bickering, but I'll tell ye *bawbags* something. We'll *feckin'* die for each other, aye?"

"Aye!"

We clap each other's backs, drinking a couple of rounds. Firth heads over, and Knox too. By the look on my older cousin's face, I see he's still holding onto auld grudges. I gesture to the glass of water in Firth's hand. He chugs the water, then hocks the wedge of lemon onto an empty table. The amber liquid swishes into his glass as I pour him a

generous amount. I eye him while filling up his water glass. It takes the *nugget* a good five or six shots worth before he mutters, “That’ll do.”

This he tosses back even faster than the water.

I pat his shoulder. “Firth, ye still hate me, *co-ogha*—cousin?”

My cousin bites his lip. His eyes narrow just so as if mentally calculating some bloody string of numbers. After a few beats, he says, “Aye.”

I cup the back of his neck, look him deid in the eye. “I *feckin’* apologize about the midges. Good now?”

“We’re good now.” He clasps my arm then pulls me into a hug. “Ye need to be warmer and fuzzier, Leith. Like ye are with Mia and Chevelle.”

“Ye a female?” I chuckle.

“*Och*,” he mutters.

“Whatever the *feck* ye did to him,” Knox juts his chin to Firth, “gimme the same treatment, then pour me some of that.”

Rolling my eyes, I gesture to his water glass. Knox sets his full glass at the perfectly set table. He then walks over to his brother and takes the empty one from Firth’s hand. Laughing, I fill it with about three shots worth of whiskey.

Knox grabs my face, pecking my cheek. “Did I ever tell ye, I love ye?”

I’m pushing him away when Mam enters the room. Da’s wheeling Erika, who isn’t wearing a wee *feckin’* t-shirt for the first time in her life, but a vast floral dress that might belong to Mam. I look around. Chevelle’s chatting with Justice, Brody’s next to them. *When did he walk away?*

Conquest my *arse*. Had he not scented pussy, he’d be over here with us guzzling down this expensive whiskey. Or priming himself for his next victim in the main bar area. Aye, Justice’s a conquest in that he’s never *fecked* her. But I’d say,

the only person who'll be left defeated between the two of them is Brody—and his guarded heart.

I'm heading over to my parents and Erika when Chevelle makes a beeline for them too. I intercept her. "Ye're not gonna ___"

"Hey!" Chevelle's hip bounces against mine. I wrap my arms around her, looking her dead in the eye. She adds, "Whatever, Leith, I don't appreciate your critical tone."

"I haven't even spoken, hen." With my mouth pressed to her ear, I reach around to grip her *arse*. I'm the type of lad who needs to hold onto something during our arguments, and her booty will do just fine. "So, *wit* is it, girl? Are we all good here?"

Chevelle looks up at me, tiny fists against my chest. "No, you and I aren't all good because you're being dramatic. For your information, I was having a moment the last time I saw Erika."

"Last time? Chevelle, ye always have a moment in Erika's presence. Can't be 'that time of the month' during each encounter."

Chevelle holds up a hand to me and communicates with a server that the first course can be served soon. Her dark gaze locks onto mine again. "Pst, Leith, my cycle is my personal business."

"Yer cycle is *my* business. Besides, once we get the insurance money from our house, we're buying a new home with a nursery."

The smallest indication of a smile appears on Chevelle's face. "We're supposed to be discussing the dynamics of my relationship with Erika. You were concerned that I still hate her."

"Do ye? And sure, ye having another bairn for me is bound to happen soon. Nae, it's *imminent*. Toss yer birth control, Chevelle."

"Alright, the ultimatum. Ye consent to pushing out the next bairn, I'll discard my pills." Chevelle pats my shoulder, fakes

left, but I've encircled my arms around her during her attempt to hightail it on my right.

"Not so fast." Smiling, I hold her close again.

But Chevelle's still wiggling away from my grip when her tone softens. "Erika, how are you feeling?"

"Pure deid brilliant, now that the codeine kicked in. Also, glad to see the two of ye happy." Erika grins up at us, folding her arms across herself.

Da cuts in, reaching for Chevelle. "Hello, sweetheart, just one smooch on the cheek, then I'll be nursing a bottle of whiskey."

"Nae, Brody," Mam cuts in. "Ye dinna even need one glass."

"That's while I'll be nursing a *bottle and not a glass.*"

"Da, if Mam tells ye nae drinking," I start, but the *nugget* salutes in my direction and heads over to the rest of the guys. Now that my auld da has walked away, we're back to square one, and Chevelle is free of my grip.

"You saved my life," Chevelle declares. Tears gloss her eyes as she reaches down to hug Erika.

"Was nothing, really," Erika says. Her face softens in a familiar way for a moment. Then a mischievous smile takes its place. "Ya know, we never finished the drinking game. Let's get it all out in the open."

I'm tensing as Mam hugs me.

"Yer a long time deid, Leith," Mam quietly says to me.

"Okay," Chevelle says, tentatively. She's still leaning into Erika.

"I was once in love with this *ned*. By age sixteen, I learned my affections would never be returned," Erika shares. "We had another friend who helped me through that. Now, *she* ran off and got married because I took her affections for granted, too long."

"I see," Chevelle murmurs. She gives Erika a sad smile.

“Yeah, I’m still stunned that the love of my life married and had a baby through surrogacy. *Shite* hurts more than the bullet wound in my stomach.” Erika declares. With one last squeeze, she releases Chevelle. “Now, I’m the female personification of Brody—talk shit, flirt, bed who I want. So, if ye hate me, it’ll be for those reasons. I’m nae home-wrecker.”

