



Business
or
PLEASURE

THE SCOTTISH BILLIONAIRES

M.S. PARKER
USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

BUSINESS OR PLEASURE

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M. S. PARKER

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Prologue

Baylen

The University of Glasgow

Fifteen years ago...

The sun was shining, and with the temperature being higher than average, it was a perfect omen for my first day of university. If only I'd believed. The McFanns, however, had not come from superstitious folk. We believed in facts and science. But on days like today, I understood why some people had faith in a being who could create such beauty.

First day. Sitting in my car, I was still the same person as yesterday. Newly eighteen-year-old Baylen McFann. Middle child with good grades, but nothing uniquely remarkable about him. I had yet to make a mark on the world, for good or for evil.

But my time was just ahead of me.

Steeling myself for whatever might come, I exited the car and retrieved two suitcases from the boot, preparing for my new adventure.

By the time I'd unpacked and settled in my new apartment, the sun was low in the sky. A glance at the kitchen clock told me it was half five, and my stomach growled, reminding me I'd hardly eaten today. Although I grew up at my family's estate well outside the city limits, I'd spent much time in Glasgow and knew several establishments nearby that served quality food.

Twenty minutes later, I walked into The Smokin' Fox. I'd been there before, and the food was better than anything I could cook up at the flat. A Saturday evening meant it was busy, and I lingered near the door looking for a place to sit.

“Yer bum's oot the window!”

A shout from my right drew my attention to a trio of men standing near the bar. All three were red-faced and sweaty, their shirts proclaiming their loyalty to the Aberdeen football club. I dimly recalled that Aberdeen had played against Glasgow Rangers today, and judging by how the men kept throwing their hands in the air, I assumed they'd won. They were obnoxiously exuberant.

One shoved another, earning a shout of, "Get tae fuck, arsepiece," from the one who'd been on the receiving end.

The Aberdeen football fans were notorious. The trio was attracting more attention now, their curses louder and more inventive as they moved from shoving each other to bumping into other patrons. The bartender glared at them. But even from where I stood, the cast on his arm was clearly visible. He wouldn't be able to do anything.

I'd pulled the door open to head somewhere quieter when all hell broke loose.

A pretty, dark-haired waitress, hardly a day over eighteen, navigated her way around the men when one of them grabbed her butt. She spun, her hand slapping against the man's cheek with a loud crack that silenced the room.

His meaty hand closed around her wrist. "Bitch!"

His two buddies stepped closer, and I moved forward without thinking. There was more fury on her face than fear. But if things kept going in the same direction, that'd change soon.

The guy yanked her toward him as she tried to pull away, his insults and curses drowning out whatever she was saying. His other hand went up, and I wasn't close enough to stop what I knew was coming.

Before his blow could land, a tall blond man grabbed the bald man's wrist and pulled him back. When the other two guys stepped forward, I moved between them, catching one of them with a hand on his chest.

"Leave the lass alone," I said.

"Or?" The redhead grinned wide, showing gaps where several teeth were missing.

The tension in the air was thick enough to choke on, and the stand-off seemed to stretch out forever. Then the redhead's control snapped, and he took a swing at me.

The next few minutes were a blur of fists and feet as the blond man, and I took on the three hooligans. A blow to the ribs had me gasping, but I dodged a punch to the face. Pain radiated up my arm when my knuckles met the redhead's jaw. He staggered back, giving me the chance to hook my foot behind him and send him tumbling to the floor.

As I turned to take on another of the assholes, other hands were there, pulling the men back, shoving them toward the door. As quickly as it'd started, it was over.

"Are you all right?"

I found the blond man talking to the waitress.

"Aye, I am." She smiled at him and then turned to me. "Thank you."

I nodded, still not having my breath back. My body was buzzing from all the adrenaline, my hands shaking, but I caught the waitress when she threw her arms around me.

The other man's blue eyes danced with amusement. He looked familiar, though I couldn't place where from.

"I've got to call my mum." The girl released me and ran off.

With everyone else returning to what they'd been doing, it left me with my new wingman. For a moment, I wasn't sure what to say, but then I held out my hand.

"Baylen McFann."

He smiled and gave me a firm shake. "Alec McCrae."

I knew that surname. "McCrae? Any connection to the McCrae International Research Institute?"

"Aye." His eyes widened with surprise. "I'm Patrick McCrae's eldest."

I looked harder at him and realized that I'd seen him before, though it'd been over ten years. We'd been children at some event with our families.

I gestured toward a table. "I've yet to eat. Care to join me?"

"You should get the girl's number first," Alec suggested. "Play the hero."

I raised an eyebrow. "You're not interested?"

He shrugged. "Not at the moment."

The waitress was on the phone. She was a pretty little thing. "Maybe later. She's had a rough evening."

"Aye," Alec said. "Later then."

After ordering, we settled around a table and spoke of our families. I learned the reason I hadn't seen him in a decade was that the McCrae family had been living in America all that time. As he spoke of the move, the shadow on his face prevented me from asking why they'd left. Instead, I teased him about sounding American and coaxed out another smile. I intuitively knew it wasn't an expression he wore often.

I leaned forward. "Can I ask why you came back to Glasgow for university if your family is in California?"

Alec didn't answer right away. For a moment, I worried I'd crossed a line.

"We moved because Da remarried," he said, his eyes fixed on his food. "I remember my mother better than my siblings, but sometimes it's like I'm losing the memory. But here...whenever we visited, I could...see her better."

I understood. Alec wasn't just here to remember his mother but also to share that experience with her.

"Will you be takin' the business route, then? Plan to head the family business here?"

He shrugged. "I haven't decided where I'll locate, but aye, I'll be takin' over MIRI one day, so I'm going the MBA route." He cleared his throat. "And you? Do you know what you're going for?"

“An MBA as well for me,” I said. “My parents expect all of us to grow the family empire.” I gave him a wry smile.

Alec’s forehead furrowed for a moment. “McFann? Would your parents be Charles and Elsa McFann? One of the wealthiest families in Scotland and contributors to medical research?”

I nodded. “Aye. That’s them. My eldest brother is already following in their footsteps.”

“But you’re going in your own direction?” The shrewd expression on Alec’s face led me to believe that he saw far more than what most people would realize.

“That I am, in a way.” I gave him a rueful smile. “Unlike my father, I want to be involved, help people become successful and thrive, rather than just invest, take over, and then sell the business in pieces.”

I rarely spoke of my family’s money with such candor. To consciously draw notice to such things was the height of vulgarity. Alec, however, came from the same background and understood our world.

I hadn’t been sure if I could find a person here with whom I could relate.

A friend.

I had no faith in signs and only the barest belief in the validity of intuition, but for once in my life, I had a flash of insight with no logical basis.

Alec McCrae and I were going to be great friends.

One

Baylen

Edinburgh, Scotland

Present day...

I gritted my teeth as the driver took a corner too fast, repressing the urge to snap at him. Better not distract him, considering the speed we were going. Besides, I *was* late. Then again, if he continued this reckless driving in the pouring rain, I might not reach my destination at all.

The office was in the heart of Edinburgh, and though my home wasn't very far, it could take half an hour in traffic to get there. Finally pulling up to the curb, still alive, I hurried to pay. The driver handed me his card, and I slid it in my pocket without a promise to call. I'd already been thinking about staying at Angie's tonight. This morning solidified my decision.

It had annoyed me she'd kept her flat after we'd gotten engaged rather than moving into my place. But today, I was grateful for the space.

With that in mind, I jogged up the steps to the entrance in much better spirits.

That immediately changed when I found the door locked and the lights off. Worried, I dug my key from my jacket pocket, thankful that I'd thought to bring it.

As I opened the door, I called, "Angie? Hello?"

No response. Nothing echoing from the shadows to warn that something had happened to Angie or the employees. I sniffed hesitantly, but all I smelled was the usual industrial scent that came with disinfectant.

No bleach or blood or...rot. I hated even to think that, but my mind automatically went there after watching a documentary on unsolved homicides.

I flipped the switch, and the lights flickered to life overhead, showing what my other senses had already told me. Empty.

Shutting the door behind me, I locked it. I didn't want somebody to wander in while I attempted to figure out what was going on. I checked each nook and cranny, every cubicle, as I made my way to the back, where I tried the door to Angie's office. Locked.

Grabbing my universal key, I hoped that I would find Angie at the desk when I opened the door, having fallen asleep because of the long hours she'd been working recently.

It was dark inside, and my stomach sank. Angie wasn't here. Still, I turned on the light and confirmed it.

Exhaling a long breath, I sat behind the desk. What happened to her?

The schedule showed Sorley Duncan assigned to work today, and Alasdair Munroe, our receptionist, was always here on days we had meetings, even ones outside of regular working hours. It was two-thirty now, which meant I had three missing people and an appointment with a large distributor in half an hour.

I dug out my phone with one hand as I rummaged around the desk with the other, searching for any sort of note or calendar. A glance at my screen showed I had no waiting messages or missed calls. I didn't know if that would be a bad or good thing, as I could think of dozens of reasons for the lack of communication, ranging from mere forgetfulness to a horrible bus crash.

I dictated a text rather than calling, not wanting to come across as overly concerned or annoyed. Over the past few weeks, things between Angie and me had hit a couple of bumps.

My parents hadn't approved of me getting involved with someone whose business I'd invested money into, warning that it was unwise to mix business with pleasure. I knew the adage but believed that, when done well, with clear boundaries, the extra connection could even be a benefit.

"I just wanted to let you know that I'm at the office for the meeting... period...do you have an estimated time of arrival...question mark."

As I waited for a reply, I finished searching the crowded desktop and found nothing that gave Angie's plans for the day. What I found, however, made me frown. A stack of unopened envelopes, some of which were most likely worthless, but others that could have been important. Had all the postmarks been only from yesterday, I would have assumed that Angie had simply been too busy to have gone through the mail, but some of these were from as far back as the previous Wednesday, which made little sense.

I opened the middle drawer and found a giant planner that took up the entire space. Or rather, I discovered the size after I cleaned the debris from on top of it. I shook my head. Angie's flat was always tidy, but now I wondered if it only happened when I came over. Perhaps that was one reason she'd balked at moving in with me.

Unfortunately, clearing off the planner didn't offer any enlightenment. I was still at a loss for where Angie was right now.

I checked my phone. She hadn't read my message yet, and enough time had passed that I felt the need to call. It went to voicemail.

"Angie, where are you? I'm at the office, and no one's here. Give me a ring back. I'm a wee bit worried."

As I waited, I continued exploring her desk, finding a list of employees' contact information in a drawer. Sorley Duncan should have been here hours ago preparing notes for the meeting. I pictured the young man as I placed the call. Tall with a beaked nose and a rather unfortunate overbite. He answered on the second ring.

"Hello?"

"Sorley Duncan?"

"Aye."

"This is Baylen McFann."

"Mr. McFann." He squeaked and then cleared his throat, continuing in a steadier voice. "How can I help you?"

“Have you spoken to Angie Ulster today?” That was as good a place as any to start.

“Not today, sir.”

“So you didn’t call her to say you wouldn’t be comin’ in this mornin’?” I kept my tone mild.

“No, sir.” He sounded confused. “She told me on Thursday evenin’ that I didn’t need to come. Did I misunderstand? I’m so sorry, sir. I’ll be right there. I—”

“Sorley.” I interrupted what would be a lengthy apology. “Don’t worry. It seems a miscommunication all the way around. You have a good day.”

I frowned as I hung up. Why would Angie have told Sorley not to come in today? Had she done the same with Alasdair? When she and I met, we needed an extra hand or two, especially if we had an important meeting.

My text to Angie still had yet to be read.

With nothing else productive to do, I called Irvine and Kirsty McTaggart, a couple not scheduled to work today but who might know something. They’d last seen Angie Thursday morning at the shop. She had mentioned nothing about today.

Before I could call Alasdair—the last name on the list—my phone rang.

A rush of relief went through me when Angie’s name appeared on the screen.

“Angie, are you alright?”

“I am.”

Her voice sounded strange, and my relief twisted into concern.

“I’m so sorry, but...well...Damian and I have eloped.”

I opened my mouth and then closed it again as I realized that I honestly didn’t know what to say. I wasn’t even entirely sure that I’d heard what I thought I’d heard.

“We didn’t mean for it to happen,” Angie continued. “I fought against it. We both did. But it was inevitable. I never wanted to hurt you.”

I finally found my voice. “You’re married? To Damian, your ex-boyfriend?”

Had I fallen asleep at some point, and this was all a strange dream?

“Aye, Bay.” The sadness I heard was sincere, but that didn’t make me feel any better. “I’ve been a right mess for weeks. I kept meaning to talk to you, explain that I couldn’t marry you because I was still in love with Damian.”

I didn’t know how to react to that. What did a person say when their fiancée suddenly stated they’d married someone else? Nothing in my life had prepared me for this. I wasn’t sure anything could have.

“I’m at a loss, Angie,” I admitted. “We have a life together. A business. What about that?”

“I already signed the patent over to you. It’s all yours.”

The guilty tone in her voice could have been only because of the infidelity and those consequences, but the sinking feeling in my gut said there was something I wasn’t seeing. “But we have a meeting today with Wholesale Bras, and inventory is coming soon.”

There was a long pause, long enough that I would’ve thought the call dropped if I hadn’t been able to hear her breathing still. “I’m sorry, Bay. There is no meeting. And there’s no inventory either.”

My chest suddenly felt tight. “What do you mean there’s no inventory? The order for a hundred thousand bras was paid and will be delivered in two weeks. You found the company, worked closely with them, vouched for them.”

“I’m so sorry, Bay,” she repeated, her voice barely a whisper. “The company we hired...it’s closed. The owner has disappeared. Everything...it’s gone.”

