



**FOUR MORE**

*Chances*



LOVED BY FOUR

**ALYS FRASER**

# FOUR MORE CHANCES

LOVED BY FOUR MULTI AUTHOR SERIES

ALYS FRASER

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# CONTENTS

[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](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Also by Alys Fraser](#)

## CHAPTER ONE

*Finn*

IT'S AN OCCUPATIONAL HAZARD, I guess, but I can't help judging the food whenever I attend an event. More often than not, I find it lacking. The canapes tonight are particularly disappointing. I mean, would it have killed the chef to use a little salt, to sprinkle some herbs here and there? Has the man never heard of pepper?

He's used the finest Wagyu beef to top his crostini but, for all the flavor it contains, he might as well have served shoe leather to the wedding guests. After a single bite, I set the offending morsel aside.

"Not up to your standards?" my friend, Callum, asks in response to my undisguised disgust.

I shake my head. As a professional chef, I've developed hundreds of recipes, honing my palate with each one. I know good food when I taste it. This is mediocre at best.

I'll bet the bride and groom paid a fortune to have the celebrity chef's name attached to their wedding. If you ask me, Chef Armand ripped them off.

"Our budget range party pack has better canapes than this wedding."

From across the table, Alex cocks an eyebrow at me. He's CEO of the food manufacturing company we started after we left school and moved to Edinburgh. Along with Callum and

our other friend, Jacob, we've created a global empire that now includes restaurants, hotels and even a golf resort near the village where we grew up.

It's quite an achievement for four guys from the Scottish Highlands, whose teachers said they would never amount to much.

Alex probably thinks I'm exaggerating about the quality of the food, but I'm not. It isn't up to the standards I'd expect at such a lavish event and that annoys me more than it should.

"I don't know," Alex says. "Have you tried those coconut shrimp skewers? They're pretty good."

I can't help rolling my eyes. Alex doesn't have the most discerning tastebuds. Although he's sampled every product I've ever come up with and listened to me describing the balance of flavors in minute detail, he still can't tell if something is seasoned correctly. His talents lie elsewhere, in running our vast organization on a day-to-day basis.

There's no point telling Alex he's a food heathen, so I just nod. Our table goes silent once more. There's been a strange atmosphere all night. If I'm honest, it's been there for a while. It's not that we're tense when we're together, it's just that we're not as relaxed with each other as close friends should be.

Lately, a restless energy has nibbled at the bonds of our friendship. More and more, our tempers are fraying. We lash out at each other over the most trivial things. Dissatisfaction with our lives is seeping into the foundations of our relationship and threatening to shatter everything.

It's because there's something missing in our personal lives. Now we've achieved greater success than we ever dreamed of, it's become apparent there's a hole that needs to be filled. Though we've dated various women over the years, none of us has ever been able to forget Carrie MacIntyre, our first love.

Carrie was our high school sweetheart. Being in a relationship with the same woman wasn't something we

actively sought. We hadn't shared a woman before Carrie, or since, but for her we were prepared to try. She was open to the idea, too.

Friends since kindergarten, we shared a few gloriously intimate months together before we left to pursue our dreams in the city. We wanted Carrie to go with us, but she refused. Used to a more privileged lifestyle she wasn't prepared to take the same risks we were.

I guess we saw her reluctance to give up her creature comforts as a sign she lacked faith in our abilities. We had a vicious fight before we left. Nasty insults were exchanged and we haven't spoken since.

Despite the way we left things with Carrie, we always intended to go back for her one day. Unfortunately, life got in the way. At first, we were busy building up our company. It was a real struggle, and we told ourselves we couldn't make things right with Carrie until we had a decent lifestyle to offer her.

Then we got caught up in the whirl of promoting our brand and dealing with the intense media interest in us. As time passed, we set aside the idea of being with Carrie and started to date other women.

When we decided to build the golf course and hotel near Kildarroch, the tiny village where we grew up, we entertained the idea of trying to win Carrie back. Ultimately, we decided it was too late, that we all had different lives now.

We did invite her to the celebrations when the resort opened last year, but she didn't show. We took that as a sign to move on. Lately, I've realized we've been kidding ourselves if we thought we'd gotten over her.

"I'm going to grab another beer." Alex pulls me from my thoughts as he abruptly rises from the table. "You want one?"

Both Callum and I shake our heads. I've had enough for one night.

"Nah," Callum says. "I'm going to rescue Jacob from those bridesmaids."



Blond-haired and blue-eyed, Jacob always has women fawning over him. Everyone is naturally drawn to him. Despite his cutthroat approach to business, he has a boyish charm that convinces people what they've heard of his reputation must be exaggerated. It's useful in negotiations because our opponents often underestimate Jacob.

With his muscular physique and laid-back style, he looks like he should be spending his days on the beach, not in the boardroom.

For the last half hour, he's been on the dancefloor with the four bridesmaids. I'm not sure he'll thank Callum for pulling him away. At least, he won't tonight. In the morning, when his head is clearer, he'll be grateful we didn't let him do anything stupid, like fuck half of the wedding party. We don't need to deal with the potential fallout of him upsetting one of them.

The bride's father owns a chain of high-end grocery stores, which stock our products. He's a major client. It would be disastrous if we fell out with him because Jacob left one of his daughter's closest friends disappointed. And he would disappoint her, because he doesn't stick with a woman for long. Over the years, he's left a trail of disillusioned women behind him. He'd hate to admit it, but it's because no-one has ever measured up to our childhood sweetheart.

As Alex and Callum leave me alone at the table, a mad idea occurs to me. I don't know if it's the romantic atmosphere of the wedding, or if I've had one beer too many, but I want to call Carrie. Though it's been ten years, I need to hear her voice.

I get my cellphone from my pocket and find her number. Hopefully it hasn't changed. My stomach lurches as my call connects. I guess I'm about to find out.

"Hello?" The soft, familiar lilt of her voice instantly soothes me.

"Hi, Carrie, it's Finn." After such a long time, it feels like an incredibly banal opening to the conversation.

"What?" Her tone instantly sharpens.

“It’s Finn Baillie.”

“I know,” she spits. “What the fuck do you want? I thought I blocked your number.”

Okay, this is not good. Her tone is aggressive and, if I’m not mistaken, she’s slurring her words. I think she’s drunk. She always got feisty the moment alcohol touched her gloriously red lips.

“I just wanted to check in and see how you’re doing.”

“How I’m doing?” She snorts derisively. “Let’s see. I’m almost thirty. I’m single, jobless and about to become homeless. How the fuck do you think I’m doing?”

Her words stun me and I need a moment to process.

“Homeless? What do you mean?”

“What the hell do you think I mean? I can’t pay my bills. I have to sell up.”

Fuck! Carrie’s family has owned the house she lives in for more than a century. It’s a beautiful Victorian country house with the most incredible gardens and an apple orchard. Everyone in our class at school envied her growing up in such luxurious surroundings.

“Why can’t you pay your bills? What happened?”

“What happened? What happened?” she rages. “What happened is that the fucking hotel you built on your snooty fucking golf course has put my bed-and-breakfast out of business. I’m done. Bankrupt. People are after me for money I don’t have and it’s all your fucking fault.”

Before I can say another word, to ask her what on earth she’s talking about, she ends the call.

Taken aback by her bitterness, I stare at the blank screen on my phone. After all this time I didn’t expect Carrie to be enthusiastic about hearing from me, but I didn’t think she’d be drunk, belligerent and ready to unload on me.

“What’s up?” Alex asks as he returns to the table, setting down a bottle of craft beer as he takes his seat. “Did the chef

overcook the scallops?”

I shake my head.

“I just spoke to Carrie.”

Alex’s mouth drops open. I’m sure that’s the last thing he expected me to say.

“Carrie MacIntyre?” he checks, as if there’s any other possibility.

“Aye.”

He blows out a breath and runs a hand through his already tousled, jet black hair.

“I take it the conversation didn’t go well.”

“No. She was pretty drunk. It seems she’s in trouble. Apparently our hotel has put her out of business.”

Alex screws his nose up.

“What business?” The last I heard, she was working at the high school.

He’s been keeping tabs on her too. We all have, through various family members who still live in Kildarroch.

“It seems not,” I say with a shrug as Callum and Jacob join us. “She said something about a bed-and-breakfast. I’ll call my Aunt Izzy and see what she knows.”

My aunt tends to have her finger on the pulse. Little happens in the village without her knowing something about it. As I find her number on my phone and press the button to call her, Alex catches the others up on what he knows of the situation. Concern is apparent on both their expressions.

“Hi, Aunt Izzy, it’s Finn,” I say as my call connects. I hold the phone away from my ear as she squeals in delight. Though I speak to her regularly, she acts as if every time we talk is special. I’ve always been her favorite nephew. “Do you know what’s going on with Carrie MacIntyre.”

“Carrie?” There’s a clear note of interest in my aunt’s voice. “What do you want to know?”

“Well, I heard she had to put her house on the market.”

“Aye.” My aunt sighs dramatically. “It’s so sad. There’s been a MacIntyre at Glenview House for over a hundred years.”

“I know, so why’s she selling?”

“Well, there were cutbacks at the school and she lost her job. She used what she had left of her father’s insurance to turn the house into a bed-and-breakfast but with all the bills and having to pay off those loan sharks, she’s been unable to keep it afloat.”

“Wait, what?” It takes me a moment to catch up to what she said. “Loan sharks?”

“Aye, well, that’s what the rumor is. A couple of dubious types were spotted leaving her house one night, not long after she finally dumped that loser Connell Beattie. Ella from the post office reckons they were loan sharks Connell owed money to.”

“I see.” I scrub a hand over my face. When I’d heard on the grapevine that Carrie was seeing Connell I’d been shocked. He was a complete asshole to her in school. If my aunt is correct, he hasn’t improved over time. I glance up and notice my friends are watching me with interest, as keen as I am to find out what’s going on with Carrie. “Do you know who has the listing for the house?”

There’s a long pause and my aunt makes a clucking sound with her tongue, a sign she’s trying to remember.

“James MacRae,” she says eventually, “at Great Glen Properties.”

I know that company. They sold my parents’ house when they decided to move to the city to be closer to me and my brother, Cameron, who’s an investment banker.

“Okay, thanks, Aunt Izzy.”

I quickly end the call before she can launch into an interrogation about my love life. She and my mother spend a lot of time speculating about whether I’ll ever settle down.

Whenever one of the tabloids runs a story about me being seen at a party with a woman, they hear wedding bells.

I wonder what they'd think if they knew there's only one woman I've ever imagined myself marrying and that I'd be sharing her with my three closest friends.

"So, it's true?" Alex asks as I put my cellphone back in my pocket. "She's in trouble?"

"Aye. She's lost her job and the house and my aunt thinks she had loan sharks after her because she was dating that shitbag Connell Beattie."

"Fuck!" Callum says what we're all thinking. "So, what are we going to do about it?"

"What do you think we're going to do?" Alex has a determined look on his face. "It's clear she can't take care of herself, so we'll do what we should have done ten years ago and take her in hand."

While Callum and Jacob nod in enthusiastic agreement, I sigh inwardly. Alex's caveman approach is not going to work with Carrie. He's obviously forgotten how headstrong she can be because there is no way she'll be happy with us sweeping back into her life and trying to take over.

As much as I agree we need to help her, I know if we push Carrie, she'll push back. If she's half the woman she used to be, we're in for a challenge. Of course, none of us has ever shied away from something just because it was difficult. In fact, we thrive in adverse situations.

A smile crosses my lips as I picture Carrie bristling with outrage as we lay down the law. She always was adorable when she got mad.

"Okay," I tell the others. "Let's do it. Let's go get our girl."

## CHAPTER TWO

*Carrie*

AS SUNLIGHT STREAMS in through my bedroom window, I wake with the bitter taste of regret in my mouth. What the hell possessed me to drink so much last night? It isn't like me, but I guess there were extenuating circumstances.

I threw a party to mark the end of an era. After a hundred and seven years, there will no longer be a MacIntyre at Glenview House. It's an immense blow to my ego to be the one who lost what my parents and grandparents before them managed to hold on to despite a dwindling family fortune.

There's no point in wallowing in misery, though. What's done is done and now I have to get on with it and build a new life for myself. I sit up and swing my legs out of bed. A wave of nausea rises up inside me and I clutch my sheets. Forging a new path is going to have to wait until I feel less wobbly.

Taking it slower, I ease myself out of bed. I head downstairs, passing the wreckage of the living room as I go. It smells like a distillery and there are empty bottles of whisky lying everywhere. Shit. I'm doing to have to clean that lot up before the photographer comes round to get more shots of the house for the real estate agent's website. Before I can think about that, however, I need a serious infusion of caffeine.

I follow the distinctive smell of frying bacon into the kitchen, knowing I'll find my friend Jennifer there. She's the

only person I know who'd be sadistic enough to be cooking a fried breakfast when I have a hangover.

“Good morning.” She's her usual bubbly self as I stumble into the kitchen.

While I'm in my ratty pink pajama pants and a white camisole, she's already dressed for the day in a cute green and black tartan skirt and white shirt. I guess she has a shift at the medieval castle where she works as a tour guide this morning. Her flame-red hair is tied back in a neat ponytail and she's even managed to do her make-up perfectly.

“Morning.” I slink over to the breakfast bar. On a good day, I find it hard with my short legs to climb onto the stools but today, when I'm not exactly steady on my feet, I won't even risk trying. I lean against the counter, propped up on my elbows. There's a cafetiere of freshly brewed coffee sitting there, its rich aroma calling out to me. “Pass me a cup?”

Jen goes to the cupboard and returns with the largest mug she could find. It's actually an oversized novelty one from a joke shop but when it comes to coffee I don't kid around, so I fill it to the brim and then take a sip.

“Ah, that's good.”

“Orange juice?” Jen waves a carton at me. “It's good for what ails you.”

I shake my head. Normally, I love juice at breakfast time but I don't think the sharp citrus flavor will agree with me right now.

“You want some bacon and eggs?”

Though I do feel a pang of horror at the thought of eating greasy food, it might help me get back on an even keel.

“How are the eggs?”

Jen tilts a copper-bottomed pan toward me.

“Scrambled.”

“Okay, yes, I'll risk it.”

“Wow, thanks for the ringing endorsement of my culinary skills.”

“Don’t take it personally. I doubt even the great Finn Baillie could impress me with his cooking right now.”

I can’t keep the note of bitterness from my voice. I’ve watched Finn’s career from a distance as he went from sous chef at one of Edinburgh’s finest Michelin-starred restaurants to running a multi-national company along with his friends, Alex, Jacob and Callum. The four of them collectively broke my heart ten years ago but if the tabloids are to be believed, they haven’t exactly been lovesick.

“Are you still smarting about him calling you?”

“That really happened? I thought it was a dream.”

Actually, I know damned well it wasn’t a dream. I wish that entire conversation had been lost to me in a fog of whisky but sadly my memory appears to be intact. I have no idea why Finn chose to get in touch last night. Perhaps some strange intuition had told him I was having a bad time, and it was his ideal chance to make it worse.

“Have you forgotten what you said?” Jen’s eyebrow curves upward as a show of skepticism.

“No, but I wish I could. It was so embarrassing to offload my problems on a stranger like that.”

Jen purses her lips at my use of the word *stranger*. She can make that face all she wants. After ten years, I can hardly claim to know those guys. I’m sure with their fast-paced lifestyle and model girlfriends, they’re far from the country boys I once knew and loved. Thankfully, Jen doesn’t pick at that particular thread.

“Well, it is his stupid five-star luxury hotel that poached all your business.”

Brushing my hair out of my eyes, I grimace. I did tell him his hotel was to blame for my financial woes, but it wasn’t the only factor. My decision to go high-end with the bed-and-breakfast wasn’t the right one. It meant spending more money on the remodeling work the house needed. Because of the



additional expenses, I had to charge guests more to stay here. I guess I priced myself out of the market.

“The guys aren’t to blame for my problems.”

“Pfft!” Jen scoffs. She was friends with us all when we were younger. Though she was never as close to the four men as I was, she felt some sense of betrayal when they walked away and never looked back.

