

STYLISH
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When
Irish Eyes
Are Smiling

Blackleach Brothers 8

Stomy Glenn

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Irish Eyes Are Smiling (BB8) Cover

Blaecleah Brothers 8

When Irish Eyes Are Smiling

[Siren Publishing: The Stormy Glenn ManLove Collection: Erotic Romance, Contemporary, Alternative, Romantic Suspense, MM, HEA]

After forty-five years, Ma and Da Blaecleah are going back to Ireland and they are taking the whole family with them. But no trip is without its troubles. Ma is anxious about seeing her parents after all this time, Da is terrified that someone will try to keep her in Ireland, one of their family members disappears, and Lachlan and Asa may have found the treasure at the end of the rainbow.

The Blaecleahs have a lot of experience banding together when trouble comes their way, but this time they can't call on the Cade Creek Cavalry. They only have themselves to rely on, and a few new friends they meet along the way. Now, if they could only find out who is kidnapping people.

Length: 41,00 words

**WHEN IRISH EYES ARE
SMILING**

Blaecleah Brothers 8

Stormy Glenn

Siren Publishing

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A SIREN PUBLISHING BOOK

When Irish Eyes Are Smiling

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*“May embers from the hearth warm your hands,
May sunshine from an Irish sky warm your face,
May a child’s bright smile warm your heart,
And may everlasting love warm your soul.”*

~ Irish Blessing ~

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Stormy believes the only thing sexier than a man in cowboy boots is two or three men in cowboy boots. She also believes in love at first sight, soul mates, true love, and happy endings.

You can usually find her cuddled in bed with a book in her hand and a puppy in her lap, or on her laptop, creating the next sexy man for one of her stories. Stormy welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website at www.stormyglenn.com.

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STORMY GLENN

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Chapter One

Alani

“Did you pack my gray gloves?”

“It’s the middle of summer, woman,” Da replied. “Why do you need gloves?”

Alani Blae Leah chuckled at the disgruntled tone in her husband’s voice. “They are my traveling gloves, Donnell. Not winter gloves.”

“Fine, then, yes, I packed your gray gloves.”

Alani shook her head as she folded another shirt and placed it in the suitcase. Why hadn’t he just said that in the first place? She would ask what all the bluster was about, but she knew. After forty-five years, they were headed back to Ireland, and they were taking the whole family with them.

Donnell was a bit anxious. He shouldn’t be. It was just a visit. Nothing her parents could do could convince her to stay in Ireland, not when her life was here. Everything she loved was here. Her home, her friends, her family.

This was just a visit.

Alani could admit to herself she was a bit nervous as well. Not because she didn’t think they were coming back—nothing would keep her from coming back—but more because she hadn’t seen her parents or the home she’d grown up in since they had left Ireland over forty-five years ago. Going back was a little daunting.

Alani folded the last shirt and placed it into the suitcase before glancing around the bedroom she’d shared with Donnell for more years than she should count. “Have I forgotten anything, Donnell?”

“The kitchen sink?”

Alani glared.

“I’m just saying, love, we’re going for a week.” He waved his hand out over the bed, gesturing to the five suitcases sitting

open on the mattress. “We are not going for an entire year. Why do you need to pack so much? It’s not as if you’ll get the chance to wear all of this.”

Alani smiled, wishing she could give her love insight into a woman’s mind, but he would never understand it. Packing for a week for him consisted of tossing a couple changes of clothes into a bag and then getting on the road. Alani had been planning and packing for weeks.

“It’s a woman thing, Donnell.”

The adoring man’s green eyes rolled. “I love you, Alani, but I’ll never understand how your mind works.”

“I know.” And that actually wasn’t a bad thing. All she needed was his love, and she’d had that for more than forty-five years.

She walked over to stand in front of the man she had run away with all those years ago. “Maybe while we’re there, we can go visit the stables and you can kiss me again.”

One graying eyebrow went up as Donnell’s hands landed on her hips, pulling her closer. “You were a sight to see, lass. So bright and beautiful.” A mischievous twinkle came into his eyes as he smoothed some white hair back from Alani’s cheek. “So stubborn.”

A soft flush came to Alani’s cheeks, heating them. She would never get tired of staring into those green eyes. “You were the stubborn one, a penniless stable hand demanding that I kiss you.”

Da chuckled. “The nerve.”

“He was a rather cheeky fellow.” And Alani thanked the good Lord for that every day of her wonderful life.

Alani released a breath, letting some of the tension that had been building in her shoulders since they’d agreed to visit Ireland fade away. “I’m looking forward to seeing my parents and visiting where we grew up, Donnell, but this is home. We’ll be back in a week.”

Donnell’s lips thinned for a moment as he nodded. “I won’t leave Ireland without you, Alani me love, even if I have to burn the entire place to the ground.”

Alani let out a little laugh as she smoothed her hands over the collar of his white shirt. “I don’t think it will come to that, old man.”

“As long as they understand that you belong to me, we won’t have a problem. I stole you away forty-five years ago, and I’m not giving you back.”

Alani loved the possessiveness in Donnell’s voice. She never doubted that she belonged to him, but she also wanted this visit to go smoothly. “How about we both promise that, in one week, we will be flying home together and we will enjoy our visit to our birthplace, knowing that it is only a visit?”

Donnell huffed before lowering his head to rest his forehead against Alani’s. “I’m trying, love. I swear I am.”

Alani swatted Donnell’s arm. “No swearing.”

Donnell’s green eyes twinkled with merriment as he grinned. “Yes, dear.”

* * * *

Donnell

Donnell Blae Leah was less than pleased that they were going back to Ireland, especially since they were taking the entire family. He didn’t mind going on vacation with them. He even looked forward to it. It was the whole going-back-to-Ireland thing he had a problem with.

When he had run away with Alani all those years ago, he knew going back would be dicey. The warrant for his arrest that had been issued every single year since then proved that. It didn’t matter that Alani’s brother Daley had been the one to make sure the warrant was reissued every year. Her parents still knew about it.

He would be the first to admit he held a lot of resentment toward them. They had tried to force Alani to marry some old codger, even after they discovered she was pregnant with their son. They hadn’t cared that he was the biological father. He hadn’t been good enough because he didn’t come from money.

There was a part of him that always felt as if he wasn't good enough for Alani. She was sweet, kind, and loving. Loyal to a fault. She had agreed to run away with him, and she had stood by his side for most of his life.

She was an angel sent from heaven.

His angel.

He refused to give her back.

Donnell set the last suitcase on the floor next to the front door and then headed for the kitchen where he knew he'd find Alani. "Everything is ready to go in the morning, love. We just have to load it up in the car before we go to bed."

"Thank you, dear." Ma didn't even look up from the food she was cooking on the stove. "Can you set the table? The boys should be here soon, and dinner is just about ready."

"I can't believe you're cooking a huge meal the night before we fly to another country."

"We still have to eat, Donnell."

They did, but she didn't have to make a big meal for every member of their family. That was a lot of work for her. Donnell would help, but he knew better than to get in her way. That was how you got whopped with a wooden spoon.

He grabbed plates and utensils for everyone in the family and then carried them into the dining room. He really did need to think about making Ma a new table. It only sat fourteen comfortably, eighteen if they squeezed in like sardines. There were almost twenty members of their close family. If they had guests, it was standing room only.

Donnell pulled out the extra chairs, including their only granddaughter's highchair. Their grandsons Niall and Aidan were old enough to sit in booster seats, but baby Alani was only two and a half. It was easier to keep her contained when eating, both on whoever was feeding her and the poor sap tasked with cleaning up after her when she was done.

After he was done setting the table, Donnell grabbed the salt and pepper shakers, the butter, and glasses for everyone. He was an old hand at this, having set the table more nights than he cared to remember. The boys used to do it when they were growing up, but they had been adults now for a very long time, leaving the task to their da.

He didn't mind.

"How many hot pads, Ma?"

"Three."

Donnell grabbed the black metal hot pads out of the cabinet drawer and set them in the middle of the table before walking back into the kitchen. "Anything I can carry into the dining room for you?"

"Grab the mashed potatoes and then come back for the roast."

"Yes, dear."

The smells inside the kitchen were making his mouth water. While he had fallen in love with Alani due to her generous heart and the twinkle of laughter in her eyes, he had lucked out when she learned to cook. It had been a few hard years until the pampered princess of the Keegan family had learned to read a recipe. Until she did, he'd eaten a few things he still couldn't identify.

Donnell carried the large pot of mashed potatoes to the table and then went back for the roast. By the time he did, Ma was pulling the gravy off the stove.

"There's salad in the fridge."

Donnell opened the fridge and grabbed the bowl of salad she had made. Ma didn't simply toss a bunch of lettuce around. She cut up cherry tomatoes she had grown herself, added cucumber, and sometimes sliced mandarin oranges. It was a weird combination, but it worked.

The door opened just as he put the last of the food on the table, and his family starting walking in. Donnell took his place at the head of the table, with Alani sitting down on his left-hand side as she always did. It was her spot. It was closest to his heart.

Donnell glanced over when he felt Alani's hand rest over the top of his. She nodded toward their family members as they came in and took their seats.

"That's why we'll be back here in a week," she said. "This is where we belong."

Donnell had no argument for that.

Chapter Two

Lachlan

There were way too many lights in the airport. Lachlan Blaebleah firmly believed that. As blurry-eyed as he was, he was almost grateful for it. It helped cut down on the brightness. What he needed was coffee. Jumping out of bed because he overslept, then dressing, grabbing his suitcase, and running out the door hadn't given him time to get any this morning.

He leaned toward his husband and whispered, "Do they serve coffee on airplanes?"

Asa chuckled. "Not that I know of, but it's been a lot of years since I've been on an airplane, so I could be wrong."

That wasn't good.

"Once we check in and get through security, you should be able to get a cup of coffee in one of the cafes. If you drink it quick, you can probably get an entire cup before we have to board the plane."

Lachlan whimpered. "I can be quick."

The *Flash* would have nothing on him.

"Well, we have to check in and get through security first, and that could take a while." Asa gestured to the line of people in front of them.

Lachlan only counted about ten people. How long could that take?

Forty-five minutes later, Lachlan knew exactly how long it could take. And from what the lady behind the check-in counter said, today was a light travel day. That might have had something to do with them flying to Ireland in the middle of the week. Waiting until the middle of the week had dropped the price on their tickets by almost five hundred dollars, well worth it.

As soon as they got through security and put their shoes back on, Asa turned to the others. “Lachlan needs coffee, and I do, too. Does anyone want to join us?”

Several hands went up.

“Our plane leaves from gate C3 in one hour,” Ma said before pointing a finger at each and every one of them. “Do not miss it. You’ll be mucking stalls for the next five years. Is that understood?”

The response was universal from all of them. “Yes, Ma.”

Lachlan followed Asa like a lost puppy as he headed down the wide corridor of the terminal to a coffee shop. When Asa ordered a large coffee just the way Lachlan liked it and placed it in his hands, Lachlan wanted to kiss the man.

Well, truthfully, he always wanted to kiss the man and imagined it would be that way for the rest of their lives. Besides the fact that Asa was six feet three inches of raw masculine power, he was just yummy to look at. Wavy dark brown hair, hazel eyes, and a perpetual smirk that made Lachlan’s pants tight every time he saw it.

“We should drink and walk,” Asa suggested as they casually walked back through the corridor a few minutes later. “I’m afraid to find out if Ma was telling the truth with that threat.”

“She was,” Lachlan assured him. “Ma never threatens something she doesn’t mean.”

Asa started walking faster.

Lachlan chuckled as he followed after him.

The corridor was long, so it took them about ten minutes to reach their gate. Lachlan figured with what it took to buy his coffee plus the walk time, they still had a good half-hour before they even had to board the plane.

They were good.

Lachlan found a chair to sit in next to his ma and then settled in for the wait. “You excited to be going back to Ireland, Ma?”

“Yes and no, son.”

Lachlan cocked an eyebrow, wondering if she would continue with that statement. When she didn't, he motioned in a rolling motion with his hand. "And?"

Ma sighed before saying, "I'm happy to be going back to see Ireland and show you where your da and I grew up, but I admit I am a bit nervous about seeing my parents after all of these years."

"Why?" Lachlan was confused. He adored his parents. They'd given him and his brothers a life of love and acceptance few others had been privileged to have. "They're your parents."

Ma smiled as she patted his hand, but it didn't reach her eyes. "My parents aren't like yours, son. Don't get me wrong, I always knew they loved me, but they are very demanding when it comes to proper behavior. Your da and I weren't. We wanted you to experience being kids before you became adults."

"It's been a long time, Ma. Maybe they have changed. I mean they did lose their daughter because of their insistence that you marry some old codger. That had to affect them on some level."

"I suppose you're right, Lachlan, but I just don't know. It's been too many years."

"I think you're buying trouble, Ma. I know you have reason to be worried because of what happened when you left, but like I said, a lot of years have gone by. If you go into this with too many reservations, you might not be able to mend those fences."

"How did you become so wise?"

Lachlan grinned. "Learned it from my ma."

Ma laughed and leaned her head against Lachlan's shoulder. When he glanced to the seats across from them, he found his da watching them. Da nodded but didn't say anything.

By the time they were called to board the plane, he'd had enough coffee to be fully awake and looking forward to their trip. He followed his parents down the jet-way to the plane and then through the aisle to his seat.

“Aisle or window, babe?” Lachlan didn’t care one way or the other.

“You’re taller than me,” Asa replied. “Why don’t you take the aisle so you have a little bit more room to stretch out?”

“I’m an inch taller than you.”

Asa shrugged, so Lachlan stepped back and waited for him to scoot in before putting his carry-on luggage in the overhead bin and then taking his seat. He made sure his seatbelt was fastened and then waited for the rest of the passengers to take their seats so they could get into the air.

They had a very long flight ahead of them.

* * * *

Asa

They were several hours into their flight, and Asa was bored out of his mind. Lachlan was stretched out as far as he could go, his arms crossed, and his eyes closed. Asa was pretty sure he wasn’t sleeping because there was no snoring.

Asa nudged Lachlan and then leaned close to whisper in his ear, “Want to become part of the mile high club?”

“Can’t,” Lachlan said without even opening his eyes. “Rourke and Billy are in there joining the club right now.”

Well, damn.

He glanced out the window, but all he could see were clouds.

Fuck, he was bored.

“How much more time do we have in the air?”

“About four more hours,” Lachlan replied.

Asa groaned. “I might not survive that long.”

Lachlan opened his eyes and held up his hand to signal the flight attendant.

“What are you doing?” Asa whispered.

“I thought you could do with some shuteye.”

Asa frowned. “I’m not tired.”

He hadn’t yawned once.

“Oh, yes, you are.”

“No, I’m—” Asa’s jaw dropped. “You can’t...not here.” He sat up a little straighter in his seat and looked around. Even with a blanket, everyone would know what they were doing. He was sure of it. Could he be arrested for letting his husband jerk him off on a plane?

“Yes, sir?” the flight attendant asked when she reached them.

“Can I get a couple of blankets and pillows?”

“Of course, sir. Would you like an eye mask as well?”

“Eye mask?”

The flight attendant smiled. “On our long-distance flights, the airline provides eye masks to those who want them. They help cut down on the lights so people can sleep. They all come individually wrapped in their own packages.”

“Yes, please, but only one.” Lachlan beamed as he gestured to Asa. “He’ll need one.”

Asa waited until the flight attendant walked away before turning to look at his husband “What are you going to do with an eye mask?”

“Put it on you,” Lachlan said with a totally straight face.

Asa wasn’t even going to ask.

When the flight attendant came back with the items Lachlan had requested, he asked. “How much longer on our flight?”

“About four hours,” the woman replied before she smiled. “Plenty of time for you to get in a nap. With the time difference, you’ll probably need it.”

Asa had totally forgotten about that. They were basically flying to the other side of the planet. There was about an eight-hour time difference. When they landed around five o’clock in the evening in Ireland, it would be about nine in the morning back home.

The time difference wouldn't be so bad while going on vacation, but Asa suspected getting back into the groove of things when they returned to the ranch was going to give them more than one sleepless night.

Still, it was worth it to spend a week in beautiful Ireland with his husband and family. It had been a long time since they had gone off to do something, and they usually had to leave someone at home to man the ranch. This time, they had called in a few favors so they could all go, even the kids.

Lachlan handed him one of the blankets and a pillow. "Get comfortable."

"Lachlan." Asa wasn't sure about this.

"Just do it. I promise no one will see."

Still wasn't sure.

He glanced around again, but most of the people on the airplane seemed to be sleeping themselves or reading or watching something on their phones. The overhead lights had been turned down low and the murmur of conversations was low.

Maybe...

Asa set the pillow against the window and the side of seat and then shook the blanket out and covered himself, making sure the blanket was pulled up to his shoulders. When he glanced over, Lachlan had his pillow behind his head and his blanket pulled up to his chest. The eye mask dangled from his finger.

"You really want me to put this on?"

Lachlan grinned.

Asa sighed as he took the mask and pulled it over his head. He was kind of impressed that these things were supplied by the airline considering they really did block out all of the light. He couldn't see a damn thing.

"Lay your head on the pillow, love, and don't make a sound."

"This is crazy, Lany."

Lachlan's voice was close to his ear when he replied. "You married a cowboy, Asa. I warned you it was going to be a wild

ride.”

Asa hissed when Lachlan’s hand moved under the blanket, coming to rest over his cock, which hardened up with a single touch. Lachlan Blaebleah had had that ability since the night they first met when Lachlan had saved him from a beat-down. One look, one touch, and Asa was hard as a rock. His erection strained painfully behind his zipper.

He nearly jumped out of his skin when Lachlan fumbled with that zipper, freeing his cock and curling his firm hand around him. His thumb slipped over the head of Asa’s cock, giving him a natural lube to use as he thrust his hand harder, letting his fingers play over Asa’s balls on the down-stroke.

Asa thrust his hips, sending his cock farther into Lachlan’s tight grip as the man began stroking him from root to tip. He ran his thumb over the moist head again, smearing the pre-cum around and squeezing lightly.

Asa bit his lip to keep from making any noise...or begging for more.

It didn’t take long before his balls were pulling up tight. A web of arousal spun around him as Lachlan squeezed his shaft, his thumb caressing over the leaking head. Asa hissed when he felt the tingle shooting up his spine.

“Fuck!” Ambrose groaned through clenched teeth. His dick jerked wildly and pumped ropes of cum into the napkin held over the head of his cock.

He barely registered Lachlan cleaning him up and tucking him back into his pants, but the sound of his zipper going up had him raising his head and pushing the eye mask up to his forehead.

“Better?” Lachlan asked.

Asa nodded absently.

“Good.” Lachlan leaned in to brush a kiss to his ear. “Now, maybe you can sleep through the rest of the flight.”

Asa snorted. His body felt like jelly. He was so relaxed he doubted he’d be able to get excited if the plane caught on fire.

Lachlan’s lips brushed his ear again. “You can take care of me when we get to our hotel room. I packed the lube in my carry-on.”

Okay, now Asa was hard again.

This was going to be a very long flight.

Chapter Three

Rourke

Rourke Blaebleah chuckled at the flushed skin of Billy's cheeks as they disembarked from the plane. His cheeks had been red since they walked out of the bathroom after joining the mile high club. It was a good look on the man.

Of course, anything was good a look on his baby.

He kept a firm hold of Billy as they walked down the narrow passage between the airplane and the main terminal. His nightmare was Billy getting lost in some foreign country and not being able to find him due to a language or cultural barrier.

He almost hadn't come on this trip because of how anxious he was about losing Billy. If he lost him, not a soul on earth would be safe from his wrath. Well, Ma and Da would be safe, and maybe his brothers and their partners, but the rest of the world would burn.

Gay marriage had been legal in Ireland since 2015, but that didn't mean everyone accepted it. Living in Cade Creek, they didn't tend to run into a lot of narrow-minded people, but Rourke knew they were out there. He wasn't sure what kind of attitude they'd run into in Ireland.

Normally, Rourke wouldn't have given a damn, but Billy's sweet nature concerned him. Billy had had such a hard time coming to terms with his sexuality because of what his brother had done to him. If someone came right out and attacked him for who he loved, Billy would be devastated.

And then Rourke would have to kill them.

"I thought this airport would be bigger," Billy remarked. "It's actually kind of quaint."

"It's actually a pretty adequately sized airport."

"Seems smaller."

“That’s because we had to change planes in New York, and you got to see how big it was.”

“I guess.”

“I also think there is less commercialism here. In the United States, the airports try and sell passengers everything they don’t really need before they even get on a plane. Here, they seem to sell some stuff, but the shops are more...” Rourke wasn’t sure what the word was that he was looking for.

“Homey?”

Yeah, that would work.

“When was the last time you saw a fresh bakery at an airport?”

Billy shrugged. “Never been to an airport before, so...”

Rourke tightened the arm he had around Billy, pulling him a little closer. “Maybe we should travel a bit.”

Billy shook his head. “I like the ranch.”

Rourke knew that. Billy loved being on the ranch. He thrived there. According to him, he had dreamed of being welcome on the ranch since he was a small child. Now that he was there, he didn’t like leaving.

“A weekend here and there would be good for us, give us time with just the two of us.”

Billy’s deep blue eyes peeked up at him. “Just the two of us?”

Rourke grinned. “Just the two of us, Baby.”

“Okay.”

God, he adored this man.

If someone had told him years ago that Billy would be imperative to his very survival, he would have laughed in their face and then punched them. Billy had been a troublemaker, lawbreaker, and all-around pain in the butt.

And then Rourke had kissed him, and everything had changed.

“Maybe we’ll luck out and find a rainbow,” Billy said. “I hear there’s treasure at the end of a rainbow.”

“What do I need with treasure? I have you.”

“But it’s supposed to be a pot of gold.”

Rourke shook his head. “You’re worth more than a pot of gold, Baby.”

That cute little flush filled Billy’s face again.

“Come on, you two,” Lachlan called out. “You’re falling behind.”

They had done more than fall behind. They had stopped right there in the middle of the terminal walkway.

Rourke grunted, grabbed Billy’s hand, and started down the corridor again, quickly catching up with the others. By the time they reached baggage claim, he felt as if he had been walking forever. Maybe this airport wasn’t as busy as the one in New York, but it was certainly big enough.

Billy pointed. “Those are our bags.”

Rourke stepped over and grabbed their three bags. He thought they had packed a little more than they needed until he saw his Da grabbing five suitcases. Made the three bags Billy insisted on seem easy. He handed one of the suitcases to Billy and carried the other two himself.

“Which way is the exit?”

Billy raised his head and glanced around before pointing. “Exit arrow says that way.”

“We rented cars, right?” he asked his da. He wasn’t sure they had taxi cabs in Ireland.

Yes, he had a few preconceived ideas about Ireland, and they might be based on his parents’ objection to ever visiting the place while he was growing up, but he honestly didn’t know much about the country other than what he’d seen in movies, TV shows, and documentaries.

Did they have taxi cabs?

Instead of heading straight for the exit, they had to stop off at the car rental station and get the keys to the three cars they had rented. Rourke, Lachlan, and John had all made sure that they had international driver permits before they even left home. It had actually been easier to get than his original driver’s license.

Go figure.

Da had rented them three large SUVs. They might not be ideal for vacationing in Ireland, but they had a large family. They would need every seat, including the child safety seats for the three little ones.

Once they got outside to their vehicles, Rourke started loading all the bags into his car. If he carried a large majority of the bags, that would free up space in the other vehicle for people to ride.

After putting in as many bags as the back of the SUV would carry, he walked around to the front passenger seat and held the door open for Billy. He got a beaming smile and a quick kiss before Billy climbed in. Rourke shut the door and walked around to climb into the driver's seat.

He waited until the other two vehicles started to move before following them. Once they were on the road, he glanced into the rearview mirror. "How far do we have to drive, Brennan?"

"Kildare is only about an hour from here," Brennan replied, "depending on traffic. Keegan Manor is just outside of town."

An hour's drive through the lush green rolling hills and valleys of Ireland? Rourke could think of worse ways to spend his day. Billy was practically bouncing in his seat as they left the city behind and got out into the countryside. His head was whipping one way and then the other as he tried to take it all in.