Fuck.

Two

Harlee

Seattle, Washington

Present day...

I shifted in my seat, aware that everyone was watching me. Even my tiniest moves. The twitch of an eyelid. Clenching of a jaw. Suppose I tilted my head or scratched my cheek. Almost every person seated here was waiting for me to make a mistake, say or do something that would reveal exactly what I was thinking.

Unfortunately for everyone else, I did the same to them, and I was better at it. Better at hiding my thoughts *and* better at reading their tells.

For example, Mr. Sleepy over there made a big production of yawning every time he tried to bluff. He yawned for a second time, and even though I knew he was faking it, I had to swallow my empathetic response. I mentally dismissed his hand and moved to the man on his right.

I'd named him Mr. Grumpy because he hadn't cracked a smile the entire four-and-a-half hours we'd been playing. His tell was more subtle but just as accurate. He screwed up his nose to push his glasses higher when he bluffed, which was rare. For an illegal poker player, he played exceptionally conservatively.

Then there was Ms. Cleavage. A lot of it. I'd seen the glare she'd given me when I'd come in, and the moment my gaze had dropped to her tits, she'd grinned. Not actually distracted by her body or her words, I'd caught on fairly quickly that when bluffing, she licked her bottom lip, and when she was excited about her hand, she leaned forward slightly, inviting everyone to look right down her dress.

The last person at the table was the whale, Captain Asshat. He'd made a big production of being a regular here and how everybody loved him. It only took half a dozen hands to figure out that they liked him because he was

terrible at poker and had plenty of money to lose. He didn't have a specific tell. He just lied like he played cards. Badly.

"I'm willing to stake everyone a couple hundred each if we can turn this into strip poker." Captain Asshat leered at Ms. Cleavage and then at me. "Unless you ladies want to join me for a private game without these two losers."

"Yo! Who're you calling a loser, bitch?" Mr. Sleepy was suddenly wide awake. "You wanna step outside?"

Ms. Cleavage turned a laugh into a cough that almost sounded realistic. Smart. She shouldn't alienate Mr. Sleepy by letting on that she thought he was a joke.

One of the first things I'd learned as a kid was *not to* laugh at idiots I was trying to con.

The dealer rapped his knuckles on the table. "Two more hands before we're closing down the table."

"C'mon," Captain Asshat wheedled. "I got money to burn."

"Two hands." The dealer's voice was firm. "No arguing. You know how this works."

Captain Asshat sighed. "All right." He gave Ms. Cleavage and me another one of those charming grins. "After we finish here, we can continue at my place. Clothing optional."

I barely kept my face blank. It might've been worth breaking my calm and collected vibe just to tell Captain Asshat what I thought of him. If he touched me, all bets were off. I'd gladly get myself banned if it meant I could kick him in his nuts.

I needed to find a new game, anyway. I never went to the same place over three times in a row, making it difficult for anyone to pin down my tells...or the fact that I rarely lost. By the time I returned to a place, some might recognize me in a general way, but even regulars wouldn't remember the crucial details. Seattle wasn't in the top ten most populous cities in America, but it was big enough.

For now.

As I folded my next-to-last hand, I wondered if a new city was in my near future.

I didn't have a family to support. Jin was the closest thing to it, and I didn't worry about losing her when I left Seattle. Our friendship had weathered far worse.

Last year, I had moved into a studio apartment in a better neighborhood, but it wasn't something I couldn't leave behind. Even when I'd gotten along well with my co-workers, I rarely stuck around for more than a year at each job, and I rarely ran into them again unless by accident. And in terms of romantic relationships? It was not that I was anti-dating, but my dating history looked a lot like my work history. It had been almost three years since I had been in a serious relationship.

Talking about casual flings. Maybe that's what I needed. Sweaty, sexy fun, no strings attached.

I decided that after the last hand, I'd go to a club. Find someone to take home.

"Two," Mr. Grumpy said. As he put his new cards with the others, he wrinkled his nose to nudge his glasses higher on the bridge.

Mr. Sleepy took a single card and didn't yawn once.

Both responses fit with their previous tells. Ms. Cleavage was staying with what she had, and Captain Asshat took three. I took one, and it was the Ace I needed. Bingo. Full house.

Captain Asshat raised. Mr. Grumpy wrinkled his nose again. Mr. Sleepy called. Ms. Cleavage called and leaned forward slightly.

In my head, I could see everyone's hand, and mine would beat all of them.

I raised, and everybody called. I couldn't hope for better action in the last game.

I laid my cards on the table.

Mr. Sleepy cursed and pushed back hard enough to jar the table. His Straight was no match for my Full House. Mr. Grumpy just sighed, like this was the outcome he'd expected, and tossed his hand without showing. Ms. Cleavage scowled and swore under her breath as she turned over a Flush. Captain Asshat, however, didn't even seem annoyed as he flashed three jacks before tossing his cards. He looked like he enjoyed himself.

After that last win, my estimation of the place went up. Maybe I would come back here after all.

But no more poker today.

I hadn't exactly dressed for going clubbing, but what I wore would work. Black skirt, fishnet stockings, and chunky black boots, topped off with a clingy dark blue sweater that matched the streaks in my golden blonde hair.

I could dance like this, and attracting a guy had never been a problem, no matter what I had on.

Rather than driving back to my place and calling a cab, I would stay sober and go straight from here. While getting buzzed to blow off steam was fun, I didn't need alcohol to relax. Dancing and sex would be the perfect combination to end out the night.

Sunday nights in April weren't exactly the busiest time for clubs, but I'd lived here my whole life, and The Catch-all always had a crowd. It was also a place that fit my mood tonight.

People didn't blend into each other. It was okay to wear the little black dress, but also ripped jeans and a corset. And sometimes it was the guys wearing those. You could find straight, gay, bi, pan, poly, cis, non-binary, and transgender people on any given night. Everyone was welcome.

Hence the name.

"Harlee." The bouncer greeted me with a wide smile. "Good game tonight?"

"I cleaned up." I accepted his one-armed hug before handing over the cover charge. "How've you been?"

“Good,” he said, dark eyes twinkling. “My sister had her baby, so I’m an uncle now.”

“Congratulations.” I was genuinely pleased for him. “What’s their name?”

“Calypso Renegade Van Houser.”

It shouldn’t have surprised me. Bear was his real name, not a nickname, and I knew his sister’s name was Lynx. “Say that one more time.”

“Like you’re one to talk, Harlee Sumpter.” He grinned at me. “I’ll bet you have an interesting middle name too.”

I shook my head. “Sorry to disappoint you, but I don’t have a middle name. My mom didn’t think I needed one.”

His grin widened. “So, how did you know if you were in trouble?”

“Then I went from being ‘Harlee’ to ‘young lady.’” I could almost hear her voice and felt a pang at the memory. She’d passed away seventeen years ago, and I still had days where the wound felt as raw as when it had happened.

Before losing myself down that rabbit hole, I entered the club. The lights and music assaulted my ears and eyes, and the bass added an extra heartbeat. The sound cleared my head. I didn’t want to dwell on the past or think about the future anymore tonight. I wanted to be in the present, nothing on my mind but that very moment.

I went to the bar and drowned a single shot, then a bottle of water. With just the edge taken off and now well-hydrated, I made my way to the dance floor. I found myself the focus of attention much faster than expected.

At first, I ignored it, getting lost in the music. Then, one guy came up smiling as his pale eyes locked with mine. I could read the intention on his face and continued to face him until only a couple of inches separated us. He smelled nice and was above average in looks, which was a good start. The two of us danced well together, and we had sparks that could lead to a hot hook-up. After ten minutes of dirty dancing, and without a word, I grabbed his hand and pulled him toward the door.

I dropped his hand as we stepped outside into the chilly April night.

“My car’s over there.” I gestured to a spot a few yards away. “Interested?”

He didn’t even hesitate. “Hell yes.”

The back seat wasn’t big, but we weren’t going for some slow lovemaking. A quick fuck with one mission...both of us getting off.

By the time we got a condom on him, we’d completely fogged the windows up. Which meant I didn’t have to worry about anyone getting an unexpected show as I dragged down my stockings and pulled my panties aside. Not that I’d have let that stop me from sinking down on his thick shaft. A little thrill of danger always added to the excitement.

We filled the car with the sounds of our harsh breathing, the friction between our bodies, and the small gasps and grunts of effort and pleasure. I didn’t know his name, and he didn’t know mine. We didn’t talk at all, just brought our bodies together over and over, having another dance. Speeding up, we raced toward the inevitable end, and I followed him into mind-numbing pleasure that leached all the tension from my body in one bright explosion.

Three

Baylen

“I thought after that cow, Keli, that Alec had sworn off women.” Colin Irons flicked a sunflower seed shell at me. “I remember him saying something like that.”

“Lumen’s different,” I said, sweeping the shell into my hand and depositing it in the trash can. “At least, that’s what he says.”

“Does she have an extra t—” Before Colin could finish the word, a balled-up napkin hit him right between the eyes. “Bloody hell, Cirion. You coulda put my eye out!”

Despite the words, Colin’s green eyes were bright with laughter. It was good to see that light again. He’d always been the prankster of the group, the one always getting us in trouble for laughing at inappropriate moments. But over the last few years, the persona he put on for the business world had also become the face he showed to everyone, even his closest friends.

“You should thank me for improving yer looks,” Cirion O’Neal shot back.

“I’m the best of the lot of us,” Colin said. “Ask anyone.”

Cirion laughed. “Yer off yer head.”

Colin looked to Pierre Dupont, the fifth of our circle of friends. He shrugged and put up his hands as if to say to leave him out of the debate. Typical of him. He changed the least of all of us.

They were all a year younger than Alec and me, but from the moment we met them our second year at university, it’d been as if we’d always known each other.

We remained in touch even after Alec returned to the States, and whenever he came back into town, we’d go for drinks together. While the rest of us had stayed in Scotland, we’d gone to different cities, and we were all busy enough that we only got together when Alec was here.

“Baylen, you can be impartial,” Colin said. “Who’s the best looking of the lot?”

I raised an eyebrow. “Hate to break it to you, but you’re not my type.”

Cirion burst out laughing, and even Pierre cracked a smile. We’d been having this argument for as long as we’d known each other. That was how we’d all met. Colin and Cirion were flatmates in the same building where Alec and I lived, with Pierre’s flat across the hall from theirs. Arguing about who was the more attractive, they took a poll of neighbors. Ever since, we were all inseparable, at least for the rest of our university years.

“What is your ‘type’ these days?” Colin asked before popping another seed into his mouth. “Right hand or left?”

I held up a middle finger in response.

“Seriously, Baylen, when was the last time you had a date?” Cirion asked. “Please tell me it wasn’t Angie.”

“Never did like her,” Colin said, shaking his head. “Always thought she was...twitchy.”

“She was my fiancée,” I reminded Colin and Cirion. “And we only broke up two months ago.”

“She’s already married,” Colin shot back.

“I believe he knows that,” Pierre said, his tone mild. “She was already married *before* she broke up with him.”

“Thanks for the reminder.” I glared at both of them. “Wankers.”

“Which brings us back to—right or left hand.” Cirion grinned at me and shrugged when I flipped him off again. “I had to say it.”

“Did you?” I picked up the paper that he’d thrown at Colin and threw it back at him.

The bell from my door went off, interrupting—or at least postponing—any retaliation. “Make yourselves useful.”

I left them to it and went to answer the door.

The woman at Alec's side was a pretty blonde, with azure eyes and a sweet smile. The way she looked at him made something in me twist. Even though they weren't engaged, I could tell they were more in love than Angie and I ever had been.

I pushed aside the twinge from that and let everyone inside.

I'd only met Alec's daughter Evanne once when she and her mother visited years ago. Evanne was only a baby then, but I'd seen pictures of her up to the age she was now. She had Keli's dark hair, but those intelligent blue eyes were all from Alec.

He told me the other girl coming with them was Lumen's daughter, Soleil. One look told me that Soleil was adopted. It was not because she had raven-black hair and naturally tanned skin. No, the age difference between Lumen and Soleil made it biologically improbable, if not impossible. Not that it mattered to me. The differences between Alec's family and mine proved that blood wasn't what made a family.

"The lads are in the garden," I said. "I thought we could enjoy the day."

"Garden?" Soleil's voice was low but still audible. "Like with flowers and stuff?"

"Garden is what they call yards," Evanne answered in a similar stage whisper. "Grand-dad still says it sometimes. They have lots of funny words."

"I don't get it," Soleil continued. "We all speak English, so why don't we use the same ones?"

I glanced at Alec to find his lips twitching. Lumen's cheeks were pink, and I saw Alec squeeze her hand as if to reassure her that Soleil wasn't rude.

"Because we don't speak English," Evanne said knowledgeably. "We speak American."

"Oh."

"Is this your first time in Scotland?" I asked Lumen as we stepped into the kitchen.

“It is,” she said. “Both Soleil and I hadn’t ever been out of the United States before this trip.”

“Well, I hope we’re living up to your expectations.” I smiled at her and then at Soleil. The teenager almost flinched, her eyes skittering away. I let my smile soften and move to Evanne, but I made a mental note to find out from Alec if I could do anything to help.

Each member of my family had a cause to support, and I chose domestic violence. While I didn’t know this girl’s story, I’d seen that look in too many eyes over the years. Someone had hurt her.

If I could, I would help.

Today, I planned to enjoy time with my closest friends and get to know the new women in Alec’s life.

Except my friends seemed determined to make this all about my love life. Or lack, apparently, of one. If I hoped having guests would change things, it had been a vain one.

“All right, Bay, time to fess up,” Cirion called out as we entered the garden. “The last time you...” his eyes darted to the girls and back to me “...the last date you were on.”

“I’ve been busy.” I dodged the question again.