“They’re not.” I gulp down some more coffee. “Fucking Connell, that’s who’s to blame.”

Though Finn and the others said a few hurtful things to me before they left, at least they never brought mobsters to my door. My ex-boyfriend, on the other hand, sent a couple of thugs straight to me. When he got into trouble over a gambling debt, he gave them my address and an assurance I’d pay. They said they’d break Connell’s legs if I didn’t give them the money. Much as I hate the little shit, I couldn’t allow that to happen, so I transferred some cash to them. They were actually pretty nice about the whole thing. In fact, I think they disliked taking money from me. I guess what they really wanted was an excuse to beat the crap out of Connell. It’s understandable. He’s annoying as hell.

Jen shakes her head. “Don’t know what you ever saw in Connell Beaton.”

“He was kind of cute underneath that scowl and I suppose I thought I could redeem him. You know, like in those romances when a guy is a seriously horrible person, but he’s different around the heroine?”

Jen breaks out her skeptical look again.

“Was Connell different around you?”

“Nope, he was a shit to me too.”

“So why keep him around for so long.”

It’s a good question and not one I really have an answer for. I suppose, after a while, being with him became a habit. Before I knew it, we’d been together for three years.

“Well, there was that thing he did with his tongue.”

“You’re incorrigible!”

Jen laughs and waves her spatula at me. Then she starts dishing up food. I wasn’t sure I could cope with eating but the moment she puts the bacon and eggs on the plate, my mouth waters. I grab a fork and take a big scoop of the eggs. They’re fluffy, buttery and cooked to perfection.

Just as Jen comes around the breakfast bar to take a seat next to me, the doorbell rings. I glance at the clock on the wall opposite me. It’s only eight thirty.

“Who the hell is that?” I mutter.

I put my fork down, but Jen puts a hand on my arm to stop me.

“I’ll get it. You’re not really fit to receive guests.”

Before I can make some token protest, Jen disappears along the corridor to answer the door. I pick up a piece of crispy bacon and take a bite. Hmm, salty goodness. It’s just what I need. I heave myself up onto a stool and carry on eating. Less than a minute later, Jen returns. To my surprise, she isn’t alone. James, my real estate agent, is with her.

“Hi, James.” I set down my fork as he crosses the kitchen and stands behind the breakfast bar. As usual, he’s wearing a gray suit with a pale blue shirt. I glance back over my shoulder. “Is the photographer here?”

I really hope he isn’t because the place looks like a frat house right now.

“We don’t need him.” He claps his hands together. “I have excellent news. The house is sold.”

“Huh?”

I blink a couple of times as I try to process that news. James grins smugly. He’s an arrogant jerk who obviously thinks he’s more attractive than he actually is, but I have to admit he’s good at his job.

“Already?” My heart flutters as panic threatens to set in. “That was quick.”

The house only went on the market a couple of days ago and I haven't even begun to look for a new place to live. I assumed I'd have a few weeks of showing people around and waiting for offers to come in before I had to deal with the inevitability of moving on.

"It happens sometimes," James tells me. "It's a cash buyer, and they offered twenty percent over the asking price."

Twenty percent? That will give me enough to clear my debts and set myself up in a smaller place. James produces a large brown envelope from his briefcase and sets it on the counter in front of me.

"Paperwork is already drawn up. You just need to sign."

"Wow!" Jen says. "This is moving fast."

"Tell me about it." I open the envelope and pull out some documents. I scan over them quickly and frown in confusion. "The buyer's anonymous?"

"They preferred not to reveal their identity at this time."

Putting down the sheaf of papers, I fold my arms across my chest. Something about this is off. It's too big of a coincidence that I spoke to Finn about my problems last night and now my house is suddenly sold before anyone's even come to view it.

"Is that because it's Finn Baillie?"

James shifts from one foot to the other, his discomfort obvious.

"I'm not at liberty to say."

"You don't have to, James. This has Finn or one of his little friends written all over it."

"The offer's good," he says. "Might be the best you get."

There's a hint of desperation in his voice and I wonder what he's been promised for facilitating a quick sale.

"Oh, don't look so worried, James." I pick up the contract again and verify the amount of money I'll get. "I'll take the offer, though what Finn wants with this place, I have no idea."

James hands me a gold pen with his name engraved on it and I try not to roll my eyes at his ill-disguised eagerness. I sign the papers in several places and then push them across the breakfast bar towards him.

“Great.” James hands one set of papers back to me. “That’s your copy.”

“So that’s it?” Jen demands. She jabs an accusing finger at me. “You didn’t even ask when he wants you out.”

Shit. That’s a good point. I wish she’d brought that up before I signed the papers. I was just so determined not to over-analyze the situation and tie myself up in knots over whether I should sell to Finn, that I didn’t even think to ask questions.

“Dates are open to negotiation,” James says, “but the money will be transferred to you as soon as I inform the buyer you’ve signed the contract.”

That doesn’t sound like normal practice, but I don’t query it.

“I’ll be packed and out of here the minute the money hits my account.”

“Well, whatever you want.” James clearly couldn’t give a shit if I move into a cardboard box under a bridge now that his commission is guaranteed. “I’ll let the buyer know.”

Jen snaps at his heels, firing off questions I probably should have asked, as James heads for the door. I smile to myself. Although it didn’t happen the way I imagined it would, my goal has been achieved. I’ve sold the house and can clear my debts. Finn has done me a huge favor but my gut tells me it wasn’t out of the goodness of his heart. He’s going to want something in return. He’s going to be disappointed. Whatever game he’s playing, I intend to win.

## CHAPTER THREE

*Finn*

PULLING UP AT GLENVIEW HOUSE, I know I don't have the element of surprise I was hoping for. James called me earlier today to let me know Carrie guessed it was me who bought the house. I suppose it was pretty obvious after we spoke last night. What she doesn't know, however, is that I'm not the sole owner. Alex, Callum and Jacob also contributed to the purchase.

When we got home from the wedding last night, we discussed what we were going to do about Carrie. Buying her house seemed an obvious first step. The asking price was pocket change to us, even with the extra twenty percent we threw in to ensure she accepted our offer. We want her to be financially secure so she doesn't feel like we're blackmailing her into a relationship with us. Don't get me wrong, we intend to win her back, but we're not going to strip her of her options. Forcing her to be with us will only lead to resentment down the line.

It took me some effort to persuade the others to adopt a softly softly approach with Carrie. Alex was all for marching in here and throwing her over his shoulder. He'd have happily chained her to his bed until she agreed to be with us. Thankfully, I was able to convince Cal and Jacob that my way is better. So, we agreed that I would come and speak to her first. Since she already knows I'm involved in the purchase of the house, it seemed the logical choice.

I get out of my BMW and walk up to the front door. The place is just as I remember it. The house itself is a beautiful red brick building with bay windows at either side of the front door. There's a well-tended garden with a large lawn bordered with flowers. Trees line the periphery of the property, making it desirable for the privacy it offers.

I ring the doorbell, the two-tone chime bringing back memories of when we used to come round to see Carrie when we were kids. While the rest of us treated each other's houses like our own homes, coming and going as we pleased, we were more respectful when we came here because Carrie's father preferred solitude. He shut himself off from the world after his wife succumbed to breast cancer. Carrie was only eight at the time. I always admired her strength in dealing with the loss of her mother and her father's depression.

I set aside maudlin thoughts of the past when the door swings open. Carrie stands there, wearing blue jeans, red t-shirt and a seriously pissed-off expression.

"Come to make sure I'm leaving?"

Her sniping tone bounces off me because I was braced for a certain amount of hostility.

"No, of course not. I wanted to see you. Can I come in?"

Carrie steps aside, leaving enough space for me to squeeze past. It's not the most enthusiastic invitation, but I'll take it. Glancing through the door into the living room, I see a lot of empty bottles stacked on the coffee table.

"Looks like it was some party."

She glowers at me but it has no effect. Even with that pout on her face, she's as beautiful as I remember. Her lips are full and pink, her nose perfectly straight, but it's her gorgeous green eyes I've never been able to resist. In the ten years since I last saw her, she's barely changed. We stare at each other for a moment as I find myself uncharacteristically lost for words. I didn't rehearse what I'd say to her because I was certain something would come to me, but my mind goes ridiculously blank.

“You want a coffee?” Carrie asks eventually.

She’s trying to be hospitable, but I can hear the reluctance in her voice. She wants me to turn the offer down, so of course I accept.

“Coffee would be great.”

As I follow her along the corridor to the kitchen, I glance into the dining room which is different to how I remember it. There used to be a large, wooden table in there with seating for ten. Now there are several smaller tables, with chairs set around them. I notice there are new fire extinguishers in the hallway and the old doors have been replaced with heavier ones. The room which had been her father’s study is the next we pass and a cursory glance tells me it’s been converted into a small games room. I guess she had to make some changes when she decided to open her home to paying guests.

When we arrive at the kitchen, I feel a pang of sadness. This used to be such a warm, inviting space, but the fridge freezer, dishwasher and cooker hood are very industrial. I guess the modifications were necessary since Carrie was running a commercial venture, but they rob the kitchen of its homeliness.

“What would you like?” Carrie asks as she gestures toward the coffee machine.

“Espresso.”

She snorts derisively. “Figures.”

I don’t ask her what she means because I don’t want to open myself up to whatever insult she has in mind. I sit on a stool at the breakfast bar and watch as she makes the coffee. In contrast to my espresso, she makes herself a cappuccino with plenty of frothy milk. She passes my coffee to me and leans back against the counter, running an appraising eye over me.

“I’m surprised you came alone,” she says eventually. “I thought you four were inseparable.”

I shrug. “We’re not joined at the hip.”

“Hmm.” Carrie sips her coffee. “That’s not how I remember it. You certainly stood shoulder to shoulder when you accused me of being a snotty bitch who led you all on.”

The vitriol in her voice suggests that even a decade later she’s still smarting from the things we said the night we broke up. I hold my hands out placatingly, hoping to deescalate.

“I didn’t come here to rehash the past.”

“No? What did you come here for? To lord it over me because you’ve got it all and I have nothing?”

“No.” I say in a measured tone, knowing this is classic Carrie behavior. She’s looking for a fight and I don’t intend to give it to her. “I wanted to check you were okay. Selling the house is a big step.”

Carrie sighs heavily.

“Yeah, but at least I’m not having to deal with the stress of a drawn-out process. I guess I should thank you for that.”

“I don’t need you to thank me.”

“So what do you need, Finlay?” She sets down her coffee cup and folds her arms across her chest in a defensive pose. “Because you didn’t ride in here on your white charger to save me from financial ruin without expecting something in return.”

“Perhaps I did it just to be a nice guy.”

“Yeah, you paid way over the odds because you’re a stand-up guy.” Carrie shakes her head. “Don’t treat me like an idiot. I know how men like you operate.”

“Men like me?”

“Rich, powerful, egotistical assholes,” Carrie says. “You don’t get to achieve so much so young by being altruistic.”

She’s right, but I don’t like hearing it from her.

“There’s a first time for everything.”

Carrie’s lip curls into a snarl. The woman is magnificent when she has her hackles up.

“Cut the bullshit, Finn. What do you want from me?”



“Dinner.”

Her eyes widen in surprise.

“You want me to make you dinner?”

“No, I want to take you for dinner tonight. I thought we could go to Nineteen.”

“Nineteen?” Carrie raises an eyebrow. “You mean the restaurant at the golf club?”

“It’s in the hotel, not the clubhouse, but yes.”

Carrie purses her lips.

“And that’s all you want?”

“For now.”

“What do you mean, for now?”

“I’ll explain over dinner.”

“Hmm.” Carrie’s gaze drops to her hands, which she studies with exaggerated interest. She’s silent for a long time and, when she looks back up at me, I expect her to refuse. “Okay.”

“Okay?” I don’t manage to conceal my surprise. “You’ll come to dinner?”

“Yeah. Pick me up at seven.”

“Okay, sure.”

“Great,” she says with a decidedly fake smile. “Now see yourself out. I have things to do.”

Too stunned by her easy compliance, I get up and head for the front door. I thought she’d require more persuasion. As I get back into my car, I realize what just happened. Carrie’s trying to take control of the situation. She probably plans to lay down the law at dinner and then walk away. If that’s what she imagines is going to happen, she’s in for a hell of a surprise.

## CHAPTER FOUR

*Carrie*

AS I FOLLOW the tall blonde hostess through the restaurant, I can't help but feel my *fuck you* to the dress code was a mistake. My jeans, floaty black top and checkered Vans combo makes me stand out like a stripper in a nunnery. Or maybe that should be like a nun in a strip club, because the women in here are all dressed to the nines in slinky black dresses.

Everyone stares at me as I make my way past their tables. Of course, it might not be me they're gawping at. My dining companion is a darling of the tabloids, after all. They're probably wondering what the billionaire hottie is doing with a country bumpkin like me.

Finn looks every inch the successful businessman this evening in his perfectly tailored black suit and snowy white shirt. He's opted not to wear a tie, his own little snub to the dress code. His shirt is unbuttoned at the neck to reveal a manly throat. Ugh! What am I thinking? A manly throat? This is what happens when you go too long without sex. You find yourself in danger of becoming enthralled by every attractive man you see.

Sitting next to Finn in the passenger seat of his swanky BMW was pure torture. In that confined space, I couldn't escape the amazing, woodsy scent of his cologne. Nor could I prevent my gaze from drifting to his large, masculine hands as they held the steering wheel in a casual, yet confident grip. As

we drove in near silence, I couldn't help remembering what those hands are capable of, the pleasure they used to wring from my body.

I try to put sexy thoughts about Finn aside as we're led past the other diners. If I'm going to shut down whatever demands he intends to make of me, I need to keep my mind free from distractions.

"Have we been relegated to the naughty corner?" I ask, as there seems to be no end in sight for our journey through the room.

"Your table is just up here," the hostess assures me as she leads us to a quiet area, away from prying eyes. As we reach the table, the hostess steps aside to clear my view. My heart lurches as three men rise from their seats around the circular table to greet me. They're all here — Alex, Callum and Jacob. Why didn't I anticipate an ambush? These men travel in a pack. They always have. Clearly, they sent Finn to speak to me alone this afternoon to throw me off guard. My instinct is to turn and run, but Finn places a hand at the small of my back and urges me forward.

"Carrie."

Alex is the first to speak. He is the leader of this little cohort, after all. Tall and broad-shouldered, everything about him screams alpha. He's wearing a navy suit with a vest which instantly makes me weak at the knees. Alex is a dark god of a man. His hair is black and his eyes are a rich, chocolatey brown. His looks are an inheritance from his Italian mother. The self-assuredness comes from his father, who's always been a cocky bastard. Though Alex's parents moved away from the village when their son hit the big time, Davie MacDonald stills comes back to visit his brother once in a while and he's not shy about telling everyone how well his son is doing for himself.

Jacob stands to his left, the golden boy of the group. His appearance is deceptively angelic. He knows how to charm people into giving him whatever he wants. When we were kids, he was the one we always send to sweettalk our parents

into letting us go to parties. I'm surprised they didn't send him to butter me up instead of Finn.

To Alex's right is Callum. Like Finn, he has brown hair and blue eyes. Of all the men, Callum is the one I've missed the most. He's smart, sexy, and he's a cuddler. At least he was. Now he's a corporate bigshot he probably doesn't have time for snuggling.

There are two open bottles of wine on the table, but the men's glasses are empty. I guess they were waiting until Finn and I got here.

"Please, sit." Finn makes it sound like a request, even as he steers me to a seat and practically shoves me into it.

He takes the chair on my right while Finn sits on my left. Surrounded by so much raw masculinity, it's hard not to feel like I'm being encircled by wolves. Unnerved as my body threatens to overdose on testosterone, I pick up the menu and study it like it's the most interesting thing I've ever read. I decide to have the smoked salmon salad, not because I'm watching my figure, but because it's the lightest option on the menu and my stomach is feeling distinctly queasy.