“Well,” Chevelle begins, “I don’t necessarily hate Brody.”

After Erika blinks a few times, my wife shrugs. “Alright, my tolerance of him has increased a little.”

My codeine-high mate fist-pumps the air. “If I weren’t hopped up on pain meds, I’d grab a drink with ya, Chevelle. Yer honesty is as refreshing as a crisp lager. Speaking of which, my uncle tells me he wants to get into business with ya.”

“Your uncle?” Chevelle asks.

“Which one?” Mam inquires, and I do too.

“Nae worries.” Erika holds her palms up. “My *good* uncle. The one with nae affiliation to the clan way. Edward was in town on business the night Cam begged anyone to check on ye. While I was held up, I told him to drive by. That is all. He came in, said he was *smitten*.”

“How did ye meet her Uncle Edward?” I corner my wife.

CHEVELLE

“YOU KNOW, THE OLD THING I ONCE DID WITH RICH PEOPLE. Just a conversational piece,” I tell Leith quickly. I scan the room for my saving grace and notice Camdyn. He looks up from his cellphone, and I lock gazes with him, an SOS glimmer in my eye.

The friggin teen, who I’ve saved from a bazillion binds returns to his phone, chuckling softly as he does. Leith clasps my arm. “Not so fast, lass.”

Damn, I haven’t the slightest right to call my husband the usual *ass*, under the circumstances.

“Let me go.” I give a hushed command. “People will think we’re fighting.”

“Nae, ye’re gonna submit like the women in those books ye love to read or suffer the consequences.” With a slight jerk of his wrist, I’m lurched back like a rag doll, slamming into his chest—the thick folds of my sex jolt. A heated flush runs the length of my spine. I take a tapered inhalation, determined not to display the effects of his dominating touch. Or how his firm body molds perfectly against my ass.

Leith whispers, “After that *arsehole* touched ye, ye promised—”

“I did, Leith. Might I remind you of our recent reconciliation?”

His warm breath tickles the bare column of my neck. “Nae.”

“Look, Mia’s watching.”

Expelling a stream of quiet expletives, Leith glances over to our daughter. She and Jake were moving around the silverware. Now, we have all her attention. Leith reaches around, holding me from behind. A grin embellishes his attractive face while he issues an ultimatum. “Tell me, right now, this very second, when we open Mia’s Place in the future, ye will stay safe!”

I glance at him over my shoulder. “Tell *me*, Leith. You’ll trust that I won’t place myself in a compromising position, not because you have someone in the clan watching?”

Leith’s smirk brightens, and his arms tighten around my midriff. The bastard plays the doting husband well. His lips drop gently along my collarbone, causing a tidal wave of goose pimples to shoot across my shoulder. “Someone in the clan *will be* watching, Chevelle. *Feck* how ye feel about it.”

“Okay.”

“Okay, okay?” His eyebrows lift.

I shrug.

The strained smile vanishes, leaving my shocked, gorgeous husband wheeling me around. “Nae argument?”

“Firth’s wife would make a good host. Although, I’m starting to get the feeling Nan had everyone play nice with me all these years. On Thanksgiving, I’ve seen her cut ...”

I trail off when Erika maneuvers over to us.

“My da,” she whispers.

Leith’s intense gander locks onto the entrance of the restaurant where a few more men are entering. The one in the center resembles a full-bearded James McAvoy, sporting wire glasses and thinning hair. I glance over the other two again and note how their eyes flit around in observation. Of a threat? Out of context, I wouldn’t make a mountain out of a molehill. But

the air shifts. A few sidebar conversations throughout the room and the soft *ching* of expensive silverware goes still.

Erika groans. “Da called a meeting with Nan and Big Brody for tomorrow. Then he rang me a little while ago. He was rather subtle in asking about my plans. I didna expect this.”

“The more the merrier,” I reply. They’re silent. While this is my first attempt at being more hospitable to my husband’s clan, their response fails to meet my expectations. I guess ‘back pats’ and ‘hand claps’ are out of the question?

“I’ll have a talk with him.” Erika’s mouth tenses. Her shoulders lift to their usual confident level while she wheels away from us.

Leith pulls me in for a kiss, whispering conspiratorially, “Chevelle, people have compared Ewan to the last Godfather in Glasgow.”

My eyebrows stitch together. “I’m not sure we watched that movie.”

“Hen, I’m not referring to the pictures. Ewan’s the *taxman* where we’re from. Nan’s strict about scheduling their meetings when ye’re away.”

“Oh?” My gaze lowers. I’m embarrassed by how unapproachable I’ve been with much of Leith’s family.

I find solace in the stroke of his warm hands across my cheeks. “Ye dinna understand. Mam does it out of respect for ye. Ya won’t take kindly to his ways. I didna invite the *arsehole* here, either.”

The main server heads over to us. She mentions how they’ll make room for the additional guests and seems to be delighted in the increased gratuity. A few minutes later, we’re all at the table for dinner. Leith and I planned to skip out within a forty-five-minute time frame while the entrées are served. Aware of our plan, the clan would ensure the fluidity of our dinner until we return. The time starts the second Leith gets up to make a toast.

As Leith arises, Ewan McFarland, who's seated next to Big Brody, stands. Resembling a college professor, he runs a hand down his gray tweed suit.

"Da," Erika speaks up, though her voice is more passive than usual. "*Wit* are ye doing?"