“Maybe you’re rusty,” Colin suggested. “We could help you out. I’m sure, between the three of us, we can find someone to take pity on you.”

“If there’s no one in Scotland, you can always come to see me.” Alec joined right in as if he’d never been away. “Plenty of attractive women in Seattle, and they always love an accent.”

“Is that so?” Lumen asked, poking him in the arm.

“I’m not looking for me,” he protested. “The lad needs help, can’t you see that?”

“I don’t need help.” I kept from snapping at my friend. “I can find dates on my own.” I pointed at Colin and then Cirion. Then Pierre, just for good measure. “But maybe I will take you up on a visit someday soon, Alec.”

“Anytime, my friend...” Alec grinned at me, more at ease than I had seen him in a long time. “But enough of that talk.” He turned to the others. “All right, lads, what have you lot been up to while I’ve been away?”

* * *

I loved my family.

I really did.

It was important to remember things like that when they were driving me around the bend.

Like now.

Family weekends weren’t a weekly occurrence, but we kept in touch enough to know what was happening in everyone’s lives. Unfortunately for me, that meant Angie and I were still a topic of conversation two months after she eloped, along with our business disaster. I avoided either issue while putting my things in my old bedroom, but I knew nothing would be off-limits as soon as we all sat down for dinner.

“How are things with...work?” A seemingly innocuous question, but the glint in my father’s dark eyes told me everything his words didn’t.

I gave him a tight but polite smile. “All is well. I’ve found a new lead on a manufacturer.”

“A manufacturer?” Mum frowned.

At sixty, she still had the same poise and elegance as the portrait above the fireplace, but her short curls now spotted silver mixed in with the brown. The lines at the corners of her mouth and eyes were more profound than they had been the last time I’d seen her. I knew, if asked, she’d say those were my fault.

I wasn’t sure she would be wrong.

“Is that the wisest thing to do?” Mum continued. “Continuing to pretend that this...flight of fancy?”

“It’s not a flight of fancy.” I kept my tone pleasant as if I hadn’t said something similar before. “It’s a good product.”

“Undergarments?” My oldest brother, Arran, spoke up from his seat at our father’s right hand. “Seems a common enough product.”

“Not what Angie invented,” I countered.

“I don’t understand how you can defend her.” The oldest of my two sisters, Finola, shook her head.

“I’m not defending her,” I said. “I’m defending her product. It’s good.”

“When are you going to admit that she conned you?” Da snapped. “She was after nothing more than our money and name.”

“And she got that by dumping me and marrying someone else?” The question popped out of my mouth before I could stop it.

My sister-in-law, Rhiannon, stared at me in shock, and I could feel the eyes of my siblings on me as well. I wasn’t one to use snark with our parents. Or anywhere near my family at all. Only my friends got to see that side of me.

I pushed down my aggravation and tried again. “I can separate the product from the person. The worth of the product has nothing to do with Angie’s infidelity.”

“Separating business from pleasure. It seems something you should have learned a while ago. It would have saved us all a lot of time and money.” Mum took another sip of wine as if she hadn’t just said that *my* broken engagement had cost *us* time and money.

I swallowed the comeback like I always did. “Angie was still in love with her ex. I couldn’t have known that.”

“It wouldn’t have mattered if you’d just listened in the first place,” Da said. “But you’ve always had to do things your way. Pretend that you know better than all the rest of us.”

“That’s turned out well,” my youngest sister, Ellen, muttered under her breath.

I shot her a dirty look. She loved me as a child, following me around all the time. Then, Mum had gotten her hooks in Ellen too, and my baby sister had decided that toeing the family line was more important than anything else.

“Penelope Gareth’s daughter is back from Paris.” Mum either couldn’t hear or just ignored Ellen’s comment. “Perhaps you could give her a ring.”

I squashed the urge to sigh. I wished I could say that my mother’s attempt at playing matchmaker surprised me, but it didn’t. She and Da always made plans for us kids to marry someone that suited their interests. Business or social. Or both.

“I don’t think that is such a wise idea, my dear,” Da said with a glance at Mum. “After all, it isn’t as if he’ll have anything to offer the girl but our name. Perhaps Egan would be a better match.”

I gave my brother a sideways look, but he didn’t take his eyes off his plate. Wise move. If he didn’t want to date Penelope Gareth’s daughter, this was not the time to bring it up.

“Perhaps.” Mum lifted one shoulder in an elegant shrug. “No point in burning a bridge with a bad match.”

“Thanks, Mum,” I said under my breath.

At least I avoided being set up on a date. I supposed there was some good in my struggling business endeavor.

“Now, let’s discuss how to repair the damage you’ve done to the family with your recklessness,” Da said, setting his fork down next to his plate.

I ignored the opinion part of his statement and focused on the facts I could present to him. “As I said, I found a new manufacturer who may be interested in putting together a few samples and a small inventory. I’m going to be scheduling a tour of the plant before I sign anything, though.”

“Wait.” Da held up a hand. “You misunderstand. Let me be more specific. What will you be doing to replace the money you threw away on this foolish

scheme?”

“It wasn’t a scheme,” I said tightly. “Angie may have been a poor businesswoman, but she had a good product. It is a good product. Once I get distributors to see it—”

“You’re talking about a strapless bra, Bay, not some technological advancement that’s going to change the world.” Arron’s tone wasn’t cruel, but his meaning was clear.

He didn’t believe in me any more than our parents did.

“Do you know how much money is spent on lingerie every year?” I asked. “Do you know how much women are willing to pay for a bra they like? One that makes them feel *and* look good?”

“We don’t need to bring up such *private* things at the table.” Mum’s voice was sharp.

I ignored her. “The numbers are there.”

“And who showed you those numbers, Baylen?” Da cut in. “Angie? Did she show you *numbers* when she was convincing you to give her our money?”

While Da would never be impolitic at the dinner table, he was skilled at making his meaning known, no matter how he said it, and there was no mistaking what that question indeed was asking. Not that he was actually *asking* it.

“Once I take it to production—”

“How, exactly, do you intend to take it to production?” Da asked. “Your little idea?”

There was an edge to that last question that made me sit forward.

“The bank is closed.”

I felt Fi stiffen next to me, the only sign of her surprise. No one else said or did anything.

“What does that mean?” I spoke carefully, hoping to keep down the anger that had been simmering just under the surface from the moment I’d gotten in

the car.

Maybe longer. Probably longer. My anger was building with every cutting comment and snide remark my parents had ever made.

“It means I will no longer give you money to throw away simply because some tart came up with an idea and you were too blindsided by *love*,” he said the word as if it tasted sour, “to care about the harm you’d do to the people who matter—”

I slammed my hands down on the table. Everyone was staring at me now, but I looked only at my father.

“She mattered to me.” I didn’t yell, but the room had gone dead silent. “Things didn’t work out, but at least I pursued her for love. Not power or money or whatever else. And that relationship was *my* business.”

“Except it affected *family* business,” Da said harshly, his expression stonily. “And since you don’t seem to understand how to be a productive member of this family, you’ll benefit no longer.”

I felt my jaw drop. I heard the words, but I didn’t understand them because they couldn’t mean how they sounded.

“You’re cut off, Baylen. No jet. No money from the family accounts.” He sneered at me with the sort of disgust that made my stomach tighten. “Until you can show the proper respect and learn how to get in line, no more resources.”

I nodded as I stood. “All right.” My legs felt weak, but I didn’t let it show. “I’ll fix it myself.”

I didn’t bother to listen for anyone coming after me because I knew no one would. Straight to my room and then to my car without a single person trying to stop me, even just to say a word, either of support or condemnation. They all just stayed in the dining room and kept eating.

I was halfway back into the city when I came up with a plan. I needed to get away from Edinburgh. From Scotland, even. I needed to put aside everything that reminded me of Angie, including the patent. I had to sell it with a profit. Show my parents that I had business sense. But to do that, I needed to go to

production and demonstrate its success.

And I needed help.

Fortunately, I knew exactly where to go, *and* it would get me out of Scotland.

My first call was to my assistant, Brigh. I told her to book a hotel in Seattle, as well as plane tickets. My second call was to Alec, telling him I was taking him up on his offer for a visit.

Four

Harlee

Since I was 18 years old, I have had a few great jobs and many terrible ones. Working at Comix & Games for the past six months has been the best. A hundred times better than my four-month stint doing tech support over the phone for Sprint. I liked my co-workers at Comix & Games, and I didn't dislike the customers.

There'd be the occasional jackass who claimed comics and games were only for men with testicles and testosterone. Fortunately, none of the staff could get away with that because Bert, the owner, wouldn't let it happen. He once fired an employee for expressing a crude, sexist view of a female gamer.

I also liked the dress code. My tattoos and piercings didn't matter. Bert was more likely to reprimand the guys for looking sloppy or scraggly than he was to complain about my body art. Even though I like to dress sexy and show some skin, I knew the difference between work and club-appropriate, which was why I was wearing nice jeans, a v-neck t-shirt, boots, and a leather jacket.

Even in June, Monday afternoons weren't usually busy, but Bert scheduled inventory today, so there were three of us here.

I was good at working the counter and helping customers, but I had to admit it was nice to stay in the stockroom sometimes, not having to deal with customers.

Wells King was behind the front desk when I walked in, and he raised a hand in greeting. He was a couple of years younger than me, early to mid-twenties, though I didn't know his exact age. But Wells was massive, rather scary looking. However, I enjoyed working with him because he dealt with the rude jackasses.

Only Bert and I knew Wells was a gentle giant. The store didn't have security guards, and while most people wouldn't think a comic book store had things

worth stealing, some of the rare editions were worth hundreds, sometimes thousands, of dollars.

I went directly to the small break room to drop off my purse and jacket. As I was clocking in, I nearly bumped into Lester Bean, who would be doing inventory with me today.

He was the oldest employee here, probably around the same age as Bert, but wasn't the most mature. It was my first time working alone with him, though. He wasn't exactly creepy, but he wasn't the most likable either.

“Hey,” I said as we walked to the front desk, keeping a safe distance. I didn't constantly worry that much about personal space, but there were exceptions.

“Bert wants you to use the new tablet.” Wells pointed to it as we got to the desk.

“Finally.” Lester let out a sigh of relief. “I kept telling him we couldn't expect gamers to take us seriously if our tech was outdated.”

Wells and I exchanged glances, but neither of us said anything. Lester played games, but he wasn't a gamer. Even though he tried to sound tech-savvy, everyone knew Lester couldn't even use his phone.

“Did you set it up to sync automatically?” I ignored Lester and asked Wells. Despite his young age, Wells was Bert's right-hand man, and he deserved that position.

“Before we opened,” Wells said with a nod.

We chatted longer since no one else was in the store, but finally, I straightened and gestured to Lester. “We better get started.”

He let out another sigh, definitely one of annoyance. The man must have at least a dozen different sighs. “All right. But I have a question. How will we both use the same tablet?”

I'd been wondering the same thing, and as we entered the storeroom, I had a solution. “One of us will take inventory, and the other will log it in.”

“Okay.” He held out his hand for the tablet.

“Why don’t you go on,” I said. “I’ll be back in a minute.”

With a huff, Lester walked away. Once he was out of earshot, I turned to Wells. “If I have to listen to another argument about how Patty Jenkins ruined *Wonder Woman* by making Diana so independent, I’m going to beat Lester to death with Bert’s ax.”

“The ax is foam,” Wells pointed out.

“I didn’t say I’d make it quick,” I shot back.

Wells laughed, a soft sort of chuckle that didn’t fit a man his size. He was still smiling when the bell over the door rang.

Squinting from the sun, I could only make out the outline of a muscular figure just under six feet tall. Then the door closed. A man with thick brown hair and a too-charming smile stood in front of me. I couldn’t see his eyes, but I knew they were blue because I’d gotten my eye color from him.

Franklin Cook.

My father.

Shit.

What the hell was he doing here?

Wells offered a greeting. I tried to sneak away without talking to dear ole dad, but I was out of luck.

“Harlee, wait. I need to talk to you.”

Dammit.

I wanted to tell him I was working and that he had to leave, but I knew my father well enough to know he wasn’t going anywhere until he’d said what he’d come to say.

“All right,” I agreed. “But I only have a few minutes before I have to get back to actual work.”

He nodded and gave me that same charming smile that saved him so often. Growing up, I always tried to earn that smile by being a good girl and

thanking him when he brought me presents on Christmas and my birthday. Then, later, I did my best learning from him, imitating him, trying to be just like him—

I gave myself a mental shake and pushed the past back where it belonged.

I motioned for him to step off to the side with me. “What is it?”

“Have you been working here for a long time?”

I crossed my arms and didn’t bother to disguise my disbelief. “Really? You could track me down but not find out how long I’ve worked here?”

I don’t know why I bothered asking. My father had always behaved like a man who could have whatever he wanted, and occasionally, he got it in his head that we needed to talk, and that always had to be on his terms.

“I don’t remember you reading comic books when you were little.”

It was hard for me to resist the urge to ask him how much he remembered about me before Mom died, but I had no intention of dragging out his visit by arguing with him.

“If you want to talk about my reading habits or hobbies, we can do it when I’m not at work.” There was a snowball’s chance in hell I would meet him voluntarily, but I didn’t mind lying to him. He was the one who taught me how to do it so well.

He scratched the back of his head—the first tell I’d ever learned—and said, “I just wondered if you could tell me what comics a guy gets if he’s looking to invest. I assume it’s the ones worth a lot of money, you know?”

My eyes narrowed. I knew that look on my father’s face, the tone in his voice. He was up to something.

“You’re getting into collecting?”

“I’m thinking more like getting some to sell and make some quick cash.”

A glance over my shoulder said that we had eyes on us, which meant I couldn’t just tell him to go to hell.