While waiting for the waitress to come and take our order, I check out our surroundings. The carpet is a deep forest green and there's dark wood paneling on the lower half of the walls. The large windows that look out over the woods at the rear of the property are framed by tartan drapes. There are photographs of the various holes on the golf course hanging on the walls. It's very traditional and, I hate to say, uninspiring.

"Have you been here before?" Alex asks.

"No."

"What do you think of the place?"

"It's nice." I choose a suitably insipid word to describe the restaurant.

"But?"

Oops. He obviously detected the note of disdain in my voice.

“Well...” How can I put this without being insulting? “It’s a bit more staid than I expected. You guys are supposed to be innovators. This is straight out of the *How to Decorate a Scottish Country Hotel Handbook*, 1980s edition.”

That was way more blunt than I intended it to be, but Callum barks out a laugh.

“I thought that too, but our designer assured us it’s what the guests would expect. We asked her to give us what people envisage when they think of a Scottish retreat.”

Thankfully, the waiter arrives before I can make a snarky comment about how far off base their designer was.

“What can I get you?” The waiter addresses Alex, who is, after all, his boss. Then he notices me sitting there. “Oh, hi, Carrie.”

“Scott.” I struggle to hide a grimace. Scott’s mother, Ella, runs the post office in the village. She’s the world’s biggest gossip. By tomorrow morning, the entire world will know I was here with these guys. It will probably reignite the rumors that circulated when we were teenagers. People suspected there was more than friendship between us. Of course, they were right, but that’s not the point. I hate people speculating about my private life. Lately, I’ve been at the center of a fair amount of gossip, thanks in no small part to my useless ex and his unfortunate entanglement with criminals. “I’ll take the salmon salad, please.”

“Oh, aye, sure,” he says as if he didn’t realize I was here to eat.

I guess I do look as if I just dropped in to pick up the guys’ dry cleaning or something. Next to them, in their sharp suits and carefully pressed shirts, I’m a hot mess.

To give myself something to do, I unfurl my napkin as Alex, Callum and Jacob order various cuts of steak. Predictably, they all want it cooked medium rare. Finn opts for the glazed pork belly. I pity the chef if he doesn’t prepare everything perfectly. Finn was a food snob when he was a kid.

As a gazillionaire chef, he's probably a thousand times more demanding.

It's unsettling to sit here with four men I once knew so well, but are now virtual strangers. There was a time when we were totally at ease with one another. Now, their presence makes me uncomfortable. They were confident as boys but now as men, dominance oozes from their pores. I like it more than I should.

"Wine?" Alex asks, holding up a bottle of what is no doubt an excellent vintage.

"I'll stick to water."

Though I do enjoy a glass of wine with a meal, I want to keep a clear head tonight. It was bad enough when I thought I'd just be dining with Finn. Finding out I'll be spending the evening with all four men is a shock. I need my wits about me.

Alex pours four glasses of wine, while Finn fills my glass with water from the jug on the table. It occurs to me, briefly, that it isn't wise to drink when I didn't see the water being brought out, but I dismiss the thought. I know the four men have changed over the years, but they'd have to have undergone complete personality transformations to consider drugging a woman. They've always had a strong sense of honor.

Alex raises his glass.

"What will we toast to?" he asks me.

"To twenty percent over the asking price."

A smirk forms on his lips.

"Fair enough. To that extra twenty percent."

Everyone echoes the sentiment, and we clink glasses together.

"So, a bed-and-breakfast?" Jacob says. "What made you go down that route?"

"Well, there were cutbacks at the school and I lost my job." Though I say it in a casual tone, it still kills me that I was

let go. Being a teaching assistant at the high school was incredible. I got on great with my colleagues and I loved the kids. A few of the parents were a handful, but on the whole, I enjoyed my job. “I was rattling around an eight-bedroom house on my own, so opening up as a bed-and-breakfast made sense.” I take a sip of water and turn to Finn. “So, what do you plan to do with the place?”

“We’re going to turn it back into a family home,” Alex answers for him.

“We?”

“Aye,” Finn grimaces apologetically. “I should have said we bought the house together. We want to use it as our primary residence.”

I suppose I should have realized they’d buy the house together, but I’m amazed they’re planning to live in it.

“Okay, so when do you need me to move out?”

“You’re not moving out,” Alex says. “You’re going to live there with us.”

“What?”

“We want you back, Carrie.”

I have no idea how to react to that. It’s flattering that these attractive, successful men would want me in their lives, but things didn’t end well for us before.

“But we don’t know each other anymore.”

“We know enough,” Jacob says. “We know we should never have let you go.”

“This is crazy. We can’t just move in together after not seeing each other for ten years.”

“We want to give it a shot,” Callum says, “and we won’t take no for an answer.”

While I could imagine Alex making a declaration like that, I didn’t really expect it from Callum. Caught off guard by the fluttering his fierce determination sets off between my legs. I don’t know what to say. Panic starts to set in as arousal fires

through my veins. Who knew I'd be so turned on by a take-charge attitude? Suddenly, it's all too much. My heart pounds and I feel like I'm going to throw up. I push to my feet.

"I need to use the ladies' room."

None of the guys tries to stop me as I turn and walk back across the restaurant to the corridor, where I spotted a sign for the ladies' room when Finn and I arrived. I fling the door open with more force than I intended and grab hold of the nearest sink bowl, using it to prop myself up. Staring into the mirror, I breathe in and out slowly, until I feel more in control.

I can't believe they want me back after all this time. We ended things badly and I haven't heard from any of them since. It doesn't make sense.

As I recover myself enough to go back out there and ask the guys what the hell they're thinking, the door opens and a tall, slender blonde enters the room. Wearing a skintight red dress and towering heels, she wiggles her way toward me.

"You're clearly not dating any of them," she says with obvious disdain. "So what are you? Some kind of assistant?"

"No, I'm not their assistant. I'm their...." I kind of want to tell her I'm their lover. That would wipe the sneer right off her plumped-up lips. I can't do it, though. "I'm an old friend."

"Great, so can you pass on a message to Jacob?"

"Sure, whatever."

"Tell him to come to Room 419 if he wants a night to remember."

"Seriously?" I cannot believe this woman.

"Yes, seriously. Tell him Celine's waiting."

"And will he know who Celine is?"

"Of course he will. We met the night the hotel opened."

They invited me to that, but having recently broken up with Connell for the sixth or seventh time, I was in no mood for a party being hosted by four guys who stomped all over my heart when we were barely out of high school.



“I’m sure he met a lot of people that night.”

“Well, he’ll remember me. He bought me a drink.”

“Wow, sounds like you two made a real connection.”

Celine makes a strange noise that sounds like a horse whinnying.

“Just make sure he gets the message.”

“Yes, ma’am,” I say sarcastically as she turns and sashays from the room.

Do the guys have women like that throwing themselves at them all the time? I guess they do. Even if they weren’t mega-rich, they’d still be incredibly attractive. Anxiety sweeps over me. Celine isn’t going to win any personality contests, but she is undeniably sexy. She’s probably the sort of woman they’re used to dating now, so why the hell do they want me? Is it because they feel some guilt about leaving me behind? Is it because I haven’t achieved anything like their success? I mean, I haven’t, but I don’t want them to pity me for the mistakes I’ve made.

I need to get out of here and untangle the confusion wrapping me up in knots. I head outside and breathe in a deep lungful of fresh air. That helps a little. As the fog in my brain clears, I realize I’ve got no way to get home. Finn drove me here, and it’s too far to walk back to the village, even if it is a warm summer night. I sink down to sit on the wall by the front door of the hotel and try to compose myself enough to go back inside and ask Finn to take me home.

“You okay?”

I look up to find Callum hovering over me, concern etched in the deep furrowing of his brow.

“I’m just a bit overwhelmed, you know? The four of you springing this on me is a lot.”

“Aye, we probably shouldn’t have dived right in like that before we’d even eaten.”

“Yeah, buy a girl dessert first,” I quip.

Callum grins. He lowers himself onto the wall next to me and stretches his long legs out in front of him.

“So, what do you need from us, Carrie? How do we move forward?”

Those are really big questions and there are dozens more floating in my mind that I have no answers for.

“I’m not sure we can move forward, or more to the point, if we should.”

“Don’t say that. We mean it when we say we want to be with you.”

I shake my head. That’s what I don’t get. I mean, I am still attracted to these guys, but the idea of somehow picking up where we left off more than a decade ago doesn’t seem feasible. We’re not the same people.

“Callum, we don’t even know each other.”

“Bullshit.” He shuts down that argument. “We’ve not changed that much.”

That’s debatable. I’m not sure you can survive in the cutthroat world of business and remain entirely unaffected, just as I’m sure I didn’t emerge from my shitty relationship with Connell unchanged.

“When we went our separate ways, we hurt each other badly. What if it happens again?”

I was devastated when they walked away from me before. Sure, I was younger and more sensitive back then, but I still don’t want to go through heartache like that again.

“It won’t happen.” The conviction in his voice tells me he really believes that. “We’ve talked it over. We know what we want and we’ll do whatever it takes to get it.”

“Yes, and that really worries me. Are you going to ride roughshod over what I want? One of you is hard to resist. The four of you together, well, I don’t stand a chance against that.”

There’s silence as Callum processes what I’ve said.

“Okay,” he says eventually, “how about this? You don’t have to deal with all four of us.”

“What do you mean?”

If he’s asking me to just be with him, I’m not sure I can do that. Though the idea of being with all four of them again terrifies me, I could never single one of them out and risk ruining their friendship. Aargh! Why does this have to be so difficult?

“Well, I’m thinking you could agree to go on at least one date with each of us individually. We can see if the spark is still there. After the four dates, you can decide whether you want to try with all of us, or if you need more time.”

“Okay,” I say slowly. “It doesn’t sound like the worst plan.”

“It’ll work,” Callum says. “Please, just give us a chance to prove we still belong together.”

“Well, I mean, it’s four chances, but okay.”

“Okay?” Callum repeats. “You’ll give it a shot?”

“I will.”

Callum leaps up.

“Great. Wait here. I’ll tell the others we’re leaving.”

“You want us to have our date now?”

Callum nods.

“No time like the present.”

Before I can say another word, he strides off into the hotel. I run my fingers through my hair as I process what just happened. Earlier, I was determined not to play along with whatever Finn was up to. Now, it seems, I’ve started a game of my own. I just hope I don’t end up losing everything.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### *Callum*

ONCE I'VE TOLD the others about Carrie's plan to give us each a chance to woo her, and persuaded the ever-impatient Alex that it's the best way to build trust with our girl, I go to the kitchen and ask them to pack up our food. It's one of the perks of being the boss that everyone immediately springs into action to get things ready for me. The head chef personally boxes up our entrees and one of the waitresses grabs a bottle of mineral water and a couple of slices of cheesecake for us. It used to be Carrie's favorite.

When I get back outside, she's still sitting on the wall by the front door. She's leaning back, face tipped toward the bright evening sun. Her hair flows down her back in soft waves and she looks so pretty in her jeans and black blouse. I wonder if she didn't realize Nineteen has a strict dress code or if she just didn't care. My money would be on the latter. Carrie has always had a rebellious streak that manifests in small acts of defiance. It's not like the restaurant was going to refuse her entry when she was with one of its owners.

As she walked through the restaurant with head held high, it was like she was thumbing her nose to our patrons. It's funny because of all of us, she's the one who seemed destined to live a life of wealth and privilege. Her family owned the largest house for miles around and her father never refused her anything. She never tried to fit in with the progeny of other wealthy families. In fact, she went out of her way to prove she

was nothing like them. I can't help wondering where it all went wrong for her.

“What's that?” Carrie asks, nodding toward the insulated bag I'm carrying.

“I thought we could find somewhere quiet to have our dinner.”

Carrie stands up from the low wall and wiggles her shoulders as if trying to banish stiffness.

“We could go to my house, or I guess it's your house now. There's a picnic bench in the back garden.”

Although I appreciate the gesture she's making by inviting me to her home, I shake my head.

“I had something else in mind.”

“Okay, then,” Carrie agrees easily. “Lead the way.”

She walks with me as I head around to the parking lot at the side of the hotel. When I stop by my Aston Martin Vanquish, Carrie huffs out a breath which might signal derision, annoyance or something else entirely.

“What?”

“Nothing. I just would have had Alex down as the sports car enthusiast, not you.”

“Believe me, he has quite the collection, but he's more into bikes.”

Carrie rolls her eyes.

“He's still a risk taker, then?”

Alex always was the most adventurous of us. How he survived past the age of twenty is a mystery. He was in at least half a dozen accidents in the three years after he got his driver's license. Fortunately, it was only ever himself he put in danger with his thrill seeking. Since we formed our company, MacDonald and Baillie, he's had to curb his tendency to get into life-threatening situations. Instead, he satisfies himself by pushing the limits in the business world.

“We wouldn’t be where we are today if he wasn’t.”

“No, I guess not.”

I open the door for Carrie and wait until she’s settled before going to get behind the wheel. Satisfaction courses through me as I hear the roar of the V12 engine when I fire the ignition. I rev just a little harder than necessary just to show off as I peel out of the parking lot and take a right onto a narrow country lane.

“We’re heading for the loch?” Carrie asks.

I guess there was little chance of surprising her since she knows this area like the back of her hand.

“Aye. Is that okay?”

Normally, I wouldn’t feel the need to check, but Carrie’s giving off skittish vibes and I don’t want to do anything that will make her feel uncomfortable. She shrugs in response, so I take that as an okay. I’m glad, because the clearing by the loch is the most suitable place I could think of to have some privacy. The spot where we used to hang out is secluded. It’s highly unlikely that there will be paparazzi lurking in the trees.

“Will this car make it down the last stretch?” Carrie asks.

Shit. I forgot we need to pull off the main road and drive down a hundred or so yards of bumpy dirt track to get to the waterside. I doubt it’s what the engineers had in mind when they designed this car, but I’m willing to take the risk.

When we reach the point where we have to leave the road and head through the trees, I take it slowly, flinching inwardly each time we hit a particularly prominent bump. Though I could replace the car easily if something catastrophic happened to it, I’m not in the habit of throwing money away. I’m relieved when we finally reach the spot where we can park and look out over the loch. It’s a breathtaking view and one I’ve really missed now that I live in the city.

“I forgot how beautiful it is here,” I tell Carrie. “The way the mountains frame the loch, it’s just....”

I can't find the words, but Carrie's nod tells me she feels the same way.

"It gets me like that too and I live here," she says. "Shall we take our food down to the water?"

She doesn't wait for me to agree before getting out of the car and making her way down to the edge of the loch, where there's a large, flat-topped stone that nature seems to have put there for people to enjoy picnics on. Looking around quickly to ensure nobody tailed us here, I grab the bag with the food and follow Carrie. Sure-footed as she was when we were kids, she clambers onto the rock and sits, looking out toward the water, her legs crossed. As I climb up after her, I wish I'd worn jeans. My suit pants aren't quite as easy to maneuver in.

When I've got myself settled, I open the bag and retrieve the foil containers with the food, along with some cutlery and the bottle of water.

"No glasses, I'm afraid."

Carrie arches an eyebrow.

"You wanted me to move in with you and your buddies five minutes ago and now you're afraid to drink from the same bottle as me?"

"No, I just thought you might prefer a glass."

"Because I'm so ladylike?" Carrie scoffs.

"No, because..."

"Are you saying I'm not ladylike?" Fire flashes in Carrie's eyes as she glowers at me.

"No...I..."

I shake my head as Carrie bursts out laughing.

"Sorry, you're so afraid of putting a foot wrong, you make it easy to mess with you."

I am pretty tense right now. There's a lot at stake if our dates with Carrie don't go well. I hadn't realized I was projecting my anxiety outward, though. Resolving to relax and enjoy the evening, I pick up the first foil container. It's cool to

the touch, so it must be Carrie's salmon salad. I pass it to her and grab the foil tub with my food, which, by contrast, is incredibly hot. I rest it on the rock and slice off a sliver of the steak as Carrie tucks into her meal.

"Good?" I ask as a murmur of appreciation escapes her.

"So good. It's got this lemon and dill dressing." She holds up a forkful of salmon. "Want to taste?"

"I can't. Allergic to fish, remember?"