"It's so beautiful here."

"More beautiful than Cade Creek?"

Billy snorted as he turned to look at me. "No place is more beautiful than Cade Creek."

Rourke was glad he thought so because he couldn't think of any other place in the world he wanted to live. He'd grown up there, and except for a small stint in the service, it was the only place he had ever lived. It was the only place he had ever wanted to live.

Visiting other places was nice, though.

* * * *

Billy

Billy's jaw dropped when they drove past a dilapidated stone castle. An actual castle. People lived there in medieval times, like hundreds and hundreds of years ago. How awesome was that?

"Could you imagine living in a castle?" he asked.

Rourke snorted. "Can you imagine cleaning one?"

Yeah, no. That wasn't part of his fantasy. His castle would magically clean itself. It would also magically have breakfast ready and waiting when he got up, tomato pots that grew the perfect tomato—ones that never went bad—and a closet full of toys for him and Rourke to play with.

Billy smiled as he thought of the toys they had back at the house. Rourke had been hesitant to introduce them to Billy due to the abuse he had suffered in the past, but Billy had enjoyed each and everyone. Although the furry handcuffs were his favorite. The feral look that came over Rourke's face every time Billy wore them was orgasmic.

Literally.

Billy glanced into the backseat and then leaned toward Rourke when he saw that Neason and Brody were cuddled together, watching out the side window. "Did you bring any toys?"

The SUV swerved abruptly. As soon as Rourke got it under control again, he shot Billy a stern look. Billy tucked his lips in and glanced away. As much as he enjoyed the toys Rourke brought into their sex life, he was still a little embarrassed by them, even after all this time.

"I brought a few things," Rourke eventually said.

Billy just nodded, and prayed Neason and Brody hadn't overheard their conversation. He had no doubt they would know exactly what he was referring to, even if he hadn't used the word "cuffs." Brody and Neason were into even kinkier crap than Billy and Rourke.

It wasn't wrong. Just kinky.

Billy found the drive through the countryside amazing. He was pretty sure he had his face pressed to the window the entire time. What amazed him the most was how similar it was to the Cade Creek Valley.

Sure, the houses here were older—sometimes centuries older—but there were still farms, farm animals, and the occasional small town. There were forests, rolling hills, and clusters of homes here and there.

The driving on the opposite side of the road was weird, but he imagined anyone from Ireland coming to Cade Creek would find driving there weird, too.

He glanced at Rourke, curious. “How did you learn to drive on the other side of the road?” He seemed so good at it and so comfortable doing it.

“I spent some time in Europe when I was younger.”

Billy frowned. “When?” He would have remembered that conversation. He remembered everything about Rourke.

“When I was in the service.”

Billy racked his brain to remember that. “That was right after you graduated from high school, wasn’t it?”

“It was.”

Billy had never really known where Rourke had gone. Just that he had disappeared for a few years, coming back only to visit. He had thought at the time that Rourke was working in the city or something. Guess not.

Those years had been some of the most depressing of Billy’s life. He had continued to watch over the Blaebleah family in Rourke’s absence, but not knowing where he was or when he might see him again had almost shredded his soul.

“Maybe later you can tell me about some of the other places you went.”

Billy wanted to know everything about Rourke. He always had.

Rourke sent him one of his rare smiles. “I can do that.”

That made Billy happy, so he went back to watching out the window. When the cars in front of them slowed and then

turned into a gated driveway, Billy sat up a little straighter. It was a long driveway, lined with thick trees on either side.

“This is where Ma grew up?”

It was actually kind of nice. Again, it reminded him of Cade Creek. At least it did until the trees stopped, and Billy found himself looking at a large expanse of manicured lawn and sculpted bushes.

He could have handled that, even if it was a little weird to have sculpted bushes, but the massive white stone building at the end of the driveway was another story.

“Holy crap!”

Rourke grunted. “You’re lucky Ma is in the other car.”

“Yeah, but...holy crap!”

Billy counted windows and realized this thing had to be at least five stories tall. Who lived in a five-story house? Mansion? Manor? Office building? It was huge.

It also had that old-world feel to it. The building seemed to be in great condition, but there was ivy growing up the sides of the white stone in several different places. The architecture was definitely not something he would find in Cade Creek. Large windows, carved doorways, and was that a gargoyle statue on the roof eave?

“Maybe we’re in the wrong place?” he whispered to himself, but Rourke must have heard him because he grunted again. Billy glanced at him. “What?”

“We’re not in the wrong place.”

Damn.

He looked back to the house, and a cold knot formed in his gut. “Rourke.”

“Relax, Baby. It’s going to be fine. I won’t let anything happen to you.”

“I’m not worried about me.”

Well, maybe he was a little bit, but his bigger worry was that he was going to embarrass the family in some way. He was just a farm boy who was good at growing tomatoes and mucking stalls. He was not made to be in a fancy place like

this. He was going to trip and end up breaking a million-dollar vase or something.

He just knew it.

Rourke grabbed his hand and tugged until Billy turned to look at him. "I will not let anything happen to you, Billy."

Billy almost rolled his eyes as he quickly corrected Rourke. "Baby."

Rourke smirked, and then Billy knew he had done it on purpose. Billy did roll his eyes that time. "I'm being ridiculous, aren't I?"

"Not at all," Rourke replied. "I'm nervous to be here, too."

Billy sucked in a breath. "Really?"

"I didn't grow up like this, Baby. None of us did except Ma, and her memories of growing up here weren't always pleasant. If you add in the forty-five years of not speaking to her parents because of what they tried to do to her and Da, I expect we're all a little nervous." Rourke glanced through the front window to the other vehicles. "None more than Ma and Da, so we should get out there and show our support."

"Oh, you're right. Ma and Da must be so nervous." Billy fumbled to get his seatbelt off. He wanted Ma and Da to both know he was there for them as they had been there for him. They had essentially saved him and welcomed him into their lives with open arms. He could do no less for them.

"Well, come on," he said when Rourke just sat there. "Ma and Da are waiting."

Rourke chuckled. "Yes, Baby."

That was more like it.

Now, if Billy could just keep his nerves under control and not crash into any vases...

He wasn't holding his breath.

Chapter Four

Quaid

As soon as the vehicles stopped, Quaid Blae Leah turned in his seat and glanced behind him to the two kids strapped into their car seats. “Do you remember what Daddy and I discussed with you before we got on the airplane?”

Niall and Aidan both nodded.

“We remember, Papa,” Aidan said. Since he was two years older than his five-year-old brother, he tended to be the spokesperson for the two of them. “We’re not to be loud, run, or touch anything unless given permission. We stay with you or Grandma and Grandpa or our uncles, and we mind our manners.”

Quaid smiled at Aidan’s quick mind. “I knew you would remember. You’re such a smart boy. Just like your daddy.”

The boys had only been theirs for two years now, but Quaid couldn’t imagine life without them. The only thing that could have made their little family of four even more perfect is if they added a little girl to the mix.

Quaid was pretty sure he could get his husband, Matthew, to agree to adopt another child. He had seen Matty staring wistfully at their niece on more than one occasion. Matty adored little Alani almost as much as Ma did.

“If you’re good,” Matty said, “then maybe tomorrow we can drive back to that little town we saw and see if they have an ice cream shop and a park.”

Oh yeah, that would be good. It would give the boys somewhere to run and play and burn off some of their excess energy. Two little boys, ages seven and five, took a lot of work even if they were as well behaved as Aidan and Niall.

Quaid turned to Matty and reached for his hand. “You ready, angel?”

“If they say anything to our boys, we’re staying in a hotel.”

“They won’t.” Quaid would make sure of it, and he had a whole lot of people that would back him up. No one messed with a Blae Leah, and they especially didn’t mess with the smallest members of the Blae Leah clan.

“Come on, Ma and Da are getting out of the car.” Quaid opened his door and then pulled the seat forward so he could get to the buckles on Aidan’s car seat. Once Aidan was free, Quaid set him on the ground and went back for Niall.

He unbuckled Niall, lifted him up, and then turned to set him on the ground until he saw the tears in Niall’s hazel eyes. “What’s wrong, son?”

“Scared,” Niall whispered as he dropped his head on Quaid’s shoulder.

Quaid shot Matty a quick look before asking, “What are you scared about?”

Niall shrugged.

“He’s scared Grandma’s Ma and Da will be mean to him,” Aidan said.

“No, that would never happen.” Hell, Quaid had no idea if it would happen or not, but he wasn’t going to allow his son to be scared. “Just because you don’t know someone doesn’t mean they are going to be mean to you.”

“We heard you and Daddy talking,” Aidan the spokesman said. “They were mean to Grandma and Grandpa. We don’t want them to be mean to us.”

Quaid squatted down and set Niall on his feet even though he didn’t let go of him. He still kept an arm wrapped around Niall’s back. “A long, long time ago, they were mean to Grandma and Grandpa, but that was a very long time ago, even before I was born. Even before your Uncle Lachlan was born. So, you know what that means?”

Two little heads shook.

“It means it’s in the past.”

Aidan’s head cocked to one side, a sure sign he was curious about something. “What does *in the past* mean?”

“Well...uh...” Quaid had no idea how to explain this in little-person terms. He glanced at Matty and mouthed, “*Help.*”

“Aidan, do you remember when you broke Niall’s train set? Do you remember how upset he was and how bad you felt?”

Aidan’s mouth turned down at the corners. “Yeah.”

“But after a while, Niall forgave you, right? And everything was better?”

Aidan nodded.

“This is like that. A long time ago, Ma’s parents did something not nice, and everyone was upset and angry, and they felt really bad, but after a while, things were better. Ma has forgiven them for what they did, and we all want to be happy together. So, I don’t think you have to worry about them being mean to you anymore.”

“They felt bad for what they did?”

“I’m sure they did, or they wouldn’t have invited us to come visit with them.”

Quaid didn’t say anything about Matty’s statement out loud, but he wasn’t so sure. He’d heard his entire life what they had tried to do to Ma and Da, and he couldn’t blame his kids for being a little wary. He was.

Quaid decided to hold Niall for now, so when he stood, he just took the boy with him, and then he reached out his hand for Aidan. “Come on. Let’s go find Ma and Da.”

They didn’t have to go far. Ma and Da, along with the rest of the family, were gathering on the other side of the vehicles. Quaid almost laughed at the picture he imagined they made. Two grandparents, fifteen sons, and three grandkids.

They were quite the sight.

At least, the guy in the fancy suit that opened the front door seemed to think so. He blinked, his jaw dropping as he stared at them. But almost as quickly, his face became impassive and he straightened his shoulders.

“Welcome to Keegan Manor.”

That was very formal.

“Hello, Jenkins,” Ma said. “It’s been a long time.”

The older man gave a respectful nod to Ma. “Miss Alani.”

“It’s Mrs. Blaebleah,” Da said. “It’s been Mrs. Blaebleah for over forty-five years.”

“Of course, sir.”

Da grunted.

Ma gave Da an exasperated look before starting up the front steps. Da was right at her side. Quaid shot his brothers a look. They all had amused smiles on their faces. Quaid understood his father’s words, but he also understood the look Ma had given him.

Of any of them, Quaid suspected Da was the most nervous to be here. This was where he had met and fallen in love with Ma. This was also the place where he had almost lost her due to the very people they were about to meet.

Quaid would be nervous too.

He kind of was. He was about to meet his grandparents for the very first time. While his mother had never said anything bad about them beyond explaining what they had done, they had still hurt her and Da.

On the other hand, if they continued to hold a grudge for what Ma’s parents had done, then what was the point of coming on this trip? The resentment was natural, but so was forgiveness. Da needed to be willing to give a little. He had Ma after all. They didn’t.

This was not going to be a walk through the daisies.

Once we stepped inside the massive manor house, Quaid’s jaw dropped. They all easily fit into the entryway. There was even room to spare. There was so much stone on the outside of the building. Quaid had expected to find some of inside. Instead, the entire entry was done in a dark mahogany wood paneling. It looked nice, but it was a little dark for Quaid’s tastes.

Ma’s quiet gasp drew Quaid’s attention to the archway to his left. When he looked to the room beyond, he saw an older man and woman inside. The man was sitting in a dark brown wingback chair. The woman stood at his side, her hand resting on his shoulder.

These were his grandparents?

* * * *

Matty

Matty tried not to squeeze Aidan's hand too tightly, but it was hard not to. His stomach was threatening to rebel due to his nerves. The two older people staring so intently at them made him want to turn around and walk right out the door.

If Quaid hadn't been holding Aidan's hand, he would have.

"Hello, Alani," the older woman said. "It's good to see you."

"Mother," Ma replied before looking at the old man at her mother's side. "Father."

Matty glanced between the three of them, not fully understanding what was going on. He knew from family talks that there was some animosity between Ma and her parents, but the air was so thick right now it was almost hard to breathe.

Matty glanced down when Aidan tugged on his hand. He leaned down to get closer to him. "What's up, bud?" I whispered.

Aidan whispered too, but his was quite a bit louder. "Are you sure that's Grandma's mom?"

"I'm sure."

"But why isn't she hugging Grandma? We always hug Grandma when we see her."

Out of the mouth of babes.

"You're absolutely correct, Aidan," Ma said before holding out her hand. "Why don't you come with me? You give the best hugs. I bet my mother would like one from you."

Aidan walked to Ma with no hesitation, but then, why wouldn't he? This was his grandma. She loved him without reservation. She didn't care that he wasn't blood related. In her mind, he was her grandson, and it was as simple as that.

Matty scooted closer to Quaid and held his breath as Ma and Aidan walked across the room to where her parents sat. His jaw dropped when Ma's mother went down to her knees when they reached her.

"Hello, Aidan," she said. "It's very nice to meet you."

"Are you really Grandma's mom?"

When she smiled, some of the stiffness faded from her face. "I am."

"Then you should give her a hug. Grandma says hugs always make things better."

"Oh, I don't know," she said. "I—"

Aidan's little arms wrapped around her neck, and he gave her a big hug. After a moment, her arms wrapped around him, and she gave him a hug back.

"There," Aidan said once he released his arms. "Now you know how to give them. My papa and daddy taught me. They told me that the best ones are the ones that squeeze the stuffing out of you."

There were a few chuckles, but everyone became quiet when the old woman straightened up and glanced toward Ma.

Aidan grabbed Ma's hand and tugged on it when they continued to stare at each other. "Go on, Grandma, give her a hug. She's your ma."

Ma shot Aidan a small smile before holding her arms out to her mother. Everyone standing there knew what courage it took for her to do that. She hadn't seen her parents in forty-five years let alone hugged one of them. She had no idea what their reaction might be.

He blew out a breath and turned to press his forehead against Quaid's arm when the old woman reached over and hugged her daughter. He doubted there was a dry eye in the room as everyone watched mother and daughter reunite.

"Oh, man," Quaid quickly corrected. "Oh man."

Matty's head snapped up. "What?"

Quaid gestured.

Matty's heart climbed into his throat when he turned and saw Aidan climbing up to sit on the old man's lap. He started

to take a step forward to get Aidan, but Quaid grabbed his arm.

“Wait.”

“Quaid.”

“No, just wait.” He gestured one more time. “Watch.”

Matty frowned as he turned to look again. Aidan was now sitting on the man’s lap, and he was chatting a mile a minute, his hands waving through the air as he explained something Quaid was too far away to hear.

What was surprising was the warm smile on the old man’s face and the way he watched Aidan with avid interest. Matty hadn’t been expecting that.

When Niall started to wiggle, Quaid set him down on the floor, and he went running off across the room to grab Ma’s hand. Ma smiled down at him before introducing him to her mother and father.

“Boys,” she said as she turned, “come meet my mother and father, Tierney and Ava Keegan. And you should each tell them a little something about yourselves so they know who you are.”

They all fell in line, oldest to youngest. It was something Matty had seen time and time again since moving to the ranch. Lachlan was the oldest, and he was the caretaker of his younger brothers. It made sense that he would go first, but the others followed right after him.

“I’m Lachlan Blae Leah, and this is my husband, Asa. We help Da run the ranch, even if Asa is better at riding a motorcycle than a horse.”

“Oh really?” Tierney asked. “I have a 1955 BMW R50 in the garage. I haven’t been able to ride it for a few years, but maybe later we can go take a look at it.”

Asa’s eyes rounded. “A 1955 BMW R50? I bet she’s beautiful.”

Tierney grinned as if they totally understood each other. “Oh, she is, she is.”

“I’m Neason Blae Leah, and this is my husband, Benjamin Brody, but everyone just calls him Brody. He’s a minister in our little town. In fact, he married all of us. Well, except me

and him. We had to get someone else to do that. He couldn't very well—”

“Neason,” Brody said. “You haven't told them anything about yourself.”

“Oh...um...” Neason's lips twisted as if he was thinking hard.

“Since his accident, Neason mostly helps me out at the church. He recently graduated from the university with a degree in accounting, and now he does all the books for the church and the ranch.”

“Accident?” Ava asked.

“Yeah, I was driving too fast and hit a tree.” Neason pointed to his Coke-bottle-thick glasses. “I have to wear these, but that's okay. I was blind for a little while, but after surgery I can see, just not well. I'm not even allowed to drive anymore.”

“But you said you just graduated from the university?”

Neason nodded as he smiled at Brody. “Brody refused to let me feel sorry for myself. He said there was no reason I couldn't do anything anyone else could. I just might have to do it a bit differently.”

“But there's no lasting damage?”

“Just to my eyes.”

Brody brushed a kiss to Neason's temple. “You're perfect, baby, and you know it.”

“I'm Rourke Blae Leah,” Rourke said as he stepped forward, his arm firmly wrapped around Billy. “This is my husband, Billy. I help Da with the ranch, but Billy helps Ma. They grow things together, and Billy makes quilts.”

Matty swallowed tightly when it was their turn.

“I'm Quaid Blae Leah,” Quaid started. “This is my husband, Matthew, and you've already met our two boys, Aidan and Niall.”

“They are adorable,” Ava said.

Quaid grinned. “We think so.”

“I'm Seamus Blae Leah,” Seamus said as he stepped up. “And these are my husbands, John Riley and Yancy Butler.”

John is the sheriff in our small town, and Yancy is one of his deputies. I'm just a glorified ranch hand."

There was a slight widening of eyes, but Ava didn't say anything about being introduced to a threesome.

"I'm the adopted Blae Leah," Ruben said as he stepped forward. "I'm Ruben Blae Leah. I'm also Matty's blood brother. This is my husband, Elijah James, and our daughter, Alani."

The woman gasped as she pressed her hands to her mouth for a moment. "Oh, she's darling."

"She looks just like her mother."

Ava's eyes darted to Elijah. "I thought..."

"I met Mahra in a refugee camp in Ras Ejder on the Libyan-Tunisian border in northern Africa. She was an aid worker there. I won't go into the specifics, but Alani came along, and we got married. Mahra was killed soon after that, so I brought her home to Ma and Da." Ruben shot his husband a quick smile. "Elijah and I were married not long after that."

"I'm so sorry for your loss."

Ruben smiled, but it didn't quite reach his eyes. "Mahra was Kapheri's sister. That's how he and Brennan met, when he came to Cade Creek with his parents to meet Alani."

Ava's lips pressed thin. "That's when Daley tried to swindle Alani out of her inheritance, wasn't it?"

Ruben nodded.

"I am so sorry about that mess. If Tierney or I had any idea he would try something like that, we never would have asked him to help us get back in contact with Alani."

"You didn't know, Mother," Ma said. "And that's all in the past now."

Matty bit back a chuckle when Brennan stepped forward. "I'm not a Blae Leah by birth, but I am in my heart." He tugged on the arm of the man standing next to him. "This is my husband, Kapheri el-Masri. We own a coffee cafe in Cade Creek."

Da was last. He walked up beside Ma and wrapped an arm around her waist, pulling her close to his side. "I'm Donnell

Blaecleah, and this is my wife. I've had her at my side for over forty-five years, and I'm not giving her back."

"Donnell!" Ma explained.

"No, he's right, Alani." The old man set Aidan on his feet and then stood so he could hold his hand out to Da. "I made a mistake all those years ago and I'm man enough to admit it." His eyes roamed over everyone standing there. "You've given my daughter the one thing my money couldn't buy her. You've given her love and happiness and a legacy any man would be proud to call his own. I can only ask that you forgive an old man who made a mistake."

Da stared at Ma's father for so long Matty started to feel sorry for him. Very few men could handle being under his penetrating gaze. Matty's shoulders slumped with relief when Da finally reached out and shook the man's hand.

"Alani has had my heart for over forty-five years, and I've worked every day of those forty-five years to make her happy. For the most part I have, but she's always felt sadness at the distance between you and her. As long as you understand that when we leave Ireland she's going with me, and you do nothing to stop us, then I welcome you getting to know your grandsons and the rest of our family."

Tierney Keegan gave a nod of acceptance and respect, but there was a shimmer of tears in his faded green eyes. "So many sons."

"And grandsons and a granddaughter," Da added as he leaned down to pick Niall up. "Great-grandchildren for you."

Tierney smiled. "Well, now, how about that."

Chapter Five

Neason

The introductions seemed to go okay, but Neason was still nervous, and when he got nervous, he chatted. A lot. If it wasn't for the tight grip Brody had on his waist, keeping him grounded, he'd probably be chatting his grandparents' ears off.

He didn't know what he'd do if Brody hadn't been there. It had taken a lot of maneuvering on Brody's part to get someone to cover for him at the church and the shop.

Surprisingly, it had been easier to find someone to take over at the church than the shop. Everyone in Cade Creek knew the story of the penniless stable hand that had run away with the pampered princess of the Keegan family. Now that Ma was trying to reunite with her parents, everyone had wanted to help.

"Rest easy, love." Brody's lips brushed his temple again. "I'll take care of you later, get you settled back into your skin."

"Here?" Neason wasn't sure how he felt about having their type of sex in his grandparents' house. "They'll hear us."

"Then you'll just have to be quiet," Brody mused with a shrug. "Or I could gag you. I did bring the ball gag."

Neason quickly looked around to make sure no one had heard what Brody had said. It wasn't that he was embarrassed by it, but what occurred between them was no one's business but theirs.

No one seemed to be paying them any extra attention, so Neason glanced up at Brody through his lashes and thick glasses. "I'd be okay with that."

He doubted he could be quiet if Brody was loving on him. Brody had learned long ago how to master his body like a fine-tuned instrument. He knew just where to touch Neason,

what silky caress would get him going the fastest, and how to keep him hanging on the edge of an orgasm for hours.

He really was great.

“Maybe we’ll be lucky and they’ll put us at the other end of the house.”

“Doesn’t matter where they put us, love.”

Neason swallowed tightly. Brody’s deep chuckle rippled along Neason’s spine. The man knew exactly what he was doing to him.

“Neason, is it?”

Neason prayed his face wasn’t beet red as he turned to face his grandmother. “Yes.”

Ava eyed his thick glasses, a frown pinching the skin between her eyes. “You said there is no lasting damage from your accident?”

“Just these.” Neason pointed to his glasses. “I’m pretty much blind as a bat without them.”

She stared for a moment before smiling and turning to look at Brody. “And did I hear right? You’re a minister?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Brody answered. “I’ve been the minister at the Cade Creek Community Church for going on ten years now.”

Her eyes darted to the tattoos peeking out from under the edges of Brody’s shirt before she plastered a smile on her face. “Well, that’s very nice.”

A bit of laughter burst from Neason’s lips. When Ava glanced at him, he shook his head. “Sorry, I just...Most people are really surprised when they meet Brody and learn what he does, but he’s very good at it. Our entire community adores him. He’s brought more than one person to God because he doesn’t look like a normal minister. They can relate to him easier.”

“Yes, I could see that. Most men of God tend to dress in a very staid manner, and it can be off-putting to many. Being able to simply sit and talk with someone and not be nervous that you are going to say or do the wrong thing must be marvelous.”

Neason grinned. "Exactly."

He was glad she got it.

"There's a little more to it than that, love," Brody said.

"Not really."

Brody shook his head before pressing another kiss to Neason's temple. "If you say so, dear."

Ava smiled. "It's so obvious how in love you are."