"Leith, I'll be needing just a moment, son." He holds up a glass of wine.

I hitch a breath—the audacity of it all.

"When I learned of my daughter's accident, for the first time in my life, I reflected on my lifelong relationship with Brody Boy here. Over the years, our comradery has come *deid natural* to me."

Between the two, Ewan is all smiles, while Leith's father wears an indecipherable mask. With the subtle sound of Mia and Jake watching a cartoon on YouTube to my right, it's hard to crack Ewan's cryptic speech. *Is he reassessing his friendship?*

"Upon arriving this evening, I learned of the event Leith had planned. Now, I've not seen such a show of good faith, Brody-Boy, in ages. Ye've raised a future-centric son in a *volatile country*."

"Heh, Da! We love this volatile country," Erika snorts laughs.

Ewan continues without acknowledging his daughter. "Leith, yer intentions saved me from the speech that I'd regrettably prepared for Nan and Brody Boy."

Big Brody snarls at him. "So, ya changed yer mind about us associating, have ye?"

"Brody Boy, I was a pure mess until I arrived. Now, I've had a moment of enlightenment when Erika discussed the fellowship occurring tonight. Which I am to assume is on her behalf? As *my* daughter was the only person hurt during the incident."

"I'm fine, Da!" Erika exclaims. "Big Brody nor Nan would ever let—"

“I am not finished,” he cuts in, rubbing thoughtfully at his jaw.

“*Wit’s* more to say? Ye’ll believe a frilly party has saved our relationship?” Big Brody’s hand sweeps across the room. “A party. Let me say this. I was yer friend when ye were still *sooking* yer mam’s tit!”

“Brody,” Nan sighs. “We’re in the presence of the wee *weans*.”

“So? A chat should’ve been between auld pals to voice their concerns. Or if ye want, I’ll share another scenario, Ewan. If I had any inkling that my bairns’ lives were in jeopardy, or Erika, a gathering wouldn’t save the man in my crosshairs. But a party! Heh, Leith where are the *feckin’* balloons?”

My gaze vaults between the two older gentlemen. When Ewan opens his mouth again, he’s not addressing his daughter or his oldest friend. I roll my eyes. *This asshole.*

Nan sits forward, softly cutting into his monologue. “Ewan, ye’ve a right to be livid regarding the events surrounding Erika being shot. As ye can see, Big Brody’s torn up about it himself. We’ve tried to address the matter with ye —”

Erika huffs. “All I need is a few weeks of physical therapy, Da. ‘Twas an exit wound, missed my liver and other vital organs. McFarland and MacKenzie clans are invincible.” She lifts her glass of lemon water. I start to lift my wine as a show of support.

Her attempt falls on deaf ears. Nan glares up at a *still standing* Ewan. A searing red flush burns across her cheeks as she scoffs. “To tell us that ye mean—”

“I considered it, yeah,” he replies, flatly.

“*Och*, ye meant to part ties? But now yer senses have returned!”

“*Wheesht*, Nan!” Big Brody commands firmly. “As for ye, Ewan, I dinna appreciate this, mate or nae! We’ve trusted each other all our lives. While this is not a discussion I’ll be having

before my bairn and his wee bairn, let me tell ye, I'll be having words with ye tomorrow. Shove that look up yer *arse*."

Ewan snubs him with a scoff. "Not possible. My plane is refueling as we speak."

While they continue to argue, Leith leans in. "They're cutting into the window we had prepared, Chevelle. Let's go."

On the opposite side of me, I caress Mia's cheek and press a kiss to her forehead. I'm clasping Leith's awaiting hand when Ewan states that the McFarlands and MacKenzies require a real union.

A marriage.

"C'mon, hen," Leith quietly escorts me to a door with an exit leading onto the beach. The second we step into the salted air, Ewan makes a bold declaration. Erika will marry a MacKenzie. Not just any MacKenzie.

"Oh my, did Ewan say Little Brody?" My pace falters along the cement dock, shock shooting down my spine.

"Aye, my *brathair* and Erika have *shite* to deal with."

When Leith clasps my hand, I stall. "But Justice! She's sitting right next to—"

"Hen!" Leith has a firm grip on my cheeks. "I'll call Camdyn down. Ye can go comfort Justice."

A flash of hurt crosses my face. His broad shoulders drop, as well as his harried demeanor. Leith gazes down at me. A look of love and devotion shines in his gorgeous cerulean eyes. His palms settle along my waist. The warm touch alights my entire body, and he descends on me with a kiss that scorches through me. A kiss dominates my entire senses until Leith's my sole focus, the center of my universe.

"Hen, I'll need ya focused." His tone epitomizes encouragement. "The only fear I have in life is losing ye or Mia. I'll say it one last time, Chevelle, I'd rather do this with ye at my side. If yer heid's not in it, I'm willing to mend this problem *for* ye."

He'll fix the problem without me. *For me*. Leith will die for me, kill for me. He'll give me the entire world. In fact, over the years, he's mended my throbbing soul. My heartbeat quickens in my chest while he holds out a hand, beckoning me to follow.

CHEVELLE

FIVE MINUTES—THREE HUNDRED SECONDS. THAT’S ALL THE time necessary for the entire abduction of Fausto and Ophelia. The entire sequence of events transpires similar to the video games Leith and I were once addicted to. I’m in the driver’s seat of a vehicle that Camdyn parked around the corner from the restaurant. He’d pulled a GTA right before the event and switched the plates.

In the passenger seat, Leith forks his fingers through a lock of dirty reddish-blond hair in his eye. He types on his laptop.