"Oh, right? I thought that was Jacob."

"No, he just doesn't like fish."

Carrie nods.

"Guess there's a lot we've forgotten about each other."

"I don't know," I say. "I remember you love cashew nuts but hate almonds. You love Thai food as long as there's not a lot of lemongrass in it. Oh, and you hate avocados, because no fruit has the right to be that greasy."

Carrie stares at me for a moment, obviously stunned as her mouth falls open. Then she shakes her head.

"It's easier for you to remember because there's only one of me. There's four of you, so I'm bound to forget stuff."

She turns her attention back to her food, and I cut off a sliver of my steak. The moment I pop it in my mouth, I groan.

"Did it not travel well?" Carrie asks.

"No, it's good, but if they served the same thing to Finn, he'll be complaining the chef was heavy-handed with the salt."

Carrie giggles.

"He's a nightmare with food. Remember that time I made us spaghetti with homemade sauce and I got garlic cloves and garlic bulbs mixed up."

I laugh because that meal was so unpleasant I've never been able to forget it.

"My skin smelled of that for a week."



“But at least no vampires got you,” Carrie says.

We go back to eating in near silence, but where it's not uncomfortable now that we've broken the ice a little. I finish my steak and the accompanying vegetables and put the foil container back in the bag. When Carrie's done with her meal, I get out the two cake boxes and hand one over.

“Ooh, cheesecake!” Carrie squeals as she opens it to find the dessert with in. “Someone's trying to get on my good side.”

I guess that was a kind of obvious ploy.

“Is it working?”

“Depends how good the cheesecake is.” Carrie breaks off a large piece with the dessert fork that was in the box and puts the whole thing in her mouth.

“Well?”

Unable to speak with her mouth full, she gives me a thumbs up. For the entire time she's eating the dessert, she doesn't so much as spare me a glance. She's clearly enjoying it. Every time she gives a throaty little moan of appreciation, my cock twitches. Thankfully, she finishes eating before I embarrass myself by turning into an over-excited teenaged boy.

“So, what now?” she asks as she dumps the empty carton into the food bag.

“We could go skinny dipping.”

Carrie arches an eyebrow that tells me it's way too early to try to relive that particular memory from my youth.

“It's too cold,” she replies. “We might not have noticed when we were kids, but that water is freezing.”

“It's a nice night. Sun's still warm.”

Carrie shakes her head.

“No skinny dipping on a first date. It's a rule of mine.”

“Well, we can’t go breaking your rules.” I edge a little closer to her. “How do you feel about kissing?”

She glances up at me from beneath thick eyelashes and smiles shyly.

“That might be okay.”

I don’t wait for her to change her mind. I lean in and curve my hand around the back of her neck. As I move to kiss her, I catch a subtle hint of coconut and something fruity from her skin. Her lips are soft and warm. I take my time to explore them. It’s such a cliché, but the taste of her lips is like coming home. I hadn’t realized just how much I missed Carrie until now. My body responds to her with the same enthusiasm it always did. As my arousal grows, I pull back. I don’t want to blow things with her. It’s time to slow down before I do something regrettable.

Carrie turns away, to look out over the water. I’m afraid things are going to get awkward, but she suddenly giggles.

“Remember the time we camped down here?” she asks. “And nobody thought to bring something soft to sleep on.”

“Yeah, and it started raining at three in the morning and it came in through a hole in the tent.”

It was simultaneously the most uncomfortable and the greatest night of my life. The ground was cold, hard and lumpy, but it was the first time the four of us got to cuddle up with Carrie all night. She’d told her dad she was staying at her friend Jennifer’s house.

“I remember. You want to camp out tonight?”

“Hell, no. I like my creature comforts too much to put myself through that.” Carrie rubs her hands up and down her arms as the air grows chilly. “In fact, it’s getting a bit cold now.”

Even in the summer it can get cold very quickly here, so as much as I hate to do it, I know I have to bring the evening to a close.

“Let’s get you home.”

With reluctance, I jump down from the rock and hold out my hands to Carrie. She doesn't hesitate to fling herself off the rock, knowing I'll catch her. I lower her safely to the ground and she grins up at me.

"Just like old times," she says.

"Yeah," I agree as she practically skips off towards the car.  
"It is."

## CHAPTER SIX

*Carrie*

WHEN WE ARRIVE BACK at my house, I realize I'm not ready for the night to end. It's been amazing to reconnect with Callum. Although it was a bit awkward at first, I soon felt myself relaxing in his company. He always was easy to get along with. Although a great deal has changed, time hasn't diminished my attraction to him.

Ever the gentleman, he gets out of the car and comes around to the passenger side to open the door for me. He offers me his hand and I take it, allowing him to help me out of the car. He walks me the half dozen steps to the front door and waits for me to fish my key out of my purse. There's a wariness about him as he scans the gardens. His shoulders tense and his jaw tightens.

"What's the matter?"

He shakes his head.

"Sorry, it's stupid, but I'm always waiting for someone to jump out of the bushes with a camera."

I consider for a moment what it must be like to be in his position, constantly having his photo in the newspapers. Well, what it must be like for all four of them.

"You were okay down by the loch."

"Yeah, because a photographer would have no idea where to find us. If anyone saw us leaving the restaurant, they might

assume we'd come to your house.”

He's being a little paranoid, if you ask me, but I suppose it's what happens when you've been in the public eye for a long time. I scan the periphery of the gardens.

“I think you're safe here.”

“Aye, you're right, but it's a hard habit to break, looking over your shoulder all the time.”

“Do the rest of the guys hate it as much as you do?”

Callum shakes his head. He is the most sensitive of the bunch, so I guess he takes the intrusion into his life more personally than the others do. I realize that making him stand on my doorstep like this is unfair.

“Do you want to come in?” I ask as I insert the key in the lock and open the door.

His eyes widen when I extend the invitation and I like that he didn't take it for granted I'd want him to come inside.

“Aye, that would be great.”

“Coffee?” I ask as he joins me in the hallway, making it feel far smaller than it is.”

“Aye.”

I lead him through to the kitchen and fill the kettle.

“I hope instant's okay. I can't be bothered firing up the machine.”

Though it makes the most amazing coffee, it does require a bit of work and I'm not in the mood to mess about with the steamer, trying to get the froth to the perfect consistency. It cost me a small fortune, and I only bought the damned thing so I could offer my guests a range of beverages. Sadly, it has not paid for itself.

“Instant is fine.”

“You still take it with a splash of milk and half a teaspoon of sugar?” I ask, quietly patting myself on the back for remembering how he used to like his coffee.

Callum nods. I realize he's hovering, so I gesture toward the stools at the breakfast bar and he takes a seat. When the kettle boils, I get two mugs from the cupboard and spoon some coffee into them. I add sugar to Callum's and fetch milk from the refrigerator, adding a drizzle to each cup. Sticking to my side of the breakfast bar, I push a mug across to Callum and lean back against the countertop behind me.

"Why did you guys never come back?" I ask.

"Huh?"

I seem to have caught him off guard.

"After that night," I say, in case clarification is required. "Why did you never come back?"

"Well, we thought the fight we had was pretty final. You said you didn't want to come with us. We said horrible things to you. It seemed like it was over between us."

I purse my lips.

"You could have come back, fought for us."

Callum nods in agreement.

"You're right, but we spent a long time licking our wounds. Then, life just got in the way."

"That's a lame excuse. You know that, right?"

"It is, but let me ask you this: why did you never come looking for us?"

Now it's me who's been caught unawares.

"I mean, all of our parents lived in the village until a few years ago. They could have given you our address."

I have to admit he's right. Callum's parents were the last to move away, and they only left two years ago. All of them still have aunts, uncles or cousins who live close by. If I'd wanted to know where the guys lived, someone would have given me the information. Even if they hadn't, the address of their head office is a matter of public record.

“I was hurt too, at first. Then, once you became an overnight success, I thought you wouldn’t want me.”

“We were hardly an overnight success,” Callum says. “It might look that way, but we worked our asses off for four years before Finn’s cooking brought him all that attention.”

“I know. I shouldn’t have made it sound like you guys just got lucky.”

“We didn’t, but for your information, there has never been a time when we didn’t want you.”

Hearing that makes my heart pitter-patter.

“So why come back now?”

“We always knew there was something missing in our lives, but we never acknowledged it as a group, until now.”

“So you decided to call me?”

“Actually, we were at a wedding and Finn got a bit sentimental, so he called you.”

“You didn’t sit down and discuss it first?”

Callum sips his coffee and sets the mug down on the countertop.

“No, but the minute we heard you were in trouble, we all knew we had to come back. We couldn’t bear the thought of you struggling when it would be so easy for us to help you.”

The sincerity in his voice does funny things to my insides, but I need to stay focused on the conversation. I have concerns about this whole situation, and I know Callum is the most likely of the group to give me the answers I need.

“And buying the house? Was that supposed to put pressure on me? Am I supposed to agree to be with you in gratitude for you writing a check?”

“Nobody writes checks these days,” Callum says flippantly. His eyes glint with mischief, and I know he’s trying to lighten the mood.

“Okay, smartass, because you did a bank transfer, I’m supposed to fall at your feet?”

He shakes his head.

“No. We actually bought the house so you *wouldn’t* feel pressured.”

“How does that work?”

“Well, we hoped the money would be enough to settle whatever debts you might have and set yourself up in a new life.”

That’s reassuring.

“So you’re not trying to force me into anything?”

“Hmm.” Callum makes a strangled sound. “Jake, Finn and I aren’t, but you know Alex. He’s always been a take what I want kind of guy.”

“I know, which is why I’ve decided I’m going to go on a date with him last. I’ll go out with Jake next, and then Finn. Then I’ll see Alex.”

“He won’t like that,” Callum says. He wraps his hands around his coffee mug. “I’d have thought you’d want to see Finn and then Jake.”

“No, Finn’s more intense than Jake. “

“If you say so.”

“I do say so. That’s the order I want to see them in. Will you pass that on?”

“Okay.” Callum gets up from the stool.

Did he think I was dismissing him? It certainly seems that way as he heads for the door. I follow him into the corridor. When he reaches the front door, he turns to say something, but I don’t give him the chance to speak. Pushing up on my tiptoes, I press my lips to his. Callum stiffens as if surprised. I have to admit, I hadn’t expected to initiate anything, but the urge took hold of me and I couldn’t resist.



When he doesn't respond, I start to pull away, but Callum has other ideas. He takes control, grabbing my shoulders and backing me against the wall as his mouth lays claim to mine. This is a new, more aggressive Callum than I knew before and I am here for it. My heart pounds furiously as he presses his hips against me and I feel the evidence of his arousal. As his tongue sweeps into my mouth, I moan. The man has come a long way since our first tentative kiss back when we were sixteen. It had been sloppy, like having a Labrador slobbering over me. This is way more skillful.

His fingers dig into my upper arms as if he's afraid I'll change my mind and kick him out. There is zero chance of that happening while his tongue continues to tease me to a frenzy. If he can turn me on like this just kissing, imagine what that tongue could do if it picked another spot to taste.

My clit throbs as his hand moves under my blouse to curve around my breast, a perfect fit for his palm. He yanks my bra aside and rolls my nipple between his forefinger and thumb until it forms a tight peak. Then he grabs the hem of my blouse and whips it off over my head. There's a brief struggle to get the sleeves off over my hands. I giggle, but all levity is forgotten as he lowers his mouth to wrap his lips around my left nipple.

"Fuuuuuck!" I moan as tingles of pleasure skitter over my skin.

I shudder as his hands skim down my body and he pops open the button of my jeans. He lowers them to just above my knees. Staring intently at me, he grabs the waistband of my panties and rips the flimsy lace clean off. My breath catches at the back of my throat.

His gaze doesn't stray from mine as his fingers explore my pussy. His touch is divine. Desire fires through my veins as he shoves a long, thick finger inside me and curls it to stroke my g-spot. Some men need a map and compass to find a woman's erogenous zones, but Callum presses his thumb against my clit, proving he needs no direction.

Callum steps back, leaving me desperate and needy. Shrugging off his jacket, he drops the designer garment on the floor, not caring if it gets crumpled. He unbuckles the black leather belt around his waist and unzips his pants. He lowers his pants and boxers to reveal an impressive erection. How could I have forgotten how well-endowed he is?

His mouth claims mine again. Then he pulls back, grabs my hips and spins me around to face the wall. He kicks my legs apart and a moment later, his cock nudges at my entrance.

“Are you protected?” he asks.

Protected? What the hell is he taking about?

“Huh?”

“Birth control? Are you covered?”

Fuck, he really has got my brain scrambled if I forgot about that.

“Yeah, I’m all set.”

“I’m clean,” he says.

He doesn’t move and I realize he’s waiting for a green light from me. I push my hips back and he takes that as the consent it was intended to be. He impales me with a single, eye-watering thrust. His cock stretches me in the best possible way. Fuck, I’ve missed this.

“Callum,” I moan. “Get on with it.”

He chuckles at my impatience, but obliges by pumping his hips. He wraps an arm around my waist to hold me where he wants me, as he fucks me hard. With each thrust, he drives deeper inside me. I’m going to feel this tomorrow, but right now I don’t give a shit if he rips my pussy apart. This is the most alive I’ve felt in months, if not years.

The savage grunts that rumble from deep inside Callum tell me he’s losing control. That only gets me wetter. I love having that effect on a man as powerful as him. As he fucks me with an intensity bordering on savage, I wiggle my hips, needing something extra to take me over the edge. Callum obliges, sliding one hand down to press on my public bone

while the other slips between my legs. He strokes a finger over my clitoris. Sensations so strong they're almost painful zap through my lower body. The world around me disappears in a blinding light as I hurtle off the ledge and into sweet oblivion.

The next thing I know, I'm wrapped in Callum's arms as he gently rubs my back.

"Are you okay?" he checks.

"Uh-huh." It's not exactly eloquent, but right now I can't manage actual words.

For the longest time, neither of us moves. I hang limply in his arms, my bones completely melted.

"Come on," Callum says eventually, "let's get you to bed."

## CHAPTER SEVEN

*Carrie*

AS MUCH AS I would have loved to stay in bed until lunchtime to recover from my all-night sex-a-thon with Callum, I force myself to get up. After a quick shower, which goes some way toward easing the ache in my muscles, I slip into a blue wrap dress with a bold geometric pattern and ballet flats. I lock up the house and head for the village to meet Jennifer for coffee.

When she called to invite me, she made it clear refusal was not an option. She's heard on the Kildarroch grapevine (aka Scott, the waiter's pain in the ass mother) that I met the guys at the hotel last night and she wants to be sure I haven't completely lost my mind.

I guess it's natural she'd find it odd I met with them, considering all the shit I've spewed about them over the years. She was the one who gulped down gallons of ice cream in sympathy with me when they first left. She also knows about my drunken conversation with Finn the other night and that I wasn't exactly friendly. Knowing she'd be likely to disapprove, I didn't tell her I'd seen Finn in the flesh, or that I'd agreed to go to dinner with him.

Though she was always outwardly supportive, I don't think Jen was ever really comfortable with my relationship with the guys. She was always afraid people would find out I was more than friends with the four of them. She feared the gossip more than I did. Perhaps she was afraid it would reflect

badly on her somehow. She was certainly relieved when we broke up and they moved away. I really hope we're not going to argue about my decision to give them another chance.

It's a beautiful sunny day and only a half-mile walk to the village tearoom, but I decide to take my car. That way, if I do find myself facing Jen's wrath, I can just hop back in the Mini and flee.

The drive takes only a few minutes, but finding a parking spot once I get to the village is where the challenge lies. Ever since the guys opened their golf resort, there have been more people around. Their investment in the area is a good thing, I guess, since it created a lot of jobs. The guests from the hotel spend a lot of money in the village, too, but at times it's frustrating that the tranquility I enjoyed growing up here is pretty much gone.