Neason beamed. "Thank you." He always liked it hear when people saw the love between him and Brody. He grabbed Brody's arm and gave it a squeeze. "He saved me after that accident and brought me back to the land of the living. How could I not love him?"

"Madame."

Neason jumped when the butler suddenly appeared like he had popped in from thin air. If that was what he was like, how did Ma stand it?

"Dinner will be served in thirty minutes in the dining room."

"Thank you, Jenkins," Ava said before turning back to Neason and Brody. "Would you like to freshen up before dinner?"

"That would be great," Neason said. "Thanks."

He needed to splash some cold water on his face and have a few minutes to collect himself. While his grandparents had been nothing but cordial since they walked in the door, there was still an air of tension in the room.

"Jenkins will show you to your room."

"Thank you," Neason said again.

He kept a tight hold of Brody's arm as they followed the butler out of the living room and up a curved grand staircase. When his brother Lachlan caught up to him, Neason leaned toward him. "This is insane. This is where Ma grew up?"

Lachlan shrugged, which wasn't an answer.

The floor was either hardwood or marble depending on where they were walking, and the walls were much the same.

The entryway was marble, the living room had been stone and dark wooden panels, and the hallway had dark wooden panels.

Neason shuddered to think what their rooms looked like. Made him wish they were back at the ranch where everything was bright and cheery. He felt at home every time he walked into Ma and Da's house. This was like walking through the halls of a museum. There were even tapestries, shields, and swords on the walls.

“Do you think these are real or just for show?”

Lachlan reached up to run his finger over the blade of one of the swords before rubbing them together. There was a droplet of blood on his finger. “They're real, and sharp. Very, very sharp.”

They were led down a long corridor and then another one and another one. By the time Jenkins gestured to a large wooden door, Neason was lost. He had no idea how he was supposed to get back downstairs because he didn't have a clue where the stairs were.

“Uh, Jenkins?”

“Yes, sir?”

“Where's the exit?”

Jenkins' face didn't move a muscle, but there was a question in his voice. “Sir?”

“How do I get back downstairs?”

“One of the staff will come get you in thirty minutes.”

Neason smiled. “Thank you.”

“Of course, sir.”

Wow.

Neason watched Jenkins walk farther down the hallway, directing his brothers and their husbands to their rooms. He realized he had no idea where his Ma and Da were.

“Did you see which room Ma and Da went into?”

Brody shook his head. “No, but I doubt she has to ask where the exit is.”

Probably not.

“They could have remodeled,” Neason insisted.

Brody’s eyebrows lifted. “In this place? I’m pretty sure it’s looked this way for the last five hundred years.”

Neason wouldn’t doubt it.

* * * *

Brody

Brody opened the door to their assigned room and stepped inside only to be brought up short by the... He wasn’t exactly sure what he was standing in other than to think of it as a museum space. The bed was huge, like really huge. The canopy reached almost to the ceiling.

The heavy damask-style curtains were a little weird.

Heavy oak furniture sat all around the room. A roll-top desk, a floor-to-ceiling bookcase, a window seat built into the window. Even the large stone fireplace was imposing.

“We should have stayed in a hotel.”

Neason snorted as he walked in behind Brody. “I think we did.”

“No, because if we were in a hotel, I wouldn’t worry about touching anything.”

“Yeah.” Neason winced as he glanced around. “That could be a problem.”

Brody eyed his husband. “It’s going to be pretty hard to spank your ass if we can’t touch anything.”

Neason gulped as his eyes slowly rose. “S-Spanking?”

Brody raised an eyebrow.

He smirked when Neason swallowed so hard his Adam’s apple bobbed. He liked seeing these responses in the man. The anticipation, the need...the lust. Neason’s green eyes turned to deep, dark emeralds when he was aroused.

Like now.

“Close the door, Neason, and then take your clothes off.”

He thoroughly enjoyed the show as Neason stripped his clothes off. He waited until Neason stood there naked before starting to take off his own clothes. He liked having Neason’s eyes on him. There was no way for the man to hide his desire.

Once he was naked, Brody walked over to Neason and gripped a handful of his hair. “You should wrap your lips around my dick to get us started.”

A mischievous little grin spread across Neason’s face right before he dropped down to his knees. Brody groaned when Neason stuck out his tongue and licked the head of Brody’s cock.

God, Neason had a great tongue.

Brody’s fingers tightened as he watched his cock disappear into Neason’s mouth. As erotic as the sight was, it felt even better. Warm hot suction surrounded his hard shaft. Brody spread his legs to give Neason more access.

Neason’s mouth tormented Brody, wringing searing pleasure after pleasure from his hard, aching dick. He lapped at Brody as though the man’s cock were an especially tasty treat. Neason moved farther down, licking and kissing his way to the root of Brody’s cock.

When Neason began to gently roll his balls, Brody thought he was going to lose his mind. He had to stop and breathe deeply as Neason took him deep in his mouth.

Brody moaned as Neason swirled his tongue around Brody’s cock before pressing the tip into the slit in the flared head of his shaft. Neason sucked harder and played with Brody’s slit with each outward stroke.

His hand cradled the back of Neason’s head as he slid slowly in and out of Neason’s mouth, moving faster with each thrust. Pleasure built inside Brody, pooling in his balls and drawing them tight to his body. His cock tingled, aching for release.

“Going to come, love.” Holding Neason in place, Brody rolled his hips backward and pulled his dick free with a damp pop. He shouted as he came, ropes of pearly white cum splattering all over Neason’s face.

Neason licked his lips before leaning forward and cleaning off Brody's spent cock. Brody grabbed a wipe off the nightstand and held it out to Neason so he could clean his face. As much as he liked seeing the man covered in his cum, Neason probably couldn't walk around like that.

Too bad.

When Neason stood, Brody felt the man's hard cock brush against his leg. He smiled and pointedly ignored it. This would be a good lesson in restraint for his love.

"Stay where you are. Don't move a muscle."

Neason shuddered, but he didn't say a word.

Brody was careful to keep his smirk as he walked over to their suitcases and dug around inside until he found the lube. He smiled as he turned. He didn't know what he expected, but it certainly wasn't the sight of Neason standing there with his hands clasped behind him and his hard cock curved up toward his bellybutton.

Brody could only stare for a moment, mesmerized. It really was a stunning sight to behold. But he could see how hard Neason was trying, and one thing he had learned over the years with Neason—always reward good behavior.

Brody looked the man up and down. He was actually a little amazed that Neason had stayed hard the entire time. Brody reached around and grabbed a handful of Neason's ass cheek. He was pleased by the moan that fell from the man's lips and the way he went up on his tiptoes before pushing his ass back against Brody's hand.

"You've been so good this morning. I think you deserve a reward. What shall it be, my little love? A spanking? Blow job? Or my dick in your ass?" Brody did not miss how Neason's cock pulsed with each word he spoke. The man was close to the edge. "Your choice, Neason."

"I...I...I can't."

When Neason's eyes started to go a little wild, Brody knew he needed to step in. He walked over and sat down on the side of the massive bed. "Over my lap, Neason."

Once Neason was lying prone over his thighs, Brody gave his ass a good squeeze before bringing his hand down in a hard swat. "Count each one, Neason."

“One, sir.”

“Good boy.”

Brody delivered one swat after another, listening to Neason call them each off. When Neason cried out the tenth swat, Brody slid his hand over Neason’s ass to the crack in the middle. Sliding his finger in between those lush cheeks, he pushed it into Neason’s tight little hole just far enough to be able to caress the walnut-sized gland inside.

“Come.”

Neason’s entire body shook, and a loud cry fell from his lips. Brody smiled when he felt a warm wetness on his legs. He kept his finger deep in Neason’s ass as the man rode out his orgasm. When Neason’s body went limp, Brody pulled his finger free.

He grabbed the tube of lube and poured a liberal amount out on his fingers before pushing two of them into Neason’s waiting hole. Brody felt another pulse of cum saturate his leg.

He also felt Neason’s cock thickening and coming back to life.

“Does my little love like that?” he asked as he moved his fingers, making sure they rubbed against Neason’s sweet spot every time he pushed them into the man’s luscious ass.

When Neason started humping his hips, Brody knew the man was working up toward another orgasm. He gave Neason’s ass a light smack with his other hand. “No coming without permission, Neason.”

“No...no, sir.”

“Good boy.” As a reward, Brody smacked Neason’s reddened ass again. He slid his fingers in and out of Neason, adding a third one when he thought his lover was ready. He started to move in a steady rhythm, making sure to nail Neason’s gland as often as he could.

When his need to feel his cock in that tight little ass collided with his desire to see Neason come apart in his arms, Brody lifted Neason up and swung him around, laying him out on the bed. His hands shook as he grabbed the condom and tore it open before rolling it down his aching cock.

He lined his cock up and pushed past the ring of muscle, gasping at the tightness surrounding his shaft as he inched his way in. He closed his eyes, staving off his orgasm as he bottomed out. Brody's mind reeled as he began to thrust his hips. His head spun as he felt Neason's pleasure mingle with his, taking the sensation higher and further than Brody could ever have imagined.

He freed one hand to feel Neason's skin beneath the palm of his hand, skating it up and down Neason's body, feeling the smooth flesh give under the palm of his hand. His fingers dug into Neason's hip.

He brought his other hand down on Neason's rounded ass. Neason cried out and writhed under him, matching thrust for thrust as Brody's cock slid in and out of his tight channel. Fuck if Neason's body didn't set Brody's blood on fire. It was a pleasure he never wanted to lose.

"Come, love."

Neason cried out as he came, his hole throbbing and milking Brody's cock.

"Fuck, love," Brody groaned as an orgasm of epic proportions suddenly ripped through him, tearing at his very soul. Giving his hips a few more plunges, he held tight to Neason as he came unglued. He was frozen in time and space as he found his pleasure and felt his balls emptying as endless spurts of cum filled Neason's ass.

"Shit," Brody panted as he became boneless, feeling as though every muscle in his body had given out. He slid back onto the chair, taking Neason with him. Brody kissed the nape of Neason's neck as he closed his eyes.

"Feeling all settled now, love?"

Neason just chuckled.

Chapter Six

Seamus

Seamus chuckled as he stepped out of his room with John and Yancy and saw the flush on his brother's cheeks. Neason was hanging onto Brody like a monkey. Seamus had no doubt what the pair had been up to...probably the same thing he had been up to with John and Yancy.

Hopefully, they were all a lot more relaxed now. Between the early morning rush to get to the airport, the insane flight across the ocean, and now meeting his grandparents for the very first time, Seamus was about ready to call it a day.

He glanced over his shoulder when he felt a hand on his back. Seeing Yancy behind him, he gave the man a smile. "Hungry?"

Yancy whimpered.

"Not to worry, I'm sure they put on a big spread."

Everyone in their family was aware that Yancy was ruled by his stomach. He was a six-and-a-half-foot-tall bottomless pit. Strangely enough, he carried it well. There wasn't an ounce of fat on his muscular body.

John carried his weight well, too, even if he didn't eat as much as Yancy.

Seamus was a lucky, lucky man.

When they reached the dining room, he felt as if his luck had just run out. The long mahogany dining table was set with a full service right down to the cloth napkins.

"Are we allowed to even eat on those dishes?" Neason whispered.

Seamus wasn't so much worried about the bone-china dishware as he was about the crystal wine glasses. Besides, he didn't drink wine. Man, what he wouldn't give for a good old-fashioned barbecue and some beer.

“Come sit down, boys.”

“Yes, Ma.”

They all moved around the table, surprisingly sitting in the same spots they would have sat in at home. No one said anything about it, but Seamus saw a few smiles so he knew his brothers noticed it too.

“I hope you like beef Wellington,” Grandmother said. “Our cook prepared it especially for you.”

Seamus did like beef Wellington, but that wasn't what was on the plates the maids brought out. There was soup and salad served before the beef Wellington came out.

Seamus smiled at the woman after taking a bite of the main dish. “Ma has made beef Wellington for us a few times,” he said when the silence became strained. “We've always enjoyed it.”

It was meat. What wasn't to enjoy?

Ava's eyes darted to Ma. “Does your mother cook a lot?”

Seamus blinked for a moment, surprised by the question. “Yes. I mean we've all moved out the house now, but we all go home for Sunday dinner. She cooks up a real storm then.”

Ava's eyebrows lifted. “All of you?”

Seamus chuckled. “We are a rather large family. Pa is supposed to be making Ma a new dining room table this year because it's getting a bit cramped on Sundays with all of us there. Good thing all of my brothers are married off now.”

“You forgot the kids,” Lachlan said. “If any of us adopt, we'll need the extra room for sure.”

“You're planning to adopt?” Ava asked Lachlan before glancing at the rest of them.

“Well, we kind of have to,” Seamus started to say. “It's not like we can—”

“Seamus!”

Seamus cringed at his mother's whispered hiss.

Yeah, he was in trouble.

“I think what my brother is trying to say,” Lachlan interjected, “is that we are looking into adoption.”

“All of you?”

“Neason and I probably won’t adopt,” Brody said, “but we’ll have lots of nieces and nephews to adore.”

“Because of his accident?” Ava asked.

“No.” He smiled as he glanced at Neason, fiddling with the hair at the back of Neason’s neck. “Our life doesn’t lend itself to children very well.”

“Is that due to your work in the church?”

“That’s one of the reasons,” Brody replied.

Seamus was damned proud of himself for keeping a straight face. He just picked up his fork and took another bite. It was a well-known, but untalked-about fact, that Brody and Neason had an unusual relationship. It worked for them and made them both happy, so no one said anything about it. Since Brody would rather cut off his arm than harm Neason, none of them cared that it was unusual.

“Have any of you considered using a surrogate to continue the family name?”

Seamus’s head snapped up at Ava’s words. “We are continuing our name.” He pointed to Alani, Aidan, and Niall. “With them.”

“Well, yes, but—”

“We see no distinction between blood and non-blood children or grandchildren, Mother. Everyone here is my family.”

“Of course,” Ava said before looking down at her plate and getting a forkful of beef Wellington.

Seamus glanced at his mother. When he saw her tight-pressed lips, his temper flared. “I don’t know how things are done in your family, but in the Blae Leah family, love is what binds us together, not blood.”

Ma looked up, and for a moment, Seamus thought she would reprimand her again, but she just smiled and nodded at him. Seamus returned her smile and went back to eating. He knew this was supposed to be a family reunion of sorts, but it didn’t seem to be going that well. Maybe the rift between Ma’s uber-rich birth family and the one Seamus had grown up in was too wide?

Seamus glanced up when Jenkins came rushing in, moving quickly around the room before bending down to whisper something in Tierney's ear. Tierney grimaced before leaning over to say something to his wife. He tossed his napkin down on the table and stood.

"I'm afraid I've been called away for a bit. Trouble with one of our mares down in the stables. Please, enjoy your dinner and I'll see you tomorrow."

"Trouble with a mare?" Da asked.

"One of our mares has gone into labor, but she's having trouble. Burrell, our stable master, believes that she is having a breech birth."

"Tierney," Ava whispered harshly, "not at the dinner table."

"Sorry, my dear."

"Need some help?" Da asked as he stood. "I've helped my share of mares through giving birth."

Tierney looked bewildered for a moment before nodding. "It would be appreciated. Our stable master is new, and I'm afraid this might be out of his well of experience."

Da leaned down to press a kiss to Ma's cheek. "I'll be back soon, lass."

Ma chuckled lightly. "I'll believe that when I see it, Donnell Blae Leah."

When Tierney and Da walked out of the room, dead silence hung in the air. A quick glance around the room told Seamus exactly what the problem was. They were all anxious to get out of there. Going to the stables was a perfect excuse.

Ma sighed heavily. "Go, go. The rest of us will stay here and watch the children."

"Thanks, Ma," several of them said as chairs scraped back and they stood.

"Would you mind if I went?" John asked.

"No, go ahead," Seamus replied. "I'll stay here and help Ma with the kids."

"I think Matty and Billy are going to stay. You could come if you wanted to."

Seamus shook his head. “You and Yancy go. I’m good.” He leaned over to press a kiss to John’s cheek then thought about it and did the same to Yancy. “You two go have fun.”

“Thanks, babe.”

Seamus’ smile grew bigger when he got a kiss on each cheek before his husbands hightailed it out of the room, followed quickly by several of his brothers, the blood-related ones and the ones related by marriage.

He glanced toward the end of the table where his grandmother sat. “Is there dessert?”

* * * *

John

John drew in a deep breath of fresh clean air when he stepped outside. He was so glad to be out of that stuffy house. It reminded him way too much of the house he grew up in, right down to the butler and maid staff.

He bumped shoulders with Yancy. “I’ll get you a burger later.”

“Where?” Yancy glanced around. “I don’t think they have any burger joints around here.”

“I’m sure there is a pub around here or something that serves a good burger.” John could hope anyway. A hungry Yancy was not pretty. Well, he was. Yancy was always pretty. John just had the urge to strangle him when he was like that.

“Where’s the stable?” Lachlan asked.

“Uh...” John glanced around. He saw a long roof off in the distance so he pointed at it. “Maybe that way?”

They all headed in that direction. As they drew closer, John saw wooden walls and a lot of fencing, so he knew they were going in the right direction. There were lights shining from inside, and the door was open, so they walked inside.

It was indeed a stable. A very fancy one. It was weirdly clean, too. Their barn never looked like this. There were

several individual stalls, and all of the stall gates seemed to be made with black wrought iron over wooden panels. They were very nice. Not something John had expected to see in a racing stable. There certainly wasn't anything like this back on the ranch.

"Down there." Lachlan nodded to an open stall about halfway down.

When they reached the stall door, John knew they had found the right place. Da knelt in the straw next to a mare lying on her side. She was panting heavily and heaving with strain. Da was rubbing her hand down her neck, whispering to her.

"Da?" Lachlan asked. "How is she?"

Da shook his head. "Not good, son."

"Really, sir," a man John assumed was the stable master asked, "is all of this really necessary?"

"Donnell lives on a ranch in America," Tierney said. "He's used to dealing with horses every day. I'm sure he knows what he is doing."

"Sir," the stable master protested, "he's just an American. How could he possibly know—?"

"He's Irish, actually," Tierney replied. "He was born right here."

The stable master's brow flickered with unease. "Irish?"

"He's married to my daughter, Burrell."

That shut the man up.

John ignored him and walked with Lachlan around the large stall. He didn't know that much about horses. He was a sheriff. He'd let the others take care of this situation and stand back in case they needed him.

Lachlan dropped down into the straw next to his father and started running his hands over the mare's extended belly. He grimaced once he was done. "She's definitely breech, Da, but there's something..." When he pressed lightly on one section of the mare's belly, she let out a high whiney. "Something is not right."

“Call Adam, Lachlan,” Da directed. “I want his opinion on this.”

“Hey, now,” the stable master started. “You can’t come in here and—”

“John, Yancy, please escort the stable master out of the stall. This poor girl doesn’t need his belligerent attitude. She’s under enough stress.”

John barely held in his smirk as he walked toward the stable master. Yancy closed in on him from the other direction, and he didn’t hide his smirk.

“Come on, let’s go,” Yancy said.

“I’m not leaving!” the man snapped. “This is my stable, and you can’t—”

“It’s actually my stable.” Tierney crossed his arms and gave a stern look to the stable manager. “And you can go. We’ll talk about this later.”

“But, sir!”

Tierney raised one of his bushy white eyebrows. The stable manager’s shoulders slumped, and he walked out of the stable without John or Yancy even having to do anything.

Lachlan got on the phone with Adam and put it on speaker. “Hey, Adam, sorry about the time difference, but we have a problem with a pregnant mare, and we could use your expertise here.”

“No worries, man,” Adam replied. “I’m on my lunch break. So, what’s up with this mare?”

“She’s a breech birth, Adam,” Da said, “but there’s something not right here.”

“How so?”

“If I had to guess, I’d say the baby’s leg is bent inside, preventing it from moving into the birth canal.”

“Can you put me on video and show me?”

“Yeah, hold on just a moment,” Lachlan said. He grabbed the phone and switched to a video call.

“Okay,” Adam said. “Show me what you got.”

Lachlan slowly moved the phone over the horse, pausing at one section low on the mare's belly. "This is what I am worried about, Adam. There's a hard spot here about the size of a horse's hoof, and it hasn't moved since I've been here."

"Is the foal moving at all?"

"Some," Lachlan replied, "but the movements are growing less."

"Check her nose, Da. Is there any discharge?"

Da leaned over the horse for a moment. "Nothing too bad. She's panting pretty heavily, though."

"Is she bleeding?"

John grimaced and glanced away when Da lifted the horse's tail. Some things were just gross.

"There's a little discharge, Adam," Da replied.

"A normal amount for a birth?"

"A little more I'd say."

"Show me."

Lachlan leaned over and pointed the camera at the horse's nether region.

"You got any of your boys there besides Lachlan?" Adam asked in an urgent voice.

Da nodded. "I do."

"You're going to need a couple of them to hold her down because she's not going to like what you need to do."

Da's shoulders slumped. "You need me to turn the baby?"

"It's a little harder than that. I suspect that the hoof is caught on the uterine wall. You're going to need to reach in and move it before the foal can come out. If you don't, it's going to rip right through the uterus and they can both die."

"What about a Cesarean, Adam?" Lachlan asked.

"Is there a vet close by that can perform one?"

John glanced at Tierney just in time to see him shake his head.

“We have a local vet on retainer. I called him after seeing the condition of the mare, but he’s currently at a farm on the other side of the county delivering a foal over there.”

“Okay, then I’d say a Cesarean is our last resort,” Adam said. “I’m not comfortable with someone without the proper training doing this unless it’s a last resort. It’s not an easy procedure to perform, especially for someone not trained to do it.”

“So, we try the other procedure then?” Da asked.

“Yes. You’re going to need a few things. Do you have something to take notes? You need to move quickly. Time is of the essence here. If that hoof rips through her uterine walls, she’ll bleed out.”

Lachlan glanced at Asa. “Can you make a list on your phone?”

Asa nodded and pulled out his phone. “Go for it, Adam.”

Adam started rattling off a bunch of stuff. Some of the items John recognized. Other items sounded foreign to him. It didn’t matter what they were, though. If Adam said they needed them to save this mare, John would scour the entire countryside for them.

“We have all of that here,” Tierney said. “If one of you boys want to come with me, we can gather it all up.”

John and Asa stepped forward. “We’ll help.”

Tierney nodded before starting for the stall gate. “Come with me. Most of it is in the tack room.”

John and Asa followed him down the wide corridor to a room at the end. Tierney opened the door and stepped inside, turning on the light. He waved to the shelves and cabinets on the walls. “Get whatever you’ll need.”

Asa read off the stuff on the list Adam had given them and John hurried around the room to gather what they needed. By the time he was done, he had an entire bucket of items to carry back to the stall plus a pile of blankets.

“I think this is everything.”

John hoped it was everything. That mare and her foal were depending on it.

* * * *

Yancy

Yancy knew he'd be asked to hold the mare down when the time came. He was one of the biggest men in the family after all. He took off his phone and placed it on a shelf so nothing would happen to it.

"Adam, it's Yancy. Can you tell me what I need to do?"

"She's going to be in a lot of pain, Yancy," Adam said. "She's going to fight you, and nothing is stronger than a woman in labor, be it horse or human. If you're not careful, she'll rip you apart. You have to hold her down so Da can do what needs to be done, but you have to make sure you don't hurt her."

Right.

"Avoid her teeth if you can. Mothers in labor have been known to bite."

Oh, Yancy was very aware of that fact. He might be a deputy in Cade Creek, but he had worked on the ranch enough times to have been bitten a time or two. Everyone was required to pitch in here and there.

"Lachlan, Quaid, I think we'd be the best ones to hold her down."

Both men nodded.

"Lachlan," Da said, "I'll need you to help me."

"I can help you, Da," Rourke said. "Just tell me what you need me to do."

"No, help Yancy and Quaid hold the mare down. Lachlan has helped with more breech births than you. He has more experience with this type of thing."

"Okay, Da."

Yancy wasn't surprised by that reply. No one argued with Da. Besides, Da seemed to instinctively know who was the

best candidate to do what. He had a lot more years of experience on the rest of them.