“Drive faster. Two corners, bend right,” he orders.

Working the clutch, I follow his instructions. I try to steady the drums imploding in my chest. With every inhale, an imaginary dagger twists and turns in my heart. The old wound that Leith’s arrival atoned for has unraveled.

“First left. Chevelle, make the bloody left! Slow down.” A flicker of concern crosses Leith’s face as he regards me for a moment. The muscles in his jaw flex. “Yer mind’s not in this. Drive us back to the restaurant. We’ll reschedule.”

“No!” My glare flickers over to him, locking onto his in defiance. His doubt drains when I add, “I’m ready for this, Leith.”

His hand finds mine for a half of a beat. The warm, callous touch is only a momentary comfort. My palms slide around the

steering wheel. About a half-mile ahead, the tunnel comes into focus. The tail end of a red Bentley Continental eases straight through the cement opening.

Leith had rerouted all traffic coming from the opposite end of the tunnel. We're the last to zip beneath the cement channel. About halfway through the two-mile tunnel, we see the cherry red luxury vehicle. *Stalled*. The emergency lights flicker, rousing my hesitant heart, the dagger in sudden rotation again.

Fausto is standing near the driver's side door as we approach. He's fiddling with his cellphone, a look of confusion crossing his face as he tosses the phone back into the car.

"Cellphone's disabled, mate, just like your car," Leith mutters, pulling on a pair of gloves.

Fausto's arm cuts through the air as I pull into the suicide lane behind him.

"Ye're strong, Chevelle. Use it." Leith's mouth bruises against mine in a fierce kiss. A dominant hand seizes my hair for a fraction of a second. Before I can intake air, Leith steps out of the car.

"You stopped, thank you, thank you! The world's just not the same these days," Fausto tells Leith. When I slide out of our stolen ride, Fausto's eyes land on mine. He chokes on air. "Ophelia, lock the fucking door!"

"I wanted you to see my face." While my sole concentration is on him, I slam the door. "To look into my eyes, *Uncle* Fausto."

"Ophelia, lock—"

"I'm trying!" Her voice trembles through the open driver's side window.

As I advance on him, Fausto steps back. "Bitch—"

"Nae," Leith's grave voice obliterates every thought from my mind. This was my show. He was my support. Now, I'm immobile. Leith moves fast; his forearm constricts Fausto's airway. The fifty-something slimy attorney thumps against the car.

From the car window, Ophelia's screams, "I can't lock the door! Fausto? Fausto!"

"Four minutes," Leith warns. His fist smashes into Fausto's stomach. "Ye watch the mouth while I get yer woman out of the car, or ye be dying." He grips Fausto's hair, bringing him to his knees. "Do ya understand that I mean a world of pain more than what my wife has in store?"

"Okay." Fausto wheezes through gritted, yellow teeth.

In a wide-legged stance, I reach beneath my dress to remove the Glock from the thigh strap.

"You're looking for your mom?" he asks, scrutinizing my gun wearily. "Marcy manipulated you, Carla. You're little Carla Anderson. I refuse to refer to you by that ridiculous name Marcy gave you. All of this is because of her. Not me!"

I fist the power in my palm. "Eh, I picked *my* name. My momma gave that bitch a Chevelle. We drove away from my *horror story of a life* in a Chevelle. Besides, I love my name; my soulmate loves my name. So, Chevelle's my fucking name." I lift my chin in defiance. "So, that bitch murdered my parents all alone? No help?"

"Yes! It was—"

"Well, dead people can't answer for themselves. That leaves you."

"No!" Spittle flies from his coffee teeth. "Let me grab my phone. I'll give you Marcy's address. Your mom—"

"Stop calling her my mom!" I snarl. "What phantom address will you pull out of your rotten ass?"

"Marcy's alive!"

Damn, I'm unable to read him. He hasn't offered a flicker of deception or the slightest tell.

"Should I let Ophelia go?" I gesture to his immaculate fiancée. Leith flings her into Fausto. He scoots around on his knees, placing distance between them. She gasps at his nonverbal answer.

“Three.” Leith refers to our window of time, coming to my side.

“Fausto says Marcy’s not dead,” I whisper.

“I saw a death certificate. Last tax form she submitted was years ago. Who knows, hen. Marcy could be living off the grid, or she could be dead. Ye trust him?” My husband lifts a brow.

“Ophelia.” I point the gun at her.

Her manicured fingers fly to her face, and the businesswoman cowers against the Bentley.

Stepping to her, I prod the tip of the Glock against her temple. “Ophelia, how do you know when Fausto’s lying?”

“I don’t know,” she cries over and over. “I don’t know a Marcy!”

“C’mon, you wanted to marry this knucklehead. An entrepreneur like you should know her future husband. My husband’s eyes shift a little when he lies.” Leith smirks. I add, “What is this sociopath’s tell, Ophelia?”

“I have no idea. He’s good for sex,” she whimpers.

“So, you don’t care if he dies?”

“No.” She knits her hands as if praying. “Just spare me.”

“Last question.” I nod. “What happened? You were excited to collaborate.”

Running an index finger through her tears, Ophelia relaxes. “The first few days, I discussed the idea with my chef. As promised, we were interested in pairing your brews with our tasting menu—”

“Hurry up,” Leith growls.

“The plans changed.” Her voice wobbles. “Fausto saw your name on a potential business proposal. He had me stall. That’s all I know, Chevelle. I-I called you. I tried to warn you!”