After several laps of the village square, trying to find somewhere to leave the car, I decide to risk the wrath of Jimmy, who runs the pub, by parking in the small lot reserved for his customers. It's only ten thirty, and he doesn't open until noon, so I expect to be gone before anyone else needs the space. When I get out of the car, just beside the 'Reserved for Customers' sign, I give a cheeky wave to the security camera. If Jimmy sees that, he's going to tear me a new asshole, but I don't care. A girl's got to park somewhere.

As I walk along the main street toward the tearoom, I spot a familiar figure on the other side of the road. My heart sinks.

"Don't let him spot me," I murmur under my breath.

It seems luck is not on my side today because Connell, the rat bastard, sees me. With absolutely no shame, the cheating, lying asshole waves and then jogs across the road, dodging between cars to intercept me.

"You're back," I say flatly.

I haven't spoken to him since he called to let me know two mob enforcers would be paying me a visit to discuss his unpaid debt. Looking at him, I can't believe I was ever in a relationship with this lanky idiot. His overly long hair is

greasy and there are dark shadows beneath his eyes that give him the appearance of being haunted. His nose is crooked as the result of him being hit in the face one too many times. He's wearing shabby black jeans and a faded band t-shirt he bought, not because he's a fan of their music, but because he wanted to look cool. Pathetic asshole.

"Yeah. You know, I appreciate you getting me out of trouble."

"Oh, no problem. I had a spare fifty grand just burning a hole in my pocket."

The sarcasm clearly goes straight over his head, because the dickhead grins at me.

"What do you want, Connell?"

"Nothing. Just wanted to catch up with an old friend." He shuffles from one foot to the other and looks down at the ground. Shady little creep. "I hear you've been doing a lot of that lately."

"Been doing a lot of what?"

"Catching up with old friends," he looks up, an avaricious glint in his eye. "I hear they're worth a fair bit, wee Finlay and his friends."

*Wee Finlay?* Even when we were in school, Finn towered a good head and shoulders over this muppet.

"What are you getting at, Connell?"

I know he's up to something, but can't figure out what.

"Well, it's just you could put in a good word with them. I have this idea to make a bit of money, you see..."

"Forget it." I cut him dead. "I am not asking them for money for you."

"But it's a sure thing," Connell whines.

"No. I wouldn't piss on you if you caught fire. I am not going to ask someone I barely know to lend you money."

"Fuck, I forgot what a bitch you can be."

“Yeah, well, luckily, I remember what a total loser you are.”

I barge past him and spot Jen standing outside the tearoom waiting for me.

“You’ll regret this, you snooty cow!” Connell yells after me.

I wave him off and greet Jen with a hug.

“Wow, Connell Beattie. They’re all crawling out of the woodwork, aren’t they?” Jen pulls back from our embrace. “Looks like we’ll be needing cake with our coffee.”

“Yeah,” I mutter. “They’d better have chocolate or I might stab someone.”

Jen laughs. She pulls open the door to the tearoom and holds it open for me. We meet here at least once a week and Morag, who owns the place, was a friend of my mother’s back in the day, so she greets us with a warm smile as we take our usual table in the corner. It’s the prime spot because it’s separated from the rest of the tables by the fireplace on one side and the corridor leading to the restrooms on the other, allowing us a bit of privacy.

“So, chocolate cake and a latte?” Jen asks.

“Yeah, but it’s my turn to pay.”

She shakes her head.

“No, it’s not. You bought the wine for the party the other night.”

“I threw the party. It was up to me to buy the wine.”

“But I drunk a lot of it.”

“No more than anyone else.”

Jen rolls her eyes. We have this ridiculous back and forth every time we come for a coffee or go out for a meal. Once, we almost came to blows when ordering Chinese food. We’d save a lot of hassle if we just split the bill each time, because it’s impossible to track who spends more. Honestly, it would be easier to achieve world peace.

“But I have a wage coming in,” Jen argues.

“And I have the money from the sale of the house,” I counter. She was there when James came to deliver the offer, so she knows I’ll be receiving a generous sum.

“True,” Jen concedes. “Okay, you win. I’ll have carrot cake and a green tea. Just remember, I tried to do you a favor.”

My brow furrows as I try to work out what she meant, but as soon as I reach the counter, I get it. Morag and her assistant, Emma, both grin at me in a manner that could only be described as salacious. I’m about to be interrogated.

“So,” Morag says, her gray eyes lighting up. “I hear that MacDonald boy and his friends are back.”

There’s no point in playing dumb. It would only make it look like I have something to hide. Which, of course, I do.

“Yes.” I see their bit of gossip and I’ll raise them another. “They bought the house from me.”

“They did?” Emma, a tall, skinny woman who’d better suit a name like Morticia or Elvira, twirls the silver cross pendant she’s wearing between her fingers. “That was nice of them.”

“Not really. It’s just another investment for them.”

“Hmm.” Morag stares at me, suspicion apparent in the twist of her mouth. “Didn’t you go out with one of them?”

“Yes, Alex and I dated for a while.”

For the sake of appearances, we pretended that he was my boyfriend and that we just hung out with the others occasionally. I’m not sure people bought it. There were certainly whispers that I was sleeping with all of them, but without concrete proof, what could anyone say?

“I hear you went off with Callum Ross last night, before the meal was even served.”

I blink as Emma drops that on me. Jesus, these women should work for the Inquisition. I thought Scott’s mother was the one I’d have to watch out for, but this pair could teach her a thing or two about mining for information.



“Yes, I felt unwell, and he was kind enough to drive me home.”

“I see.”

Emma doesn't believe me. It's obvious in the way she drags out those two little words.

“Yep, it was very nice of him.” I glance up at the chalkboard behind the counter as if I need to check the menu. “So. I'll take a latte, a green tea, a carrot cake and a slice of the chocolate and hazelnut cake, please.”

Emma makes a note and rings the items up on the till. I hand the money over and wait for the change. Though it's only a couple of pounds, there's no way I'm tipping these gossipy old crones.

“Nothing serious, I hope.”

It takes a moment for my brain to circle back to the point where I said I'd felt unwell.

“No, just a headache,” I say, wishing Morag would move faster as she puts the slices of cake on a tray for me and sets about making the drinks.

“You should see a doctor about that,” Emma says. “Headaches can be a sign of all sorts of things.”

Yes, tension, I think, as a tiny thump in my frontal cortex makes me wonder if I'm about to get a headache now. I breathe a sigh of relief when Morag sets a little pot of tea and a cup on the tray and then finishes making my latte.

I grab the tray and hurry back to Jen, who laughs at the *oh-fucking-hell* expression on my face.

“They should work for M15,” I say as I set down the tray and flop onto my seat.

“Should have listened to me,” Jen says smugly.

“Yes, yes. So, does everyone know I went to dinner with them?”

Jen nods.

“They do. The question is, why did everyone know but me? I had to hear it from the local gossip whores. When that old bat at the post office realized I didn’t know what she was talking about, she asked if you and I had fallen out.”

Feeling guilty that I didn’t confide in her before my dinner date became public knowledge, I grimace.

“Sorry. Finn came round to talk about the house, and he asked me to go to dinner with him. I didn’t realize until we got there, he meant dinner with all of them.”

“Oof! They ambushed you?”

“Pretty much.”

“So, what did they want?”

“They want me to move into the house with them.”

The expression ‘eyes popped out of her head’ is usually an exaggeration, but in Jen’s case, it looks like they just might. I’ve never seen anyone look so surprised.

“What did you say?”

“Not a lot. I ran off to the bathroom and then slipped out the front door.”

“Then what?” Jen asks because she’s savvy enough to know that’s not all there is to the story.

“Callum followed me. I agreed to see each of them individually until I work out if I want to try again with them all.”

“Okay, that could work,” Jen says. She purses her lips in a thoughtful pout and then nods. “Yeah, that’s a sensible approach.”

Her easy acceptance of my situation surprises me.

“I thought you’d be more opposed.”

“No, you’re a big girl. You can make your own decisions.” She says magnanimously. “But I worry you’ll get hurt. You were a wreck when they left for the city.”

“I know. I haven’t forgotten.”

Jen pours some of her green tea from the pot into her cup.

“And you know how people can be. If they find out you’re seeing all four of them, the gossip will be brutal.”

That is a concern, and it’s not just the village busybodies I’m worried about. The guys are rich and powerful now. Gossip about them sells newspapers. I don’t want strangers examining the details of my love life in the tabloids.

“I know. I’ll be careful for now.”

“I know you will.” Jen reaches across the table to pat my hand. She can be quite maternal at times. “So now that’s out of the way, tell me what that wank stain Connell Beattie is doing here.”

I shrug.

“Presumably he’s visiting his mother.”

“Yeah, but what did he want with you?”

“He’s looking for money for some business venture. Thought I’d put in a good word with Alex for him.”

Jen snorts with laughter.

“He must be crazier than we thought if he imagines Alex MacDonald would ever lend him money.”

Before I can respond to that, my cellphone bleeps. I get it out of my purse and open my messages to find a text from Jacob. I grin as I notice Jen straining to catch a peek.

“It’s Jacob. The others have had to return to Edinburgh for business, but he’s stayed behind. He says he’ll pick me up at seven and to be dressed for a nightclub.”

“What nightclub?” Jen asks. “Is Jimmy running one in the pub cellar?”

“I assume he’s planning to take me into town.” Mentally, I run through a list of every item of clothing I possess. “It’s been years since I went to a club. I don’t think I have a suitable dress.”

“Well, then eat up and we’ll head into town. We need to find you something fabulous to wear.” Jen flashes me one of her wicked grins. “By the time I’m done with you, Jacob Ross is not going to know what hit him.”

## CHAPTER EIGHT

*Carrie*

WHEN JACOB PICKS me up in a chauffeured Mercedes, I'm glad I let Jen talk me into the eye-wateringly expensive red dress and heels. Jacob looks amazing in black dress pants and a gray shirt. The sleeves are rolled up to his elbows to reveal tanned, muscular forearms that make me weak at the knees. He helps me get settled in the back seat of the car before climbing in next to me. In the confined space, I catch a hint of a mandarin scent. It's not very strong, so I reckon it's from his body wash rather than a cologne.

As the driver takes a left at the end of the driveway, I wonder where on earth he's going. Inverness is in the other direction. The road he's taken leads toward the golf resort. Perhaps he's changed his mind about the nightclub.

"Aren't we going to a club?"

"We are," Jacob says.

"So why are we heading for the hotel?"

"You'll see."

He grins enigmatically, the way he used to when we were kids. Clearly, he has some trick up his sleeve. I'd like to try to get more information out of him, but when Jacob wants to keep a secret, there's no prying it out of him.

The driver takes the car around to the back of the hotel and stops. My heart lurches as I look out onto the lawn.

“What is that?” I ask, though the answer is obvious.

“A helicopter.”

“Is that for us?”

Jacob nods.

“Where are you taking me?”

“Edinburgh. We have a new club there that I want to check out.”

“I see.”

Jacob tilts his head to one side as he studies me closely.

“Is there a problem?”

Aside from the fact I’ve never been on a helicopter and I consider them flying deathtraps?

“No. No problem. Just surprised, that’s all.”

Jacob gets out of the car and comes around to open my door. He offers me his hand and I take it because moving in this tight dress is not easy. He holds onto my hand as we walk across the grass. My heels sink into the grass and I stumble. In a lightning quick move, Jacob scoops me up and throws me over his shoulder, striding toward the helicopter like a Viking marauder carrying off his prize.

“What the hell are you doing?” I hiss.

“Getting you there in one piece.”

“Well, hurry up. I can feel the breeze up my ass.”

Jacob chuckles and walks a bit faster. When we reach the helicopter, he sets me down on one of the seats and climbs in next to me. While I try to straighten my hair, which did not appreciate being upside down, he fastens my seatbelt.

The helicopter is like nothing I’ve ever seen before. It’s way bigger than I thought it would be and the interior reminds me of a posh gentlemen’s club. Its seats are covered in a butter soft beige leather. There’s walnut paneling and a thick carpet on the floor. There are screens on the partition between the passenger area and the cockpit, or whatever you call it, in a

helicopter. I notice there's even a small refrigerator which I would bet is stocked with champagne.

"Is this your helicopter?" I ask.

"It's a charter."

"Oh, no. You don't have one of your own?" I tease.

"We do, but for some mad reason, we decided to drive up here. We also have a jet, but we only use that occasionally."

"Of course," I say, because that's perfectly normal. "So, tell me about this club."

"It's sort of my baby," Jacob says. "Finn has his food thing going. The others prefer restaurants and hotels. I wanted to do something different."

"But you all still work together?"

I hate the thought of them drifting apart to do things on their own.

"Of course. We're brothers in all but blood."

"That's goooooo....."

I yelp as the rotors whir to life above me. Grabbing the armrests on my seat, I dig my nails into the padded leather. The helicopter starts to lift into the air and I feel the color draining from my face. Jacob grabs my hand.

"You used to enjoy flying."

"Yeah, in a 747. I trust planes, but these things? I don't understand how they work."

"Neither do I," Jacob assures me, "but I trust Jamie."

"Who?"

"The pilot. I requested the best they had and apparently he's it."

I nod, but I'm not feeling any more confident about this. Jamie doesn't know us. He's not invested in making sure we get to our destination safely. I shake my head as I realize what a ridiculous thought that was. His job depends on being able to get to our destination in one piece and unless he's got a death

wish, I'm sure he wants to make it to Edinburgh unscathed as well.

Just as I'm getting my panic under control, the helicopter veers to the side and I shriek. Jacob edges closer and puts his arm around my shoulders.

"It's okay, Carrie, I've got you." His hand moves down to rest on my knee. "Why don't you let me take your mind off it?"

I'm not sure even Jacob has the ability to make this experience any less nerve-shredding for me, but I'm willing to let him try. He stares at me, desire burning deep in his denim blue eyes, and slides his hand up under my skirt. I part my legs to give him better access as he reaches the bare skin at the top of my thigh-high stockings. His fingers stroke over the satin fabric of my panties.

"These are nice," he croons. "Did you wear them for me?"

"No."

My denial sounds weak, and his chuckle tells me he knows it. I haven't forgotten his love of silky undies. My head falls back as he drags my panties to one side and runs a finger along my feminine slit. Stroking me, he leans over to take my mouth with his, absorbing my desperate moans as he explores my folds.

"You're soaked," he murmurs. "And I know that's for me."

"Cocky bastard!" I grumble and he grins.

As he presses two fingers into my drenched channel, the pressure inside me builds quickly. I lift my hips but, constrained by the safety belt tied across my lap, I can't move far. To my surprise, I like the feeling of being trapped, unable to escape the pleasure surging through me.

Before I can reach the pinnacle, he withdraws his fingers. I whine in disappointment, but he's not done with me yet. He unfastens his seatbelt and gets to his knees in front of me. Shouldering my legs apart, he lowers his head and flicks his tongue out over my sensitized flesh. He laps at me like a man feasting on the most succulent peach.



As his tongue draws a figure of eight over my clitoris, he reaches up to yank the neckline of my dress down and grab my breast. He pinches my nipple, hard, through the flimsy satin of my bra. The pain he causes travels to my core, where it transforms into the most intense pleasure. Who knew I liked it so rough? He pulls his hand back and slaps my breast. It sets off something deep inside me. My hips buck wildly and I cry out as my pussy clenches. I swear I go deaf for a full minute.

I reach out, desperate for something to hold on to, and Jacob grabs my hand. Suddenly, reality rushes back like someone just threw a bucket of cold water over me.

“I can’t believe you did that,” I say accusingly.

“What?” Jacob gets off the floor and retakes his seat. “What’s wrong? Don’t tell me you didn’t want that, because I know you did.”

“Well, yes, but not with someone sitting six feet away.”

Jacob laughs.

“You’re worried about Jamie?”

“Of course I am. I’m not an exhibitionist.”

Jacob raises his eyebrows and I know he’s thinking about the time I stripped off my clothes and danced about naked in front of them at the side of the loch.

“It’s different with you guys,” I hiss. “You know I’d not do that stuff in front of a stranger.”

“You didn’t do anything in front of a stranger,” Jacob says, his eyes gleaming with mischief. “We’re behind him.”

I huff out a breath, unamused by that distinction.

“Well, whatever, it won’t happen again.”