Yancy moved around the mare and dropped down to his knees. He whispered softly to her as he stroked his hand over her sweat-dampened coat. He didn't like the shiver that rippled under his hand.

“Da, I think she's going into shock.” Really, he had no idea what was happening, but it didn't feel right. “You'd better hurry up.”

Things moved quickly after that. John and Asa had come back with Tierney and everything that Adam had said they would need. Between Da and Lachlan, they got everything all set up.

Yancy held the mare down as best as he could without hurting her. He grimaced and glanced away when Da slathered his arm with some sort of lube all the way up to his armpit and started pushing his hand up into the mare.

It was so gross.

This was why he was a deputy and not a rancher.

Yancy tightened the hold he had on the horse when she started to struggle. He could see Rourke's and Quaid's muscles straining as they helped hold her down. The horse screamed and it was a sound Yancy never wanted to hear again. It damn near rattled his teeth.

“Careful, son,” Da warned. “Grab the hooves and gently pull.”

Yancy turned back just in time to see a gush of liquid, and then the foal slid out of her mother. Lachlan quickly started wiping the foal down and made sure she was breathing while Da took care of the mare. It seemed as if everyone was holding their breath as they waited to see if the two would live.

“How's her breathing, Da?” Adam asked.

“She's still panting pretty heavily,” Yancy said, “but it's slowing down.”

“Keep a close eye on her. We don't want her going into shock.”

“Will do,” Yancy said. He wasn't exactly sure what he was supposed to be watching for, but he assumed Da and Lachlan

would.

When the mare suddenly lifted up her head, Da said, “Let her go, son. She wants her baby.”

Yancy scooted back and then stood, Asa and Quaid joining him. Da and Lachlan stood back as well. The foal wasn’t standing, but she was lifting her head and the mother was gently licking her clean.

“Well,” Yancy said, “would you look at that.”

Guess miracles did happen.

Chapter Seven

Brennan

Brennan pulled back the edge of the curtain and looked toward the stable. He could see lights shining from inside, but no movement. “I hope everything is okay.”

“It’ll be fine, Brennan,” Grandmother said. “Come sit back down and eat your dinner.”

Brennan sighed. He knew better than to disrespect his grandmother at the dining room table. She wouldn’t berate him or anything, but the disapproval in her eyes was enough to make him wish he could jump off a cliff.

“Yes, Grandmother.” Brennan turned away from the window and walked over to sit down in his seat again. He didn’t have the heart to do anything more, so he just fiddled with his fork, scooting the food around on his plate.

“Is something wrong with your beef, Brennan?” Ava asked.

“Oh, no, Grandmother.” Brennan shot the woman a small smile. “I’m just not very hungry.”

Ava’s lips thinned, but she didn’t say anything.

Brennan dropped his head but glanced at Ma as he did so. She gave him an encouraging nod, which made him feel a lot better. It amazed him how much Ma and Grandmother were alike and how different they were at the same time.

They were both strict, but they both had hearts of gold. Brennan just wished others could see that. The quiet looks the others were shooting Grandmother told Brennan they didn’t know quite how to take her. He wished he could figure out a way to bridge the gap between them. It was clear that they wanted the closeness, but they didn’t know how to go about it.

“Grandmother, did you know Ma and Billy are growing tomatoes? They actually grow several different kinds and then can them or sell them at the farmer’s market.”

“Oh?” Ava glanced at Ma with interest. “Beef steak tomatoes or...”

Brennan smiled when they started talking. When Ma picked up her plate and moved closer to her mother, Billy did too. Within a few minutes the trio were deep in a conversation about tomatoes and other vegetables. And then they started discussing canning.

Brennan really had no idea about any of that, but he was glad they were getting along. When he glanced at the others sitting around the table, they were all smiling. He hoped everyone could find more common ground and they could become friends.

His grandmother and grandfather had been his only saving grace when he was growing up. He spent more time with them than he had spent with his father. That was something he would always be grateful for.

In his adult life, Ma and Da had been his saving grace. They had welcomed him into their lives and their family despite what the man who was supposed to be his father had tried to do to Ma. Brennan desperately wanted the important people in his life to get along with each other.

“That’s an interesting necklace you have there, Brennan.”

Brennan smiled as he fingered the necklace that hung around his throat. “It was a present from Kapheri when I opened the coffee cafe.”

“Is that an Egyptian symbol?”

“Yes, it is. It’s the eye of Ra, the ancient symbol of love.”

“It’s very nice.”

Brennan treasured it.

He glanced up when a door slammed open and someone came storming into the dining room. He didn’t recognize the man, but he recognized the anger reddening his face. He’d seen it many times on the face of the man that had pretended to be his father for so many years. He was so glad Daley was out of his life now. He was bad news. This guy didn’t look much better.

Brennan ducked his head so he wouldn’t gain the man’s attention. He had learned early on in life that the smallest

target meant less anger aimed at him.

“Mrs. Keegan,” the man barked out in an angry tone, “I really must insist that you remove those men from the stables at once.”

Brennan’s grandmother’s head snapped up. “Excuse me?”

“Those American upstarts have no business in my stable. God knows what they are doing to Princess’ Pride. They could damage her permanently. They have no idea what they are doing. It has to stop. You must make them leave.”

Ava carefully wiped her mouth and then tossed her napkin down on the table before scooting her chair back and standing. Brennan expected her to say something to the man, but she just walked past him to the phone on the sideboard.

“Jenkins, Mr. Burrell was just leaving. Please see him off the estate grounds. He is not to return. He is no longer in my employ.”

She hung up the phone and then walked back to sit down in her chair as if nothing had happened. Her smile was a bit strained when she looked down the table at everyone. “Would anyone like dessert?”

Brennan smiled brightly. “I’d love dessert, Grandmother.”

“Mrs. Keegan!”

Brennan jumped at the shouted words. He glanced at the others at the table and saw the same shock on their faces he was feeling. Billy was cringing, his face drained of color. It looked as if he was going to crawl right out of his skin.

Brennan tucked in his lips to keep from laughing when Brody stood up. The man was built like a Mack truck and looked like a bad ass biker. No one looking at him would know he was actually a minister unless they knew him.

“Is there a problem?” he asked in his rich baritone voice.

Elijah and Seamus stood as well. Not to be left out, Brennan stood. He smiled when Matty stood, then Neason, and lastly Billy. Ruben remained seated, but he had baby Alani in his arms, so that made sense.

“Ma always said no fighting in the house. I doubt there is much difference in how one should behave in Grandma’s

house than Ma's," Brody stated. "So, if there's a problem, we should probably take it outside."

He was so calm he could have been discussing the weather.

"Are you going to let these heathens threaten me this way?" the man snapped as he glared at Ava. "They are uncivilized barbarians, every one of them. If you're not careful, they'll be scratching their balls and belching before dinner is over."

Ava smiled, but it was tight. "Benjamin, isn't it?"

"Yes, ma'am," Brody replied. "Benjamin Brody, but everyone calls me Brody."

"Brody, can you please escort Mr. Burrell to the door?"

"Yes, ma'am."

When Brody started walking around the table, the stable master backed up, alarm registering on his face. "Stay away from me, you bloody barbarian. Touch me and I'll have you arrested."

"Ma doesn't like swearing," Brody said, and then he completely ignored the man's demands and grabbed him by the back of the collar and frog-walked him out of the dining room.

The level of tension dropped in the room immediately.

"I apologize," Ava said. "Mr. Burrell is new to our employ. I was unaware of his disruptive demeanor. If I had known, he never would have been hired."

"His behavior is not your fault, Grandmother," Brennan said. "Ma says we're all responsible for our own behavior. We can't control what other people do."

Ava's eyes darted to Ma, who just smiled back at her. "Those are very wise words," she said when she looked back at Brennan. "My daughter is a very wise woman."

She was.

Brody walked back in, nodding to Ava. "Mr. Burrell has been escorted out, ma'am."

"Thank you, Brody." Ava smiled what looked like a real smile as she looked out at everyone. "Now, shall we have dessert?"

Brennan was still standing so he gave his grandmother a quick bow of his head. "I'm going to go see if the others are done yet, Grandmother."

Ava nodded. "Be quick, Brennan. Dessert waits for no man."

Oh, he was aware.

Brennan could hear conversation pick up as he walked out of the dining room. It sounded quite normal. No yelling. No shouting. Just people sitting and talking about everyday stuff. It was nice to hear.

The night air was a bit brisk so Brennan pulled up the edges of his collar. He slid his hands into the pockets of his slacks and started walking toward the lights off in the distance. There was a little pep in his step with the knowledge that he would soon set eyes on the love of his life.

The last few years with Kapheri had been a dream come true, and one Brennan never thought he'd have. Going to visit Ma and Da at their ranch, even if he had hated it in the beginning, had turned out to be the best thing that ever could have happened to him.

He now had the love of his life, his own coffee cafe, and lived in a town where everyone accepted him just the way he was. If things patched up with Ma and her parents, things would be as close to perfect as they could be.

Brennan couldn't wait.

He turned when he heard a noise behind him. Just as the figure of a man formed in the shadows...lights out!

* * * *

Kapheri

Kapheri smiled as he looked down at the newborn foal. Even just minutes old, he could tell that she was going to be a strong one. "This one is a fighter."

"Princess' Pride always was," Tierney said. "If she's anything like her mother, she'll be well worth any money I

spent on her.”

“Breeding fees that high?” Kapheri asked.

“It is when you want to breed with Soaring Prince.”

Kapheri lifted an eyebrow. “Does he have a good breeding line?”

“One of the best,” Tierney replied. “He belongs to one of my neighbors. He’s won best in show three years running.”

Kapheri knew more about camels than he did horses, although now he knew more than he had before he moved to Cade Creek. Being related to the Blaeacleahs, he kind of had to. They raised horses and cows.

“We should probably get back to the house,” Da said. “Ma is going to start to worry.”

She would.

“I’d like to stay, Da,” Lachlan said. “I want to keep an eye on this little girl.”

Da gave a nod. “Call me if there are any issues.”

Kapheri followed Da and Tierney and the others out of the stall and down the wide corridor to the large doors at the end. It was dark outside, but that wasn’t surprising considering what time it was. There was also a nip in the air, making Kapheri glad he had worn a thick cable-knit sweater.

“I thought it was supposed to be summertime,” Rourke said. “Why is it so cold here?”

Tierney chuckled. “This *is* summer.”

Kapheri shook his head. “You should spend some time in Egypt, and then you’d really see a summer.”

“I’d melt.” Tierney wiggled his bushy eyebrows. “We Irish need the brisk fresh clean air to get us going in the morning.”

Kapheri had gotten used to the different seasons in Cade Creek. It was much different from Egypt. But this, cold in the middle of summer, just wasn’t his cup of tea. He preferred cold in the winter and warmth in the summer, not cold all year long.

Made him wonder what wintertime was like in Ireland.

It was pretty, though. While there was beauty in the rolling sand dunes and ancient buildings in Egypt, there was also beauty in the lush greenery and stone buildings in Ireland. Two vastly different countries, but both beautiful.

Still, Kapheri could never live here fulltime.

Kapheri slid his hands into the pockets of his pressed slacks and glanced down at the ground. The moon was up, and there were lights coming from the house off in the distance, but it helped to watch where he was going.

A flash of something on the ground caught his attention. Kapheri stopped and bent down to pick it up. Once he held it up, he realized that he was holding the gold necklace he had given Brennan.

A cold chill ran down his back, but it was colder than anything he had felt since coming to Ireland. This one wrapped around his spine and made his gut knot with fear.

“This is Brennan’s necklace.”

“He probably dropped it,” Quaid said.

“Then where is he?” Kapheri glanced back toward the stables. “If he had been coming to the stables, we would have run into him.”

Quaid frowned. “You go check the house. We’ll check the stable.”

Kapheri didn’t even bother nodding. He just took off toward the house. He felt a little weird about going into someone else’s house without them there, but not enough to stop. Finding Brennan was more important.

He barreled in through the door they had taken when they left to go to the stables, John and Yancy right on his heels. He hated running indoors. His mother always frowned upon it and gave him a disappointed look whenever he did it, but these were special circumstances.

As soon as he reached the dining room, he quickly scanned it. Brennan was nowhere in sight. “Where’s Brennan?”

“He went to see if you all wanted to join us for dessert,” Ma said before frowning. “What’s wrong?”

Kapheri held up Brennan’s necklace. “I found this outside.”

Ma instantly pushed away from the table and stood. “Kapheri, Brennan left here over ten minutes ago. He was headed right for the stables to get all you boys.”

Damn it!

Kapheri twirled around and raced back toward the door. He had to find Brennan. He was more important to Kapheri than breathing. Kapheri had rearranged his entire life to be with Brennan, and he refused to live one second without him.

Da, Quaid, and Rourke were hurrying back toward the house when Kapheri got outside.

“He’s not inside,” Kapheri said. “Ma said he was headed out to the stable to get us.”

“He’s not in the stable,” Da said. “He has to be around here somewhere.”

Kapheri swallowed tightly. “We have to find him.”

Da rested a hand on Kapheri’s shoulder. “We’ll find him, son.”

“Da...” If anything happened to Brennan, he’d burn this country to the ground.

“I know, but you need to stay calm for Brennan. He needs you right now.”

Kapheri nodded, even though he felt like he was going to shatter.

Da turned to John and Yancy. “How do we do this?”

They would know.

Chapter Eight

John

“Do you have flashlights and more men that can search the property?” John asked Tierney. “If we pair up each of us with someone that knows the layout of your estate, we can cover more territory.”

Tierney nodded. “I can have everyone together in about ten minutes.”

“Have everyone meet here,” John directed. “We’re going to search this area and see if we can find any signs of where he went.”

Tierney and Da took off.

“I need you guys to search the area here, and someone needs to let Lachlan know what is going on. I’m going to head inside and let the others know Brennan is missing.”

“I was just in there,” Kapheri said. “They know he’s missing.”

“Yes, but I want them to stay together and back each other up. If there’s someone out here kidnapping people, I don’t want to leave them undefended, and they won’t know there’s an issue unless we tell them.”

Kapheri didn’t look convinced.

“Go with Yancy and help him look for Brennan.”

Kapheri nodded and moved off with Yancy. John quickly sent the others out in a large search pattern before heading for the house. As soon as he stepped inside, he could hear people talking. He followed the sound to a living room.

“John,” Seamus said as he hopped up and hurried over to him.

John hugged him tight before turning to the others, keeping one arm wrapped around his husband. “Brennan is missing,

and we're starting a search for him. I need everyone to stay together. We don't know if this is an isolated incident or not." John met Brody's eyes across the room. "Until we know, you all need to stay safe and stay together."

Brody nodded.

"Mrs. Keegan, do you have any weapons?"

The older woman's eyebrows lifted. "Weapons?"

"Guns?"

She grimaced. "Well, we have some hunting rifles, but..."

"Those will do fine. Can you get them and distribute them to Brody and Elijah?" Matty and Ruben had kids to deal with, Neason couldn't hit the broad side of a barn, Seamus and Billy didn't like guns, and Ma would rather use her frying pan to take someone out.

"We got this, John," Brody said. "Go find Brennan."

John nodded to the man and then turned to press a kiss to Seamus' forehead. "We'll be back soon. Don't go anywhere alone, not even to the bathroom."

"I won't," Seamus promised.

John hated leaving him, but this wasn't the ranch. This wasn't even the same country. Until he knew exactly what they were dealing with, he wouldn't trust anyone except those he came with.

He hurried back outside just as Da and Tierney came up with several other men holding flashlights. Da quickly distributed them to those standing around while Tierney explained how they were going to break up into teams to search for Brennan.

"I'm Cal," a rather short, sturdy man said, holding out his hand.

John quickly shook his head. "John Riley."

"I'm a little confused as to what is going on here," Cal said. "Do you know?"

"Brennan, Tierney's grandson, disappeared. It looks as if he might have been taken by someone. We're going to try and find him."

“Little Brennan?”

Granted, Brennan wasn't that tall, but John hadn't ever really thought of him as little. His personality was huge.

“Yes,” he said.

“Any idea who might have taken him?”

“Not a clue.” But John was determined to find out. No one messed with his family, and despite what had happened with Daley and that mess, Brennan was still a member of that family. “You know this area better than I do. Have there been any problems around here lately? Anyone people tend to steer clear of?”

Cal reached up and scratched the side of his bushy auburn beard. “There's always people that don't get along none on a spread like this, but no one that sticks out to me.”

John cocked his head for a moment. “You're not from around here, are you?”

“I am, actually.” Cal chuckled. “I was born just down the road a spell, but I was raised in Texas. Parents moved there for work when I was still in diapers. Came back here to live with my grandparents a few years back.”

That would explain it.

“You have a little of an accent, but I can't tell if it's Irish or southern, and that kind of threw me.”

Cal chuckled again. “A little of both, I expect.”

“We're from Cade Creek.”

“Never heard of it.”

“I'm not surprised. It's not that big of a place.”

“Can't be any worse than growing up in the small town in Texas where we lived. We didn't even have a traffic light. Just a post office, diner, small market, and a four-room school that taught elementary through middle school. High school students got bussed two towns over.”

“Cade Creek is a little bigger than that, but not by much. It's set in a valley about two hours from the city, but you have to go over a mountain pass to get to it. We have a lot of the amenities the big city does like a hospital, hotel, restaurants, and such, but we're definitely small town.”

“That actually sounds kind of nice.”

“If you ever want to get off the Emerald Isle, you should come visit.”

Cal grinned. “Yeah?”

Uh-oh.

John winced when he got a good look at that overly friendly smile. “One, that accent will drive a lot of people there crazy. Two, if you’re not gay-friendly, don’t come. And three—”

“I’m gay.”

That was what John had thought.

“And three”—John held up the hand with his wedding ring on it—“I’m married.”

Very married.

Cal’s shoulders slumped. “Really?”

John pointed to Yancy. “See that tall handsome man over there with the black hair?”

Cal nodded. “He is rather handsome.”

“He is my husband.” Wait, that didn’t sound right. “He’s one of my husbands.”

“He’s...one of your husbands?”

“I’m married to both Yancy and Seamus.”

“How does that work?”

John chuckled because he got that a lot. “Very carefully.”

Cal squinted as he glanced back to Yancy. “And that’s accepted in that small town of yours?”

“I’d say a good sixty percent of the people that live there are in same-sex relationships, so, yes, it’s accepted there.”

“And you don’t get roused by the authorities or anything?”

John pulled his badge out of his pocket and showed it Cal. “I am the authorities.”

Cal’s eyebrows shot up to his hairline. “You’re a cop?”

“Sheriff.” Kind of the same thing. “Yancy is one of my deputies.”

“Wow.”

“We also have a couple of gay DEA agents and an FBI office just opened up, and both those agents are gay as well. Being gay in Cade Creek is almost a plus.”

“We don’t get a lot of that around here.” Cal kicked at the small pebbles on the ground with the tip of his boot. “I mean a lot of people don’t seem to care one way or the other, but there are some that seem to go out of their way to cause trouble for anyone they think doesn’t fit the norm. Most guys like me have to hide it so we don’t get hassled.”

“Yeah, you need to come to Cade Creek.” John slapped Cal on the shoulder. “We don’t allow that there.”

“I’ll certainly consider it.” Cal smiled. “Now, let’s see if we can find Brennan.”

John nodded even though he had been looking for Brennan the entire time they had been talking. What concerned him was that he wasn’t seeing anything out of place. There were no displacements in the gravel, no crushed grass or bushes, nothing. It was like Brennan had disappeared right out of thin air.

“If someone was going to take Brennan, where would they hide him?”

“How would I know?” Cal asked. “I don’t kidnap people.”

“No, but you’d know where someone could hide someone.”

“Oh.” Cal frowned. “There are a few places I can think of off the top of my head. There are a couple of vacant cottages near the back of the property. That would be the first place I’d look.”

John’s heart beat a little faster. “Can you show me?”

“Yeah, sure.” Cal started leading the way down the gravel road past the mansion and the stables. It grew darker with each step they took.

John was very glad to have a flashlight.

“What’s that building over there?” John pointed to a two-story stone-looking building off in the distance.

“That’s the old stables,” Cal replied. “They haven’t been used since around the time of the Second World War. No one goes in there anymore. Mr. Keegan had the new stables built not too soon after his daughter left for America.”

“We should check in there, too.”

“That place doesn’t even have a roof,” Cal said. “Why hide someone in there?”

“If someone wanted Brennan out of the way, hiding him someplace where no one goes would be the smart move.”

John had been at this game long enough to get some clue how criminals thought, and anyone that would kidnap someone else was clearly a criminal.

They walked to the back of the property to check out the cottages first. While they were deserted, they weren’t in horrible condition, which made John wonder. “Why is no one using these cottages?”

Cal shrugged. “You’d have to ask Mr. Tierney about that.”

“How long has it been since someone occupied them?”

Cal’s brow furrowed. “A couple of years at least. The old stable master and his family lived in the bigger one. When he passed away, no one moved in.”

“Where’s the new stable master live?”

John had not been impressed with that man.

“Mr. Burrell has a house down the way a few miles.”

“He doesn’t live here on the estate?” John asked.

“Naw, he was offered one of the cottages, but he lives in a fancy house on the edge of town. Living in cottages is too plebian for him.”

John’s eyebrows lifted. “Plebian?”

That wasn’t a word he heard very often.

Cal snorted. “The man’s a piece of cow shit. He’s got no business being around livestock of any kind. How he came to work here I’ll never know. He don’t know shit about horses.”

“I don’t know Mr. Tierney very well, but I’d think Burrell had to have some kind of experience and training to get the

position. Tierney doesn't strike me as the kind of man to employ fools or idiots."

"Yeah, I thought that too, but..." Cal shook his head. "He's getting up there in years, and I have to wonder if he knows everything that's going on around here."

"What do you mean?"

"It's nothing I can really put my finger on, and this is my opinion only. You understand that, right?"

John nodded.

"I've been here for a few years now. Most of the people that work on the estate have been here even longer than me. Hell, Jenkins has been here for decades. But lately there have been a few new people coming and going around here, people that don't seem to really know what they are doing. It just seems a little odd to me."

Cal shrugged before letting out a little laugh. "What do I know, right? I'm just a ranch hand from Texas. What might be normal there might not be normal here."

John was pretty sure Cal was on to something. He just didn't know what that something was. "I live on a ranch," he said. "I think they're pretty much the same no matter where you go."

"You'd think that, wouldn't you, but some of the new hands on the place have no business working around horses. If you work in a horse stable, you should at least know you mount one on the left side. That's simple horse training. And you don't walk directly behind them. Again, simple training. You brush a horse down after riding them every damn time. You don't overfeed a horse anything, especially sugar cubes. You don't put two ungelded stallions in the same pen unless you want trouble."

John was getting the picture, and it wasn't pretty. He might not work the ranch full time, but even he knew all of that. Like Cal said, it was simple training, especially for someone that worked with horses.

"Can you give me a list of these people?" he asked.

Cal blinked at him. "Yeah, I suppose so. I don't know more than a first name for a couple of them, though. They don't tend to socialize with a lot of us."

That was another clue to John that something was wrong. In his experience, people that worked closely together on a place like this tended to socialize together even if it was just hanging out after work for a drink.

“How many of the employees live on the estate?”

“Uh...all of the house staff lives on-site, and I guess maybe fifty percent of the stable hands. The part-time employees tend to live off-site.” Cal pointed to a row of trees on the far side of the cottages. “There’s a bunch of cottages past those trees where the full-time staff lives. Why?”

John wasn’t ready to share just yet, so he shook his head. “Just trying to gather clues.”

There were a lot of them, and none of them made sense.

Chapter Nine

Asa

Asa hurried into the stable and down the wide corridor to the stall where Lachlan was babysitting the new mother and her foal. He knew he needed to get out and search for Brennan, and he would, but he wanted to check in with Lachlan first.

He couldn't believe Brennan was missing. His heart totally went out to Kapheri. He'd be devastated if anything happened to Lachlan, which was another reason he wanted to set eyes on the man. He needed to reassure himself that his love was safe.

"Lachlan?" he called out as he got closer to the stall.