“Comics rarely have that fast of a turnaround.”

“C’mon, Harlee.” He tried turning on the charm. “It’d be a great score, and we could split it. Your inside knowledge. My skills. It’d be a piece of cake, like old times.”

“Not interested.” I risked another look back and lowered my voice even more. “I told you, I’m not doing that shit anymore.”

“Fine. If you won’t help me...” my father muttered as he turned around and marched out.

Yet another great talk with my father.

* * *

Today just sucked.

After my dad tried getting me to steal from my employer, my co-worker treated me to a boring lecture about people making comics political. Finally, after two hours, I had enough, and I told Lester he needed to educate himself on comics before spewing any more bullshit at me. That hadn’t sat well with him. He called me bitch and several other names, which I will not repeat. He told me that the only place a girl like me should be in a place like this was on her knees.

I went out front and asked Wells to switch with me. If I had to spend one more minute with Lester, I would need help hiding his body. Wells hadn’t minded and was now working inventory in the back while I held down the fort upfront.

It was slow going in the store, but then something caught my attention.

If those two teenage boys put those comics down their pants, I would kick their asses.

I sighed and pushed off the counter. No, I wouldn’t kick their asses, no matter how much I wanted to. Jailhouse orange wasn’t a good look on me. Besides, they were still kids. They deserved a second chance. I knew that all too well.

What I could do, however, was scare them a bit. I waited until the tallest was just about ready to tuck a copy of *Deadpool* into the front of his pants.

“Don’t.” I came around the counter toward the pair, who froze at the sound of my voice. If you put it in your pants, I’ll take it back and leave you in your tighty-whiteys or whatever you’re wearing while I call the police. And I will let them march you out to their cars like that too.”

Slowly, without looking at me, the boy’s hands rose, and he set the comic back on the shelf. My gut said that wasn’t all he had.

“Put everything back, and I’ll only ban you from the store. Try to leave with even a paperclip, and the cops will escort you away.”

My instincts were right. The pair had been picking up little shit all over the place to work up the courage for the bigger prize. When their pockets were empty, I had a little stack of stuff on the counter, and their faces were red.

“You’re both banned from ever showing your faces in the store again. And I’ll make sure everyone else who works here knows that. Take the punishment gracefully and learn from it. You don’t want to end up in juvie for a couple of comics you could’ve borrowed from the public library.”

They nodded and left without a single word of argument.

“That was very well-handled.”

An amused female voice had me turning around. The woman appeared to be in her early forties, short, with ash blonde hair almost light enough to make the few streaks of gray disappear completely. Not a typical customer, but who was I to judge by appearance?

“Thanks.” I smiled at her. “How can I help you?”

“I’m looking for a few comics for a nine-year-old girl, and I have no idea where to start.”

“Daughter? Niece?” I asked.

She looked confused by my questions but answered politely, “My boss’s daughter, actually. Does it make a difference?”

“In a way,” I said. “If you were shopping for your daughter, you’d be able to tell me exactly what you would or wouldn’t allow her to read. A niece or cousin, child of a friend, those are a little trickier.”

“And since her father is my boss?” She was giving me a strange look but still didn’t sound annoyed.

“That depends. Do you like your boss and your job?” I smiled and gestured toward a rack near the front of the store. “I usually recommend these for kids under twelve because they’re safe but well-written. You should buy those if you don’t want your boss to freak out when his daughter reads them.”

“You’d really recommend something edgier for a child if I said that my boss was a jerk?”

I laughed. “No,” I admitted. “But if his daughter already watches and reads things that are mature for her age, then yeah, I’d recommend something older.”

“And you’d just go by what the customer said? The customer’s always right?”

One side of my mouth tipped up in a smile. “I’m an excellent judge of character.”

She studied me for a moment, and I had the weirdest feeling that she was sizing me up the same way I had been doing to her since we started talking. “All right. Evanne’s nine going on thirty but still likes to play pretend. She loves superhero movies, and *Spiderman* is her favorite. The Tom Holland one, not Andrew Garfield or that other guy.”

I nodded. “Should we build on *Spiderman* or introduce her to a new superhero?”

“A new one.”

I thought for a moment and then picked from the lowest shelf. “How about we introduce her to Stargirl? She’s DC, not Marvel, and about the same age as Spiderman in the new films.”

“Sounds perfect.” The woman took the comic. “Now, do you sell graphic novels too? You know, the ones made from regular books?”

“A few,” I said. “We mostly have original graphic novels, but some are novel-based, and I have the perfect one for a nine-year-old girl.”

I stepped around the rack to the graphic novels. The one I was looking for was on the bottom because it was technically a kids’ book.

“Here.” I held out a hardcover of *A Wrinkle in Time*, the graphic novel edition.

Her face lit up. “I remember this book. It was one of my favorites growing up. I didn’t know it was a graphic novel.”

“It hasn’t been for long,” I said. “One of my favorites too. Just about the only thing that I ever read as a kid.”

“Meg Murry was the first female protagonist in a young adult science fiction novel, did you know that?” She lightly traced the picture on the front. “I wanted to be just like her when I grew up.”

“Has she read it?” I asked. “Your boss’s daughter?”

“I’m not sure,” the woman said. “But she’ll love this.”

I nodded. “I think so too. There’s a reason it’s done so well after all these years.”

“What reasons do you think those are?” The way she looked at me made me feel like her question wasn’t just polite curiosity.

It was as if I was being tested. Not in a snotty, condescending sort of way. More like a challenge based on curiosity.

“People like seeing themselves in heroes. It’s why there’s been such a push recently for diversity. We’re tired of being expected to relate to white men as the only heroes.” I thought back to the reasons I loved the book. “And Meg’s not just a girl. She’s a non-popular girl with glasses and braces and a love of numbers. Everything that a girl wasn’t supposed to be, especially not in the sixties.”

“You put a lot of thought into that answer.”

I shrugged. “I like having actual reasons for my opinions.”

“Do you like statistics?”

“I’ve always liked numbers and figures,” I answered honestly. “And I’ve enjoyed the statistics classes I’ve taken.”

After studying me for a moment, she extended her hand. “My name is Tuesday Boswell.”

I gave her my name and shook her hand. I didn't know why. I thought it was weird how she kept asking me questions. She wasn't creepy. It was more like she was figuring something out.

“Have you ever heard of MIRI?”

“Vaguely. I know it’s a big ass company here in Seattle, but that’s about it.” Now I was baffled.

“Did you know that part of what they do is statistical analysis?”

“Interesting. I did not.” I meant it, but I had no idea why she was telling me any of this.

“There’s an opening for a position in that department. Are you free Friday morning?”

I blinked at the question before forcing my mouth to work. “Yeah.”

“Excellent.” She beamed at me. “Come to MIRI at ten o’clock Friday morning for your interview.”

“I don’t have a college degree,” I protested. “I’ve taken classes, but that’s all.”

She waved a dismissive hand. “Trust me, MIRI looks more at what people can do rather than what their education is.”

“Do you work in hiring for the company or something?”

Her smile widened. “Or something.” She gestured toward the counter. “I think I have everything I need here.”

Before she left, she reminded me about MIRI at ten on Friday. The offer kept ringing in my head. I didn’t get it. If MIRI were looking to hire someone like me, they had to be pretty desperate. But it would be fun to see what happened.

Five

Harlee

I wrestled with my decision all night but finally admitted that it was time for a change. I wasn't working today, but my boss Bert was, and I needed to talk to him.

I waved to Wells as I walked by but didn't stop to talk. He was the only one who could convince me to stay. The closest thing I had to an actual friend at work, and while I'd like to keep in touch with him, that wasn't a big enough reason to stay.

Bert's door was half-open, but I knocked on it anyway.

"Come in." Bert smiled when he saw it was me. "Ah, Harlee, I was just getting ready to call you."

"Really?" I sat down in the chair across from him.

"Wells filled me in on what happened yesterday with Lester. While I'm sorry for the stuff he said to you, I'm glad to have a reason to fire him finally. He always walked just right up to the line but never quite crossed over it until now. I just got off the phone with him, telling him that he's been terminated. He won't even be coming in to pick up his check. I'll mail it."

Shit. Now I was feeling horrible about quitting my job.

"All right, that's not a happy face. I would've thought you'd want Lester out of here." Bert leaned forward, his expression softening. "Something wrong?"

I shook my head. "I'm sorry. No, I'm glad he's gone."

"But?"

I sighed. "But I came in to give my two week's notice."

"Because of Lester?"

“Because I don’t do long-term very well.” I decided to give him most of the truth. “And I got another job offer.”

"I guess I always knew this would happen." Bert leaned back in his chair. "You're far too smart to be stuck here. Wells is getting trained to take over when I retire. I don't have a job like that to offer you. If you have a chance to find something good, a chance to realize the potential I see in you, take it."

I got a lump in my throat. Bert and I weren't close, but his genuine tone told me he meant everything he said. In contrast, my father didn't care if I wasted my potential. The only potential he saw was how it could benefit him.

"If two weeks isn't enough time, I'll see what I can do..."

“Not at all.” Bert waved off my offer. “I was going to suggest that you take the next week or two off.”

“What, huh? I don't get it?”

“It’s a little embarrassing.” Bert’s cheeks turned pink. "I'm dating this woman, and her son came to visit, and the only thing he talked about was comics. But I couldn't just tell him to hang out at the store, so I offered him a summer job. I just need to make it sound like he's doing me a favor."

“And if you’re short-staffed, that gives you the perfect opening.” I chuckled. “That’s a good plan.”

“Thanks.” He beamed, and then his smile fell. “You understand I’m not trying to get rid of you, right?”

I laughed again. “I do. And thank you.”

Let's hope my interview on Friday goes as well.

* * *

It was a crazy idea.

That's all I've been telling myself since Miss Boswell left the store earlier this week. I said it out loud more than once this morning when I'd dressed for my interview.

I never considered myself working in an office. Hell, that's why I never got a degree. To be honest, those types of jobs weren't my cup of tea. It wasn't that I was lazy. It was more that I lacked ambition. Minimum wage jobs suited me fine, especially ones where I could be myself and forget my past.

So why was I standing in the guest parking lot, staring up at the MIRI building, working up the courage to go inside?

Maybe a part of me thought this was the sort of job that would've made my mom proud. She would've been proud of me no matter where I worked. She never cared about diplomas or making a lot of money. Mom only wanted me to be happy.

I cleared my throat and pushed back the memories—no need to get my hopes up or count on anything. I'd do the interview, see where things went. If I didn't get the job, maybe I'd look into moving. Seattle was starting to bore me a little.

The dark blue streaks in my hair were showing, but otherwise, I had dressed conservatively. A business dress code wasn't a problem for me at work, but I wouldn't give myself away completely. That hair was me right now.

"I have an appointment," I said to the man behind the lobby desk.

"With whom?"

"I honestly don't know," I replied with an embarrassed laugh. "Tuesday Boswell told me to come for an interview at ten."

His professional smile turned into a genuine one. "Of course. Miss Boswell mentioned you might show up." He handed me a guest badge and sent me to the elevator, telling me the floor.

When the doors opened, Tuesday was there, smiling from ear to ear.

"Mr. McCrae is right this way." She led me down a hall. "I told him I met you in the comic book store and how you helped me find a present for

Evanne, in case he mentions it.”

Suddenly, butterflies erupted in my stomach, and I rubbed my palms together. I was more than a little nervous. We reached the end of the hall, and Tuesday knocked on the door.

“Mr. McCrae, Harlee Sumpter is here.”

A pleasant male voice came from inside the office. “Come in.”

As I walked around Tuesday, she nodded at her boss. Is there anything else I can help you with?”

“No, thank you.” The man behind the desk stood up. “Ms. Sumpter, I’m Alec McCrae.” He held out his hand.

“It’s nice to meet you, Mr. McCrae.” As we shook, I hoped my hand wasn’t clammy.

“Have a seat.” He gave me a polite smile and gestured to the chair in front of me. “Ms. Boswell spoke highly of you, both as an individual and as a professional asset. He paused for a moment. “You should know her compliments aren't given lightly.”

My chest tightened.

“And, she's a good judge of character.”

"She seems to be a wonderful woman."

He nodded. "Aye. Still, I have a few questions for you.”

I realized he had an accent. Scottish. I’d read about MIRI being founded in Scotland by Patrick McCrae, Alec’s father. I’d never been there, but it was on my bucket list. Someday.

My thoughts went to the back of my mind. "Yes, of course."

The number of hours you have spent at various universities is impressive, but you have never completed a degree. Why is that the case?”

Clearing my throat, I continued. "I never did well in traditional schools. As you can see, I hold a GED rather than a regular diploma. I had trouble

choosing just one major. As a result, I was never able to accumulate enough hours in one specific field to earn a degree."

"I understand." Alec tipped his mouth up in a half-smile. "What caught your eye?" Which specific classes piqued your interest?"

"Facts are important to me. Checklists. I like writing the pros and cons of a decision and looking at it from every angle. Understanding why things happen. I'm fascinated by statistics in particular."

Slowly, he nodded. "According to your employment history, you never stayed in one place for more than a year. Why is that?"

"I get bored easily," I confessed. "Before you ask, I have never been diagnosed with ADHD or anything like that. It's just that I get bored."

"Every child is different," Alec said softly, and I could see something in his eyes that told me he understood. "I'm sure your parents did what they thought was best for you."

I didn't bother correcting him. I have a complicated family history. "I always thought that." At least about my mom.

He turned serious as his smile faded. "I'm almost finished—just a few words on the business rules. Respect for the policies I have here is essential to me."

I nodded in agreement.

"For example, we prohibit fraternization with our clients. That may seem like a suggestion to some, but not to me. It is also the same for relationships between supervisors and their subordinates. Do you agree with such rules?"