“Oh, sweetheart,” Jacob says with a grin. “That sounds like a challenge, and you know I never back down from a challenge.”

As he rests his head against the back of his seat and refastens his safety belt, I can practically hear his mind

whirring. He's planning something and I have to be honest, I can't wait to find out what it is.

## CHAPTER NINE

*Jacob*

AS THE HELICOPTER finally touches down in Edinburgh, I'm relieved, not for my own sake, but for Carrie's. The whole trip was obviously torture for her. I'll need to come up with an alternative method of getting her home again.

"Ready?" I ask, as Jamie opens the door for us.

"You bet."

She waits for me to hop out first and doesn't complain when I put my arms around her waist and lift her out of the helicopter. As I place her on the ground, she wobbles, clearly still shaky after her ordeal. I wrap an arm around her to steady her as I lead her to the car.

"This is more like it," she says as she climbs into the passenger seat of my BMW, which I had arranged for my assistant to bring out to the helipad for me.

Carrie pulls down the visor and checks her hair in the mirror as I start the car and drive toward the city. It takes only twenty minutes to get to the club. I'm gratified to see a long queue has already formed outside. Our soft opening last week went well, but until now, I wasn't entirely sure people would turn up tonight. It was risky to choose to open on a Sunday.

"Looks busy," Carrie says. "What time do the doors open?"

"Ten o'clock."

Carrie glances at the clock on the dashboard.

“So, another hour and a half. It’s going to be mobbed.”

“That’s what I’m hoping for.”

The club’s success is important to me. Although I could easily bear the financial hit if the place bombs, my ego would never recover. It’s not always easy to be around three guys who each possess a high level of creative genius. Alex is amazing at thinking outside of the box. Finn is a culinary superstar, and Callum handles our marketing and PR, using his own creative flare to push our brand to global success. My role has been more about the nuts and bolts of the business. I negotiate purchases, manage projects. I rarely get to express my own creativity, but Apex is all mine and I need people to like it.

I pull around to the side of the club and park the car in the alleyway by the side entrance. Carrie jumps out before I can come around to open her door for her. She always was Miss Independent, which is one of the many things I like about her. She comes to join me as I enter my passcode into the security entry panel. As I key in two-one-one-zero-nine-three, she gasps.

“My birthday?”

“I use it for everything,” I admit.

My cheeks heat as Carrie stares at me in wonder. I clear my throat and gesture for her to precede me into the building. She brushes past me, deliberately rubbing her butt against my hand.

“Watch your step, young lady,” I say jokingly. “Or I’ll throw you against the wall and fuck you right here and now.”

“You could,” Carrie says. Even in the half-light of the corridor I can see the gleam in her eyes. “But you’d just be following in Callum’s footsteps and you don’t want to seem unoriginal, do you?”

Without realizing it, she’s just struck at my deepest insecurity. Everyone thinks I’m the most confident of the group, the cocky ladies’ man who can charm the panties off

any woman he chooses. For the most part, that is me, but when it comes to Carrie, who means so much to me, I'm a quivering wreck inside.

"Can't have that," I say. "So, do you want the grand tour?"

"Sure."

I take Carrie's hand and lead her along the corridor, pointing out the various offices, break rooms and kitchens that will be used on nights when we host special events that require food to be served. We go upstairs to the floor where the main sections of the club are situated. Dozens of members of staff mill about, putting the final touches on décor, getting ready to serve the complimentary drinks, etc.

Carrie pulls her hand away from mine, walks to the center of the dancefloor and spins in a circle.

"This is incredible."

"Wait until you see the VIP section."

I put my arm around her shoulder and steer her towards the glass and steel staircase leading up to the VIP area. It's decorated in a palette of silver and purple. There are large, comfortable sofas arranged around low tables. There are booths around the edge of the room and there's a space for a DJ to set up in the corner. A glass wall allows patrons to look out over the main club.

"This is nice," Carrie says. "I've never been a VIP."

I kiss the top of her head.

"As far as I'm concerned, you've always been a VIP."

"Oh, that's smooth!"

Carrie slaps my shoulder, but it wasn't a line. She really has always mattered a great deal to me. I just forgot it for a while.

"If you think that's smooth, wait until you see what I've got for you over here."

I take her to the booth I arranged for us. It's got a great view over the VIP section and the dancefloor, so we can

people watch, but it's out of the way enough that we can enjoy some privacy.

Carrie squeals in delight as she finds the bottle of champagne on ice, the chocolate-covered strawberries, and the rectangular red box with the ribbon wrapped around it. I called ahead to ask my staff to light a candle and scatter some red rose petals on the table.

"This is lovely, Jacob,"

I pick up the jewelry box and hand it to her.

"What's this?" Carrie asks.

"Open it and see."

My heart is in my mouth as she carefully slides the ribbon off the box. Though I like that she's treating my gift as if it's something precious before she's even seen it. She removes the lid and carefully takes the gold bracelet out of the box.

"Oh, Jacob."

I actually had it made for her ten years ago, shortly before we broke up. It cost me an entire month's wages. The bracelet has five charms on it with the initials ACCFJ on it to represent all of us.

"I know it's early days and you haven't even had your trial run with each of us yet, but I wanted you to have it."

Carrie's eyes glisten, like she's close to tears. She nods and wraps the bracelet around her wrist. She struggles to fasten it, so I step in to help her.

"It's perfect," she says. "Thank you."

She peers up at me with those beautiful big blue eyes and suddenly I can't wait to make her mind. Grabbing her hand, I lead her across the VIP area and through a door to where my private office is located. Once inside, I switch the light on and pull her against me.

My mouth slams down on hers as I take the kiss I've been desperate for since I first saw her at the restaurant last night. When she walked in there, looking no different than she did

ten years ago, it stirred emotions inside me that I thought were dead and buried. This woman is a part of me, of all of us, and we should have come back for her years ago.

There's no point in dwelling on that now. I have Carrie right where I want her, and it's time to remind her of how good we were together. As her soft, pink lips open to me, I thrust my tongue into her mouth. She tastes so sweet, like summer fruit. Moaning, she wraps an arm around my neck.

I walk her back against the wall. A raw need to possess her rises within me. I reach around to lower the zipper on her dress.

"Take it off," I command, as I step back to watch her.

Carrie slips the thin straps off her shoulders and draws the dress down her body, wiggling her hips as she shimmies out of the skintight garment. She lets it drop to the floor and kicks it aside. I take a moment to admire her. Although she's only five foot four, her legs are long. They look incredible in the lace-topped, thigh-high stockings she's wearing. Her underwear consists of little scraps of black satin. Knowing she wore that for me makes my cock painfully hard.

I curve my hand around her breast and watch her face as my thumb circles her nipple. Her mouth forms a little O-shape as her nipple hardens beneath the delicately thin layer of satin. Though I'm barely touching her, a shudder rocks her body.

I hook my fingers in the waistband of her panties.

"Don't rip them," Carrie warns.

"Wouldn't dream of it, sweetheart."

I sweep her panties to one side and run a finger along her slit, finding her slick and ready for me. There can be no room for recriminations, so I watch her expression carefully, making sure she's with me every step of the way. As my fingers explore her bare pussy, her eyes glaze with desire.

Unable to wait a moment longer, I undo the fastening of my pants and free my erection. Carrie bites her bottom and glances down at my cock.

“You want it, sweetheart?” I ask.

“You bet I do.”

She grabs the collar of my shirt and pulls me in for another kiss. This time, she’s the one who takes what she wants. Her lips crash against mine and she kisses me with the most intense passion. It’s more aggressive than I’m used to, but I like it.

With a feral growl, I lift her, cupping her cute little ass in my hands. She wraps her legs around my waist and digs the heel of her shoe into the back of my thigh, sending a delicious wave of pain through me. If she wants to play rough, I am more than happy to oblige. Our tongues duel as I bring her down onto me, filling her with a brutal thrust.

“Fuck! This is heaven.”

“Mmm-hmm,” Carrie agrees.

Slamming her back against the wall, I pound into her welcoming body. She’s so tight, a perfect fit for my cock. I fuck her hard and fast. This won’t last for long. As Carrie’s pussy clenches around mine, I throw my head back and thrust in deep. Slipping my hand between us, I find her clit and pinch it between my forefinger and thumb. Carrie shrieks in ecstasy. With a roar ripped from soul, I come at the same time she does, spilling myself inside her.

For several long seconds, we just stand there, reveling in each other’s embrace. Carrie sighs contentedly and her head flops forward onto my shoulder. I never want to let her go, but eventually, the realization that we have to go back out there creeps in. I carefully lower her to the floor.

“That was amazing,” Carrie says.

“Aye, sweetheart,” I agree, “it was.”

Carrie bends down and grabs her dress from the floor as I straighten out my clothing. She steps into the dress and pulls it up to cover herself. Then she turns to give me her back and I zip her up. She runs her fingers through her hair, so it looks like the messiness is intentional rather than the result of her being ravished.



“Right,” she says in a determined tone, “we’d better get out there. You have a club to open.”

As I watch her strut to the door, wiggling that incredibly sexy ass, I really wish I didn’t have responsibilities here tonight, because I’d love nothing more than to take her home and fuck her senseless.

“Come on,” Carrie says as I hesitate. “I can’t wait to get out on the dancefloor.”

“Okay.” I guess if I can’t take her to bed, having her pressed up against me, our bodies swaying in time to the music, will just have to do instead.

## CHAPTER TEN

*Carrie*

WATCHING Finn cooking breakfast for me is incredible. It's like seeing Mikhail Baryshnikov on stage. There's a fluidity to his movement as he works that's reminiscent of a ballet. It's mesmerizing, and I feel honored to be able to watch a master in his field up close.

When I woke this morning, I was surprised to find myself alone in a huge sleigh bed in a strange room. It took me a moment to remember where I was, in Jacob's bedroom in the Edinburgh townhouse he shares with the other guys. We arrived home from the club late and I fell asleep almost immediately. I haven't danced so much in years.

I got up, pulled on my ridiculously short, tight red dress and wandered through the corridors of this impressive home like I was on an extended walk of shame, until I found Finn in the most amazing kitchen I've ever seen.

"So what did you think of the club?" Finn asks as I perch on a high stool at the marble-topped island, sipping the freshly squeezed orange juice he poured for me.

"It was fun." I take a larger gulp of the juice. Boy, I needed that. I didn't drink much last night, just a couple of glasses of champagne, but with all the dancing in a hot, sweaty environment, I'm feeling pretty dehydrated this morning. "Why weren't you there?"

“Because Jacob wanted you by his side, and we knew you weren’t ready to see all of us at once.”

That’s really sweet. I like that Jacob wanted me to be at the opening of his solo venture and that the others were willing to respect my wishes and let me be there instead of them. I wonder if that’s why I haven’t seen the rest of the guys this morning.

“So where is everyone?”

“Alex and Callum had to fly to London for a meeting. Jacob’s still here. He’s downstairs in the pool. If he doesn’t get a few laps in before breakfast, he’s in a foul mood all day.”

Out of all the guys, Jacob was always the sportiest. He was on the soccer team at school, as well as being a keen swimmer and cross-country runner. As I register what Finn just told me, my eyes widen.

“You have a pool?”

Finn nods.

“In the basement. There’s a gym and a sauna down there, too.”

“That’s impressive.”

Finn shrugs, like it’s no big deal. I guess it’s not when you’re as wealthy as he is. You get used to living in an amazing home and, from what I’ve seen, this place is incredible. The few rooms I’ve seen are decorated in a palette of soft grays and off-whites. It should feel cold, but it doesn’t. The soft furnishings and colorful art on the wall make it more comfortable.

The kitchen is out of this world, with more cabinets than I count and enough counter space to prepare a banquet for dozens of people. There’s a massive cooker with eight burners and other ultramodern appliances. I think the refrigerator is one of those that keeps an inventory and orders items for you when you run low. I could use something like that in my house.

“If you like, I can show you around after breakfast,” Finn says as he grabs a couple of plates from a cabinet overhead.

“I’d like that.”

I watch as Finn places a slice of toasted sourdough bread on each of the plates. With great precision, he lays thin slivers of salmon on the toast and then adds two poached eggs to the top of each dish. He spoons some hollandaise sauce over the eggs and then grabs a handful of chives, snipping some tiny pieces off with his kitchen scissors, to garnish the plates. Finn carries the plates over to the large wooden table at the far side of the room. I jump down from my stool, follow him over, and take a seat. Though the two plates look identical to me, he examines them both carefully before placing one down in front of me. He goes to grab the pot of coffee he had brewing before I got here.

“Dig in,” Finn says as he returns to the table and pours two cups of coffee. He goes to sit down, but quickly rises again before his butt hits the seat. “Milk!” he exclaims. “You still take milk in your coffee?”

“Yes, please.”

While he rushes off to fetch the milk, I slice into one of my poached eggs. A rich, orangey yolk oozes out. It makes me smile. I should have known Finn would cook the eggs to perfection. It’s something I’ve never mastered, despite trying every TikTok hack I’ve ever seen.

I cut into the Eggs Benedict, making sure to get a little of everything on my fork. The moment I taste it, my eyes roll back in my head. The hollandaise is silky smooth and has just the right amount of lemon in it to cut through all the butter. The salmon is fresh and the sourdough is nice and crunchy. Don’t even get me started on the eggs. I could wax lyrical about how good they are all day.

“You like it?” Finn asks as he places a small jug of milk down in front of me and takes his seat.

I’m tempted to tell him the dish could use a little salt, just to see his reaction, but I know he takes his culinary reputation

very seriously, so I'm not going to yank that tiger's tail.

"It's divine, the best I've ever tasted."

Finn averts his eyes for a moment. His cheeks redden. I can't believe it. He's gone all bashful. He clears his throat and looks back at me.

"I'm glad you like it."

I splash some milk into my coffee and take an unladylike gulp. It's rich, warm and just the right side of bitter, as I prefer.

"So how come you're not at work?" I ask Finn.

"I don't go into the office every day. Sometimes I work from here. I come up with better recipes in my own kitchen."

"Makes sense." I cut off another piece of the Eggs Benedict. "So, how did you guys end up starting your own company?"

"Well, you may not remember this, but none of us particularly likes taking orders."

That understatement makes me laugh. I remember the four of them at school, balking at being told what to do. Finn and Callum were less openly defiant than Alex and Jacob, but they found subtler means of making their displeasure known. Once, when we had to sing at a school concert, Finn sung in such a monotone voice half the audience went home depressed.

"Oh, I remember."

"So, anyway," Finn continues, "I was working at this restaurant in the Old Town and I had a huge blowout with the head chef. The man doused everything in garlic oil. It was overpowering the ingredients. He told me if I thought I could do any better, I could just fuck off and do it. I went home, ranted to Alex about it for a while, and we came up with the idea for Highland Country Cuisine. That was our first range. MacDonald and Baillie grew from there."

"How come Alex gets first billing if the food ideas come from you?"

“We thought it sounded better that way round. It wasn’t a case of Alex taking over.”

I’m glad to hear it. Alex can be pretty pushy when he wants to be and the others don’t always call him to account for it. I mean, they don’t let him trample all over them, but they do tend to defer to him. He’s the alpha other alphas stand aside for.

“So, what about the others? When did they get involved?”

“Right at the start. We’ve always been one for all and all for one.”

An unexpected dread twists in my stomach.

“Does that apply to women, too?”

The smirk on Finn’s face tells me he’s picked up on my insecurity. I hate the thought of them having had a relationship with another woman.

“No. There is only one woman we’ve ever wanted to share.”

“So if I tell you I don’t want to see you guys again, you’re not going to go out and find another woman to fit in with the group.”

Finn shakes his head.

“Us being with you is something that grew out of our friendship. We all loved you and we were happy to share. It’s not something we would seek otherwise. If it doesn’t work with you, we won’t go looking elsewhere. You’re it for us, Carrie.” Finn gives me a sad smile. “In fact, if you don’t want to be with us, I may never date again.”

“I can’t imagine that.”

“It’s true. I’ve never spent more than a couple of nights with the same woman because it’s just not the same as being with you. I’d rather be alone than accept some second-rate substitute for the woman I’ve loved since I was five years old.”