"Yeah?" Lachlan appeared in the doorway. "What's up?"

Asa blew out a breath before speaking. "Brennan is missing."

Lachlan frowned. "Did he get lost?"

"No, we think he was taken. Kapheri found his necklace in the driveway. It looks like he was on his way out to us, but he never made it. John and Da are organizing a search with some of Mr. Keegan's men."

Lachlan glanced back into the stall.

"No, it's fine." Asa knew Lachlan was still worried about the mare. "You stay with her. We have enough people searching. I just wanted to let you know what was going on."

And to see for himself that Lachlan was okay.

"Keep your phone handy," Asa said. "If you hear anything, let one of us know."

"Yeah, you, too."

Asa stepped closer and then brought his hand up to brush along the side of Lachlan's face. "Don't go missing, yeah?"

Lachlan smiled as he covered Asa's hand, pressing it against his skin. "You know me, babe. I'm too ornery to go missing."

Asa certainly hoped so.

Lachlan leaned and pressed their lips together. It wasn't a kiss of passion. Asa knew the difference. This one was more of a "be safe and take care of yourself" type of kiss.

It broke Asa's heart that they even had to consider that one of them wouldn't be safe. It was like being involved with Billy's idiot brother all over again, or any of the other idiots they had dealt with over the years.

"I'll be back."

Lachlan's smile wobbled. "I'll be waiting for you."

Asa knew Lachlan wanted to go with him and protect his back, but he also wanted to keep watch over the new mother and her baby. He took a lot of pride in the care he gave the animals back on the ranch. Asa saw no reason he wouldn't do the same thing here, even if it wasn't his animal.

Asa forced himself to turn away and walk back down the corridor toward the exit. He knew if he continued to stand there, he wouldn't leave. The quicker they found Brennan, the quicker he could be back at Lachlan's side.

The small group of men was starting to pair up when he reached them. Asa walked over to Da. "I just let Lachlan know what was going on. He's going to stay with the mare. Who am I paired with?"

Da waved his hand to a couple guys standing there, one older looking and one younger. "Go introduce yourself and then start searching. Everyone is to meet back here in fifteen minutes. No exceptions. I don't want to lose anyone else."

"Yes, Da." Asa stepped over to the two men and held his hand out. "I'm Asa Blae Leah. Which one of you do I get?"

Only one of the men shook Asa's hand. The other one looked at him like a bug under glass that he wanted to smash.

"I'm Mike," the nicer of the two men said. "I work in the garden."

Asa smiled at the guy. "Great, since you know it, maybe we can search there."

“He stays here,” the older of the two men said.

“Uh...my understanding was that we were pairing up, one of you with one of us.”

The man crossed his arms and glared. “He stays here.”

“I’m just going to go search the garden with him, Pops,” Mike said. “Not run away with him.”

Asa held up his ring hand. “Married, and my husband would get mighty upset with me if I ran away with anyone, and he knows how to rope.”

It was not an idle threat.

“He stays here!”

Asa rolled his eyes. He didn’t have time for this shit. “Fine, then you come with me.”

The man’s upper lip curled back in a sneer as he looked Asa up and down. “I’m not going anywhere with the likes of you.”

Oh...Asa suddenly got it.

“Dude.” Asa snorted. “You ain’t got nothing I want.”

He turned and marched back over to where Da was talking to Tierney. “We’re going to have a problem with those two.”

“Oh?” Da lifted his head and glanced at them. “How so?”

“The younger one, Mike, seems easy-going enough, but the guy with him seems to think I want to run away with Mike, so he won’t allow him to go. He also didn’t seem too comfortable going off with me himself. I got the impression he thought I’d jump him the first chance I got, ‘cause I’m gay and all.”

Asa almost smiled when Da’s eyes narrowed. That stupid man should have kept his mouth shut.

“It’s not because you’re gay,” Tierney said. “It’s because you’re American.”

Okay, that was a new one.

“Does he know we’re just here to visit?” It wasn’t like they planned on staying. Their home was in the United States, not Ireland.

Tierney sighed. “Angus McCrery is—”

Da’s eyes narrowed. “Angus McCrery?”

“Yes, he’s worked for me for the last forty years or so. His grandson Mike started up with us a few years ago.” Tierney frowned. “Why?”

Asa’s eyebrows lifted at the grin that crossed Da’s face. He wasn’t sure he’d ever seen it before. It wasn’t evil necessarily, but Asa was really glad it wasn’t aimed at him.

“Angus and I started working in your stables about the same time,” Da said. “I remember him well.” When Da turned to look at the man in question, Asa actually felt sorry for him. He didn’t know what had happened, but there was clearly some heavy animosity between the two of them.

“Angus McCrery, you old goat,” Da called out as he stormed toward the man. “You messed with someone I cared about all those years ago. If you think I am going to let you do that again, you have another thing coming. I wiped the floor with you then, and I’m still spry enough to do it again.”

Wow, there was a story there.

Asa knew he was right when Angus paled.

“Donnell?” the man gasped. “What in the bloody hell are you doing in Ireland?”

“Alani wanted to come home and see her parents.”

Angus’s lips tightened. “Alani is here?”

“Yes, my wife of forty-five years is here with all our sons.” Da waved his arms around, gesturing to those remaining there. “Including Brennan, who is missing, so get your ass in gear and help search for him before I whoop it again just like I did all those years ago when you tried to kiss my wife.”

Asa’s jaw dropped.

Angus’s eyes narrowed. “I never understood why she wanted you so damn bad.”

“Because she loved me.”

The “duh” was implied.

Angus gave Da the same disgusted sneer he had given Asa. “I guess there is no accounting for taste.”

Asa stiffened at those words. He didn’t care about the history between Da and Angus, but the man had no right to insult either Da or Ma. When he stepped forward, he noticed

that several of the others did as well. Apparently, he wasn't the only one that had issues with this man.

"You've got no call to insult Da like that," Asa said. "Ma and Da love each other, and they have a life together other people dream about. You could only be so lucky."

"Who the hell are you to tell me—?"

Asa pointed to Da. "I'm his son." He pointed to a few of the others. "And so are him, and him, and him. There are fifteen Blae Leah boys here tonight, not to mention three grandchildren. Insult him and you insult every damn one of us."

This time, it was Angus standing there with a dropped jaw. "You have fifteen sons?"

"I do," Da said. "Alani and I have a very full life."

"But...you were just a penniless stable hand. How?"

Asa was shocked when Tierney started laughing.

"Because two people that truly love each other can build a world together."

Asa couldn't have said it better himself.

"And right now, one of those sons is missing," Da said. "So, get your ass in gear and help us find him."

Angus' head snapped back. "Brennan is not one of your sons."

"Brennan is very much my son," Da said. "He might not be related to me by blood, but he is no less my son than the ones Alani gave birth to."

"Daley told me he wasn't even a Keegan."

Da's fists clenched. "Daley is an ass."

Man, Asa was really glad Ma wasn't out here. She'd be breaking spoons over everyone and then trying to wash their mouths out with soap.

"You're using the words of a man that tried to kill my grandson," Tierney said. "Is that really the way you want to go?"

Angus's eyes rounded. "Daley tried to kill Brennan?"

“He shot him,” Da said.

Angus grunted. “What an idiot.”

“He was a colossal idiot.” Da snickered for a moment before growing serious once again. “Don’t make me put you in the same category.”

Angus grimaced before stating, “I don’t like you, Donnell. You’ve always known that. I never did. But my grandson and I will help search for Brennan. It’s the least I can do for Alani.”

Asa expected Da to get pissed over the comment Angus made about Ma. He was surprised when Da rolled his eyes. He was usually a lot more composed than this.

“I don’t care if you like me or not, Angus.”

“No, you never did.”

Da pointed a finger at Angus. “Stay away from my wife.”

There was the man Asa knew.

Da spun and stormed off.

Asa stared after him for a moment before glancing back at Angus and Mike. “So, the garden?”

Chapter Ten

Lachlan

Lachlan walked over to the stall door and glanced out into the corridor for a moment before going back to the wall he'd been leaning up against as he watched the mare and her new foal bond.

It was quite a sight to see and one of the reasons he always liked to be on hand when one of the horses on the ranch gave birth. There was nothing like watching the love blossom between a mother and child, even if they were horses.

After a few minutes of watching, he walked back over to the stall doorway. It didn't sit well with him that he was letting the others go out and search for Brennan without him, and not just because Asa was out there without him. Brennan was part of his family. He needed to be found.

Asa couldn't imagine what Kapheri must be going through right now. Lachlan would be devastated if anything happened to Asa. They'd been together too long for Lachlan to be without the handsome man.

Lachlan frowned and glanced down the other direction of the corridor when he heard a small rustling sound. There had to be other horses in the stable. Maybe it was one of them.

He almost dismissed the sound until he heard a very human-like snuffle.

That had not been a horse.

He stepped out of the stall and then slowly closed the door behind him. If there was something down there, he didn't want it getting to the mama and new baby.

Not having a flashlight on him, Lachlan pulled out his cell phone and used the flashlight app on it. It wouldn't light up nearly enough area to keep a lump from forming in his throat, but it was better than darkness.

It would be great if he knew where the light switch was located.

He peeked into the first stall he came to, moving his cell phone around in a wide circle. When he didn't see anything but hay, he moved on to the next stall. He repeated this process for all the stalls on the left side of the corridor before he reached the tack room.

He was a little more hesitant about checking this room, as it was fully enclosed, unlike the stalls which had slats on the top. Lachlan cautiously turned the handle to the tack room door and pushed it open. He felt ridiculous. He shouldn't be this anxious from just opening a damn door, but he was.

After sweeping his cell phone flashlight around the room, he felt even more ridiculous. There was nothing in this room that shouldn't be here. A few blankets, saddles, and reins, and that was about it.

Lachlan huffed at himself and pulled the door closed before turning to face the door directly opposite of the tack room. He wasn't quite sure what this room was, but as soon as he opened it, it became apparent. This was where they kept the horse feed. Just to be on the safe side, he checked behind a few of the crates and barrels.

Again, nothing.

Lachlan was feeling more ridiculous by the minute.

He stepped out of the feed room and closed the door behind him before moving on to the first stall on the right side of the corridor. He stepped into the doorway and flashed his cell phone around. Again, he didn't see anything out of place except a lot of hay.

He started to turn away when some of the hay in the corner moved. Lachlan stilled for a moment before raising his cell phone and pointing it directly at the small pile of hay in the corner. It wasn't a big pile but obviously big enough to hide something.

But what?

Lachlan's eyes narrowed when he heard another snuffle, followed quickly by someone making a shushing noise.

"Hello?" he called out quietly. "Is someone there?"

The hay rustled.

Lachlan took another step into the stall. Considering the amount of hay piled in the corner, it couldn't be a big someone, so Lachlan tried to gentle his voice when he said, "It's okay. You can come out now. You're safe."

The muffled sob he heard just about broke his heart.

Lachlan walked closer before going to his knees. "Come on, come out now."

The hay rustled again, and then a pair of emerald green eyes appeared.

Lachlan smiled. "Well, hello there. My name is Lachlan. What's yours?"

Another set of green eyes appeared.

There were two of them.

"I bet I sound a little funny, huh?" Lachlan asked when they didn't say anything. "Well, I was born in Ireland, but when I was a little bitty baby, my ma and da took me to America, and that's where I live now. I'm just here visiting my grandparents."

Still nothing.

"Do you have a ma and da?"

One of the heads shook no.

Damn.

Lachlan plopped down on his butt so he was closer to their level. "My ma and da are really nice. You want to meet them?"

That same head shook again.

Lachlan decided to go with a different tactic, even if it meant losing his light. He brought up his picture gallery and searched for a picture of his parents before holding it out to the two sets of frightened eyes. At this point, he wasn't even sure if they were male or female, but he was positive they were kids.

Scared kids.

"This is my ma and da." Lachlan flipped to the next picture, one of Asa standing on the front porch in a cowboy hat. "This is my husband, Asa. He's real pretty cowboy." He flipped to

the picture taken at their last Christmas celebration. “And this is the whole family.”

When one of those pairs of green eyes leaned closer to get a better look, a head of reddish curls appeared through the hay. If that wasn't a little girl, Lachlan would eat his hat. He guessed her to be about five years old based on how old his niece and nephews were.

“You gots a big family.”

“I do,” Lachlan said happily. “We all live on a big ranch out in the country with lots of cows and horses.”

The little head leaned closer. “You got horsies?”

“I do, several in fact.” Lachlan got another bright idea. “You like horses?”

Curls flopped around a pale face.

“You know, there's a mare just down the way that just had a brand-new baby foal. Want to see her?”

“Can't,” was whispered right before the head disappeared back into the hay.

Well, hell.

“I promise you can. I'll take you to meet them right now.”

“Bad man out there.”

Bad man?

Lachlan did not like the direction this conversation was going. “Can you tell me about the bad man?”

Another head shake.

Lachlan tried another tactic, which wasn't easy. He was quickly running out of them. “Are you hungry? My grandmother made beef Wellington for dinner.” Well, her cook had, but kind of the same thing. “I hear there is dessert.”

“I hungy.” The little face that appeared out of the hay this time was distinctly male. The cheeks were fuller and and he lacked the same rosy lips as the other one. They were the same bright emerald green eyes, so Lachlan was pretty sure they were related to the first pair of green eyes.

Lachlan held out his hand. He had already introduced himself, but... “My name is Lachlan Blaecleah. How do you

do?”

A chubby little hand reached through the hay and grabbed onto Lachlan, but instead of shaking it, the little boy used it to pull himself out of the hay.

“No, Robby,” someone cried out. “We can’t. The bad man will find us again.”

“I hungry, Hanny.”

A moment later, a little girl climbed out of the hay. She was a little older than the boy, but not by much.

Lachlan’s heart ached at the fear he could see on both their faces. “I promise to keep you safe from the bad man.” Just as soon as he figured out who that was. “Why don’t you come with me and we’ll get you something to eat?”

Lachlan held his arms out to the two kids. The little boy ran right into them. The little girl held out for about five seconds before she too ran into his arms. Both of them started crying, their sobs tearing at Lachlan’s soul. He didn’t know what had happened to them, but they had clearly been traumatized.

“Hey, hey, it’s okay. You’re safe now.” He wasn’t sure how he was going to make sure they were safe, but he wasn’t a Blae Leah for nothing.

Lachlan kept his arms firmly locked around the two kids as he used his cell phone to send a text message to Quaid to come out to the stable as soon as he could and to bring blankets. His brother had much more experience with frightened kids than he did.

He also sent a text message to Asa, asking him to come back to the stables as soon as he could. Frankly, he was out of his line of experience here. Asa was the gentler of the two of them, and right now, these kids needed gentle.

“My brother is going to bring us some blankets to help keep you two warm, and then we’ll all go get something to eat, okay?” He didn’t really expect an answer, so he was surprised when both kids nodded. “You want to go see the new baby horse?”

Again, they nodded.

It took a little bit of maneuvering, but Lachlan carefully climbed to his feet and then walked out of the stall. Quaid

walked into the stable just as he reached the stall with the new mama and baby. When his eyes widened at the sight of the two kids in his arms, Lachlan gestured for him to stay where he was. He didn't want to frighten them anymore than they already were.

“Hey, look, here she is.” Lachlan squatted down just inside the stall so the kids could stand on their own feet. Not wanting to spook either the mare or the kids, he kept his voice low. “Isn't she cute?”

“Can I pet her?” Hanny asked.

“Not for a couple of days,” Lachlan replied. “New mamas are very protective of their babies, so it's better to let her be until her baby is on her feet a little more. Maybe in a couple of days, huh?”

“What's her name?”

“The mama's name is Princess' Pride, but I don't think the baby has a name yet. She's a little young for that.”

“Babe?”

Lachlan picked the kids back up and stepped out of the stall. Asa was standing next to Quaid at the entrance to the stable. His eyes widened when he saw the kids in Lachlan's arms. Robby started shaking and buried his face in Lachlan's neck as soon as he saw the two men. Hanny whimpered.

“Hey, remember the picture I showed you of that pretty cowboy?” Lachlan asked as he slowly walked toward the entrance. “That's my husband, Asa, remember? And the other man is my brother Quaid. He has two little boys just about your age. Neither of these men will hurt you. I promise.”

“Whatcha got there, bro?” Quaid asked.

“This is Hanny and Robby.”

“Hannah,” the little girl whispered. “My name is Hannah, but Robby can't say it so he just calls me Hanny. Robby's name is Robert, but no one calls him that.”

Huh.

“Do you prefer Hannah or Hanny?”

She just shrugged.

“Well, I’ll just call you Hannah until you decide, okay?” There was no way in hell he could have kept the smile on his face when Hannah sniffled and buried her face in his neck. His eyes were stricken with sadness—and a bit of anger—when he glanced at Asa and Quaid. “This is Hannah and Robby. I found them hiding in a pile of hay in one of the stalls.”

Quaid handed Asa the blankets before stalking past Lachlan, stepping inside, and checking each stall as he went down the corridor. Luckily, he had a flashlight.

Lachlan gestured to the blankets. “You want to cover them up? I’m not sure how long they have been out here, but they have to be freezing.” What clothes they were wearing were shabby and threadbare.

Asa’s brow furrowed as he draped the blankets over each kid. “What happened?”

Lachlan shook his head. “I don’t know, but they are terrified of someone they call the bad man.”

“He mean,” Robby whispered, almost as if he thought if he spoke louder the bad man would hear him.

“He hurt Robby,” Hannah added.

Lachlan’s jaw clenched with rage. “He hurt Robby?”

Hannah nodded without lifting her head from the crook of Lachlan’s neck.

What kind of idiot hurt a kid? The little boy couldn’t be more than three or four years old. He should be laughing and playing and trying to sneak cookies. He shouldn’t be so afraid that he was shaking.

Lachlan fumed with rage as he met Asa’s eyes. “We won’t let the bad man hurt you anymore. We promise.”

He had no idea how they were going to keep that promise, but they would. And Lachlan knew it was “they” and not just him. Asa’s hazel eyes were almost black as they simmered with outrage.

“Hey, Robby? Can Asa hold you?” It was getting kind of hard to hold both kids. Lachlan’s arms were beginning to ache.

Robby shook his head but peeked over at Asa through the fall of his auburn bangs.

Lachlan leaned his head down closer to the small boy. "I'll let you in on a little secret. Asa gives really good hugs, and he's really strong, so he won't let anyone hurt you."

Being safe seemed to be really important to the two kids.

Robby stared at Asa so long Lachlan was about to give up trying to convince him to go to the other man, but then he reached out his arms.

Asa smiled as he took Robby and tucked him close. He started rubbing Robby's back as he murmured something to him that Lachlan couldn't quite hear. Whatever he said seemed to comfort Robby, as the little boy's body relaxed and his thumb went into his mouth.

When Asa looked up at Lachlan after wrapping the blanket around Robby, pure rage was alive and well in his eyes. Lachlan nodded, understanding his anger. He hadn't seen the bruises on the kids' arms until they were in the light of the stall where the mare and her foal were.

He was livid as well.

"Let's go into the house and see if we can scrounge up something to eat, okay?" Lachlan wanted the kids to know everything they were doing so there were no surprises.

Asa fell into step beside him, and they walked out of the stable and headed toward the house. When he spotted Da in the driveway talking to Tierney, he changed directions. He needed to apprise his father of his discovery and get someone to keep an eye on the mare and foal. He still didn't feel right about leaving them alone.

"Da," he called out when they were close enough.

Da's eyebrows lifted when he saw the two kids Lachlan and Asa carried. "Son?"

"This is Hannah and Robby," Lachlan explained. "They were hiding out from the bad man in one of the stalls."

"The...bad man?"

Lachlan nodded.

"And just who is the bad man?"

Lachlan shook his head. "I don't know."

And that worried him more than anything.

Chapter Eleven

Asa

Rage was a cold, dark pit in Asa's gut. He had no clue what was going on beyond the fact that Lachlan had found these two abused kids in one of the horse stalls. If he ever found out who put those bruises on the kids, he was going to feed them their head.

"We should get them inside."

Lachlan nodded before glancing at Tierney. "Can you get someone to go keep an eye on Princess' Pride and her foal? I think I'm going to be a little busy for a while."

"Yes, of course," Tierney replied. "But what...Where did you find these children? Did you say one of the stalls?" His bushy eyebrows drew together as he frowned, almost making a straight line across his forehead. "My stalls?"

"The one next to the feed room," Lachlan explained. "They were hiding under a pile of hay. Quaid is in there now searching all of the stalls to make sure there's no one else hiding in them."

Asa glanced down at the small body tucked into his chest. "Do you recognize them?"

"I can't say that I do," Tierney replied. "But there's an orphanage down the road a spell. The Sacred Heart Orphanage. They might be from there. I can call down there and ask if they are missing any children."

Asa stiffened when Robby jerked in his arms and let out a desperate whimper. "You might want to hold off on that for right now." At least until they got to the bottom of what had happened to Hannah and Robby.

"Why don't we take them inside and get them something to eat for right now?" Lachlan said. "We can figure out where they came from later."

“You know we have to report this, Lachlan,” Tierney said. “Their parents could be looking for them.”

Lachlan shook his head. “Hannah said they didn’t have parents.”

“Then they are most likely from the orphanage.”

“Let’s just hold off on calling anyone for now,” Asa said. “We need to get these little guys inside where it is warm and get some food in them, and we still need to find Brennan.”

Lachlan sucked in a breath as he turned to look at Asa. “You don’t think Brennan’s disappearance and these little guys showing up have anything to do with each other, do you?”

Asa didn’t know how, but he wasn’t willing to discount anything at this point. “I don’t know,” he admitted honestly. “I think it’s better to err of the side of caution at this point.”

“Let’s keep all information to family only for now,” Da said. “Once we know what we’re looking at, we can call in the authorities.”

Tierney huffed. “Donnell—”

“Tierney,” Da began, “we have two experienced police officers on this plus the rest of my sons. If they can’t find Brennan soon, we’ll call the authorities, but let us handle this for now. At least until we know what we’re looking at. We know what we’re doing.”

“This isn’t the first kidnapping we’ve dealt with,” Lachlan said. “Unfortunately.”

They just didn’t have the cavalry to call in this time.

Man, he wished they were back in Cade Creek.

Tierney’s eyebrows lifted, but they were still in one straight line. “You’ve dealt with a kidnapping before?”

Lachlan snorted. “A couple of times.”

Or three or four.

“We may live in a small town,” Asa added, “but it’s an interesting small town.”

“Lachlan,” Da said, “once you get the children settled, I want you to call Mike Ryan and Norton Beck. Ask them if there have been any kidnappings in this area or anything out of

the ordinary. I want to know if this is an isolated incident, and they have better access to that type of information than we do.”

“Who are these two men, and why would they have better access?” Tierney asked.

“Mike Ryan is a DEA agent and Norton Beck is FBI. They both have field offices in Cade Creek. If they don’t have the information or know who to call to get it, we have a few other people we can call.”

Tierney’s eyes were a little round as he asked, “You have a DEA and FBI field office in Cade Creek? I thought you told me that it was a small town?”

Da actually chuckled. “Oh, it is, but like I said, it’s an interesting small town.”

“Must be.”

Da gestured toward the house. “Go on, boys, take those little tykes on inside and get your ma to look them over. We need to continue our search for Brennan. I’m sure they could use some of her loving touch.”

“Don’t forget to have someone go watch over Princess’ Pride and her foal,” Lachlan said even as he turned and started for the house.

“Ma is going to bust something when she sees these guys,” Asa said.

Lachlan snorted again. “Oh, she’s going to bust something all right. Her spoon over someone’s head.”

He was probably right.

Alani Blae Leah had the biggest heart in the entire world. She was kind to everyone and believed in second chances for those that made mistakes, but she didn’t take to anyone abusing kids.

Asa followed Lachlan into the house and then down the hallway toward the dining room. Before they could reach it, they heard voices coming from the room across the entry from the dining room. Lachlan changed directions and headed that way.

“Ma,” he called out as soon as they reached the wide archway leading into what Asa assumed was the living room.

He'd seen a couple more that looked like this while wandering around the massive house so he couldn't be positive. "We need a little help."