I took my time before answering. "I do. I think you're the sort of man who wouldn't just give random rules without good reasons. Company policies should be followed unless someone's life or health is at stake."

He smiled, and I knew he liked what I said. "Perfect. Only have one last question for you. Do you want to work here? Don't feel obliged to say so just because Ms. Boswell spoke well of you. I would prefer it if you came into the job with a passion."

"I asked myself the same question," I confessed. "I always look for something I enjoy about every job. But this one's different. I don't need to look for anything, because I like it all. And I like the idea of having to use my brain for once."

He gave me a long, searching look and then nodded. "Ms. Boswell was right about you. I'll tell you what, Ms. Sumpter, I'd like to offer you the position."

I just stared at him for a moment. I thought things were going well, but I didn't expect a flat-out offer.

"You don't have to decide now, of course. Take your—"

"I can start Monday," I blurted out. Heat flooded my cheeks. "I mean, yes, thank you. I'd love to work here."

What the fuck just happened?

Baylen

The seatbelt sign above me illuminated, and I braced myself for another round of turbulence as the plane descended for landing.

This time a week ago, I never imagined I'd be flying to Seattle today. And definitely not on a commercial flight. Usually, I'd have taken our family jet, but after I left my parents' house, I knew I had to do this on my own, and not only because my parents had essentially cut me off from the family's business funds.

If I went to them and apologized, admitted that they were right, perhaps I could have at least used the jet. But I still believed in this product. And while I had vowed never to mix business and pleasure again, I didn't think it was always a bad idea. How could a person choose whom to love? Love just happened. It's there, or it's not.

The plane shook again, and the woman next to me woke with a start, her expression one of confusion.

"Where are we?" Brigh Flitton, my assistant, asked.

"Landing. Or crashing, maybe." I clenched my hands deep into the armrests. "Brace yourself."

Another violent jolt rattled through the plane, and the captain's soothing voice echoed from the speaker. "I apologize for the minor bumps. We're experiencing high winds as we descend into Seattle. Please remain seated with your seatbelt fastened."

Brigh tugged my hand. "Don't worry. Everything will be fine."

Right.

When Brigh and I reached the baggage claim nearly an hour later, I had to admit that we made it to the ground safely. I still wasn't so sure if I would say everything was fine. It was evening here in Seattle, but early morning

back home, and my body felt it.

I hated jet lag, almost as much as I hated flying.

Exhaustion and a massive headache told me I would need to change my original plans for today. I couldn't meet Alec for a drink tonight. Not like this. Lunch tomorrow would have to be soon enough.

* * *

Knowing that the time difference would have me up in the wee hours of the morning, I took some sleeping pills that knocked me out until mid-morning. The shower helped me wake up some, but I was still a little foggy as I checked my reflection to ensure I hadn't missed a spot shaving.

I appreciated Brigh's help over the weekend and her willingness to accompany me to Seattle with brief notice. She fully deserved a bonus when we returned home. I just hoped I'd have the money to do it.

The reminder on my phone alerted me that it was time to leave. Even though Alec was my friend, this was primarily a business lunch, which meant Brigh would be coming with me to take notes. I didn't feel the need to text her a reminder, though. She was great at remembering details. It was one of the things that made her an invaluable employee.

Cast in point, I stepped into the hallway just as Brigh came out of the suite across from me.

"Perfect timing," she said with a bright smile. "I already rang for a car."

"Brilliant." I gestured for her to enter the elevator ahead of me and joined her. "Did you take in any sites after breakfast?"

"I went to Chihuly Garden and Glass," she said. "The desk clerk recommended it. A local 'artist.'"

She made the air quotes as if her tone hadn't conveyed her thoughts about the exhibit.

"An entire museum for a single person." She shook her head.

Correction. Museum, not exhibit.

"I prefer European entertainment," she continued, "and I had always heard that American tastes ran to the uncomfortable, but that was...I canna understand what anyone would see in *that*."

I would have called her a snob, but I knew far too many people who would have said the same, regardless of the actual quality of the art Brigh had seen. My parents would most likely have concurred immediately, which didn't make me any more inclined to agree.

Not wishing to engage in a conversation—or debate—I changed the subject.

"You have the address for the restaurant?"

"Of course." She pulled up her notes on her phone and gave the address to the driver before buckling herself in.

During the ride to the restaurant, I reviewed my business pitch and had Brigh check my notes for mistakes. The last thing I wanted was to present the wrong numbers. Nothing spelled amateur more than getting the facts wrong.

She smiled as she handed me the notes back. "You'll be brilliant," she said, giving my hand a squeeze that didn't seem entirely appropriate, but was welcomed at the moment.

I hoped she was right. I had too much riding on this to fail, too much to prove.

Alec was waiting for us, dressed in the sort of business casual that didn't look out of place here, even late on a Saturday morning. If he thought my suit and tie were too formal, he didn't say it. Instead, he greeted me with a smile and a handshake and invited us to sit down.

We chatted while placing our orders, then moved on to business.

The air seemed to shift, and suddenly, my palms were sweating. It was daft, I knew. Alec was my closest friend, closer to me than even my own flesh and blood. He didn't judge me when everything with Angie fell apart. He was a businessman, but he understood what it meant to be human too.

"You said before that your product is in the clothing industry." Alec must have sensed that I was having difficulty starting. "That's a large field."

Right. Start with the basics. "I have a patent on a new type of strapless brassiere." I took a steadying breath. "There are strapless bras for women of all shapes and sizes, but larger chested women often have trouble finding one that gives them the support they need."

I continued for a quarter of an hour, explaining my idea of producing a limited stock for new investors. To get them on board, I had to show an entire business and market plan.

"Which is why I'm here." I reached the end of my spiel with a feeling of relief. "I need help compiling the marketing information. To support my claims, I need statistical data and a marketing strategy. I want to find investors who believe in me and my vision, not because I'm a McFann."

Alec nodded slowly, a thoughtful expression on his face. I knew that look. I'd seen it often when we were at university together. Everyone knew Alec McCrae was intelligent, but I always had a feeling that he was even brighter than most people believed. I could almost hear the wheels in his mind turning.

"MIRI is the right place for you," he said. "And I think I have the perfect person to work on your account. A new hire, Ms. Sumpter. She can give a fresh take on things and a female perspective, which I think is far too often disregarded." He gave me a slight smile. In my brother Carson's opinion, most women's fashion is designed by men, primarily to look good in their eyes, with little consideration for functionality.

"I hadn't thought of it that way," I admitted. "A valid point."

Alec nodded. "And I think Ms. Sumpter would be the perfect person to offer that view."

“She must have quite the resumé for you to trust her with your closest friend’s account,” Brigh spoke up. “I would have thought you’d want to work on Baylen’s project yourself.”

Before I could figure out how to respond to my assistant’s comment, Alec said, “I’m glad to see how passionate you are about your work. Rest assured, one of the first things a successful businessman learns is how to spot the talents of those around him and best utilize them. In MIRI, the part of finding the right person for each project is mine.” His tone was mild, his expression unreadable. “And I excel at my job, Ms. Flitton.”

“Of course, Alec.” I gave Brigh a sharp look. “I trust your judgment.”

“My apologies, Mr. McCrae.” She wore a tight smile that didn’t quite reach those dark eyes of hers. “I didn’t mean to imply otherwise.”

He inclined his head and then turned to me. “I had Tuesday clear a spot on my calendar for Monday morning. If you have any specific ideas, bring them. I’ll introduce you to Ms. Sumpter, and you can get started right then.”

“Thank you, Alec. My parents have made it abundantly clear that they have no faith in this at all and if it fails...” I shook my head. “I know how it could look for MIRI if things go badly.”

“If I didn’t believe in you, I wouldn’t have taken this as a business meeting,” Alec said with a smile. “Is it possible that it won’t work out? Aye. No business is without risks. But I agree that what you have sounds like a solid investment. I wouldn’t accept any account otherwise.”

Something in my chest squeezed. When I met Alec and the others, I understood what it was like to have true friends, and I never once doubted that they liked me for who I was.

“I do, however, have one request.” Alec’s eyes glinted with humor.

“Aye?”

“Please be kind to Ms. Sumpter. It will be her first day.” He grinned. “But not too kind. She doesn’t need her head clouded by some bloody Scot hitting on her.”

“Wanker,” I muttered as he laughed. “Don’t worry. I have no intention of hitting on your employee. If I want a date, I’ll look elsewhere.”

“Glad to hear it.” He raised a hand to signal our server. “Now, let’s hear about the dessert options.”

Seven

Harlee

“Water, please,” I shouted over the music.

I’d already had two shots of tequila and a beer at the previous bar Jin, and I had gone to, and while that had done wonders flooding my brain with dopamine, it did little to keep me hydrated. I was sweating, and I wasn’t the only one. My best friend – pretty much my only friend – was still spinning around out there, her sable-colored hair plastered to her forehead. Between it being a Saturday night and a live band performing, the place was packed. I doubted the next stop on our pub crawl would be quite as crowded.

“Two bottles of water!” I held up two fingers.

By the time the bartender handed over two bottles, Jin Renshaw had joined me, dark eyes sparkling. Three inches taller than me, with just as many curves, she was a knock-out. When we first met, we were both teenagers, but I never had any of the confidence problems Jin did. She was a gawky teen, overweight, and with bad skin. By the time we aged out of the system, that extra weight had become curves, and her skin had cleared up. She learned how to do her make-up, got a few piercings, and finally had the money to act on her fashion sense. Now, she had her pick of men.

Which was a good thing since she liked all types.

“Water.” I held out a bottle.

“Tequila!” she shouted.

I narrowed my eyes. Jin drank more than me, though she didn’t always remember to drink water too. “Water first.”

“Yes, ma’am.” She laughed and drank half the bottle in one go. “Always looking out for me.”

“Always.” I bumped her arm with mine, smiling.

She was right. I was always looking out for her. Ever since I was fifteen and some assholes jumped her. They paid for it, and we became inseparable. And it was a good thing because she didn't always make the best decisions, mainly when men and alcohol were involved.

"I'm so happy for you." Jin threw her arm around my neck. "Your dream job!"

I wasn't sure if I could call it my 'dream job' since I hadn't dreamed of a specific job or career, but I understood what she meant. Furthermore, saying I had my dream job was a lot easier than saying I had a full-time job with benefits. Maybe.

"I wish those assholes from school could see you now," she said. "All those people who thought we were trash because we were foster kids. They'd all be kissing your ass if they knew you were working at a place like MIRI."

I doubted that, but I wasn't going to argue with her. It never did any good to go against Jin, especially when she had this much to drink.

"Jin?"

She turned to see a hulking blond with stringy hair and a tight black t-shirt coming toward us. Despite how packed The Black Crow was tonight, people moved out of his way. Considering he looked like someone crossed a Hell's Angel with an actual angel of hell, I wasn't surprised. Nor was I surprised when Jin launched herself at him with a squeal.

She and Quaid had been on-again-off-again for the last six years, usually off when he was in jail for whatever small-time shit he got caught doing. Last I heard, the guy was doing two to five for possession with intent to sell. He must've gotten out for good behavior. Or he rolled on someone higher up the food chain.

Still, Quaid was better than some of the other assholes Jin dated. At least he never hurt her. Hell, he never even cheated on her. They argued and broke up over stupid stuff. He was usually getting arrested again or getting drunk and forgetting her birthday—that sort of thing.

When they started making out, I just laughed and shook my head. Some other women might've been bothered if they'd gone out with their friend and she

went off with some guy, but Jin and I weren't like that. I gave her a little wave to let her know she could keep on going. I could entertain myself for a while.

I drained my water and ordered another shot. I was here to celebrate, after all. Because I didn't have to work tomorrow, I didn't keep track of the time. Instead, I just enjoyed the music. The band was excellent, putting on a good show and had people dancing.

As I finished my drink, the bartender slid me a glass of something pink and pointed to a guy across the bar. The man looked like he was in his forties and his clothes were too nice for this place. Likely a divorced bank or investment manager, looking for a bit of fun. Not that I cared what a hookup did for a living. Hell, I rarely asked for names.

I nodded in his direction and took a drink, waiting for him to come to me. He wasn't bad-looking. It didn't take long. Another sip later, and he plopped down on the stool next to me.

“Hey.”

I played with the straw. “Hey.”

“I'm Craig.”

“Harlee.”

“I like it. Harlee. Like the bike.” He grinned like he'd said something clever.

Oh hell, he was one of those.

“I wanted a motorcycle when I was in college, but my girl, she said it was a waste of money,” Craig continued. “We wanted to get married right after we graduated, so it made sense. I should've known she just cared about money. Then, after I work my ass off for eighteen years, she suddenly decides she has to find herself.”

My eyes met the bartender's, and he raised his eyebrows, mouthing *sorry* when I rolled my eyes.

“She found herself all right. In her yoga instructor's pants.” Craig sighed and leaned back. “And now they're off in Aruba on my dime and I'm stuck here

with my dick in my hand.” He turned his head and leered at me. “Unless you want it in *your* hand.”

And that was enough.

I was on my feet and weaving through the crowd before Craig could protest. I heard a shout behind me but didn’t turn. I would’ve been more polite if he’d just been annoying, talking about his ex, but his last comment had lost him the right to that.

The ladies’ room would be an excellent place to take a moment. Craig was so wasted he’d forget about me and move on to someone else. I just needed to give him a couple of minutes.

My trip to the bathroom was more difficult than I thought it would be as people jostled me from side to side, and I lost my bearings. Then, my leg bumped against the stage, and a hand caught my arm.

“Hey!” I looked up to see the lead singer grinning at me. He let me go but held out his hand.

“Come on up here.”

I laughed, my sense of adventure returning. “Why the hell not?”