Wow, he knows how to tug at a girl's heartstrings, though I do have to dispute that he loved me when he was five. I distinctly remember him putting worms down my jumper on the first day of school.

"That's...." I pause to think. "I don't know what to say to that."

"You don't have to say anything."

Perhaps I don't, but it occurs to me there is something I can do to demonstrate how what he said makes me feel. Setting down my knife and fork, I push back my chair and drop to my knees on the floor.

"What are you doing?" Finn asks as I crawl under the table toward him.

"What does it look like?"

He's wearing gray sweatpants this morning, so they're easy to get off him. When he realizes what I'm doing, he lifts his hips to help me lower them, just enough to reveal his erect cock. Seems someone's pleased to see me. I've never really thought a man's penis can be beautiful, but Finn does possess a relatively pleasing example. Long and thick, it has a deep blue vein running along its underside.

Cupping his balls in the palm of my hand, I squeeze gently. Finn shifts in his seat, groaning softly as I caress him. He always was responsive to my touch.

"Take me in your mouth," he commands.

Wrapping my free hand around the base of his cock, I wet my lips and take a couple of inches into my mouth. I run my tongue around the flesh head of his cock, lapping up droplets of fluid. The taste isn't what you'd call pleasant, but I don't hate it either.

I slide my lips down over his rigid flesh until I've taken him as deep as I can. Sucking lightly, I pull back. Then I repeat the motion, over and over. Finn grabs a handful of my hair, but doesn't try to take control. His moans of pleasure tell me I'm doing this right.

“Have you seen Carrie?” Jacob’s voice suddenly booms across the room.

I pause for a moment and then continue to bob my head up and down, letting Finn’s cock slide back and forth over my lips. Finn must have indicated to Jacob where I am because, a moment later, he’s on the floor behind me. He whips my skirt up over my waist. Caught by surprise, I pop off Finn’s cock and turn to look at Jacob.

“Get back to what you’re doing,” he commands. “Finish him off.”

My clit tingles with desire. I like where this is going. As I turn my attention to Finn, Jacob slides under me and pulls my hips down so I’m sitting on his face. His tongue flicks out over my clit and I hum in pleasure, sending a vibration along Finn’s shaft which makes him moan.

As I greedily suck Finn’s cock, I rock my hips back and forth, taking every ounce of pleasure I can from Jacob’s tongue. This is not how I pictured starting my day, but I can’t complain. It doesn’t take long before tiny spasms in my womb fan out to become a tidal wave of pleasure that crashes over me. Taking a cue from my frantic moans, Finn thrusts his hips until he, too, reaches his peak, spilling his seed down my throat. I release him from my mouth and roll onto my side on the floor next to Jacob.

I smile as Finn bends to look under the table where I’m lying, utterly spend.

“Wow.” A grin spreads across his face. “If you liked my Eggs Benedict that much, just wait until you try my Beef Wellington.”



## CHAPTER ELEVEN

*Carrie*

“YOU KNOW YOU’RE FAMOUS?” Jen says the moment I open the door for her.

I was expecting her, since I asked her to come and help me to pack a few things, but her greeting catches me off guard. I blink a couple of times to clear the confusion.

“What?” I ask as she steps into the house and closes the door behind her.

“Here.” She thrusts her cellphone at me and I take it. “There’s a photo.”

I look at the page from a national tabloid that she has opened on her phone. It’s a blurry image of me and Jacob dancing in the club the other night. My head is resting on his chest and he has his hand on my ass. Wow, classy shot. It looks like someone took it from across the room. Sneaky bastards. I read the caption and shake my head.

“I’m not famous,” I tell Jen. “I’m a mystery.”

“Not for long. Someone is bound to recognize you and tip off the papers.”

Scrubbing a hand over my face, I nod. It’s a possibility I had considered. Local gossip about me and the guys is bound to spread out to the wider population since they’re tabloid fodder these days.

“I’ll cross that bridge when I come to it.” I give Jen her phone back and head into the games room. It used to be my father’s study and still houses his library. Jen follows. “Now, grab a box and start packing.”

“Do we need to pack?” Jen asks. “I mean, will you be leaving now your billionaire boy toys own the place?”

I shrug. We haven’t discussed me staying at the house again so I don’t know what will happen.

“Whether I stay or not, there are things I need to get rid of.”

“Okay, so what am I packing?”

“My dad’s old books.”

Jen gives me a sympathetic look, but there’s no need for her to worry about me. I don’t feel sad about giving his books away.

“I’m donating them to the university.”

I spoke to one of the professors there and she was excited at the prospect of the students on the literature course having access to my dad’s books. He built up an extensive collection of classic texts and rare editions.

“That’s a generous gift,” Jen says, picking a first edition Thomas Hardy off the shelf. “Some of these must be worth a fortune.”

“They are, but my dad would hate the thought of me selling them.”

Though my dad and I butted heads a lot, especially in the months when his dementia made him more erratic, I want to honor his memory by doing something worthwhile with his book collection.

Jen and I spend more than two hours carefully packing up the books and stacking the boxes by the wall. I’ve got to arrange for someone to pick them up and deliver them to the university because there’s no way even a quarter of that lot would fit in my teeny little car.

When we're done, Jen gets started on packing up the crockery, cutlery and other bits and pieces from the dining room, while I make us some chicken club sandwiches and a pitcher of iced tea for lunch. I pop everything on a tray and carry it through to the dining room. We sit at one of the half dozen tables and I think about how much I hate the changes I had to make to this room.

Instead of having one large dining table formal dining table, I had to bring in a half dozen smaller ones to accommodate my guests. I also had to install a fire extinguisher and put evacuation instructions up on the back of the door. This place hasn't felt like my home since I converted it into a bed-and-breakfast. Even if I put things back the way they were, I'm not sure I'd want to stay here. I guess I'll have to see how things go.

"Good sandwich," Jen says, taking an enthusiastic bite. "Perhaps you could give Finn a few pointers."

I snort derisively.

"Yeah, he'd love it if I started bossing him around in the kitchen." I bite into my own sandwich. Damn, it is pretty good, but I think most of the credit has to go to the tomatoes I bought at the farm shop. "It's his turn for a date next."

Jen shakes her head.

"That sounds so weird, them taking turns."

"I know, but it's the only way I could think of to buy myself some time before I have to deal with them en masse."

"You could have just said, no thanks, I'll take your money, but keep your delectable bodies to yourselves."

"Says a woman who's never turned down a delectable body in her life."

Jen grins, unabashed. She's cut quite a swathe through the male population of Scotland and she's not ashamed to admit it.

"So how is it going?"

"Honestly, it's great and terrifying at the same time. In some ways, I'm so comfortable with them, you know. It's like

old times.”

“But?”

“But it’s not the same, is it? They’re successful businessmen and I couldn’t even run a small bed-and-breakfast.”

Jen makes a dismissive sound.

“So what? They don’t want you for your entrepreneurial skills.”

“Nope, just my sparkling personality and scorching hot bod.”

“You ask me, they’re getting the better end of the deal.”

That’s what I love about Jen. She’s an awesome cheerleader who makes it her mission to lift me up. I’m about to agree with her when the sound of a door banging shut makes me freeze.

“Was that the front door?” I ask.

Jen nods. Her expression is as wary as mine.

“Are you expecting someone?”

I shake my head slowly and get to my feet. My heart pounds as I creep toward the door. Jen follows close behind. We both shriek as six foot three of muscular male appears in front of us.

“Fucking hell, Alex!” I yell. “You almost gave me a heart attack.”

“Don’t you know how to knock?” Jen demands.

“On my own front door?”

“Oh, it’s like that, is it?” I ball up my fists and place my hands on my hips. “You’ve come to take possession?”

Alex grins humorlessly. In his black pants, white shirt and black vest, he looks like he means business.

“Jennifer,” he addresses my bestie, “leave.”

“Wow.!” Jennifer huffs out a breath. “Money did not improve your manners, did it, Alexander?”

I know that if I don’t step in now, there will be bloodshed. Alex has that implacable look on his face and Jen is bristling with indignation just looking for an outlet. I turn to Jen and put a hand on her arm, a placating gesture I know won’t wash with her.

“You head off. I’ll speak to you later.”

She opens her mouth to argue so I pull out the big guns and flash my puppy dog eyes at her. Even Jen isn’t immune to those. She sighs dramatically and throws a hand in the air.

“Okay.” She steps up to Alex, getting right in his face, which I know he’ll hate. “Hurt her again, and I’ll mangle your dick so badly you’ll never take a piss again.”

Leaving that threat in the air, she flounces off. It would be seriously impressive if her heel didn’t catch on the doormat on the way out, causing her to trip. When she’s gone, I turn and head back into the dining room to clear away the lunch things and get on with packing. Alex follows.

“What the hell are you doing here, Alex?” My tone is hostile, but fuck him for coming in here and ordering my friend to leave. “My next date is with Finn.”

“From what I hear, you’ve already had a taste of Finn.”

I roll my eyes.

“Technically, that was still my date with Jacob. I’m seeing Finn tomorrow.”

“Nuh-uh.” Alex shakes his head. “I am done with this shit.”

“Oh, are you?”

He stalks toward me and I pick up the plate with my half-eaten lunch as if I’ll somehow be able to ward him off with it.

“Put that down,” he says sharply.

“Oh, no, Alex. You do not get to walk in here and tell me what to do.”

“No?” A smirk forms on his lips. “We’ll see about that. Now put the plate down, raise your skirt and bend over that table. You’ve earned a punishment.”

My eyes go impossibly wide. Is he seriously threatening to spank me. A glance at his clenched jaw and narrowed eyes tells me he did.

“A punishment for what?”

He steps closer and I back away. My pulse rate picks up. Why is this dominant dickhead act of his turning me on?

“You left me ‘til last.”

Shit. I should have predicted Alex’s ego wouldn’t be able to take me seeing the others before him.

“Now, bend over that table before I make you.”

My heart pounds furiously and my insides quiver as he unbuttons his cuffs and rolls his sleeves up. I know if I wanted to, I could stop this. Alex won’t do anything I don’t consent to. Despite us being apart for more than a decade, I trust he’s still the same fundamentally decent person. But I’m curious to know if the things I’ve read about in romances are true, that being spanked can heighten arousal. I do as Alex instructed. Setting the plate down, I walk to the next table, flip my skirt up over my waist and bend over, propping myself up on my elbows.

Alex steps up behind me and runs a hand over my ass. I’m glad I chose these cute pink lace panties today, a thought that disappears as Alex rips them clean off me.

“Hey! I liked those.”

“Not another word,” Alex says, his stern tone sending a thrum of nervous anticipation through me.

As his hand cracks across my butt for the first time, I yelp. It didn’t really hurt, but I wasn’t prepared. He smacks me again. It stings, but the ripple that fans out from the point of impact is kind of pleasant. He falls into a rhythm, spanking me steadily, and a delicious heat begins to build at my core. By the time he reaches the tenth, twelfth, hundredth spank,

whatever the count is, my lower half is all warm and tingly. My mind is officially scrambled by a confusion of pain, pleasure, humiliation, and desire. All I know is I need Alex inside me.

“Please, Alex,” I say, wriggling my hips. “I need you.”

He ignores me.

“One more,” he warns, right before bringing his hand down hard across my left cheek.

Sonofabitch, that hurt. I dance up on my toes, but the sting in my ass is quickly soothed as he rubs a hand across my bottom, caressing me until I feel the wetness pool between my legs. Alex steps up behind me and I brace myself. There’s a rasp as his zipper is lowered. He grabs my hips and spears me with his massive cock.

The breath whooshes from my lungs, but Alex isn’t playing around. He ruts me like an animal. I whimper and moan, but he doesn’t slow down.

“Come for me,” he demands as he thrusts in deep. “Come for me now.”

Who am I to refuse a direct order? I press my hips back against him and clench my pussy around his cock. I shake violently as an orgasm rips through me, leaving me a boneless, trembling mess.

I’m not aware of Alex finishing inside me until I feel a trickle of semen on my thigh. He strokes my back as he leans over to whisper in my ear.

“Let that be a lesson not to piss me off.”

Grinning, I push myself up, whirl around on shaky legs, and grab the back of his neck, pulling him down to press my lips hard against his.

“I didn’t learn a thing,” I say. “Why don’t you wake me upstairs and teach me some more?”

Desire flares in Alex’s gorgeous brown eyes. Putting a hand under my knees, he scoops me up into his arms.

“Okay,” he says, already carrying me toward the stairs, “I will.”



## CHAPTER TWELVE

*Alex*

SLAMMING the tablet down on the kitchen counter, I curse violently. I pay people good money to make problems like this go away, or at least to give me a heads-up when they're about to occur. But none of my extremely talented staff let me know the Daily News was about to publish this load of shit.

"What is it?" Finn asks, walking over from the grill where he's about to fry steaks for us all.

"There's a story about Carrie."

Frowning deeply, Finn picks up the tablet and opens the internet browser. He scans the page I left open.

"What the fuck?"

"It's bullshit!"

The newspaper, if you can call it that, has printed photos of Carrie and Jacob apparently groping each other at his nightclub opening. There's also a couple of her and Callum in what looks like the hallway of her house and several of me and her in the dining room, along with an old school picture which features the five of us. The story that accompanies the photos is full of speculation about which one of us Carrie is trying to get her hooks into. It stops short of calling her a whore, but the insinuation is there. A 'concerned neighbor' of hers is quoted as saying that Carrie wanted nothing to do with us when we

were young and poor but is suddenly smitten now that we're rich. It's downright offensive.

"This makes her sound like a fucking gold-digger," Finn says, "when we're the ones pursuing her." He studies the screen closely. "How the hell did they get those pictures from inside Carrie's house?"

"That is a question I would like answered."

"You don't think she set us up?" Finn asks. "She wouldn't be the first woman to sell stories to the press."

I arch an eyebrow and stare at Finn in disbelief that he could even think Carrie would do that to us.

"Of course she didn't," he says, eventually reaching the same conclusion as me, "but someone did."

"Yeah, and we need to find out who."

Finn nods.

"Call Carrie. If she's seen that article, she'll be devastated."

I get out my cellphone and call her number. There are several rings and then a familiar female voice answers. It isn't Carrie, but Jennifer Macrae, her best friend since we were in kindergarten.

"Jennifer, it's Alex. Are you with Carrie?"

"I am."

Though Jennifer has never been my cup of tea, I am glad she's there with our girl right now.

"Has she seen the news?"

"Aye, and she's inconsolable. She doesn't know how they got hold of those photos and she's terrified of what people will think of her. She's also afraid you'll blame her for this."

"Of course we don't blame her. Someone must have set her up."

"Well, duh, genius." I can almost hear Jennifer rolling her eyes at me. "This has Connell ratbag Beattie written all over it."

The wanker tried to get Carrie to ask you to invest in some business idea he had. I guess he decided to cash in on her relationship with you this way instead.”

“Do you think he has access to her security system?”

“What security system?” Jennifer asks. “If there are cameras in this house, someone put them there without Carrie’s knowledge.”

“Motherfucker!” The word explodes from my lips, startling Finn, whose eyes widen. “I am going to tear his fucking head off.”

“That can wait,” Jennifer says. “What are you going to do about the fucking reporters camped outside her gates?”

Fuck! It didn’t take long for the vultures to descend. I wish I hadn’t come back to the city after spending the afternoon with her yesterday. I should have been on site to deal with those assholes when they arrived. Feeling the first twinge of a headache coming on, I rub my temples.

“How many are there?”

“Half a dozen.”

“Okay, pack her a bag. I’m sending the head of security from the golf club to get her. His name is Rex. He’ll bring her to us.” I pause for a moment. “You’re welcome to join her.”

Though I’m not keen on the idea, and I know we can handle this, I have to put Carrie’s needs first. She might want her closest friend with her.

“I can’t. I’ve got work tomorrow,” Jennifer says. “Just take care of our girl.”

“I will.”

It’s a vow I don’t intend to break. Once Carrie gets here, I’m going to make sure nobody ever hurts her like this again. I end the call and place another. Rex, our head of security at Kildarroch Golf Resort, answers almost immediately.