Ma immediately stood and made her way toward them. "What have you got there, son?"

"This is Hannah and Robby," Lachlan said. "I found them hiding in one of the horse stalls in the stable. We think they might be from the orphanage that Tierney says is just down the road."

"Oh, the poor things."

"They need food, Ma," Asa said and then grimaced as he looked down. "And probably a bath and some warmer clothes."

"Of course." Ma turned and glanced across the room. "Matthew, can they borrow some of Aidan's and Niall's clothes?"

"Sure, Ma." Matty handed off Niall to Billy. "I'll go grab them something."

"Mother, can we get something for them to eat?" Ma asked.

Ava didn't say a word. She just reached over and pulled a cord hanging on the wall. A moment later, Jenkins appeared in the entryway.

"You rang, madam?"

That was so cool.

"Jenkins, I need cook to make some food for two little children, maybe something they can eat with their hands. They will also need some milk."

The butler didn't even bat an eye. He gave a curt nod, said, "Of course, madam," and then walked away.

"Hey," Lachlan said as he jiggled Hannah around a little bit. "Remember me telling you about my ma?"

Hannah nodded before turning her head just enough to see Ma. "She looks like a grandma."

Ma smiled. "I am a grandma. Would you like to meet my grandchildren?" Without waiting for a reply, Ma turned and gestured to Aidan and Niall. "Come here, boys."

Asa knew she would have called baby Alani to her too, except she was passed out cold on Ruben's chest.

Aidan and Niall didn't hesitate to hurry over to Ma's side.

Ma turned and sat down on the closest chair before drawing both of the boys to her. "These are two of my grandsons. Aidan and Niall." She pointed to the sleeping toddler. "That's my granddaughter, Alani."

Hannah started to wiggle to be let down. Lachlan squatted down until she could stand on her own two feet. Hannah stared at Ma for a moment before pushing away from Lachlan and moving over to stand right in front of Ma.

"You a grandma? A real grandma?"

Ma smiled again. "Yes, child, I really am."

Asa's eyebrows shot up when Hannah leaned in between Aidan and Niall and hugged Ma. He wasn't surprised necessarily. Ma seemed to have that effect on people. They were naturally drawn to her, especially kids.

He was a little surprised that the frightened child had gravitated toward her so quickly. They had pretty much refused to even acknowledge Da and Tierney or even Quaid.

Asa glanced down at the child in his arms to see if he wanted to go to Ma, too, but Robby's eyes were closed and he was sucking on his thumb. Asa was pretty sure he was asleep. He wasn't quite sure what to do with him.

"You said you found them hiding in the stables?" Ava asked.

Asa nodded. "Lachlan found them, ma'am."

Her lips pressed thin.

"Tierney said he thought they might come from the Sacred Heart Orphanage," he added. "Once they get all settled, they'll put in a call to them, but we want to put that off a little bit." He grimaced as he glanced back down at Robby. "They seem really scared of someone they keep referring to as the bad man."

Asa had no idea who that could be.

He glanced at Ma and then said in a low voice, "Da wants this kept in the family, Ma. He thinks it might have something

to do with Brennan's disappearance."

Ma sucked in a harsh breath as she raised her head to look at him. "Any news on Brennan?"

"Not yet." Asa hated admitting that, but he would never lie to Ma. "They're all there looking for him, though. I'm sure we'll find him."

He prayed they'd find him, and soon. Kapheri would burn this place to the ground if anything happened to Brennan. The man wasn't the most alpha out of all of them, but he'd be plenty pissed if Brennan was hurt. Of course, the rest of the Blae Leah clan would be standing right next to him holding the matches.

When Jenkins appeared in the doorway with a tray of food, Asa carried Robby over to the coffee table. He sat down on the floor and then settled Robby down on his lap. When Lachlan sat down across from him and did the same with Hannah, Asa chuckled.

Asa didn't know if it was because Lachlan had found them and rescued them, and then called him in, but they were both feeling a little over-protective. Asa was used to that in Lachlan, but not himself.

It was weird.

Asa gently shook Robby until the boy opened his eyes. "Are you hungry?" When Robby nodded, Asa glanced up at the butler and then nodded to the coffee table. "Go ahead and set it down. These guys need to eat."

Jenkins sent Ava a startled look. "Madam—"

"It's okay, Jenkins," she said. "I think we can make an exception in this case."

Asa had no idea what that meant, and he really didn't care. He was more invested in getting food into Robby and Hannah. Once Jenkins set the tray down, Asa grabbed a plate and started filling it with food and then set it in front of Robby. He did the same for Hannah.

He sat back with a satisfied smile when they both dove in. He was a little concerned with how fast they were eating though. How long had it been since they last had food?

“Hey, guys,” he said. “You should slow down a little. You don’t want to get a tummy ache.”

Two sets of bright green eyes peered up at him.

“It’s okay. There’s plenty to eat,” he hurried to reassure them. “No one is going to take it from you. Just slow down. I don’t want you getting sick.”

Hannah and Robby went back to eating but slowed down. Asa watched them for another moment before lifting his head to look at his husband. When he saw the clenched jaw, he knew Lachlan was thinking the same thing he was.

Someone had seriously abused these kids.

Asa wanted them dead.

Chapter Twelve

Quaid

Quaid searched every stall in the stable, including moving any piles of hay that he came across just to be sure no one else was hiding in the place. He didn't come across anyone, but he did find some bits of rope in one of the stalls.

It was probably nothing, this was a horse stable after all, but he couldn't shake the feeling that these little bits of rope were out of place. They were no longer than his arm, and that was what made it weird for him. A rope long enough to attach to a horse lead he could understand, but these little bits? They made no sense.

He grabbed them up and carried them out of the stable. He wanted to ask Tierney about them. Quaid had grown up on a ranch. He still worked it to this day with several of his brothers and his da. He knew what equipment was needed. He had no idea what small bits of rope were for, so it was better to ask.

He spotted Rourke standing with Tierney and Da when he walked out of the stable and headed for them. When he reached them, he held up the small bits of rope. "Grandfather, what are these for? I found them in one of the stalls."

Tierney frowned as he took one of the pieces and looked it over. "I have no idea."

Rourke took one and stretched it out, comparing it to the length of his arm. His lips started to turn down at the corners as he gathered it back up and ran his thumbs over the hard material. "These are for tying someone up."

Rourke would know. He was into that type of shit. Granted, Quaid had tied Matty to their headboard more than once, but he always used the handcuffs they kept in the nightstand. Rourke had an entire trunk full of sex toys, ropes included.

"How many pieces do you have?"

Quaid quickly counted them out. "Five."

“And you’re sure you got all of them?”

“Yeah, I think so.”

“Then we’re probably looking for five kids that somehow figured out how to escape their ropes.”

Quaid swallowed tightly as his gut grew cold. “Kids?”

“That would be my bet,” Rourke replied. “Either kids or very small adults.”

Neither was a good option.

“We should go see if those two kids Lachlan found have any rope marks,” Da said. “We also need to let John and Yancy know about this.”

“Quaid and I can go track them down if you want to see about the kids,” Rourke offered up. “I want to keep looking for Brennan. I don’t like the idea that there is someone out there possibly kidnapping kids when Brennan is missing.”

Quaid totally agreed with him.

“Keep your cell phones handy,” Da said. “If you come across anything else that seems out of place, call me. I don’t like how this is going.”

Quaid wasn’t thrilled either. This was supposed to be a simple visit to Ireland to meet their grandparents and so Ma could reconnect with them. It was turning into a clusterfuck of epic proportions.

After Da and Tierney started for the house, Quaid turned toward his brother. “Which way did John and Yancy go?”

“I’m not sure about Yancy, but I think John was headed toward the gardens.”

Quaid nodded. “So, where are the gardens?”

Rourke snorted. “Fuck if I know.”

Good thing Ma wasn’t here.

They started walking past the stables toward the back of the property. Quaid hadn’t really seen anything that would qualify as a garden at the front of the house. Just lots of manicured lawn, shrubs, and flowers. That didn’t make a garden.

Well, maybe it did in Ireland. What did he know?

“There’s a greenhouse over there.” Rourke pointed toward a wood-and-glass building off in the distance. “Maybe that’s the garden.”

Quaid had no idea, but it was as good a place to start as any. When they reached the glass-and-wood building, Quaid realized that it was a greenhouse, and while the outside was a little rough, the inside was fully functional and well organized. Someone had obviously put in a lot of work here.

He pointed to the far-right side of the greenhouse. “You search that side. I’ll search this side.”

Rourke nodded before heading to the right side of the greenhouse. Quaid searched around for a moment until he found a slight switch next to the door. He flipped it, and the entire room lit up, illuminating three rows of raised vegetable beds.

Rourke paused before looking up and down the aisles. “Do you see anything?”

Quaid shook his head.

Rourke grimaced before continuing down his aisle.

Quaid walked down the left side of the greenhouse, looking under the raised beds every few feet just to make sure no one was hiding anywhere. When he reached the end of the aisle, Rourke was there, shaking his head.

“Anything?”

“No.”

Well, damn.

Together, they headed back to the entrance, going down the middle aisle. Quaid was disappointed that they hadn’t found anything out of place other than a well-stocked vegetable garden. Not even Ma and Billy’s garden was this nice.

“So, where next?” he asked as he turned off the light.

Rourke shrugged. “I say we keep going toward the back of the property. I’m sure we’ll run into someone.”

Sounded good enough to Quaid, so he started walking. It wasn’t like he had another plan anyway. He wasn’t thrilled with how dark it was. The flashlight he had didn’t cover much ground.

He was thrilled when he spotted John and another man walking toward them, however. He waved the flashlight so that they would see him and Rourke. The two men turned and started heading in their direction.

“Hey, John, anything?”

“Cal and I just got done searching the abandoned cottages at the back of the property. We were getting ready to take a look at the old stable. You find anything?”

“I found some odd lengths of rope in one of the stalls. Rourke said they were the right size to tie up kids or small adults, but that’s not the weirdest part, John.”

John’s eyebrows lifted nearly to his hairline. “That’s not the weirdest part?”

“Lachlan found a couple of kids hiding in one of the stalls,” Quaid said. “They can’t be any older than Aidan and Niall.”

John’s hands fisted. “What in the hell is going on around here?”

Quaid wondered that too. Going back to Cade Creek was sounding better and better. At least there they had their friends to back them up when situations like this came up. Here, he wasn’t sure who they should go to for help. He didn’t know who they could trust.

“Let’s go check out that stable and then get back to the house,” John said. “I want to check in with the others and see if they have found anything.”

Quaid nodded.

“I’ll go grab some more flashlights and meet you there,” Cal said.

He didn’t know where they were headed so he let John take the lead. He didn’t realize how close the old stable was until it was right in front of him.

Truthfully, the place kind of gave him the creeps. There was no glass in any of windows. The door was hanging off the frame. The building was made of sod and stone, so at least there wasn’t any chipped paint.

“Well, this place isn’t creepy at all, is it?” Rourke asked, taking the thoughts right out of Quaid’s mind.

“Do we really have to search it?” Quaid asked. He could think of a lot of other places he’d rather go into. He drew in a deep breath and then started for the open doorway. He paused just as soon as he stepped inside and waved the flashlight over the entire room.

This was a stable, but it was much smaller than the other one. There were only six stalls here instead of the twelve in the new stable. There was a lot of broken and faded fencing and stall walls, almost as if the place hadn’t been used in a long time.

Go figure.

“Anyone else have a flashlight?” he asked.

John raised his cell phone.

“Okay, you guys head that way,” Quaid said. “Rourke and I will go this way.”

They had to move slowly so they could check every stall and step over the debris in the way. When they reached the end of the corridor, they still hadn’t come across anything that looked out of place.

Quaid was just about to turn back when he heard a small whimper. At least, he thought it was a whimper. He couldn’t be totally positive, but it was a sound, nonetheless. He glanced around to see where it could be coming from and spotted a door on the side of the wall at the very end of the corridor. It was covered with several tall beams and a couple of ladders, which was why he hadn’t seen it during his first sweep of the area.

He grabbed his brother’s shirt and then pointed toward the door. Rourke was a big guy, but Quaid was bigger. He handed Rourke the flashlight and then stepped over to start removing the wooden beams and ladders.

By the time he had gotten most of it out of the way, John and Cal had shown up. They helped him move the rest. And they then were faced with a padlock.

“Considering how new this padlock is,” John said, “it seems a little out of place in here.”

“Can you break it off?” Quaid asked.

“Maybe.” John started looking around, so Quaid did, too.

“I’ll go see if I can find something in the new stable,” Cal said.

“While you’re at it,” John said, “ask Mr. Keegan why something would be padlocked in here.”

“Sure thing.”

Quaid continued looking for something to break the lock off with as Cal hurried out of the stable. When he couldn’t find anything, he planted his hands on his hips and stared at the new padlock. “How sturdy do you think those walls are?”

Maybe he could break them down with brute force?

“Not that sturdy,” Rourke replied, “but breaking them down might bring the whole building down on top of us. Nothing in here is sturdy.”

That was true.

“Hey, there’s a second floor to this thing.”

Quaid glanced over to John and then followed the direction of his gaze to a square cut into the ceiling above him. “Hey, there is.”

He handed the flashlight to Rourke and then grabbed one of the ladders they had moved so he could carry it over to where John was standing. It took him a moment to maneuver it into place. Once he did, he stepped around behind it. “I’ll hold it. You go up.”

“I’m afraid of heights.”

Quaid rolled his eyes. “Then maybe you shouldn’t have married Yancy.”

He was even bigger than Quaid was.

John chuckled before grabbing both sides of the ladder. He put his foot on the bottom rung and then tested it with his weight. When it held, he started slowly climbing up the ladder.

“See anything?” Quaid asked when John had reached far enough to the top floor to see up there.

John held his hand down. “Hand me your flashlight.”

Rourke slapped the flashlight into John’s hand.

Quaid held his breath as he watched the light shine through the old floorboards. “Well? Do you see anything?”

“Not much,” John called out. “There are a few wooden crates, some cardboard boxes, and miscellaneous pieces of furniture, but not much else.” John boosted himself up a little more. “I’m going to look around.”

“Move carefully, John,” Quaid advised. “We don’t know how rotten those floorboards are.”

“I’ll be careful,” John replied.

Quaid didn’t relish trying to explain to Yancy and Seamus what had happened if John fell through the floor. Yancy could be a scary man when one of his husbands was in danger, but he didn’t have anything on Seamus. Quaid’s little brother was six feet of terror in a small package.

When John started moving, Quaid backed up and then followed him across the floor. It wasn’t hard to follow him. He could see little streams of light flashing through the floorboards. And if John fell through the floor, Quaid was really hoping he could mitigate the damage.

Quaid froze when he heard a gun cock behind him.

Chapter Thirteen

John

John frowned and glanced down at the floorboards when he heard a very distinctive click. Being a sheriff, he'd heard that sound often enough to not mistake it for anything else but a gun cocking.

He wasn't sure exactly what was going on, but he knew there was trouble. He quickly turned the flashlight off and slid it into his back pocket before grabbing his cell phone and typing out a SOS message in the family group chat. He might not have the Cade Creek Cavalry here, but he did have several strong and fierce brothers, and that was just as good.

"Move," growled a heavily accented voice right below him.

"Hey, man," Quaid said. "What's with the gun?"

John knew that Quaid was trying to give him information. As much as he appreciated that, he wished he would just do what the man said. Quaid had a husband and two kids to go home to. It would be mighty hard to do that with a bullet in his body.

And Matty would be so pissed.

On the plus side, the building had no roof, which meant John might be able to get down without using the ladder. Assuming he could find a way down without it.

John looked down at the floorboards, trying to find a support beam. He'd spent enough time fooling around in the barn back home to know they had the most support, hence the name support beam. If he could locate one, maybe he could follow it to the edge of the wall without making too much noise.

"Just move!" the man snapped.

"I'm going, I'm going," Quaid said rather loudly, letting John know exactly where he was and which direction he was

moving in. There was enough light casting down from the moon that John was able to see two figures moving toward the back of the stable. He assumed one of them was Quaid, but where was Rourke?

As soon as the two figures moved off, John began slowly inching his way to the wall. He hadn't found a support beam, but time was of the essence. He needed to get into a position where he could prevent both of his brothers-in-law from getting hurt, or worse.

When he reached the wall, John moved along the edge until he reached an empty window frame. He pushed himself up and looked through the broken window. The ground wasn't that far down, but it still might be tricky getting down.

John grabbed the edge of the frame and wiggled his body out through the opening and then let his body dangle, readying himself to let go so he could drop the last few feet. He barely muffled a scream when someone grabbed his ankles. Positive he was about to be yanked down and beaten or shot, John was greatly relieved to see Yancy standing below him.

He blew out a breath before releasing his hold on the edge of the windowsill and—with Yancy's help—dropped down to the ground. He was instantly wrapped up in Yancy's muscular arms.

"Hey, baby," he whispered into the man's ear.

"What's—"

John reared back and held his finger to his lips. Yancy was talking too loudly. Once Yancy nodded, John leaned in and whispered into his ear. "There's someone with a gun inside the building. They have Quaid and possibly Rourke."

Yancy nodded again.

"I'm going to come in the main entrance. I need you to go around the other side and come in that way so we can box this guy in." He leaned back to mouth, "Don't get shot."

"You either," Yancy mouthed back before leaning down to press a quick kiss to John's lips.

And then he walked away.

This was the part of life that John hated, sending him into danger. Yancy was as trained and experienced as he was,

probably more so, and he knew that. It didn't make it any easier. Yancy held a part of his heart, snuggled in right next to Seamus.

John waited until Yancy disappeared before quietly making his way around to the main entrance of the old stable. He wished that they had a few more people with them, but he couldn't wait for them to get here. Anything could happen to Quaid and Rourke if he did.

He was kind of thankful that it was dark out. It hid his movements as he slipped into the stable and made his way down the corridor. He made sure he stayed low and kept to one side of the walkway so it would be harder to spot him.

As he drew closer, he started to make out what was being said, and it made his blood run cold.

"Look, man, I don't know what you want, but aren't guns illegal in Ireland?"

"Shut up!" someone growled.

"I'm just saying that could get you in a lot of trouble."

Quaid really needed to shut up.

"Guns are not illegal in Ireland."

"Oh, my bad," Quaid replied. "Carry on."

John was going to strangle Quaid, right after he tattled to his husband.

When John got as close as he could get without being seen, he hunched down next to one of the stalls. The man with the gun had his back to him, but the gun was pointed right at Quaid. One wrong move and that gun could go off. Matty would not be thrilled to get his husband back with a bullet hole in him.

Quaid and the man with the gun were standing directly in front of the door with the padlock. John had to figure out a way to get Quaid out of the line of fire. He had no idea how to accomplish that.

When Rourke stepped around the corner into full view of the man with the gun, the problem was taken out of his hands.

"Hey," Yancy said.

The gunman turned, aiming his gun at Yancy. “Who the hell are you?”

“I’m not your problem.” Yancy grinned as he pointed toward John. “He is.”

The gunman swung around but not quick enough to avoid the piece of wood Quaid brought down on his arm. As soon as John saw the gun clatter to the floor, he jumped up and rushed toward the guy. Before he could reach him, Rourke came roaring out of one of the stalls and slammed into the guy, taking him to the ground.

John hurried over and grabbed the gun and pointed it at the man. “Okay, Rourke, you can let him up.”

Rourke rolled to his feet and took a step back.

John pulled the flashlight out of his pocket, turned it on, and pointed it at the man on the floor. He frowned when he got his first good look at the guy. “Burrell?”

“Isn’t that the stable master?” Rourke asked.

“Yeah, I think so.”

“Mr. Keegan will never forgive this,” Burrell spit out. “He’ll toss you in jail for attacking one of his employees.”

Rourke snorted. “What do you think he’ll do to you for attacking one of his grandkids?”

It was nice to have connections.

“Get him up, Rourke.”

Rourke was none too gentle as he grabbed Burrell by the shirt and yanked him to his feet. John was pretty sure if he and Yancy hadn’t been there, the guy would be sporting a couple of black eyes. Luckily, Rourke understood the process of law.

He gestured toward the open doorway with his gun. “Come on, let’s go.”

“Wait,” Quaid said. “I still want to open this door. He seemed pretty upset that I was here and kept asking me what I was doing. I think it has something to do with this room. I want to know what’s in there.”

Burrell tried to run.

Yancy stepped in front of him before he even took two steps. “Where do you think you’re going?”

Rourke grabbed Burrell by the back of the shirt and swung him around, slamming him into the wall just as hard as he had slammed him into the floor moments before.

“You can’t hold me!” Burrell shouted as he started to struggle. “This is kidnapping. I’ll call the police and have you arrested.”

“Go for it.” Rourke chuckled as he leaned in close to Burrell. “You have to survive long enough to report us first.”

John almost gave freedom to the laughter that bubbled inside of him, but now was not the time for that. “Yancy, we need that door opened.”

“Flashlight?” Yancy asked.

John didn’t want to take his eyes off Burrell so he just held the flashlight out to Quaid.

“Point it at the lock,” Yancy said as he pulled a small black case out of his back pocket. “I didn’t think I’d need this on this trip, but I’m glad I brought them.”

A smirk came to John’s lips. He didn’t even need to look to know Yancy was picking the lock. His husband was a man of many surprising talents. Lockpicking was just one of them.

A moment later, he heard a click and then the sounds of the padlock being removed and tossed to the ground.

“We need something to tie this guy up,” John said. He didn’t want to take his eyes off of Burrell until he was restrained, but he wanted to get a look inside that room.

“I don’t think that’s going to be a problem,” Quaid said.

The ominous tone in his voice was enough to gain John’s attention. When he turned to look, both Quaid and Yancy were staring into the room with their mouths hanging down. “What is it?” John asked. “What’s in there?”

Quaid’s green eyes were huge on his face when he turned to look at John. “Found Brennan.” He glanced back into the small room. “And he has friends.”

Chapter Fourteen

Kapheri

Kapheri had received the SOS on the family chat line just like everyone else and was quickly making his way toward the old stable. He'd been searching for Brennan for what felt like forever, the man's necklace clutched in his hand like a talisman connecting him to the man that owned his heart.

He didn't know if there was a problem or if Brennan had been found, but everyone responded when there was an SOS from one of the family. That was something he had learned over the last few years. The Blae Leah Clan was a tight one. They always looked out for each other, and since he had been accepted into that clan, that meant he had to respond.

Hurrying as he was to make his way toward the old stable, he almost didn't answer his cell phone when it rang, but it could be news about Brennan. Kapheri stopped long enough to pull his cell phone out and answer it.

"Hello?"

"Kapheri?"

He frowned. "John?"

"We found Brennan."

"Is he..." Kapheri swallowed tightly. "Is he..."

He heard a bunch of fumbling and then the most beautiful sound in the world came through the phone.

"Kapheri?"

Kapheri's breath caught at the sweet sound of Brennan's voice, and tears sprang to his eyes. "*Habibi?*"

"I'm okay, Kapheri. I've got a bump on my head, but I'm okay." Brennan sniffled. "Can you come get me?"

"Tell me where you are, Brennan. I'll come right now."

“Oh, uh...I’m not sure. Here, let me give you to John.”

A moment later, John’s rich baritone voice came across the line. “We’re at the old stable, Kapheri. It’s near the back of the property.”

“I’m on my way.” Nothing would stop him from getting to Brennan.

“He’s safe, Kapheri. We caught the guy that took him.”

“I want him.”

“Wish I could, man, but it looks like Brennan wasn’t the only one he kidnapped. We found Brennan tied up in a room with a bunch of kids.”

Kapheri stumbled. “Kids?”

“Aidan’s and Niall’s ages.”

Kapheri growled and continued walking. “He needs to die.”

“Not sure Ireland has the death penalty, but if it does, I’ll highly recommend it.”

Kapheri knew he would. No one fucked with John’s family, and luckily, Kapheri and Brennan were included in the people John considered family.

“This entire trip has been a clusterfuck. Next time Ma wants to see her parents, they can come to us.” Ireland was permanently off their visiting list.

John chuckled. “I hear ya, man. I just want to go home.”