I put my hand in his and let him help me up onto the stage.

“What’s your name?” he asked.

“Harlee.” I squinted into the spotlight.

“What do you think, Harlee? Would you like to help us sing a song?”

I heard the crowd yell in encouragement, even though I barely saw them. Maybe it was the liquor, or perhaps I was just in the right mood, but whatever it was made me turn to the guitarist to borrow his instrument.

He gave me a skeptical look but handed it over. The crowd went quiet, and I could feel their eyes on me. I’m sure they’d expected a drunken, off-key, karaoke version of “Wrecking Ball” or something, but now they were curious.

I settled the guitar strap around my shoulders and stepped up to the mic. After adjusting it to my height, I played a few notes before launching into the whole opening riff of the newest Paxton Gorham song. The band caught on, and the audience went crazy.

When I finished, I basked in their admiration for a minute and then made to take the guitar off.

“More!” Several members of the audience shouted, and then the others took up the chant. “More! More! More!”

I held up a hand, and the noise faded enough for me to know I had their attention. “If I’m going to do another song, I need some help. I came here with a friend tonight, and I make my best music when I’m with her. Jin! Get your ass up here!”

A minute later, the bassist pulled Jin onto the stage, and she motioned for his guitar. With a shrug, he handed it over and went to stand next to the guitarist.

“‘Love is a Battlefield’?” she asked as she settled the instrument into place.

I nodded, and she stepped up to the microphone next to me. I strummed the first few chords, and she plucked the strings, getting a feel for the bass. It only took a few seconds before we were ready to go, and then we slipped into the familiar roles music gave us.

A couple of weeks after she and I connected, we were walking around the city and saw guitars hanging in the window of a second-hand music shop. We arranged to do some janitorial work in exchange for using the instruments and getting the occasional lesson. By the following year, we formed a band. We weren’t ‘recording contract’ good, but we played the occasional bar and party. The other members came and went, but we did our thing whenever possible, though it had been a while.

But that didn’t matter. Playing with Jin was like slipping on a familiar coat, and a smile spread across my face as we began to sing.

Eight

Baylen

My eyes opened, blinking into the darkness, my head muddled with sleep. For a moment, I didn't remember where I was, but then I saw the glowing red numbers of a bedside clock and remembered. After lunch with Alec earlier today, I came back to the hotel, too tired to do anything but kick off my shoes before falling into bed. Sleep was always how my body coped with stress. In university, the day after finals were over, I would sleep for ten hours straight.

I looked at the clock again—nine o'clock. I groaned as I sat up, reaching for my phone. My stomach growled, and my head gave an angry throb, not surprising as I saw it was nighttime, and all I'd had to eat and drink had been at lunch hours ago. I made a quick call down for some food and then hopped into the shower. I needed to be up and about for at least a few hours before trying to go back to sleep. I was unsure how much time I'd be in the US, so I needed to get my body on Seattle time.

I'd been out of the shower only a few minutes when the knock for room service came. I grabbed the hotel robe and put it on as I answered the door. A pretty brunette smiled as she pushed the food cart into my room, her eyes moving over my body in a way that made me think she was picturing what I looked like underneath the robe.

I didn't mind, though I wouldn't have a dalliance with a member of the hotel staff. Not knowing how long I'd be staying here, if I slept with this young woman and she didn't take a one-night stand well, I could end up with unpleasant things in my food or my room. It wasn't worth the risk, not when there was a whole city out there with women I didn't know.

"Thank you," I said as I pulled a bill from my wallet. "Have a good night."

It could have been my imagination, but she looked a little disappointed that I didn't ask her to stay. I had told Alec that I could find my own dates, and that's what I would do after I ate. The food was delicious, as was the beer, but I wanted something a little more substantial, and I planned to get it

somewhere else. Somewhere I could also find someone to take the edge off.

Not familiar with the city, I did what I would typically do in a strange place and went to the young woman at the front desk. Her name tag read Zoe, and she looked at least ten years younger than me, though plenty old enough for the sultry look she gave me when I approached. If I had met her somewhere else, I might have seen where things would go.

Regardless, I gave her my best charming smile. “I’m looking for a place to get a drink.”

“You’re Scottish, right?” Her gaze dropped to my lips for a moment.

“Aye, I am.”

“Are you looking for a taste of home or something more locally?”

I had to admit I was impressed that she hadn’t just given me the name of a club...or told me she’d take care of me when she got off work. “As long as it’s close and has good music, either one is fine.”

She appeared to think for a minute and then nodded. “The Black Crow. It’s a Scottish bar two blocks over, and they have a live band on Saturday nights.” She winked at me. “I always go there after work on Saturdays.”

I smiled to show that I heard, but I didn’t offer any encouragement. Even if she showed up, I wouldn’t lay a hand on her. Not even Zoe couldn’t tempt me to break my no-hotel-employees rule. With a polite nod, I thanked her and headed toward the front doors. It was a clear, beautiful night, and I’d spent too much time over the last couple of days sitting around. The opportunity to stretch my legs was appealing, so I took it.

As I walked, I decided that tonight, I would just let things happen, see where they went. Not listen to my heart. That had just fucked everything up. No, I wasn’t going to listen to my head or my heart. I would simply exist in the moment, let it be whatever it would be.

I could hear the music before I reached the bar, some old school rock which made me smile. I’d honestly expected either bagpipes because Zoe had called it a Scottish bar, country because it was an American bar, or dance music because it was more club than bar. What I heard would’ve been better

classified as classic American rock. I wasn't familiar enough to know if it was a cover or an original, but the band sounded talented.

As I stepped inside, I immediately registered how packed the place was, but the second thing I noticed was that everyone seemed completely riveted by whoever was on stage. When I saw her, I understood. Her voice was great, but her skill on the guitar was amazing. Her friend was equally as talented, but it was the blonde with the black and blue streaked hair who I couldn't look away from, not even as I moved around the crowd to find a place at the bar. She wore some sort of leather and lace dress that managed to show off a fantastically curvaceous body and a pair of chunky black boots that somehow looked sexy even though common sense said they shouldn't.

I ordered a shot and downed it without really noticing what I was drinking. Everything in me was focused on the gorgeous woman in the spotlight. I felt like I could barely even breathe until the song ended and she handed over the guitar.

At first, I thought she was taking a break, but then a man came to the mic and asked for another round for the two ladies who'd done a wonderful job and I realized that the women weren't part of the band. Pity, because I would have liked to listen to her more. Maybe I'll catch a break with her later, but first, I needed to find the damn loo somewhere.

Nine

Harlee

Jin and I grinned at each other as we played the last notes, and for a moment, it felt like we had been transported back to a time when playing music together was our way of escaping. Our lives had never been easy, but music was always constant with us. Whenever we picked up a guitar or sang together, it was like no time passed, and for a moment everything was suddenly easy and simple.

The applause was deafening, cheers and whistles, people calling for more. It sounded like they could have listened to us play all night, which just made me smile even harder as I handed the guitar back to the owner. Always leave the audience wanting more.

Jin linked her arm through mine and the two of us climbed off the stage. Quaid was right there waiting and swept Jin up in his arms. Their mouths fused together as Quaid stumbled backward, hitting the wall with a thud. I laughed and shook my head. Jin would be occupied for a while. That was okay. If she wanted to end the night here instead of three bars down, I didn't mind.

I could keep drinking here.

Singing had made me thirsty, so I headed back to the bar, first to order another water and then to get something else. Except before I could order anything, a glass with yellow-orange liquid settled on the counter in front of me. I looked up to see Craig smiling at me.

"It's a Golden Margarita."

"I see that." I tapped the glass with a nail.

"Drink up."

Craig was obnoxious and crude, clearly unable to take no for an answer, and yet he'd still bought me another drink. I didn't have any specific reason to be

suspicious, but I'd been taking care of myself for a long time and I wasn't foolish enough to drink from an open glass that I hadn't had my eyes on every minute.

"I'm not a fan of tequila," I lied.

He frowned. "I thought I saw you drinking tequila shots earlier."

Shit. "Right. I meant lime juice."

Craig's face twisted into something ugly. "I paid for the damn drink."

"Here." The bartender set a glass bottle in front of me. "On the house for that stellar performance."

"Back off, asshole." Craig pointed at the bartender. "I saw her first."

"Fuck you," I snapped. "You don't get to call 'dibs' on me."

That ugly expression on his face deepened. "I bought you drinks. You owe me."

Dammit. He was one of those.

"I don't owe you shit." Out of the corner of my eye, I could see the bartender at the other end of the bar, too far away for me to signal him. I was all for handling my own shit, but I'd rather have security throw this asshole out rather than have to kick him in the nuts myself.

"C'mon," he said, "cut a guy a break." He reached out for me, and I took a step back. He came closer. "Don't be a bitch. Give me a kiss."

I had a decision to make.

I could shout for someone to help me. Even though the place was loud, people were close enough that I was sure someone would hear me, and I knew that they took consent very seriously here. But it would make a scene and that was the sort of thing that would put a damper on my celebratory mood.

Or I could continue to handle things myself, going as far as to physically respond. A slap could get him pissed enough to just call me names and stomp off. It could also make him violent.

The options went through my mind lightning fast, but before I could choose one, another body suddenly appeared at my side.

“There you are, love.”

Craig stopped at the words, and I looked up at the owner of the deep voice. Auburn hair, the reddish tone visible only when the lights flashed a certain way, and eyes that I thought were some shade of blue. Over six feet tall and clean-shaven, the man was hot.

But it was the look in those eyes that had me smiling and saying, “Hey, sweetie.”

“Who’s he?” Craig asked as he took a few steps back.

“I’m her boyfriend. Who are you?” The man’s voice was mild, but he had the sort of presence that meant he probably didn’t need to sound angry to intimidate people.

“You didn’t say you had a boyfriend,” Craig muttered as he shoved his hands into his pockets. With a last glare at me, he walked away.

Once he’d disappeared into the crowd, my ‘boyfriend’ turned toward me, his body still close enough for me to smell the rich scent of his cologne or body wash. I liked it. Both the smell and how close he was.

“I’m Baylen.”

“Harlee.” I held out a hand and he shook it laughing, a pleasant, rumbling sound that twisted things in me. “I like your accent.”

“And I like yours.” He leaned down to avoid shouting and his breath ghosted over my neck, making me shiver.

“I have an accent?” I leaned in closer to him.

“Oh, aye. A lovely American one.”

Smokey blue. That was the best description of his eye color, I decided.

“Where are you from?”

“Scotland.” His fingers brushed against my arm, sending electricity dancing across my skin. “At the risk of sounding like the jerk who just left, may I buy

you a drink?”

“You’re nothing like that asshole,” I said. “He never asked. And yes, you may.”

Baylen flashed me that charming smile, his gaze heating. “What would you like?”

“A Bellini would be great.”

He nodded and flagged down the bartender, ordering my drink and one of his own, a whiskey brand I didn’t recognize called Shannon’s. It wasn’t surprising that I didn’t know about it. I’d never been much of a whiskey drinker. When it came to anything harder than a beer, I preferred either a straight shot of tequila or something fruity.

“I enjoyed your performance,” he said as we waited for our drinks. “You’re not part of the band though?”

I shook my head. “My friend, Jin, and I did the whole band thing for years. Now we mostly just play for us, but every so often we find other people who like to play.” I took a sip of my Bellini and nodded in appreciation. “Do you play anything?”

“I used to,” he said with a soft smile. “Piano. I haven’t played in a long time.”

In the pause that followed, I knew we were at a place where the night could go one of two ways. We could have a pleasant conversation while we finished our drinks and then go our separate ways, or I could find out if the electricity I felt when he touched me was mutual.

I knew which one I wanted.

“I’m going to make a suggestion,” I said as I leaned closer. Our knees touched and even that little bit of contact sent a thrill through me. “Tell me if I’m mis-reading the situation and it’s no harm, no foul.”

He didn’t move his leg away from mine. “All right.”

“I’m looking for a good time tonight. No strings. No past or future, just the present. So what do you think about us not talking about anything personal,

getting a couple more drinks, and then maybe getting a hell of a lot more personal someplace private? Maybe a couple times if you think you can manage?”

How he responded would say a lot about whether or not the two of us would get along sexually. Some guys thought it was ‘uncouth’ for women to be that direct when it came to sex. That only the man was ever supposed to lead. While I was all for some alpha male in the bedroom, a man better be willing to take some direction because I didn’t waste my time with a guy who thought a couple pumps with his dick was enough to get a woman off.

If my words shocked him, his expression didn’t show it. Instead, his eyes darkened to the blue of a summer evening sky, the heat in them warming me in a way different than alcohol. This was the sort of heat that had me pressing my thighs together and needing something more substantial between them.

“I’ll accept that challenge,” he said finally. “Would you like to dance?”

I finished my drink and set my empty glass next to his on the bar. Taking the hand he offered, I couldn’t stop a shiver of anticipation. Sometimes, a quick fuck was exactly what I wanted, and even though I didn’t want this to be anything but a one-night stand, I didn’t want it to be something we did in a shadowed corner. I wanted to make a night out of it. Baylen, it seemed, was on the same wavelength since he didn’t immediately suggest we go back to his place.

Dancing was the perfect foreplay. We could learn how to move with each other here and use that later. Besides, there was something sexy about the press of two bodies, separated only by a few layers of clothes, knowing that there would be skin-to-skin contact later. Running my hands over his chest and wondering just how good that solid torso looked bare. The feel of his hands on my waist, fingers just touching the top of my ass, and knowing he’d be grabbing it soon.

It wasn’t going to take me long at all to get worked up, but that just meant the release would be all the sweeter.

This was going to be a great night.