“Yes, you did.” Inside, I’m laughing at her attempt. I hand the gun to Leith, nodding toward Ophelia.

Relieved, Ophelia shakes as she cries. “Thank—”

A bullet penetrates her eyes, and she falls to her side. Crouching in his own area, Fausto glances over his shoulder at Ophelia. His eyes bite shut. Without a break in emotion, Leith hands the gun back to me. We’d agreed on a few things. Ophelia was a liability, but Fausto was all mine. I lick my lips, tentatively.

While drawing my gaze to Fausto, I ask, “Which one of you pulled the trigger on my mom and dad?”

The deceiver jumps at the opportunity to respond. “Marcy!”

“Sure. Because I should believe my Uncle Fausto.” The dagger rivets another three-sixty in my heart. “Why?”

Fausto’s shoulders lift. “Your pa was my best friend.”

“So why?” I press the gun against his head.

“Two minutes,” Leith grits.

“Why, Fausto!” I scream, ignoring my husband.

“Your dad wasn’t a support to me like I’d been to him. Carla, sweetheart. He had money. Pick your reason.” The devil tosses an empathetic bone. “I regret it.”

I sputter in reply, “My dad helped people.”

“The wrong fucking people, Carla.” He sneers in frustration. “Your dad and I grew up together. His parents died because of gangs in the area. Black-on-black crime! Who attended their funeral? Who supported him? Me!”

My chest has endured so much pain. It hurts to speak. Tears collect in my eyes. Voice shaking, I ask, “Dad owed you something?”

“Yes!” The truth lights in Fausto’s eyes. “More than he owed the same fucking gang-infested community that he gave all his money to.”

My husband states, “One minute.”

“Alright, Leith.”

“Carla,” Fausto’s gaze connects with mine. “I’m your uncle. Don’t let this guy influence you! You’re a good girl!”

Something in me snaps. “I *was* a good girl who came from a damn good family. But you kept screwing me over. Taking my parents’ money. Smearing my dad’s name.”

Lifting his hands palms up, Fausto shifts on his knees. “I’ll admit, your uncle made a world of mistakes. I’m five years, two months, three days sober, sweetheart. See, I’m admitting my faults, telling you the truth!”

“In those rehab meetings, aren’t you required to reach out to people you’ve wronged?”

“Yes.” His eyes widen, encouraged. “I still see your father in my dreams. Sweetheart, I’ve apologized to him countless times.”

What about me. “Anyone else?”

“Your mother was gorgeous. I wish *Marcy* hadn’t—”

“Anything else?” I choke back a sob. Through a cacophony of emotions, I notice Leith. The deadline’s written all over his face, along with an apology. The heart of the matter is beyond Fausto’s realm of understanding.

“Anything else?” I croak on repeat.

Annoyance burns in Fausto’s eyes. Although he’s supposedly leashed his demons, the self-absorbed prick digs through his mind for more lovely lies. “I regret that my friend di—”

My hand flies to my chest. In a hoarse whisper, I ask, “What about me? You ruined my life!”

My husband hesitates at my side. His palm runs along the back of my hand. “Give me the gun, hen. Get in the car.”

At age nine, the life I once lived was over.

I settled into existence, surrounded by an uglier, darker world.

At age twelve, Leith picked me up from the pits of Hell, gave me a new reason to live.

Today, I'll take my first life. Tomorrow, I'll pray to a God who forgives and hope that my resentment doesn't haunt me the rest of my days. My wrist kicks back as the gun discharges.

The sound reverberates off the cement walls. My husband removes the Glock from my fisted grip, scoops me up, and escorts me to the car. He places me in the passenger seat, squats down. The back of his knuckles run tenderly over my cheekbone. There's so much love in his eyes that my body and soul ache. Then he's gone. Leith shoves their dead bodies back into the Bentley and douses the inside and the surrounding area with gasoline.

My focus returns to the pool of blood. A dark, thick crimson puddle had been all I'd seen all those years ago before I passed out. I'd come to with the authorities beating down the front door of our house. I never saw what that rookie cop must've witnessed. While Leith pulls away, flames overcome the scene.

I place a hand against my chest. For the first time in my life, the dagger tormenting my heart has vanished.

I can start a heartfelt conversation about my parents with Mia. Maybe tell her the zany things Daddy once did when he switched gears from being an impeccable lawyer to a family man. A man so similar to her own father.

I can hold my tongue when angry at Brody in the future. And perhaps one day, in the not-so-distant future, I'll apologize for assaulting him the other night. *I might*. Who knows?

But there are other things I'm capable of now.

I can love my clan.

I can cease from keeping Nan at arm's length.

I can love my husband freely, unafraid of my past, our present, or our future.

I can breathe.

LEITH

I LEFT THE SPORTSCAR CAMDYN STOLE AT MACKENZIE Freight to be stripped for parts, exchanging it for the Chevelle SS. Now, the green freeway sign bolted on the overpass signifies that the restaurant is the next exit. I glance at Chevelle. She's clutched her chest this entire time. There's nae *feckin'* way she's prepared for company. Pressing harder on the gas, the Chevy sails past the off-ramp.

Twenty minutes later, my ride is parked at the top of a cliff. The entire city stretches out in the darkness beneath us.

"Leith," Chevelle glances around her, the moonlight catching in her sparkly, brown eyes. "We're behind schedule. We need to return."

Shifting in my seat, I take her hands, kissing her knuckles. "Tell me yer thoughts, yer feelings, yer desires, love."