Considering they hadn’t even been here a full twenty-four hours, that was saying a lot. And Kapheri couldn’t argue with that. He wanted to grab Brennan and get him back to Cade Creek where he’d be safe.

“He’s really okay?” Kapheri had to be sure.

“He is, Kapheri. I promise.”

Kapheri’s relief almost took him to his knees, but he wanted to get to Brennan more. “Please keep him safe. I’ll be there in a minute.”

“I won’t take my eyes off of him,” John promised.

Kapheri hated hanging up, but he’d run faster without a phone attached to his ear. He spotted several bobbing lights

moving in the same direction as him. It wasn't until he got closer that he realized they came from several people all heading toward the old stable.

As soon as he stepped inside, he searched the darkness for his love. "Brennan?"

"He's here, Kapheri," John called out from the other end of the building. A flashlight flickered in his direction.

Kapheri hurried for the flashlight. The second he spotted Brennan sitting on a wooden crate, he made a beeline for the man, sweeping him up into a tight hug. "*Habibi.*"

"I'm really okay," Brennan whispered. "I promise."

Kapheri held him tight for another moment before leaning back. "You said you had a bump on your head?"

"Yeah." Brennan reached for the back of his head. "I guess Burrell hit me over the head and knocked me out."

Kapheri spun Brennan around and started gently probing the back of his head until he winced and jerked away.

"Ouch."

"You need to see a doctor."

"No." Brennan pointed to the corner to three small kids, two of them huddled around Quaid, the other one held in John's arms. "They need to see a doctor. I just need some aspirin and a shower."

Kapheri frowned as he looked at the frightened children. "Who are they?"

"I don't know." Brennan shook his head before pointing to a doorway just to the left of the kids. "We were all locked in that room when I woke up." Brennan's jaw clenched as he glanced toward the open doorway leading outside. "We were tied up."

Kapheri's eyes narrowed as he turned to look. He didn't see anything, but he could hear voices. Mostly Yancy, but he was talking to someone. "Stay here," he said as he pushed away from Brennan and stepped over to the doorway.

Yancy was there, and he was pointing a gun at a man Rourke had pressed up against the outside wall of the stable. "Is this him?" Kapheri snapped.

“You can’t, Kapheri,” Yancy said.

“Oh, but I so easily could.” Kapheri grinned. “I am from Egypt. The punishment for crimes in my homeland is very finite. An eye for an eye.”

Burrell’s eyes rounded, and he tried to press back into the wood siding. “Y-You c-can’t touch me.”

“*El’an Abook!*” Kapheri spit out. “*Tah-hathek!*”

Burrell screamed and slid down the wall.

Kapheri snorted and turned away.

Rourke’s voice stopped him just as he got to the doorway. “Hey, Kapheri, what was that you said?”

Kapheri grinned as he glanced over his shoulder. “It was an ancient Egyptian curse.”

Burrell whimpered.

“A curse?” Rourke asked. “What kind of curse?”

“I basically cursed his father to have bad luck for all his generations to come.” Kapheri shrugged. “This is Ireland after all.”

Rourke stared for a moment before bursting out in laughter. “I may borrow that from you.”

“I have a few more I can share. We’ll talk when we get home.” He glanced at Burrell again. “The curse should fit the situation.”

“Is there any way to lift your curse?” Yancy asked.

While Kapheri didn’t believe his words alone would place a curse on someone, he was willing to entertain Yancy’s words. “Only if he does good deeds for the rest of his life. It will counteract the bad luck.”

Well, not really, but it sounded good.

Kapheri walked back into the stable and headed right for Brennan again. He grabbed the man and hauled him into his arms. Maybe he’d just keep Brennan attached to his hip for the rest of their trip. It seemed like the safest place for him.

Kapheri frowned when he saw the tears in Brennan’s eyes. “What’s wrong?”

Was he hurting?

“I lost my necklace,” Brennan whispered.

“I have it, *habibi*.” Kapheri held out the necklace he had refused to release until this very second. He carefully looped it back around Brennan’s neck and then made sure the medallion was right where it was supposed to be.

“Can we go home now?”

Very few words had ever sounded sweeter.

“We can. I’ll book us tickets first thing in the morning, but I want you checked out by a doctor before you fly.” He brushed the hair back from Brennan’s face. “I’m not sure if you can fly with a head wound.”

Brennan grunted and dropped his head against Kapheri’s chest. “I grew up here, and it was horrible then and it’s horrible now. I prefer Cade Creek.”

Kapheri tightened his arms around Brennan. “Me, too, *habibi*, me, too.”

He couldn’t think of anywhere he’d rather be in that moment than back home. Well, maybe back home in their bed or the cafe, but definitely back home. That was the important part.

Kapheri glanced around until he spotted John again. “Do you need us?”

“You’ll need to make a statement to the police, and you might want to consider having Brennan see a medic.”

Kapheri nodded. “I’m taking him back to the house. We’ll be there when you need us.”

“Can you send Seamus and Brody out here?” John glanced at the child huddled in his arms. “I may need a little help.”

“I’ll have them bring blankets out.”

“Thanks, Kapheri.”

“What should I tell Ma?” He knew she would ask questions just as soon as he walked in the door with Brennan.

“Ask her to wait until we get there. I really don’t know much right now, so I have some things to find out before I’ll have a clear picture of what is going on here.”

Kapheri nodded his understanding and then started leading Brennan out the far door away from Burrell. If he had his way, Brennan would never see that man again.

“I’m tired, Kapheri.”

Kapheri instantly swung Brennan up into his arms and then kept walking. “Don’t go to sleep yet, *habibi*. I want you to get checked out before you sleep.”

“Just going to rest my head.”

Kapheri slowed when he saw Da, Tierney, and a bearded man walking toward them. “We are flying back to Cade Creek tomorrow,” he said in a no-nonsense voice. “Ireland isn’t safe.”

Da frowned at the man in Kapheri’s arms. “Is that Brennan? Did you find him?”

Kapheri’s jaw clenched as he looked at Tierney. “Your stable master knocked him out and then tied him up in the old stable with a few kids.”

“Burrell?” Tierney asked.

“Yes.” He narrowed his eyes as anger infused him. “You need to screen your employees better. and you also need a new stable master. Try and find a better one next time.”

Tierney’s lips twisted into a grimace. “Yes, it does seem so.”

“I’m taking Brennan inside until the paramedics get here. He needs to be checked out before we fly home tomorrow.”

“Kapheri—”

“We’re going home, Da.”

Da sighed. “I understand.”

Kapheri nodded and then walked past the two men. He really didn’t have anything else to say. He had wanted to come here to see where Brennan grew up, but it was clear that they just should have stayed home. Kapheri wanted to get his love back there as soon as possible.

When he reached the house, he had to fumble with the doorknob for a moment before he could push the door open. He kicked it closed with his foot and then headed through the house to the living room, following the sounds of voices.

Ma gasped just as soon as he walked in and jumped to her feet, Ava following quickly behind her. “You found him,” Ma asked.

“John, Rourke, and Quaid found him,” Kapheri corrected. “Plus some kids.”

“More kids?”

“More kids?” Kapheri echoed. “You found other kids?”

“Lachlan found a couple of kids hiding in one of the stable stalls,” Ma said. “They are upstairs with them now putting them to bed.”

“When Brennan woke up, he was tied up in the old stable with three kids.” Kapheri glanced around when he remembered John’s request until he spotted the two men he was looking for. “Brody, Seamus, John needs you to grab some blankets and take them out to the old stable. It’s near the back of the property. Take a flashlight.”

“I’ll go with you,” Elijah said. “I might not know Irish law, but I still know the law.”

Kapheri walked over to one of the sofas and sat down, cradling Brennan in his arms. “Ma, can you get Brennan a blanket?”

“Of course, dear.” Ma hurried out of the room.

“Who is doing this?” Ava asked. “Who hurt Brennan and those kids?”

“It looks like it was your stable master, Burrell.” Kapheri knew he wasn’t really supposed to say anything, but the woman did have a right to know her employee was behind all of this, even if they didn’t know the motive.

Ava frowned. “He’s not supposed to be here. I fired him and had him removed from the property.”

“Then he didn’t listen to you because John has him under arrest in the old stable.”

Ava’s eyes narrowed. Kapheri could practically see flames or rage leaping off of her. “Burrell hurt my grandchild?”

Kapheri wondered if maybe cursing Burrell was the best thing he ever could have done for the guy. This woman wanted to kill him.

“I think Burrell did a lot more than that.”

They just needed to figure out what all “that” was.

Chapter Fifteen

Elijah

Elijah was a little astonished to see all the activity out by the old stable when they reached it. Not only were there several people moving about, but there was a police vehicle parked alongside of it. He found another one when he walked around the corner.

John, Rourke, Da, and Tierney stood talking to a police inspector. A uniformed officer was putting cuffs on Burrell and then escorting him to the back of one of the police units.

Brody walked up to John and then held up the blankets. John grabbed one and wrapped it around the little redheaded girl in his arms before handing the child off to Rourke. Rourke's eyes widened as if someone had just handed him a live grenade.

When she started to whimper, Rourke frowned and then placed her against his shoulder and began rocking her and gently patting her on the back. She immediately quieted down, closed her eyes, and stuck her thumb in her mouth.

John pointed to the stable.

Brody, Seamus, and Elijah walked into the stable together. They moved around a few officers that were walking around and headed over to where Quaid was sitting with two kids, a boy and a girl.

Elijah's heart sank when he saw the fear on their little faces. They couldn't have been any older than Niall. "I brought blankets," he said, holding them up.

Seamus grabbed one and wrapped it around the little girl. As soon as he was done, she held her arms out to him. Seamus glanced at child then to Quaid and then back to the child before picking her up and holding her in his arms.

"What's going on here, Quaid?" Elijah asked as he stepped closer. "Who are these kids?"

“It looks like they might be orphans from the Sacred Heart Orphanage down the road,” Quaid said. “We won’t know for sure until the authorities look into it a little more.”

He glanced down at the child in Quaid’s arms. “These guys come from the same place as the two Lachlan and Asa found?”

Quaid grimaced. “It’s looking that way.”

Damn.

“Here, could you take this one?” Quaid held the kid out to Elijah. “I need to call Matty and check in with him.”

Elijah didn’t really have a chance to say no. Quaid just kind of dumped the little boy into his arms. Luckily, he had a little girl so he knew what he was doing. He made sure the blanket was firmly wrapped around the little tyke and then held him close to his chest.

Baby Alani seemed to like that.

“I Caden.”

Elijah blinked down at the kid. “Hello, Caden. I’m Elijah.”

He was delighted to see the smile on the little boy’s face. If he could smile like that, then maybe he hadn’t been traumatized too much.

“How old are you, Caden?”

Caden held up four fingers.”

“Wow, you’re four? You’re such a big boy.”

“How old you?” Caden asked.

Elijah chuckled. “Old.” He sent Brody and Seamus a glare when they laughed. “No comments from the peanut gallery.”

He kept a tight grip on Caden as he turned toward the door. “We should take these guys up to the main house where it’s warmer and they can get some food.”

“They need to be checked out by the paramedics before they eat,” Brody said. “We don’t know what was done to them.”

Elijah’s jaw clenched. He really didn’t want to think about that. “Let’s go talk to John.”

He didn't like the idea of these kids sitting outside in the cold. There were no doors or windows on the old stable. The draft was insane. The weather wasn't any better. It was cold inside the stable and cold outside of the stable.

"John," he said when he stepped out, "is it possible to take these guys to the house while we wait for the paramedics to get here? I don't think they should be sitting out here in the cold."

John glanced at the inspector he'd been speaking to. "Can they take the kids to the house?"

"One of my officers will have to accompany you," the man said.

"That's fine," Elijah replied. "I just want to get them out of the cold."

Elijah's eyebrows shot up when Rourke tried to hand the little girl in his arms off to Brody and she started screaming bloody murder. Rourke rolled his eyes heavily and pressed her back to his chest, but Elijah was pretty sure he saw a slight smile on the man's face.

"Come on," Rourke said as he started for the house.

Seamus pressed a quick kiss to John's cheek and then Yancy's cheek and followed after him. Elijah glanced at Brody.

"I'm going to stay here for a bit and see if I can find out what's going on. Can you let Neason know?"

Elijah nodded and then started for the house himself. "As soon as the doctor looks you over, we can get you something to eat, okay?"

"No!" Tears started to stream down Caden's cheeks as he started to struggle. "No doctor! No doctor! No doctor!"

"Hey, hey, hey." Elijah held tight to the kid with one arm while rubbing his back with the other. "It's okay. You don't have to see the doctor if you don't want to."

He wasn't positive he could keep that promise, but he'd try to.

Brody had a deep frown on his face as he walked over to stand in front of Elijah. "Caden, why don't you want to see the doctor?"

“Doctor bad,” Cadence whispered.

Elijah’s eyes shot to Brody.

“Why is the doctor bad?” Brody asked. “What did he do?”

Caden shook his head and buried it in Elijah’s neck.

“Hey, Caden,” John said as he walked over to stand next to Brody. “Do you know what a sheriff is?”

Caden lifted his head. “Sheriff?”

“Sheriff.” John smiled. “A sheriff is like a police officer and a cowboy all rolled into one. They make sure the bad guys go to jail for hurting people and they ride a horse.”

Caden lifted his head. “A real horse?”

“Yes, a real horse.” John pulled his wallet out and flipped it open, showing off the gold star inside. “See this gold star? It means I’m a sheriff. I put the bad guys in jail and—”

“Ride a horse?”

That seemed to be the important part for Caden.

“Yep, so if the doctor is doing something bad, you can tell me and I can lock him up in jail.”

Caden laid his head back down on Elijah’s shoulder, but he kept it turned so he could watch John. “You can really take him to jail?”

“I can,” John said. “I just need to know what he did that was bad.”

Elijah glanced at John when Caden began playing with the collar of his shirt.

“The doctor and Mrs. Green made us take lots and lots of pictures even when we didn’t want to. If we weren’t good, they got mad and spanked us and took away our food and locked us in a closet.”

Elijah clenched his jaw as anger ripped through him. He understood disciplining a child, but to spank them and take away their food because they didn’t want their picture taken? That seemed a little excessive to him. But locking them in a closet? That was child abuse right there.

“You don’t want your picture taken?”

Caden shook his head. "It's cold, and I don't like taking pictures with no clothes on."

Elijah stilled.

"They made you take pictures with no clothes on?" John asked in a very tight voice.

Caden nodded once again. "It was really bad when the old grandpas came and watched. They say mean things and make us stand funny."

Elijah didn't even want to know.

"Okay, one more question, Caden," John said. "Do you know Mr. Burrell?"

Caden nodded. "He took the pictures. He's Mrs. Green's brother."

Elijah was going to kill the fucker.

John looked past Elijah and asked, "Do you know who Mrs. Green is?"

"Yes," Tierney said. "She runs the orphanage."

Oh, things were looking so much better now.

Not.

Elijah swallowed tightly. "John, you know what this looks like."

John nodded once. "Take the kids to the house. I'll handle this." He glanced behind Elijah again. "Is there a doctor that works at the orphanage?"

"There is," Tierney replied. "He travels between several orphanages around this part of the country. Why? You don't think he's involved in all of this, do you?"

John's jaw clenched. "Inspector, you need to get someone to go search Burrell's house and now before any evidence is removed. I would also suggest you have Mrs. Green and the doctor held on suspicion of child pornography and find someone else to operate your orphanage until your investigation is complete."

Elijah was already planning on killing Burrell. What was another two monsters?

"I'm taking this little guy to the house."

“Take Yancy with you,” John said. “I want one of ours on hand.”

Made sense.

When he started walking again, Brody and Yancy flagged him on either side. One of the officers trailed behind them. Elijah kept his mouth firmly closed because if he opened it, they were going to hear him all the way back in Cade Creek.

“Do you think we should ask the other kids if they have ever had pictures taken?” Brody asked.

“We can’t talk about this in front of the kids,” Elijah replied. “Not only are we not qualified to question them, but if we did, it could be considered witness tampering and it could get the whole case tossed out of court.”

“John questioned Caden,” Brody pointed out. “Won’t that get it tossed out?”

“John is an officer of the law,” Yancy said. “He can question people.”

It was a fine point of the law, but it was still the law.

“But you’ll be there,” Brody pointed out.

“Better let the *An Garda Síochána* handle it.”

Brody frowned. “The what?”

“The national police service of Ireland.”

Brody blinked. “Oh.”

“All we can do at this point is make sure their needs are met. Keep them warm, feed them, and give them a safe place to rest. The *An Garda Síochána* has to do the rest.”

Elijah loved being a lawyer, he took great pride in it, but this was one of those times when he wished he had gone into a different line of work. Still, it helped having two brothers-in-law on the police force, even if they weren’t in the *An Garda Síochána*.

They made it to the house in easy time. Brody rushed ahead to open the door for Elijah. When he walked inside, he headed for the living room, which was the last place everyone had been gathered. He was glad he did because everyone was still there, plus Rourke, Seamus, and the two kids.

Yancy instantly walked over to sit down next to Seamus. He stretched his arm out behind him before leaning in to press a kiss to his temple.

Elijah walked over and sat down next to Ruben. “Where’s the princess?”

“In bed,” Ruben replied. “I didn’t think she needed to be here for all of this.”

Probably right.

“Who is this?”

Elijah smiled. “This is Caden. Caden, this is my husband, Ruben.”

Ruben smiled as well. “Hello, Caden. It’s very nice to meet you.”

Cade waved.

Ruben watched the boy for a moment before lifting his eyes to Elijah. “What’s going on?”

Elijah shook his head. “Now isn’t the time, but it looks like Caden and the others might be from that orphanage down the road, and it might not be the best place for them or any kid. I can’t really say more than that until John gets here.”

When Ruben’s eyes went back to the boy in his arms, Elijah knew he got it. “He’s so young.”

“I’m four,” Caden murmured. “I’m a big boy.”

Ruben let out a little laugh. “And a very well-spoken boy as well.”

Yeah, Elijah had been surprised by that too. Alani was just now starting to be able to string sentences together, and he sometimes needed Matty to interpret things Niall said. He had no problem understanding Caden.

Elijah settled Caden on his shoulder a little better, placing him between himself and Matty. He gently rubbed circles on the boy’s back until he felt his body relax. Only then did he lift his head and glance around the room.

What he saw amused him and made his heart hurt.

Yancy sat on the couch next to Seamus watching as Seamus whispered words to the little girl in his arms. They were too

far away for Elijah to hear what they were saying, but whatever it was, the little girl was nodding as the tension faded from her body. They were probably reassuring her that she was safe.

Billy and Rourke sat on another couch. The little girl Rourke had carried to the house had been transferred to Billy's arms and was clinging to him for all she was worth. Billy was speaking softly to her, and Rourke was basically surrounding the two of them as if daring anyone to come in and try and take the little girl from them.

The two kids that Lachlan had found were asleep, snuggled between him and Asa. Lachlan was talking quietly with Ma and Asa while keeping his arm wrapped around both kids.

Elijah was pretty sure his workload had just increased, but this was why he became a lawyer instead of a police officer. Whatever help they needed with the law, he would try and make it happen.

He smiled as he glanced down at the little boy sleeping in his arms. Maybe he needed a little bit of that legal work for him and Ruben. There was something about Caden that drew him. Elijah couldn't quite figure out what it was because none of the other kids had the same effect on him.

He didn't want to put the kid down. It was as simple as that. He didn't want to let Caden out of his arms.

That had to mean something, didn't it?

Elijah lifted his head and glanced at his husband. "Hey, Ruben?"

"Yes."

Elijah's eyebrows lifted swiftly. "Don't you want to know what I was going to ask first?"

Ruben chuckled as he reached out to stroke the side of Caden's face. "I know what you were going to ask, Elijah, and the answer is yes."

Relief flooded Elijah. "I knew there was a reason I married you."

"Because I'm a sucker for a handsome guy?"

Elijah smirked. "That's one of the reasons."

“And what’s the other one?”

“Because you love me.”

There was no doubt in Elijah’s mind.

Chapter Sixteen

Rourke

Sophia was a doll. A living, breathing doll. Rourke was sure of it. She was three years old according to her, but she looked younger, so Rourke wasn't really sure if that was true. She was no bigger than baby Alani.

The bright red curls that framed her little cherub face were just as cute as those big soulful green eyes peeking up at Billy as he talked to her. As hard as she had clung to Rourke when he carried her to the house, he knew his Billy would be the one to calm her.

He calmed Rourke.

Billy was special like that. After all the years he had kept a tight leash on his emotions, even to the point of putting distance between him and his family, Billy gave him peace. He made what Rourke wanted and needed okay.

Rourke would thank the powers that be until his dying day for bringing this little man into his life and giving him a chance to win Billy's heart. Billy had given him something that he never even knew he was missing.

"Can you go get her some milk?"

Rourke tore his gaze away from the little girl and glanced to Billy. "Huh?"

Billy chuckled. "Milk, Rourke. She needs some milk."

"Oh, right." Rourke glanced around the room for a moment before standing and walking toward the entrance of the living room. He made his way to the kitchen, which was where he figured the milk would be.

He was surprised to find it a hub of activity. Several people were moving around the room. Food was cooking on the stove. There was a woman chopping up fruit and vegetables on

a long white marble counter. Another one was making sandwiches.

“Excuse me.”

The woman cutting the fruit and vegetables jumped and turned. “Can I help you, sir?”

“Can I get a glass of milk? Maybe in a plastic cup?” He wasn’t sure how a three-year-old did with glass. “One of the kids needs milk.”

“Of course, sir.” The woman hurried over to a tall cupboard, grabbed a glass, and then went to the fridge. She poured a glass of milk and then carried it back over to Rourke. “I’m afraid we don’t have any plastic cups.”

Guess there was nothing he could do about that.

“Thank you.”

“We’ll have food out for the children in a few minutes.”

Rourke brightened. “Thank you. That would be wonderful. I’m sure they are starving by now.” He had no idea how long they had been locked up in that room with Brennan or what had happened to them before that, so food was appreciated.

Rourke carried the glass of milk back into the living room and handed it to Billy. He sat down next to them and then watched as Billy held the glass for her. “There should be some food out for all of them in a few minutes.”

Billy nodded. “I’m sure they are hungry.”

“How is she doing?”

Billy’s eyes were stricken when he glanced up. “Oh, Rourke.”

Rourke wrapped an arm around Billy’s shoulders and pulled him and Sophia to his side. “It’ll be okay, Baby. We’ll make sure of it.” He didn’t know how, but he had never broken a promise to Billy in the past, and he wasn’t going to start now.

Rourke glanced up when John, Da, Tierney, and another man walked into the room. The dark scowl on John’s face sent a tight knot of dread into the pit of his stomach. He leaned over and pressed a kiss to Billy’s temple.

“I’ll be right back, Baby.” He got up and walked across the room to John. “What’s wrong?”

“We need to talk.” John glanced beyond Rourke to those in the living room. “Is there any way that Ma and Ava can take these kids somewhere?”

Rourke winced and glanced over his shoulder. “I don’t think you’re going to be able to tear Billy away from Sophia.” It didn’t look as if they would be able to tear several of them away from the kids.

“Where are Kapheri and Brennan?” John asked.

“Kapheri took Brennan upstairs, dear,” Ma said. “He needed a bath and a little quiet time.”

After seeing the rage on Kapheri’s face when he brought Brennan in, Rourke was pretty sure Kapheri needed quiet time as well. He had only known the man for a few years, but he had never seen him that angry.

Well, maybe once, when Brennan had been taken hostage and locked in the closet of the cafe. Kapheri had been pretty pissed then, too.

Rourke blinked when suddenly Jenkins appeared at Tierney’s side.

“Food for the children is being served in the dining room, sir.”

“Thank you, Jenkins,” Tierney replied before turning to John. “Maybe that will help.”

Da stepped into the dining room and addressed everyone. “Can I have your attention?” When everyone glanced in his direction, he continued. “John and I have some things we need to discuss with everyone, things not for little ears. For those that are interested, please stay. Those that would rather not hear about it, there is food for the kids in the dining room.”

Rourke was in no way surprised when Billy got up and carried Sophia over to him. He bent down so Billy could press a kiss to his cheek, and then the man walked past him into the dining room.