Ten

Baylen

Walking back to the hotel with Harlee, my skin was buzzing. Her hand was clasped in mine and the feel of it was so natural, so right, that I had a hard time remembering that we met only a couple hours ago. If I was the sort of man who believed in things like past lives, I might have thought we lived before, maybe had a life together.

I laughed, the sound loud enough for her to look up at me. “I may have had a wee bit too much to drink.”

“Too much’ as in, I’d be taking advantage of you if I take you back to your hotel room, strip off your clothes, and have my wicked way with you?” Her eyes flashed with humor and heat, and her words sent my blood rushing south.

I was half-hard from the moment we started dancing and what she said only made it worse. I honestly couldn’t remember the last time a woman turned me on this much. Perhaps not even since I was a teenager, getting erections at the sight of a pretty girl.

Even Angie – no. I shook the thought of her aside. I was here to get away from memories of her.

“I’d be a sorry excuse for a Scot if I was that drunk,” I assured her. “The world’s not spinning.”

She laughed, a free, light sound that made me smile just from the sheer joy in it. Harlee was beautiful and sexy, but there was more to her than that. She was a hell of a woman.

The walk to my hotel was only a couple blocks, but by the time we reached it, I couldn’t keep my hands off her. First, it was an arm around her waist before we even entered the lobby, then a hand on her hip when we walked by the desk to the elevators.

The moment the doors closed, the last bit of restraint snapped. Not only mine, but hers as well, and she slammed into me, yanking my head down so she could claim my mouth.

She tasted like fruit and alcohol, delicious and something I could become addicted to far too easily. But I didn't let myself dwell on that now. Instead, I cupped her face in my hands and turned us to put her back against the wall. I took control of the kiss, plundering her mouth, greedy for her. She fisted my shirt, yanking it from my pants, hands shoved beneath the fabric to find bare skin. I groaned, nipping at her bottom lip.

Something dinged and she pulled away from me. I stepped toward her, mind still befuddled enough from that kiss that it took me a second to remember that we were in an elevator. Laughing – probably at the expression on my face – Harlee backed through the open door, crooking her finger at me. I followed, catching her hand and pulling her down the hall.

“If there are cameras in the elevator, we just gave them a hell of a preview,” Harlee said, sticking her hand in my back pocket and squeezing my ass. “And I can't wait to get to the main show.”

“If the kiss was any hint of what's to come, neither can I.” I pulled my key out of my pocket.

“Shit!” She clapped her hand over her mouth as if she just realized something. “That was loud.” Her words were muffled behind her hand.

“Something wrong?” I asked as I tapped the key on the lock.

“Do you have condoms?” she asked. “I have some in my purse, but I don't think they're gonna fit. Not what I felt in the elevator.”

Heat flooded my face and I suddenly realized that we were still standing in the hall. And she was definitely *not* talking quietly.

I tugged her into the room after me and closed the door. As she took off her boots, I said, “Why don't you take a seat on the couch? I believe there's champagne in the bar.”

As impatient as I was to have her, I needed a minute to calm down or this would be over far too quickly. Besides, I had an idea. A couple minutes later,

I joined her on the couch with two glasses of champagne. Not the best quality, but not the worst either, which was fine with me since that wasn't really the point of the champagne.

No, I had something else in mind for that.

"Thank you." She took the glass and took a sip, then laughed. "Bubbles."

"First time you've had champagne?"

She shook her head, a shadow crossing her eyes, there and gone in a fleeting moment. "It's just been a long time."

She didn't seem old enough for there to have been a 'long time' ago where she'd be old enough to have had alcohol, but perhaps that was why she'd seemed so troubled for a minute. Whatever it was, it was in a past that we agreed not to talk about and I simply leaned forward and kissed her. The electricity from the elevator came rushing back. I could practically hear it crackling.

She made a startled sound that quickly turned eager and reached for me, jostling her glass. A few drops of liquid spilled on my hand as she pulled back, laughing.

"Oops." She looked at her hand. "Sorry about that."

"Actually," I took her glass and set both of our glasses on the coffee table, "You just beat me to it."

"Beat you to what?" she asked as I caught her hand and raised it to my mouth. Keeping my eyes locked on hers, I slid her finger into my mouth. "Oh."

The tang of salt from her skin and the sweet, fruity flavor of the champagne flowed over my taste buds as I licked the liquid from her finger. A shiver went through her, her irises darkening.

"My turn." She grabbed the bottom of my shirt and yanked it over my head, hands greedy as she ran them over my torso, then shoved me back to lie down on the couch.

She grinned at me as she reached for her glass, holding my gaze as she tipped it, splashing the alcohol on my chest. The chill made me suck in a breath, and she laughed, leaning down to lick across my skin, chasing the droplets with her tongue.

“Fuck,” I groaned, my eyes closing. The wet heat of her mouth had me right back on the edge, the very reason I had the champagne in the first place. My cock pressed painfully against my zipper.

“Mmm. You taste good.”

I felt hands at my waist and my eyes flew open.

“Does *all* of you taste that good?” She tugged at my pants. “Let’s find out.”

“Isn’t it my turn?” I asked, reaching for her hands.

She swatted at me. “A gentleman would give a lady what she wants.”

“I never said I was a gentleman,” I pointed out.

“And I’m no lady.” The words had barely left her mouth before she had me in her hand and was wrapping her lips around me.

I let out a garbled yell that was either a curse or her name, but I didn’t know which. All I knew was that the hottest, sweetest mouth in the world was wrapped around my cock and it was all I could do to keep from coming.

Then, it was gone.

“As much as I want a better taste of that,” Harlee said. “I want it inside me more. Condom?”

I blinked at her for a minute, my brain still spinning. With a smug smile, she reached out and scraped her nail over my nipple, making me jump.

“Condom.”

I nodded, then dug in my pocket to retrieve one. She snatched it out of my hand and ripped it open, the eagerness on her face matching my own. Still, she was careful as she rolled it on, which told me as much about her as anything else she did tonight.

Then she was moving over me, pulling up her skirt to reveal a tiny black thong that covered very little. I grabbed her thighs, sliding my hands up to her hips, but not needing to direct her in any way. She knew exactly what she wanted, and I wasn't about to argue with the lady.

Pulling aside her panties she lowered herself onto my cock, her pussy already slick with arousal. We both moaned as she sank down in one smooth motion, a shudder going through her when she settled on my lap.

“Fuck, Bay.” She leaned forward, pressing her palms flat on my stomach. “You feel so damn good.”

I grunted in agreement, unable to form an intelligible word, not with her pussy squeezing me so tight. I could barely think, and even then, the only thoughts I had were consumed by the woman in front of me.

Then she began to move and even those thoughts fled. It was all heat and friction and pleasure. With every roll of her hips, she squeezed me, her nails digging into my chest. Keeping one hand on her hip, I dropped the other, moving it to where our bodies were joined. The moment my thumb found her clit, her body jerked.

“Yes,” she hissed. “Keep doing that.”

I did as I was told, rubbing the slippery bundle of nerves, changing speed and pressure based on the sounds Harlee was making until she began gasping, chanting my name, her body moving faster and faster until she cried out, tightening around me until it was nearly painful. I thrust up into her twice and then followed her over the edge.

With a burst of laughter, Harlee collapsed on me. “That was amazing.”

My arms went around her without conscious thought, the intimacy of the way we were laying unlost on me, but unimportant at the moment. I just liked the feel of her in my arms. We'd have to move soon enough.

I didn't know how long we laid there, but finally, Harlee sat up. “You're sticky.” She touched her cheek where it'd rested on my chest.

“The champagne was fun, but it's a wee bit messy.” I laughed.

“So’s sex, if you do it right,” she quipped. As she climbed off my lap, she added, “Case in point...”

“Right.” I sat up, removing the condom. “What do you say we take advantage of my large shower and clean up together?”

I knew my invitation was close to making this not a simple hook-up, but I hadn’t asked her to stay the night. I hoped she would accept, because I knew that this one little encounter on the couch wasn’t enough. I wanted more.

Her answer was to pull her dress over her head and drop it on the floor before turning and walking toward the – as Americans called it – bathroom in just her thong and matching strapless bra.

I had a moment to think that I’d like to see her in one of the bras I wanted to make and then I was stripping off my clothes and following her. She was already naked and turning on the water by the time I reached her, and I took the opportunity to linger in the doorway and admire what her dress had only hinted at before. Full breasts with tight, peach-colored nipples, and a nicely curved ass. Each curve the perfect size and shape to fit in my hands. Her body was stunning.

“Are you going to stand there staring or are you going to join me?” she asked as she stepped into the glass-enclosed stall.

“You put your hair up,” I said as I slid the shower door closed behind me.

“If I washed it, I’d need conditioner and then take the time to comb it out, dry it...” A sultry smile curved her lips. “I can think of other things I’d rather be doing with that time.”

My cock perked up at that. I always thought I had decent recovery time, but this was quick even for me, especially considering how much I drank tonight.

“But let’s get you cleaned up first,” she said, reaching for the body wash on the counter.

Instead of taking the cloth next to her, she squirted the gel into her hand and then rubbed her hands together, creating a pleasant-smelling foam. I watched, mesmerized, as she came closer. When she put her hands on my chest, I couldn’t suppress a shudder. How was it that I had been inside her less than

ten minutes ago and I still wanted her touch this badly?

As steam filled the room, she used her hands to wash me, fingers moving delicately over my sides before wrapping around my half-hard cock. Two firm strokes had me groaning and she was moving on, down to cup my balls, roll them in her hand, give a gentle squeeze. Then she was turning me around, running her hands over my shoulders and back, squeezing my ass. By the time she finished, I was erect and aching.

But it was now my turn to finally get my hands on her and I didn't intend to waste it.

Carefully adjusting the showerhead to keep the water out of her face, I then reached for the same body wash, taking secret pleasure in knowing that she would smell like me when she left. I pushed away the thought of her leaving and focused on the present. It wasn't difficult considering what I had in front of me.

I ran my hands across her shoulders and down her arms, over her palms and fingers, before moving to her waist. I slid my hands up her sides, my thumbs brushing against the sides of her breasts. Cupping her breasts, I explored the weight of them, the shape. I teased her nipples, plucking at them, rolling them between my fingers, all the while watching her face, seeing the way her lips parted, seeing what made her catch her lip between her teeth, what made her eyes close.

Finally, I made myself move on, running my hands down her thighs and then over her ass. When I finally slipped a finger between her folds, she whimpered, hands coming up to grab my forearms. I stroked her clit gently a few times, stopping only when her body began to sway.

"Baylen," she practically whined.

"Bedroom." My voice was rough. "I want you to come on my tongue."

Her eyes flew up to my face, pupils wide. "Fuck yes."

We rinsed and dried off quickly, just enough that we wouldn't soak my bed, and then we were tumbling onto the rumpled bedspread, mouths fused together, hands all over. When her fingers brushed my cock, I pulled back.

“No distractions.” I made my tone stern and the sparkle in her eyes as she held up her hands in that *I surrender* gesture just turned me on even more. I loved that she knew what she wanted and wasn’t afraid to take it or ask for it, but I also loved that she could switch and let me drive a bit. “Up on the pillows and spread your legs.”

Her cheeks flushed as she quickly moved to do as I said. I settled on my knees near the foot of the bed, waiting until she got comfortable and then parted her legs, showing me what I only felt before. Soft and pink and...

“Beautiful,” I breathed.

“No distractions, remember?” she chided, her tone a mixture of teasing and arousal.

“Aye.” I stretched out on my stomach and pulled her legs over my shoulders. I brushed the tip of my nose against her velvety skin, and breathed in the scent of her.

“Baylen...”

“Not distracted,” I said. “Appreciating.”

Before she could protest or argue, I licked her, a pass of my tongue from her core up to her clit. She gasped and her hips jerked, making me smile for a moment before I pressed my mouth against her. With lips and tongue, I explored her, the taste of her heady and addictive.

As I circled her clit with my tongue, she writhed, and I had to grab her hips to keep her still. My hands slid under her ass, squeezing the firm muscles and lifting her slightly, giving me a new angle as I dipped my tongue inside her, then moved back up to that most sensitive bit of flesh. I sucked it into my mouth, increasing suction until she wailed.

“Baylen!”

Fuck.

The sound went straight to my cock.

“Come for me,” I said. “I can feel you close.”

“I am.” She grabbed my hair, trying to twist in my grasp. “So close.”

“Then come.” I took her clit between my lips again and lightly bit down.

Her surprised gasp immediately became a cry of pleasure, and I watched her orgasm break over her, wave after wave as I used my tongue to push her from one climax into another. Only after her body went limp did I pull back, pleased with my work.

She was gorgeous like this, sprawled out and panting, her skin flushed, eyes wild. I wrapped my hand around my cock, biting the inside of my cheek as I stroked myself slowly. Only a few times before I stopped and moved to retrieve what else I’d need.

By the time I returned to the bed, Harlee was sitting up, eyes hooded, smile full of promise. She crooked a finger at me, and I came to her, rolling on the condom as I went. As full of smiles and laughter the night had been, something much more serious had settled between us. Nothing we wanted to talk about, not if we didn’t want to risk ruining this moment.

Neither of us spoke as I settled in the cradle of her legs. She reached between us, guiding me to her entrance. With our eyes locked together, she raised her hips as I surged forward, our bodies coming together in one smooth motion, like two pieces of a puzzle fitting together perfectly. I let out a breath, the immensity of what I was feeling making my chest tighten.

She reached up, locking her fingers together behind my neck, and using the leverage to rock her body against mine. The motion broke through the strange heaviness that held me in place and I began to move. Like when we danced earlier tonight, our bodies found a rhythm that brought us together with the sort of deliberation that came from having the same goal.