She falls quiet at my side. The dimmest of smiles begins to shine on her face. "I'm relieved. I'm blessed to have you, Leith. Fortunate that we pushed through this chaotic part of our life."

"I think this wee exercise has better equipped us, aye?"

"Definitely." Forking her bottom lip through her teeth, she asks, "Can we go to Chicago?"

Eager to support my wife, I suggest, "Tomorrow?"

Though tears dazzle in my wife's eyes, she laughs. "I won't change my mind, Leith. However, tomorrow sounds perfect. I ... uh ... never visited my parents' grave after their funeral."

"This time, ye have me, hen. I'll be there every second of the way."

She nods thoughtfully. "Alright, I'd like to stick a pin in this. Tomorrow, I promise more bearing my soul. Right now, I desperately want you to kiss me."

Clasping the back of her neck, I hold her a fraction away. "Ye want a kiss?"

"More than anything in the world, Leith." Her voice is tiny, delicious, and goes straight to my cock as she adds, "You could make me beg. I desperately love it when you do."

Satisfied with her genuine response, I cup Chevelle's thigh, bringing her into my lap.

"Should I punish ye?" I stop short of the salacious title, my little *feck* toy, which makes Chevelle dizzy with desire when she's in trouble.

I gently frame her face and taste the champagne still on her lips. I run my hands over the silk material of her dress, gradually removing it while kissing her softly. When Chevelle's straddling me with her breasts practically spilling from her bra, I cup her tits together, inhaling her sugary scent.

"So *feckin'* breathtaking." I peel the silk layer that separates my intense gaze from her bare skin.

Chevelle dips her head, nipping at my neck and running her hands beneath my shirt. Her thumb massages over the bruising along my ribs. A fire rages through me. I'm almost incapable of stopping her as she pulls my dick out and starts to position herself between my legs. I interrupt her, though my cock would thoroughly appreciate her mouth, returning her sturdy thighs around my waist.

"Tonight's about ye, hen." I tease, kissing her collarbone, her neck, then capture her lips with my own for a passionate taste. Chevelle sighs, arching into my erection.

She runs a finger beneath the waistband of my pants teasingly. “After all you’ve done for me, Leith. You sure? Tonight could be about you.”

“Trust me. I’ll enjoy every moment of this.” I smile, shoving the seat back. I press her legs wide, manhandle my dick, and slither the head around her wet sex. My tongue explores her ear, and I can feel her relaxing further into me. She squirms as my tongue runs along the length of her neck, then I nibble at her skin. At her sharp intake of air, I fasten my mouth around her hardened nipple.

“Leith.” Chevelle sighs, attempting to spear her swollen pussy lips along my erection. I continue to caress her breasts with my tongue. She’s conquered by a staccato of moans. My dick deep-dives into her slick warmth. My thumb and forefinger stroke her clit until the overwhelming pleasure breaks her down, bit by bit.

“I’m cumming!” Chevelle bounces up and down, riding out her orgasm. For a while, we grind together. Her tiny orgasms squeeze my dick.

When she’s at the height of her next orgasm, I grip her thighs, thrusting deeply into her. My wife clutches me, unable to do anything but scream my name repeatedly and writhe.

“I love *feckin’* ye. *I love ye!*” I groan out. Her legs lock around my waist, soft breath in my ears as I plow into her. One last incredibly deep thrust causes Chevelle’s screaming to crescendo. She collapses into me. I savor this memory, glancing across her sweat-slicked skin.

“Cum with me, baby,” Chevelle reads my mind. Her mouth crashes into mine for a deep, long kiss. “Please, Leith.”

Savoring the sensation of her wet slit spasming around me, I kiss the single tear trickling down Chevelle’s cheek. My rhythm increases, and while we kiss, we pass the point of no return.

A while later, our heartbeats sync. A peace transcends for some time, and the only sound around us is the quiet night. Out of nowhere, my wife speaks.

“Ever since I was twelve,” Chevelle’s voice muffles, tickling my neck. “These arms have shielded me from the world. I still remember the first time you called me hen. A million emotions swarmed through me—elation, exasperation.”

While licking her pulse point, I whisper against her throat, “That so?”

“Yup.” She sighs. “I was already in love with you. I also was very much afraid of your reaction had I cursed you out for what I assumed was name-calling.”

The most gorgeous sight comes into view. My wife’s face as she leans back, beaming at me. Her deep brown eyes stare intently into mine.

“After putting all the pieces into perspective, I honestly don’t regret our last couple of weeks. For the first time, you weren’t just my peace. Your actions helped me put so much into perspective, Leith.”

I run a hand along her back, offering silent encouragement for her to continue.

“Damn, I said tomorrow, but the way you make love to me, it just has me feeling peaceful, also exposed. Hey,” Chevelle pouts, “now that I’m sharing, you haven’t said a thing. So, you’re just going to sit there? Sure, I could gain some ground regarding opening up, but damn!”

Laughter pours out of me as my wife pushes against my chest. I claim her thighs, ceasing her retreat. Clasp the back of her neck, I close the distance between our faces, my nose affectionately nudging hers. “*Och*, Chevelle, stop! I was amazed is all. I just wanted to thank ye for something.”

“Mhmmm.”

Nothing but sincerity shines in my eyes. “Thank ye for being the reason I smile.”

My wife’s face lights up like fireworks. “Awe, you are so amazing, Leith. Although, I doubt that you wanted to say that. Usually, you kill the tone with a joke.”

I scoff.