He was actually kind of glad that Billy had chosen to go with the children. Billy had grown up in a life of abuse. He

might be the strongest man Rourke had ever met, but he didn't need to hear about whatever John had to say.

Ruben, Seamus, Lachlan, and Asa all had children in their arms when they walked out of the living room. Brody, Neason, Ma, and Ava trailed after them. Lachlan was back a moment later.

"We'll help with the kids," Matty said. "Aidan and Niall are still upstairs sleeping, so my arms are free."

"I'd like to stay, angel," Quaid said.

Matty nodded before giving Quaid a kiss and heading out of the room.

"Should I go get Kapheri and Brennan?" Lachlan asked. "They might be interested in what you have to say."

John nodded.

Rourke waited until Lachlan went for the stairs before turning his attention back to John. "What in the..." He quickly glanced behind John to make sure Ma wasn't within earshot and then returned his attention to John. "What in the hell is going on here?"

"Let's wait for everyone to get here, and then I'll explain."

Rourke didn't like it, but he understood the delay. Better to wait and explain it once than have to do it over and over again.

"Jenkins," Tierney called out.

"Sir?"

Rourke jumped.

How did that guy keep popping in and out like that?

"Get a bottle of whiskey out of my study and glasses for everyone."

"Right away, sir."

"Let's all sit down and get comfortable," John said. "This conversation might take a bit."

Maybe they should have coffee instead of whiskey?

Rourke walked over to sit down in the spot he'd had before while everyone else found places to sit. It wasn't long before Lachlan came back down the stairs with Kapheri and Brennan.

Kapheri had Brennan wrapped up in a blanket as he carried him into the room. All three men sat down, although Kapheri settled Brennan on his lap.

“Okay, we’re all here,” Rourke said. “What’s going on, John?”

“First, I want to introduce Inspector Boyle of the *An Garda Síochána*.”

Rourke nodded to the man. He knew who he was.

“Okay,” John said. “Here’s what we know so far. Stable master Burrell has been a very bad boy, but after Kapheri put an ancient Egyptian curse on him, the man started singing like a bird.”

Rourke’s eyebrows rose as he glanced at Kapheri. “That actually worked?”

Kapheri shrugged, but there was a very satisfied smirk on his face.

Rourke snickered and looked back to John. “So, what did he say?”

“Burrell, in conjunction with his sister and her husband, have been using the children at the orphanage to fund their child pornography enterprise.”

Rourke fisted his hands. “Child pornography?”

“They have a long list of clients around the world that they sell pictures to. They also cater to an exclusive clientele that pay a premium to actually be on site when the pictures are taken, and they pay for the privilege of being able to choose the poses the children are in when the pictures are taken.”

Elijah gasped. “That’s what Caden meant when he said they take funny pictures.”

John nodded. “Inspector Boyle called in Interpol since this thing is global, and I have to tell you, those guys do not fuck around. In the couple of hours since we found Brennan and the kids, they have searched Burrell’s house and raided the orphanage.”

“What about the doctor and Mrs. Green?” Elijah asked. “Have they been taken into custody?”

“Burrell and his sister are currently in custody,” Inspector Boyle said. “There’s an Interpol warrant out for the doctor. We hope to have him in custody soon.”

Rourke wasn’t thrilled with that answer. “And if you don’t?”

“Oh, we will. The doctor has been red-flagged across the globe. If he tries to get help anywhere, I doubt anyone will help him. They’re all too busy trying to save their own asses. Burrell has given us a list of all their clients, so we’re going after them, too.”

“What about the children?” Elijah asked. “What’s going to happen to them?”

Rourke felt his heart lurch. “I’m keeping Sophia.” He blinked in surprise when the words came automatically. He hadn’t meant to say that.

Had he?

John shot him a look of confusion, his eyebrows pulled together across his forehead. “Rourke—”

“We’re not giving up Caden either,” Elijah said. “Ruben and I have already discussed it. We want to keep him.”

Inspector Boyle glanced at Elijah and then Rourke. “You want to adopt these kids?”

“Yes, we do,” Elijah said. “Will that be a problem?”

Rourke hadn’t discussed it with Billy, but the words felt right when he thought about them. He did want to adopt Sophia. He couldn’t imagine adopting any of the others or even another kid back home, but he could see him and Billy with little Sophia.

This was definitely not the direction he ever thought his life would go, but he couldn’t exactly say he was against it. It just felt right.

He really needed to talk to Billy.

“I’ll be right back.” He didn’t wait for anyone to say anything. Just stood and walked out of the room. When he reached the dining room, he stopped, crossed his arms, and leaned against the doorframe as he watched the animated goings-on in the room.

The kids were all eating, some on their own and some with a little help. Sophia looked small sitting on Billy's lap as he fed her, and that was saying a lot. Billy wasn't that big. He only stood five foot seven inches tall and weighed about a hundred and twenty-five pounds. He was practically a sprite.

"Billy?"

Billy's head snapped up. "Baby."

Rourke smirked as he pushed himself away from the doorframe and walked over to squat down next to the sexy little man. He spared a quick look at Sophia. "Are you getting enough to eat, *banphrionsa álainn*?"

Billy stared. "Ban what?"

"Beautiful princess."

"Oh, yeah." He nodded as he glanced back down at Sophia. "That makes sense."

"So, I was thinking..." God, this was hard. "Maybe we could make her *our* beautiful little princess."

Billy's dark eyebrows furrowed. "You mean...?"

"Maybe we could adopt her."

Those perfectly manicured black eyebrows shot up to Billy's hairline. "You want to adopt Sophia?"

Rourke shrugged.

"You've never mentioned wanting to adopt before."

"Not sure I ever wanted kids to tell you the truth, but..." *Come on, Rourke, use your words.* "I'm not saying I want to adopt a bunch of other kids, but there's something special about Sophia." Rourke peeked at Billy to see how he was taking his words. "What do you think?"

Billy stared at Rourke for so long that he started to feel his heart sink, and then he slowly turned to look down at Sophia. "I supposed every knight in shining armor needs a princess."

Rourke snorted. He was not a knight in shining armor by any stretch of the imagination, but Billy seemed to think he was and Rourke never wanted to dissuade him from thinking that.

He reached out and covered Billy's hand where it rested on Sophia's leg. "I think every beautiful baby needs someone beautiful to love."

"I already have someone to love. I have you." Billy's smile was wide and bright, and Rourke loved it. "And now I guess I have Sophia, too."

"So, yes?"

Billy nodded.

"It's just a want right now. You know that. I don't know what the adoption process is here in Ireland, especially since we're essentially foreigners, but I'm sure Elijah will help us wade through the paperwork."

Billy lifted his head and glanced across the table to where Ruben sat with a little redheaded boy. "I think Elijah has his own paperwork to deal with."

"He did say he and Ruben had already discussed adopting Caden." Rourke chuckled as he glanced at the others in the room. "I don't think this will be the only adoption in the family."

And that wasn't necessarily a bad thing.

Chapter Seventeen

Brennan

“How are you doing, *habibi*?”

“Still want to go home.” Brennan needed the stability home represented. He had forgotten how insane life was in Ireland. Granted, he had never been involved with something quite like this when he had lived here before, but life had still been kind of insane.

Cade Creek was so much more peaceful.

Kapheri patted his arm. “First flight out we can get, Brennan. I promise.”

“You are leaving, Brennan?”

Brennan winced as he glanced up at his grandmother. He hadn’t noticed that she had walked into the room. “I’m sorry, Grandmother, but I just want to go home.”

Her lips pressed thin.

“I will not allow Brennan to continue to stay here when it is not safe for him,” Kapheri said firmly. Ava didn’t look thrilled with his words, but Brennan was. To him, it showed how much Kapheri cared for him.

He leaned up and pressed a kiss to Kapheri’s cheek. “Thank you.”

“Anything for you, *habibi*.”

“You really love him,” Ava said. “I can hear it in your voice and see it in the way you look at him.”

“Brennan is my life,” Kapheri said.

“That is all that I could hope for, a love like that for him. Tierney and I learned our lesson with our daughter. Having a good man to love them is much more important than that man’s prestige or standing in society.” Ava finally smiled. “I’m thankful he found you.”

No one was more thankful than Brennan.

“You are always welcome in our home,” Kapheri said as he lifted Brennan into his arms and then stood. “Please, come visit. Brennan won’t be back until I can get the fear of him being kidnapped out of my mind.”

“I suppose I can understand that,” Ava replied. “And visiting your Cade Creek is something Tierney and I have already discussed. I think you’ll see us before you know it.”

“We’ll be anticipating your arrival.”

Kapheri gave Ava a respectful nod before carrying Brennan toward the stairs. Brennan’s eyes widened when he glanced into the dining room as they passed it. There were a lot of kids in there.

He hadn’t missed what everyone had said about keeping the kids they had found. He had been surprised by Rourke’s words, though. He didn’t seem like the type of man that would be comfortable raising a kid.

On the same thought, he had been surprised Brody and Neason hadn’t decided to take one of the kids. Brody was so good with kids. Well, with anyone really.

“Do you want kids?” he asked.

Kapheri’s eyes widened. “What makes you ask that, *habibi*?”

Brennan shrugged. “We’ve never really discussed it.”

“Maybe someday, but I don’t feel a burning need to have a child. Do you?” Kapheri asked. “Is that why you asked? Do you want to adopt one of these orphans?”

“No, not really. Like you said, I don’t feel a burning need to adopt a kid. But I didn’t want to deprive you if you did.” Brennan smiled. “While I think you would make an excellent father, I kind of like having all of your attention.”

“I like having all my attention on you as well, *habibi*.” Kapheri lifted Brennan enough to press a kiss to his lips. “You are my treasure. I need no other.”

“If you ever change your mind, tell me, okay?”

“Of course, Brennan. These are things we will always need to discuss together.”

That was one of the things Brennan loved about Kapheri. He was always willing to discuss things with Brennan and give him a voice in the decision-making. He never overrode Brennan's wants or desires. He gave him a choice, which was more than most of the people in his life had done.

Brennan leaned up to nuzzle at the skin right under Kapheri's ear. "Want to snuggle when we get to our room?"

He wanted to show Kapheri just how much he was loved, and considering how stiff and staid the man had been when they met, loving on Kapheri until he relaxed was a goal Brennan worked toward every single day.

"I think a good snuggle is definitely warranted."

Brennan almost snorted at Kapheri's formal words. Yeah, this was going to need a big snuggle. Maybe even a blow job or two.

When they reached their room, Kapheri carried him inside and over to the bed. Brennan's eyebrows lifted when Kapheri set him down on the mattress and then turned and walked away.

"Wha—" Brennan lost his ability to speak—and maybe to breathe—when Kapheri locked the door and then started stripping off his clothes.

Kapheri smirked once he was naked. The man sauntered sensually across the floor between them like a man who knew he looked good and had no problem putting on a show.

Brennan was going to swallow his tongue.

"You're falling behind, *habibi*."

Brennan laughed when Kapheri pushed him back on the bed and then climbed on top of him before rolling them so he was on top. It was in a really good position to be in.

"You are so sexy, Brennan," Kapheri whispered. "I am one lucky, lucky man."

Brennan licked his lips, hunger riding him hard. He leaned in and shoved his face into the curve of Kapheri's neck, inhaling deeply. He shuddered at the deep rich scent filled him. He nuzzled his face against the man's skin, rubbing Kapheri's scent all over his face. He would bathe in the scent if he could.

Brennan moaned and arched up when he felt Kapheri's hands stroke down his back. It felt so good to be touched, caressed. He wanted to touch as well. All that smooth skin combined with a smattering of dark hair across the top of his chest—it was incredibly yummy.

Brennan leaned down and followed the small trail of hair from the edge of Kapheri's bellybutton and up his chest to one dark-hued nipple hidden in even more curly hair. He heard Kapheri moan when he gently bit down on that nipple. Large hands curled into his hair, holding him there.

Brennan took it as an invitation for more and gently bit down. One of Kapheri's hands stayed in his hair. The other moved down Brennan's back to grab his ass. Brennan moaned as heat filled him. The need to feel more snapped any control he might have had.

He scooted down Kapheri's body and buried his face in the man's groin. The strong fragrance of man was overwhelming. Brennan inhaled again and again, rubbing his face back and forth over Kapheri. He growled when Kapheri's erect cock smacked him in the face.

Brennan wanted.

He wanted to feel that silky, hard cock in his mouth, and he wanted to feel it in his ass as well. His aching hole nearly quivered at the idea of being claimed by Kapheri again.

Brennan wrapped his hand around Kapheri's wide girth and licked the tip, pressing his tongue into the small slit on the top before swirling it around the mushroomed head. Kapheri shouted out his name and bucked beneath him. Hot spunk filled Brennan's mouth. Brennan swallowed it down and kept licking and sucking until Kapheri was hard again.

He yelped when he was suddenly grabbed and rolled beneath Kapheri. The man was all over him, as wild as Brennan felt. Their mouths came together in a flurry of passion, lips against lips. Kapheri was a master kisser. Brennan could come just from being kissed.

Kapheri's hands move to his pants. Brennan kept his lips pressed against Kapheri's as he lifted his ass and tried to help Kapheri drag his pants down his legs. He kicked them off then wrapped his legs around Kapheri's waist again.

Brennan stiffened when their cocks rubbed together. His hands clenched against Kapheri's shoulders. He ached. He throbbed. He felt like his head was going to blow off, both of them. He inhaled sharply when Kapheri grabbed his shirt and ripped it apart. Smooth naked skin met hairy muscular skin. Brennan groaned as a shiver of pure ecstasy rippled through his body.

"Need," he pleaded.

"Mine," Kapheri whispered back.

Brennan stiffened for a moment when he felt Kapheri's fingers trail between his ass cheeks. He yelped as Kapheri grabbed him by his arms and pulled him up his chest until he was straddling Kapheri's face. Hot breath blew across his balls, followed quickly by something wet and cold and cloth like. Then Brennan felt Kapheri's long tongue stroke over him. He shuddered.

"Fuck, Kapheri, that's... that's..."

Kapheri lifted him up by his thighs. Brennan fell forward, catching himself by his arms. They started shaking when Kapheri's tongue scraped across his hungry hole. He could feel Kapheri's fingers digging into his ass cheeks. The man's thumbs were just a hair's breadth away from his opening, almost within stroking distance. The tease was almost Brennan's undoing.

All coherent thoughts were pushed from his mind when Kapheri's tongue began pushing into him. Brennan inhaled deeply and clenched the tight little ring of muscles. Kapheri just pushed right on through them and started fucking Brennan with his tongue.

Before long, Brennan started bouncing, impaling himself on the thick organ. His arms shook even as his ass quivered. There was no word in the dictionary Brennan could think of to describe the ecstasy flowing through his body. He felt like he was on fire. Every stroke of Kapheri's tongue lit another fire.

He could feel his body opening up, begging for more. He didn't know how much more he could take without exploding into a million pieces. Brennan ached so badly that his entire body shuddered.

"Kapheri, please," Brennan begged.

He could only shiver in anticipation as Kapheri pulled him down until he was once again straddling him.

“Brennan.”

It took Brennan a moment to understand what Kapheri wanted. When he did, he grinned and lifted his ass into the air. He grabbed Kapheri’s cock and placed the head against the entrance to his body.

Brennan held his breath as he slowly lowered himself down on Kapheri’s slick cock. He had no idea when Kapheri had slicked himself up with lube, but he was really glad he had.

He winced a little at how much he was being stretched as he inched himself down onto the man’s cock. Kapheri gripped his hips. His lips were pulled back tight against his teeth. If Brennan didn’t know better, he would have thought Kapheri was in pain.

“Move.”

Kapheri’s reaction to his words took Brennan by surprise. Exquisite pleasure shot through Brennan as Kapheri suddenly started to move, pulling his hips down as he thrust up. The sensations were at first a little abrupt, but they quickly turned into something that kept building and building until Brennan couldn’t catch his breath.

He distantly heard Kapheri roar, and then the man was frantically pounding into him. Kapheri stiffened, and something burning hot suddenly filled Brennan’s tight channel. Brennan shouted out as the hot seed filling him dragged him into his own orgasm. His body felt like it was seizing, shaking from head to toe.

Brennan slumped against Kapheri when his body finally stopped throbbing. He panted heavily. He could hear the heavy thud of Kapheri’s heart beneath his ear. Every few seconds, the cock in his ass would spasm, sending little shockwaves through Brennan.

When he could breathe again, Brennan lifted his head and smiled down at Kapheri. “Sleep, then home.”

“Yes, *habibi*.”

It was good when people agreed with him.

Chapter Eighteen

Donnell

“They caught him, Da.”

Donnell clutched the phone in his hand and held his breath. “They caught him?”

“Inspector Boyle just called,” John said. “They caught him trying to board a ferry in Belfast. He was dressed in a disguise, but one of their officers spotted him acting strange and started questioning him. The idiot tried to run. After they caught him, they figured out who he was and arrested him right there on the spot.”

Donnell blew out a relieved breath. “Thank the good Lord.”

It was over.

“Inspector Boyle told me he would send me the final report once it was all over, but it looks like Burrell, his sister, the doctor, and the men that came in while the pictures of the kids were being taken will all be doing a lot of time. They might not even make it out of prison before they die.”

Donnell could certainly hope not.

“What about the men they were selling pictures to?” Da was pissed enough to want all of the people involved to serve a lifetime behind bars.

“They’ve arrested about a hundred and fifty of them across the globe. All of them are being charged with dealing in child pornography. There’s still a few more that they are after, but I have no doubt they will be caught soon. Inspector Boyle doesn’t strike me as a man that is going to give this up easily. He seems to have taken this as a personal insult to all of Ireland.”

Considering this thing was global, it wasn’t an Ireland thing, but Da could appreciate the man’s anger at the people that had done this. The news had been pretty quiet about this

so far, but if word got out, it had the potential to make Ireland look really bad.

“How soon will you be home, son? Ma is chomping at the bit to have everyone home again.”

“We’ll be there soon, Da. We just got to the top of the pass.”

“Okay, drive safe. You have precious cargo with you.”

“Awww,” Seamus said in the background. “You do love me, Da.”

Donnell rolled his eyes. “Just get home before your ma starts hunting for her wooden spoon.”

John chuckled. “We’re on our way, Da.”

Donnell hung up and then went hunting for Alani. He had fully understood why so many of his sons had stayed behind in Ireland, and he fully approved, but it had been hard without them here. Not because he needed them to work the ranch, although he would be glad when they were back to help out, but because it broke Alani’s heart each family dinner that they had missed.

During the week, she was fine with them all going off and having their own lives, but she lived for that weekly dinner where all of their children and grandchildren came home for a few hours. Da kind of did, too. He liked being able to check in with all of them and make sure they were okay.

Still, life was ever changing on the Blaeacleah ranch, now more than ever before. It would be interesting to see how much once everyone was home.

* * * *

Alani

It had been a little less than six weeks since she’d cooked a family dinner, which, in the grand scheme of things, wasn’t that long. Still, Alani would be very glad when her entire family was under one roof again, even if those roofs were a little bit apart.

She understood why so many of her boys had to stay back in Ireland, and fully supported that decision, but she was glad they were finally coming home. She couldn't wait to see them again, all of them.

Strong arms wrapped around her waist. "Need any help, lass?"

The kiss that was pressed against the side of Alani's neck made her shiver.

"Did you get the extra booster seats?" she asked instead of giving in to her natural desire to offer more of her neck to her husband.

"Of course."

Alani turned away from the fruits and vegetables she was cutting and eyed her husband. "Did you get the sippy cups set out?"

"Yes." Donnell tapped his finger on the end of her nose. "I even got your new table all situated so there's a place for everyone."

Alani drew in a breath. "I can't believe how much our family has grown, Donnell."

Donnell smiled while wagging his eyebrows. "Helps that you are such a pretty lass."

Alani laughed as she swatted at Donnell. "The things you say, old man."

Still, she was glad that Donnell never missed an opportunity to tell her how beautiful she was even now. Donnell hadn't given her riches all those years ago because he didn't have two pennies to rub together.

Instead, he had given her something much more precious. His unconditional love, a family anyone would be proud of, a confidence in herself to be who she always wanted to be, and a freedom to be that person. That was worth so much more than gold.

"I love you, Donnell Blaecleah."

Sometimes the words needed to be said.

Donnell's smile was blinding, his green eyes sparkling with joy. "I love you, lass. Always have, always will."

Alani knew that.

“My mother called today.”

“Oh yeah?”

Alani smiled at Donnell’s response. He no longer stiffened whenever she mentioned her parents. Alani didn’t see herself ever going back to Ireland. The one trip she had taken had proven to her that Ireland was no longer her home. She might have been born there, but Cade Creek was where her heart lay.

“She told me that they are going to be joining us for Christmas this year, and then they are planning on renting a house in town for the summer.”

“That’ll be nice,” Donnell said. “Maybe you and Billy can take your mother to the farmer’s market.”

Alani was a little concerned with her parents moving around so much at their advanced age, but meeting their grandkids and their great-grandkids had seemed to give them a new lease on life. She was pretty sure they were going to be around for many more years to come.

“Ma,” Brennan shouted from the other side of the house. “We’re home.”

“No yelling in the house,” Ma called back just as loudly. She heard Brennan’s laughter before she saw him. “Hello, son.”

When he walked in, he was accompanied by Kapheri, Neason, and Brody. Brennan walked right over to her and planted a kiss on her cheek. “Do you need any help?”

“Do you want to start plating these fruits and vegetables for me?”

“Sure.”

“Good afternoon, Ma,” Kapheri said as he walked in and gave her another kiss, this one on the other cheek. “My parents said they would be here in about an hour. They wanted to give everyone time to settle in.”

“Thank you, Kapheri.”

“I don’t want to put a damper on our excitement, but I have news I think you all might want to hear,” Da said. “John called me from the car. He told me Inspector Boyle called him and

they caught the doctor trying to hop a ferry in Belfast. He's been arrested."

Alani's shoulders slumped in relief. She had been so worried that the authorities wouldn't catch that evil man that she had prayed every night.

The Lord was good to her.

"That's good news," Brody said. "I don't think it put a damper on anything."

Alani didn't either.

"Finish setting the table," she directed. "I want to have dinner ready when everyone gets here. I'm sure they will all be hungry after their flight."

Alani liked it when everyone started moving.

She finished cutting the fruits and vegetables she had picked out to serve to the children. In her experience—and that was a lot of experience—children were picky eaters, and that was okay.

"This is a dinosaur, Ma," Brennan said. "How did you make a cucumber look like a dinosaur?"

Alani pointed to her cookie cutters. That was one of her sneaky ways to get children to eat their vegetables. Make them into interesting shapes.

"Ma," Neason called out from the other room, "there are cars coming down the driveway."

Alani's breath caught. She quickly set her knife in the sink, wiped her hands on a towel, and then hurried out into the main room. "Is it them?"

Neason stood by the front window, holding the curtain out of the way. "Looks like it."

"Oh." Alani started for the front door. Donnell beat her there, holding it open for her. Alani flashed him a thankful smile and walked out onto the porch just as three large SUVs stopped in front of the house.

Alani reached for Donnell, and he was right there to take her hand. She heard Neason, Brody, Kapheri, and Brennan all come out of the house and walk over to stand beside them.

Tears flooded her eyes when people began climbing out of the vehicles. One by one they walked over to stand at the bottom of the steps. Her boys, their husbands, and the children they had all welcomed into their lives.

Lachlan and Asa stood with Hannah and Robby in their arms.

Rourke and Billy stood next to them, Sophia cradled in one of Rourke's arms. The other one was wrapped around Billy's shoulders. Lilia, Billy's mother, stood next to them, beaming.

Ruben held baby Alani in his arms as he stood next to Elijah and Caden, the boy they had fallen in love with.

Little Kara was snug in Seamus's arms as he stood between John and Yancy.

Quaid, Matty, Aidan, and Niall walked up from their house, taking a spot next to everyone else.

"Hey, Ma," Lachlan said as he grinned up at her. "We're home."

Yes, all of her beloved family members were finally here.

"Welcome home."

THE END

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