“Sir?”

“Alex,” I correct automatically. I hate when people call me sir, especially when Rex was two years ahead of me at high school.

“What can I do for you, Alex?”

“I want you to go to Glenview House.”

“Miss MacIntyre’s place?”

I roll my eyes. He has no need to address her formally either.

“Carrie’s place, yes. There are reporters there and I need you to get her out without anyone causing her upset. Can you do that?”

He makes a tsk sound that tells me it’s a dumb question.

“Aye, Alex, I can do that. Where do you want me to take her?”

“I’ll arrange a flight to Edinburgh. I’ll text you the details.”

“Okay, consider it done.”

“Great, and Rex, do not leave her side until you’ve delivered her safely to me.”

“Got it, boss.”

Finn nods approvingly as I hang up.

“Rex is going to get her?” he checks.

“Aye, it’s quicker than me flying up there, driving to the village and then bringing her back. Rex can have her at the airport in thirty minutes or less.”

“Good. She needs to be here with us. This will show her that.”

I wish I had Finn’s confidence because I’m pretty sure Carrie is going to take this as a sign we shouldn’t be together. As I go to pour myself a much-needed glass of whisky, I smell smoke.

“Finn, the grill!”

He curses and runs to rescue the steaks. The smell of burning fills the air and our super-sensitive smoke alarm starts to bleep loudly. That brings Callum and Jacob through.

“What the hell happened?” Jacob asked. “Did the great Finn Baillie just burn dinner?”

“Show them the tablet,” Finn says as he flaps a cloth under the smoke alarm until it stops beeping.

I pick up the tablet and hold it out to Jacob. He takes it and he and Callum look at the article. Their expressions tell me they’re as furious as Finn and I are.

“What are we doing about this?” Callum demands. He’s always hated the tabloid press.

“I’ve sent Rex to fetch her. I just need to organize a plane from Inverness to get her here.”

“I’ll do it,” Jacob offers.

Before I can thank him, he’s already striding from the room, his cellphone at his ear. He comes back less than a minute later.

“Well?” I ask

“They can take off as soon as Rex gets her to the airport.”

“Good.”

Now that everything’s organized, I can relax a little. I hate that Carrie’s been upset, but I guess press interest in her had to happen sooner or later. We’ll need to figure out a way to keep reporters off our backs because losing Carrie is not an option.

“Dinner’s ready,” Finn says as he brings a couple of serving dishes to the table. “Might as well eat while we’re waiting for her to get here.”

We sit and eat our overdone steaks. Even Finn doesn’t grumble that they’ve been pretty much incinerated. The atmosphere is subdued. We’re all worried about where to go from here. When the meal is done, we load the dishwasher. Though we have a housekeeper, the kitchen is Finn’s domain and we take care of the cleaning in here for ourselves.

By the time we settle in the living room with a glass of malt whisky and a rugby match, none of us is actually interested in watching on the TV, two hours have passed. Carrie should be here by now. I'm just about to call Rex for an update when the buzzer for the door goes.

"I'll get it," I say as we all jump to our feet.

When I get to the door, I open it to find Rex and Carrie standing on the step. She looks upset. Her eyes are rimmed with red and her nose is all puffy, like she's being blowing it a lot. Still, she manages to turn a beautiful smile on Rex.

"Thank you, Rex."

She walks past me, into the house, defeat apparent in the slump of her shoulders. I turn to Rex.

"There'll be a bonus in your paycheck this month," I tell him. "I want you to get a team to sweep her house for hidden cameras."

"Already on it, boss. Her friend alerted me to the problem, and we informed the police of the illegal recording."

Rex hasn't worked for me long, but I can see now I made the right choice in appointing him to oversee security at the hotel. There will definitely be a generous bonus for him.

"Find a hotel for the night," I tell Rex. "We'll organize transport home for you in the morning."

"Thanks, Alex."

I close the door as he walks away. I put an arm around Carrie's shoulder, but she shrugs me off. For now, I let her go. She walks ahead of me, finding her way to the living room.

"Good, you're all here," she says as she comes to a stop just inside the door. "This thing between us ends now. There's no future for us where I'm not ridiculed and judged for public entertainment, so we are done."

With that, she spins on her heel and flounces from the room. I charge after Carrie, catching her by the front door. I grab her arm, but she wrenches it free from my grip.

“I meant what I said, Alex. This can’t happen.”

I knew she would do this and I’m not letting her get away with it. She’s looking for an excuse to run but I won’t give it to her.

“Oh, sweetheart,” I say with mocking sympathy. “If you think that, you are very much mistaken.”

“Alex, please.” She scrubs a hand over her face. “This can’t work. People won’t understand.”

“Who cares?” Callum says, as the others join us in the hallway.

Carrie signs.

“It’s easy for you guys. You’re rich and influential. People aren’t going to mess with you.”

“I get it,” I tell her, because I do. She has more to lose than us. We have enough money to cushion us from any scandal and, frankly, after years of having ridiculous stories printed about us, we no longer give a shit. “But you have to believe we will never let anything happen to you.”

“You say that now, but we haven’t been together for these past ten years.”

“Enough!” My harsh tone makes her shoulders stiffen. I’m not about to apologize, though. This doubt has to end now. “We are not going anywhere. This is it for us.”

She’s silent for a long time and we all wait expectantly for her to speak.

“Okay,” she says eventually. “Where do we go from here?”

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

*Carrie*

ON THE JOURNEY HERE, I had it all planned out. I was going to tell the guys it was over, find myself a hotel for a couple of nights, and then go home once the interest in me had died down. The moment I stepped into the living room, however, my resolve began to crumble. I thought I could make a clean break, but now I know that will never happen.

I love these men as much as I did when we were younger and I can't see that ever changing. It's time to embrace it, for better or worse.

When I asked "where do we go from here", I should have guessed Alex would take me to the nearest bedroom. He has that predatory gleam in his eye, the one a more sensible woman would run a mile from. The others have equally hungry expressions on their faces.

I press myself against the wall as they crowd around me. I've wanted this for so long, the four of us together. I just hadn't understood how much I needed it until now.

"Don't worry, sweetheart," Alex croons as he senses my apprehension, "we'll be gentle with you."

As his hand slides between my legs, I hope that was a lie. I let out a shuddering breath. Even through the fabric of my jeans, his touch is exquisite.



“You need me to decide for you, don’t you, Carrie?” he says. “You need me to take control.”

“Yes,” I whisper. I like it when he’s in charge.

“Good girl. Now, strip.”

He steps back to give me room. I kick off my sneakers as I peel off my jacket and drop it on the floor beside me. My jeans are next to go. I put a little extra wiggle into it as I shimmy out of them. Then I slowly unbutton my shirt to reveal the white lacy bra beneath. I shrug out of my shirt.

“So virginal,” Jacob remarks when he sees my innocent white bra and panties set. “For such a naughty girl.”

Alex grins.

“Get on the bed and show us just how naughty you can be.”

I cross the room slowly so they can all take a moment to appreciate my toned ass. I climb onto the bed and lie at the center, so there’s room for all the guys if they want to join me.

“Touch yourself,” Alex commands. “Get yourself ready for us.”

He’s given me a simple task to start off with. I slide one hand between my legs and use the other to squeeze my breast. As I circle my thumb around my nipple to draw it into a rosy peak, I stroke my intimate flesh.

Already wet, I easily slip two fingers into my pussy and fuck myself with them. My clit throbs with need as I press my heels into the mattress and lift my hips up off the bed. If these guys want a show, I’m going to give it to them. Closing my eyes, I writhe and moan as excitement thrums through my body.

The sound of clothes dropping to the floor tells me my men are getting naked. I smile and pump my fingers harder, taking myself close to the pinnacle. Just as I’m about to get there, someone knocks my hand away. I open my eyes as Alex yanks me toward the edge of the bed. He drapes my legs over my hips.

Expecting him to shove his cock into me, I'm surprised when he enters me slowly, making me take his length inch by tantalizing inch. I whine impatiently, but he's not about to give me what I want. He takes his own sweet time filling me.

Only when he's seated deep inside me does he move. He takes long, steady strokes. At this angle, his cock rubs against my clit, teasing the swollen bud to a frenzy.

"Fuck, Carrie," he grits out. "This tight little hole was made for me."

I can't dispute it. We do fit together perfectly. I whimper and something inside him snaps. He pounds into me with a ferocity I've never experienced before. It's not enough for him to lay claim to my body. He wants my soul as well. I clutch the sheets, holding on tight as he drives into me again and again. My hips buck and my pussy clamps down around him as I hit the most insane climax. Alex's cock swells inside me.

"You're ours, Carrie," he says possessively. "Don't ever forget it."

He comes deep inside me, spreading warmth through my belly. He pulls out of me and steps aside, making way for Jacob and Finn, who both climb onto the bed. They take turns to kiss me, Jacob with a sense of urgency that steals the breath from my lungs and Finn with such softness I could cry. Then Jacob lies down, his cock begging to be taken. Finn runs a finger along the seam of my ass and presses against my rear entrance.

"How long has it been since a man took you there?" he asks.

"Not since you," I admit.

"Okay, then we'll take it slow." Finn says. "You know what to do."

Though it's been ten years, I've never forgotten the steps to this particular dance. I straddle Jacob's body and sink slowly onto his massively erect cock. The stretch is incredible. I lean forward, presenting my ass to Finn. He caresses my butt with aching tenderness, at odds with his next words.

“I can’t wait to fuck your tight little ass.”

His words send a wave of heat through my body.

“Callum, get me the lube.”

A drawer opens somewhere behind me and a few seconds later something cold drips onto my ass. Finn smears the cool liquid over my rear entrance and then coats his cock with a generous amount of the lubricant.

I tense as he positions himself behind me and presses an inch of his cock inside me. It’s been a long time since I took a man like this and Finn is not what you’d call petite.

“You’re doing great, sweetheart,” he says soothingly as I whimper in discomfort. “Just breathe and let me in.”

I take a deep breath and exhale slowly, relaxing as much as I can as Finn pushes forward. He rubs my lower back as he eases his cock into me. When he’s fully seated inside me, the feeling is insane.

Now we’re in position. I prop myself up on the palms of my hands and start to slide back and forward along Jacob’s rigid shaft. Finn also begins to move.

We’ve barely started, but already it’s too much. I’m stretched to my limits. Pain and pleasure are coursing through my body. I can barely think. Then I realize I don’t have to. I can let go and just feel.

“Fuck me,” I moan, “please.”

As the two men take over, all I can do is hold on for the ride. Jacob grabs a handful of my tits and squeezes as he pumps his hips, driving up into me as Finn fucks my ass.

They move with perfect synchronicity. As Jacob withdraws, Finn pushes forward. The pace they set is merciless. My body convulses as my arousal reaches its peak.

I cry out as I’m swept up in a maelstrom of sensation. As I come, my body shaking violently, so do Jacob and Finn. I collapse onto Jacob’s chest and he holds me tight, stroking my hair and murmuring softly to me until I can breathe again. We

carefully disentangle ourselves from each other, and I roll onto my back.

Callum leans against the opposite wall, stroking his cock as he gazes down at me. I'm tired, but I want him. I hold a hand out to him.

“Make love to me, Cal.”

Finn and Jacob roll out of the way as Callum climbs onto the bed. He crawls toward me, positioning himself between my legs. He kisses me softly, teasing my lips with the lightest touch. Then he trails kisses down my neck. He puts his arms around me, holding me close as he eases himself into my poor, battered pussy. Instinctively, he knows what I need.

Looking down at me with such reverence I want to cry, he rocks his hips. He slides one arm out from under me and trails his fingers down my side. His touch is barely perceptible, but it makes my skin prickle with desire. He smiles down at me and brushes a hair back from my face.

“I love you, Carrie,” he says.

I'd not have thought it possible, but that's what sends me over the edge. It isn't an earth-shattering climax, but gentle waves of pleasure lap at my body. I come with a contented sigh. Callum thrusts a few more times and stills inside me. He groans as his cock swells. He lies there, careful not to crush me, for a minute or so after he comes. I love the feeling of his solid, masculine body on top of mine.

He pulls out of me and rolls onto his side, gathering me close. Alex takes his position on the other side of me and Finn and Jacob join us. I love being at the center of this heaping pile of masculinity. There isn't an inch of me that doesn't feel like it's been thoroughly fucked, but it was worth it.

“We're really doing this?” I say with a yawn as tiredness suddenly grips me.

“Yes, sweetheart,” Alex says. We really are.”

## EPILOGUE

*Finn*

IF THERE'S one thing I don't have to worry about today, it's the food. Because I oversaw the kitchens personally, I know that everything is perfect. It's just as well because this is the most important day of our lives.

Officially, Carrie and Alex got married this afternoon. Hundreds of friends and family members joined them here at Kildarroch Golf Resort to witness the event. Unofficially, we all formalized our bond with her this morning. We held a small, private ceremony where we pledged to love, honor, and support her for the rest of our lives.

The last six months have been incredible. Publicly, Carrie and Alex have presented themselves as a couple, while the rest of us have kept a low profile. The tabloids throw out mad speculations once in a while, but we pay it no attention.

Carrie is happy and settled. We restored Glenview House and use it as our weekend home, spending the rest of our time in Edinburgh.

Her asshole ex who planted the cameras in her home and then sold compromising images of her has mysteriously disappeared. While I'd like to take credit, it has nothing to do with us. Connell got himself into a spot of bother with some motorcycle club in London and hasn't been heard from since. If he is buried in a shallow grave somewhere, it won't be a loss to humanity.

I watch as Alex and Carrie cut the wedding cake, a gorgeous creation with different flavors in each of the five tiers. Callum, Jacob, and I exchange a smile. None of us minds that Alex is the one getting the honor of making Carrie his bride. We spoke about it and agreed it was the best way forward.

“When do you think we can leave?” Jacob asks, staring at his watch for the hundredth time in an hour. “I can’t wait to be alone with her.”

“Soon,” Callum assures him. “Once everyone’s got stuck into the free champagne, they won’t notice if we slip away.”

As Carrie bites the piece of cake Alex holds out to her, I can’t help but think how beautiful she looks. Her dress is a sleek satin sheath in ivory, rather than white. I’m sure she chose it just to drive Jacob wild. He has a real thing for silky fabrics.

The happy couple pose for a few photographs and then Alex goes and grabs a microphone from the lead singer of the band we hired for the night.

“Thank you, everyone, for coming to celebrate our wedding,” he says, wrapping his arm around Carrie’s waist. “We’ve had a great time, but we’re going to leave you now.”

Jacob, Callum, and I breathe a sigh of relief while the other guests all express surprise and disappointment. It is pretty early for the bride and groom to be leaving their wedding. They haven’t even had their first dance.

“So,” Alex continues, ignoring the noise around him, “if the single ladies would like to gather on the dance floor, the bride is about to toss the bouquet.”

As there’s a stampede toward the center of the room, we decide it’s a good opportunity to slip out. We’re spending tonight in the privacy of Glenview House, so Callum, Jacob and I take my car and drive there, ahead of Carrie and Alex. Tomorrow, we’re flying off to a private island in the Indian Ocean, where we’re safely out of sight of prying eyes.

When we get back to the house, we go inside to check everything is ready. We had the main bedroom decorated with rose petals and there's a bottle of champagne waiting there for us, too.

Alex and Carrie arrive just a few minutes after we do. Our relationship is anything but traditional, but when Alex comes through the bedroom door, he's holding Carrie bridal style in his arms.

He sets her down on her feet and curves a hand around her cheek.

“Are you going to be a good girl for us tonight?” he asks.

“No,” she says, eyes alight with mischief, “but you wouldn't want it any other way.”

She's right. We wouldn't. She's perfect just the way she is. And she's ours until death do us part.

THE END.

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THANK YOU FOR READING. If you enjoyed this book, please consider leaving a review.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alys Fraser has loved to write from an early age. A university lecturer by day, she spends her nights creating contemporary and paranormal romances.

She lives in Edinburgh with her husband, kids and a menagerie of small animals





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