The gorgeous woman whose face is attached to all my good memories shakes her head. Her laughter fills every inch of my dream car. “I’m kidding, baby. You know when to make me smile or when just to hold me. Leith, you are worth more than the prayers I was too afraid to ask God for.”

“*Shite*, I like the sound of that.”

The warmest, chocolate brown eyes flit up in thought. “Damn, I do too. You have the jokes—although most of them are recycled—*Illusion Leith*. But on occasion, you say the stuff that melts my heart. Is this my first time melting yours?”

“Eh, nae. Well, maybe.” We share a soft laugh as my knuckles strum across the small of her back. “But bloody hell, hen, I’m a lad. I can’t go round saying my wife melts my heart. Besides, ye and Mia have my heart in yer chests.”

My wife looks at me like she’s drunk off my love. “Humph, I had your heart before the tiny human appeared. Also, if we have more, that line might not work so well.”

“It will.”

“Sure.”

“It will, hen,” I assure her. “Gimme ten wee *weans*.”

Chevelle face-plants into my chest with fake laughter. “Ten? Hah! Now, be honest. I wasn’t even smiling when you stared at me like a creeper a few minutes ago.”

“Nae, ya weren’t, but it’s still true. Anyway, I was *speechless, feckin’ amazed too*.” I glance at her thoughtful expression. “I’ve loved ye for almost two decades. For the very first time, though, it feels like I finally have all of ye, hen.”

Threading her fingers through my hair, Chevelle leans close. Her lips hover a fraction of an inch from my own. Right before our lips connect, she replies, “You do.”



WANT TO READ THE OPTIONAL EXTENDED EPILOGUE FOR Leith and Chevelle? Keep scrolling and you'll get this exclusive ;) Also, I'll share an excerpt of Brody and Justice's story, which kicks ass!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Thank you from the bottom of my heart for reading “Die For You.” If you’ve read some of my past work, I love sharing the reality that goes into writing them.

I wanted to return to my love for crime romance and recalled all the fun I had while learning about Russian Bratva while writing [Fearless](#) series and the [Lawless](#), spin-off series. So, I considered Irish Mafia and Scottish ... well, this culture doesn’t technically have a mafia. But the Scots have a fascinating language. Long story short, I turned to a Glasgow gangster, turned novelist (whose name I’ll tell ya if ye ask me via one of the social media links below). Anyway, many Youtube videos later, including Gerard Butler discussing Scottish lingo, and I was sold!

I hope you enjoyed Die For You. *A review will help other readers pick up this incredible story!*

*Turn the page for a wee taste of Brody and Justice’s story, “**Take a Bullet For You,**” and also grab Leith and Chevelle’s [Extended Epilogue](#).*

Have a blessed day,

Amarie



FORESHADOWING

BRODY



My hand snakes out, claspng the Barber’s scrawny neck. “Watch the beard, or ye’ll be dying.”

“I’ve always paid special atten ... Ye-yes sir,” the ginger corrects his tone. He lowers his eyes to the stainless-steel bowl of shaving cream in his hands. I click my tongue, release his wee collar and settle back in the auld-school leather seat. The whole place is fashioned similar to where Da took my wee brathair, Leith, and me back when we grew up in the Scottish Highlands. Linoleum floors, chrome, and leather chairs, a sign that looks like half of a wee candy cane. But I’m not chasing nostalgia, and I sure as feck didna come in for a social session. Anytime I schedule, though, the lad clears the place out. This is about me.

Me and me beard.

One could say I love my beard about as much as I love my Mam, my six brathairs, my Da, my clan! My fingers curl around the chrome finish of the armrest, and I’m telling myself to enjoy the self-care time. I work hard, toss my weight around, threaten, murder, I’ve earned this wee slice of heaven. *Dinna think of her. Dinna think ...*

I lose focus. From the corner of my eye, there’s a slight tremor in the Barber’s hand while he slathers the shaving cream. I live for the earthy scent of this stuff: coriander, eucalyptus, peppermint. At first inhale, I’ll have relaxed.

Not today.

The Barber admits, “Yer a bit testy—more than usual.”

I pin him with *the* look. Blether over. As the cool cream lines the perimeter of my beard, I close my eyes and contemplate the Barber's statement. Aye, I'm nae sunshine and daisies. But Justice did this to me. God made women from the rib of man, not the other way around. Her unwillingness to abide by the rules has made me a cold-blooded crabbit!

I force myself to focus on the straight razor traveling along the edge of my jaw, lining up my beard. It took ages for me to trust the Barber while my eyes are closed.

In my line of work, one must never let down his guard. Sightless, I'm vigilant. Though, from appearances my bulky muscles have relaxed. I focus on the procession. Best to think of that then Justice anyway. The sharp shearer lowers onto my skin, drags over my vein, travels around, and then lifts again. Lower, travel, lift.

At the break in the procession, I peel my eyes just so and gauge the Barber's location. He's at my right. Someone else's here.

That lad's behind me. Well, now, that makes the guy a dead motherfecker. In a mighty jerk, my head slams backward.

He gasps in surprise.

A garrote, meant for my fecking throat, misses its mark. The sharp wire bites through my white shirt, slicing along my chest. Not the effect the arsehole was aiming for. I lift my arms, grip the man's scrawny neck, and wrench him from over the left side of my shoulder. He's nae wee lad, but I'm a big motherfecker.

A bad motherfecker.

A mad motherfecker.

My so-called assailant tumbles to the ground. I anchor a hand at the counter and the other on the armrest. The shite-part of my boot clobbers down. I stomp the man's spine, his neck, give him a swift kick up the arse. Reaching down, I grip his collar, and glare at the bloody pulp. "Who the feck do ye work for?"

Red-stained teeth grit out, "Ki-kiss my ..."

My knuckles slaughter his mouth. The sharp jolts of pain are a subtle reminder that I was pissed moments ago and the focus of my wrath was Justice Flowers.

My gaze sweeps toward a soft trembling movement to the left. The Barber I've trusted for five years still has the straight razor in his hand. The light from above reflects across the dangerous blade.

I open my palm. "May I?"

He gestures to the razor.

"Aye."

When he hands it over, I pay tribute to Justice by saying a quick, gritted "thank you."

She'd be proud.

Fisting the handle, I reach down and point the blade at the lad. "They call me the surgeon because I'm really good at what I do. The Glasgow smile's my specialty." My hard eyes glower into him. "Yer *deid*. But I'll give ye two choices. Death with that arse ugly mug. Or we give ye a brilliant face, aye?"

Fear glints in his eyes.

I press the knife-edge to his jaw, leaving a clean, taunting gash. "Ya see, I've this way with me hands. Cutting lads comes *deid* natural to me. Wit's in gonna be? Who are ye?"

The dimensions of his pupils are enormous. On top of being an *eejit*, the Ned's a *druggy*. Aye, that's why he'd target me, *nae* strategy.

"Wit will it be?" I level the blade.

In one quick thrust, the man pushes his eyeball into the razor. His body goes still as the blade no doubt cuts through the few brain cells he has—if any.

My eyebrows slowly stitch together, and I mutter, "Och, that was unexpected."

I remove the razor, laying him along the ground.

The Barber's gaze drops from my eyes to the straight razor in my hand.

"I've known ya for years." I brush a hand over my beard while the blade drips a red liquid in my other hand. I have his reflection behind me in the mirror while I crane my neck and inspect the half-complete job.

With an unsteady hand, the Barber further dishevels his hair while forking his fingers through it. "He threatened my life if I spoke."

I open the silver top off the barbicide and grab a clean shearer from the disinfecting blue liquid. "Figured as much."

I wait for a few beats.

Justice taught me that too.

To be patient—to get my heid outta my fecking arse—is wit she said. To apologize.

That word was never a part of my vocabulary until she came colliding into my life.

The ginger hesitates a beat—as I've said, he's known me five solid years.

His Adam's apple bounces. "I'm soorry."

"Nae yer not a sorry lad. Unlucky. Not sorry." Craning my neck, I inspect the Barber's craftsmanship while pawing my beard. Then, I place the bloodied razor down and grab another from the kit.

"I'm sorry," he says over and over while I shear the entire length of my jaw. *Goodbye auld friend, I tell my beard, I'll be seeing ya again, though.*

"Should I?" The Barber offers, gesturing toward the blade in my hand.

"Nae." I glare at him through the mirror, and he blanches. A few minutes later, I run my palms over my smooth face, giving a nod of satisfaction. I open a plastic compartment where he'll often grab a steamy, hot towel to wipe my face.

"Feels good," I sigh, turning around.

“Brody, I’m truly sor—”

My Barber’s last bout of apology dies. With the precision and swiftness of a cobra, my hand strikes out. The knife glides across the ginger’s throat. As he lays choking on blood, I mutter, “Yer not a sorry lad, just unlucky and *deid*.”

Damned this messy business. My DNA is all over the area. I toss both bloodied straight razors into the barbicide, that’ll combust. A fire will do just fine. I reach down again to the *deid* stranger and search for his wallet.

“Did ye wait for me to arrive, aye? Or did my mate, here, feck me over?” I’m a creature of habit. Only when safe. Which means, only Around my clan ... Or Justice.

I dinna visit the Barber on a set schedule. On the days I’ve come in the past, I’ll give the ginger approximately twenty minutes to clear out the place. He *was* paid well for discretion and prompt service, and the special facial cream concoction.

I pat down the druggy. There’s nae wallet in his jeans. I press my fingers into the pocket of the stranger’s linen shirt, pull out a photo that’d sober the town drunk. A picture of Justice and me.

“Shite,” I mutter, pinching the bridge of my nose. “Who sent ye?”

Is the *deid* lad from Justice’s past or have I tangled her into the clan’s trouble? When we first met, she had a goon chasing her. The lad answered to me. So who sent this arsehole, and is she a target too?

Nae hesitating, I’d die for my clan—Erika McFarland included. But for a pretty face, nae. Can’t say that I’ve met a lass who differed much from the one before her. On occasion, I have played the knight when I saw a guy roughing up a lass. Aye, that’s just me tossing my weight around. For a pretty face, I’d take a two-piece to the beard, followed by claiming the life of the lad who tested me.

But reckon, I need to reevaluate a few things. Assuming this *deid* bampot had a target on Justice too. Granted, the bonny lass is different than any other woman I’ve crossed. Not

saying I'd die for her. We've established that she ain't clan. For Justice, aye, I'd take a bullet. Maybe even two.



I hope you enjoyed this super short introduction to Brody and Justice's story that will launch in April. Hope that's not too much of a delay, if the narrators speak any faster for the audiobook version the readers might complain ;)

In the meantime, if you haven't, grab Leith and Chevelle's [Extended Epilogue](#) for closure on Lady/Marcy and to get a glimpse of Chevelle's fresh, new relationship.

Please leave a review on Amazon, Goodreads, and BookBub. You should also read more of my work if you haven't.

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