I covered her mouth with mine and her nails raked across my shoulders. My tongue dueled with her, her urgency feeding mine as the pressure inside me built. With each thrust, the tension between us grew, pleasure stretched into tight until, finally, it snapped.

She cried out my name, clinging to me as I curved my body around hers, every muscle tense as I came. Her body shook, soft little whimpers escaping as she dug her nails into my back, sending sharp bites of pain mixing in with

everything else. I pressed my face against the side of her neck, gasping for air as I came back down.

I stayed where I was for a minute, but then rolled off, getting up to dispose of the condom. Everything I'd been feeling rushed back, welling up until words burst out.

"I don't have anything planned for tomorrow. Would you be interested in getting together? Getting to know each other a bit. I know it's not what we discussed, but..." My voice trailed off as I came back into the bedroom and realized the reason she hadn't spoken up was because she'd fallen asleep.

With a smile, I climbed back onto the bed and pulled a blanket over us both. I'd ask again in the morning. Maybe over breakfast. Still smiling, I closed my eyes and, for the first time in a long time, was able to fall asleep almost immediately.

Eleven

Harlee

I was hot and had no clue why. The studio apartment I lived in was always cool, even in the summer, thanks to a combination of the people who lived under me always keeping their AC cranked up to insane levels and the shitty insulation between floors. At least it meant I didn't have to run up my own electric bill for the AC during the summer.

But that didn't tell me why I was hot right now.

Or why my blanket felt like it weighed twice as much as usual.

And then I realized that I couldn't remember going home last night after...oh. Right.

I opened my eyes to see a dimly lit hotel room and a leanly muscled arm draped over me. Last night was a little fuzzy, but I didn't drink enough to forget what happened. Hell, I wasn't sure there was *any* alcohol strong enough to make me forget the best sex I ever had.

Twice.

And let's not forget the orgasms he gave me when he went down on me.

Like I could.

My body throbbed in response to my memories, and I slowly rolled onto my back to see if Baylen was awake. Normally, on the very rare occasions I fell asleep at someone's place after sex, as soon as I woke up, I got out of there, whether the guy was awake or not. And I usually wanted him to still be asleep. Now, I was half-hoping I'd see Baylen looking at me with that hunger in his eyes.

I wouldn't say no.

The disappointment when I saw he was sleeping was sharper than I anticipated, chasing away even the thought of waking him up for another

round. Carefully, I slid out from underneath his arm and made my way to the bathroom, closing the door before turning on the light.

I did a quick clean up and put on the underwear and bra I'd left in here, then headed out to the main area to find my dress and boots. The dim sunlight coming through the window was enough for me to find my clothes and it told me it was probably only six or seven o'clock at the most, which I hoped meant I wouldn't have a lot of people watching me do the walk of shame.

Not that I was actually ashamed of having hooked up with a random stranger for a night of blazing hot sex. I wanted to fuck and that's what I did. I wasn't going to apologize for it or pretend that I didn't want sex when I wanted it. That wasn't who I was.

So as I slipped out of the hotel room, I held my head high...and nearly ran into a slender blonde standing only a couple feet behind me, as if she was preparing to knock on the door. I caught a glimpse of dark eyes before she looked away, mumbling an apology and something about needing to be on her way. I thought I caught a faint Scottish accent but before I could say anything, she disappeared into the room across the hall.

Shit. She was Scottish and across the hall from Baylen. Probably his sister or something like that since they weren't sharing a room. And she just caught a woman coming out of her brother's room early in the morning dressed in nightclub clothes.

No hiding what that meant.

I hoped she didn't give him too much of a hassle about that. I didn't want him embarrassed by our encounter. I wanted him to look back on it as fondly as I would. I wanted him to be a little sad that we wouldn't see each other again.

Like I was.

Fuck.

I was sad I wasn't going to see my Scottish friend again, and I was suddenly glad that we only exchanged first names. If one encounter had me wanting to see him again this much, I could only imagine what it would be like to know I could find him again.

Nope. It was better this way.

And I continued to tell myself that as I walked through the lobby and out the front doors to get a cab.

Twelve

Baylen

I'd never known Brigh to be this quiet.

Yesterday, I waited for her to text me breakfast, lunch, and dinner plans, but those messages never came. As I didn't plan on us working, I didn't reach out to her, wanting her to have the freedom to do as she wished. I considered calling Alec and seeing if he wanted to do something, but then I reminded myself that I wasn't here to sit with my friend. He had a family now and I couldn't expect him to drop everything because I suddenly showed up in his city.

So, I went out into the city and explored. Or, rather, I wandered. I went nowhere specific and did nothing intentional. I walked in and out of shops but bought nothing. I went into Pike Place Market and the Seattle Aquarium, smiling and nodding at people but not striking up any conversations.

It was a pleasant experience and would have done wonders to clear my head if I was able to stop thinking about Harlee.

She left before I woke and didn't give me any contact information, which didn't surprise me, though I was disappointed. I supposed that answered the question I didn't ask. If she wanted to see me again, she would have waited for me to wake up or left me a way to contact her. But she didn't. Which meant she didn't want anything more than what we already had.

Perhaps that was why Brigh was being so quiet. She barely spoke at breakfast, only asking if I was prepared for today. I said I was and that was the last of what we said. Maybe her reticence had more to do with my own silence than anything on her own part. Once we finished at MIRI, I'd suggest lunch and initiate a conversation. Going on a last-minute international trip with no definite end date was definitely above and beyond her job description. I didn't want to make her miserable simply because I was in a gloomy mood.

I glanced over at her as our car pulled up to the curb, but Brigh was staring straight ahead, not looking anywhere or at anything. She didn't look upset or even displeased, and that must be enough for right now. Unlike yesterday, we had work to do. It was, after all, why we were here.

Alec once took me to the MIRI offices back home. As impressive as it was, it paled compared to the Seattle offices. Tall, made of steel and glass, it was modern and efficient looking without being cold. It was a place that inspired confidence.

Inside the lobby, we confirmed our appointment, and the smiling receptionist directed us to the elevator. When the doors opened, a pleasant-looking woman with short ash blonde hair was waiting. Though I hadn't met her before, I suspected I knew who she was.

"Good morning, Mr. McFann, Ms. Flitton." She held out a hand. "I'm Tuesday Boswell, Mr. McCrae's assistant."

"He didn't come to meet us himself?" Brigh's question was low and perhaps she meant for it to be for her ears only. Unfortunately, our surroundings were quiet enough that both Ms. Boswell and I heard it.

Ms. Boswell's light brown eyes narrowed slightly, and her smile tightened, but her response was perfectly polite. "Mr. McCrae is finishing up a few emails that needed to be handled immediately. If you'll follow me, I'll take you to him."

"Sorry," Brigh muttered. "I was just wondering."

It sounded like a valid reason for what was still a rather rude question, but considering the sorts of comments she made when we had lunch with Alec on Saturday, I didn't think she was being entirely honest. This, however, wasn't the time to discuss such things. Maybe that would be a good place to start a discussion over lunch, though not as pleasant a subject as I hoped to broach.

Ms. Boswell knocked on a half-opened door at the end of a corridor and I heard Alec call for us to come in. We had a moment or two of greetings and offerings of chairs and drinks before we were all settled, and Ms. Boswell left to get us tea and coffee.

“You’ve brought your ideas?” Alec set his elbows on his desk, lacing his fingers together.

I nodded. “I’ll admit, there aren’t many of them.”

“That’s all right,” he said. “It’s our job to come up with those sorts of things. It’s always nice to know where a client’s already thinking, but we can work from nothing.”

“Well, I’m not sure what I have is any better than nothing,” I said wryly. “All of the businesses I’ve worked with in the past, I haven’t needed to be an idea man.”

“We all have our strengths,” Alec said, smiling at his assistant as she handed each of us our requested drinks. “Thank you, Tuesday. If you’ll get Ms. Sumpter now.”

“Of course.”

“Once I introduce you to Ms. Sumpter, she’ll take over.” Alec grinned at me, more the friend than the businessman for the moment. “And, don’t be forgetting, no flirting. It’s her first day.”

I glared at him. “You donna need to worry about that. I’m not here to date.”

If Brigh wasn’t here, I might’ve told him that I already met someone I would have wanted to spend time with if she felt the same. I wasn’t about to have that conversation in front of my assistant though. She was loyal to me, but a single stray comment back home could easily get to my family, and they would assume that my irresponsibility followed me across the ocean.

“Here she is.” Alec stood.

Automatically, I did the same, turning toward the door as Ms. Boswell entered the office with a short curvy blonde in a smart charcoal gray business suit. Her hair was pulled back and up, leaving her relatively make-up-free face easy to see. I had a moment to think that she was pretty and then my mind finished processing what I hadn’t recognized the first time.

The dark blue streaks in her hair.

The familiar line of her jaw.

The shape of a body that my hands knew.

Fuck me.

Ms. Sumpter was Harlee.

Thirteen

Harlee

Shit. It was him.

“Harlee Sumpter, meet Baylen McFann and his assistant, Brigh Flitton.”

My boss – the fucking CEO of the entire company – was talking, but all I could think was that I had the worst luck ever. What were the chances that my Saturday night fling would be in my boss’s office on my first day of work? Probably the same as flopping a royal straight flush in Texas Hold’em.

Then my brain finished processing the rest of what Mr. McCrae had said.

Mr. McFann’s account was going to be mine. My first assignment was going to be for a man who’d seen every inch of me naked. This was so bad.

Mr. McCrae seemed to be waiting for me to say something. “Thank you, Mr. McCrae.”

“As we speak, Ms. Boswell is emailing you the notes from my meeting with Mr. McFann. I apologize that I didn’t get them to you earlier, but this was last minute.” Mr. McCrae glanced at Baylen – at Mr. McFann – and then continued, “Baylen here is an old friend from university, so of course I made the time for him.”

Mother. Fucking. Shit.

Not only was my one-night stand now my first client, he was also my boss’s friend. A good friend, I’d bet since MIRI wasn’t exactly the sort of place that accepts walk-ins.

If I fucked this up, I was done.

“If you have any questions, Ms. Sumpter, or want a second opinion, feel free to reach out to the others on your team, or to Ms. Boswell,” Mr. McCrae continued. “The work you do will provide direction for the marketing department and if they have any questions or need more information, they’ll

come to you.”

My years of working with the public had taught me how to hide what I was thinking, making it possible for me to nod at my boss and then turn to my *client* and smile. And then I saw the woman standing next to him. I got a better look than I did yesterday morning, but I had no doubt she was the woman who saw me coming out of Baylen’s room.

Not his sister, but his assistant.

Fortunately, I didn’t see any recognition in her eyes. I remembered all too well the part in the company policy that forbade any sort of entanglements with clients. Even if Baylen and I kept our mouths shut – and what little I knew about him made me believe he would – one word from Brigh could ruin everything.

I was suddenly extremely thankful that Jin convinced me to wear temporary black dye streaked into my hair Saturday night. Between that and the different way I was dressed, she didn’t seem to be connecting me to the person she saw at the hotel, and hopefully, she never would.

I couldn’t dwell on that too long though. Mr. McCrae thinking I was a little flustered over getting my first client was one thing. Him having to wonder why I completely froze was something else.

“I will need a few minutes to read through everything, but if you’d like to wait in one of the conference rooms, I’ll join you shortly.” I was pleased with how professional I sounded.

“I’ll have Ms. Boswell bring in a few breakfast foods, as well as refills for everyone’s drinks,” Mr. McCrae said. “Conference room three?”

I nodded, hoping I was thinking of the correct one. “That would be perfect.”

And then I realized I had absolutely no idea what to do next. Did I take them to the conference room myself and then leave them there to go back to my office? Would Ms. Boswell bring them to the room when she came with the drinks and food? I’d never thought to ask about any of that the previous two days. Then again, it wasn’t as if I knew what would happen today.

“I’ll show them to the conference room,” Mr. McCrae said.

“Thank you, sir.” Those two words seemed inadequate for the faith he was placing in me, but I hoped he could tell that I meant them wholeheartedly. I couldn’t, however, work up the courage to meet Baylen’s eye when I said, “I’ll meet you there shortly.”

“Aye.”

I swallowed hard. This was going to suck.

Less than fifteen minutes later, I gathered the notes I just took and headed for what I hoped was the right conference room. I breathed a sigh of relief when I spotted Baylen and Ms. Flitton through the glass and fixed a confident smile on my face. I knew how to fake things better than anyone. I could handle a single meeting.

“Do either of you need anything before we get started?” I asked as I tried to figure out the best place to sit.

“Ms. Boswell took care of us.” Baylen’s voice was slightly stilted, and I wondered if that meant he was as affected as I was. “Thank you.”

He and Brigh were sitting next to each other near the head of the table, so I went to the chair that was nearest them and took a seat. As I settled in, I lifted my chin, striving to appear confident. “I read through the files Mr. McCrae sent me, and first, let me say that I think the concept is a solid one. In most cases, people are more concerned with how sexy a bra is rather than any sort of practicalities.”

I felt heat rising to my cheeks and cursed myself for not realizing that the subject matter was going to make this even more difficult. But, if Baylen could get through it, so could I.

I just couldn’t seem to think about him as Mr. McFann though. Not when I’d spent time screaming his name.

Shit. I was in so much trouble.

“So, what is it exactly that you do here?” Ms. Flitton asked, her lips curled into what I could only call a sneer.

Damn.

“My role here is to gather and analyze statistics, then use those findings, along with the things we brainstorm today, to give the marketing department a direction to go.”

“I don’t see why you need to separate departments. Wouldn’t it make more sense to just hire people who can do both?” Ms. Flitton leaned closer to Baylen. “I know Alec was your friend—”

“He *is* my friend,” Baylen said, his expression tightening. “And I trust him. I trust his expertise.”

“I ken—”

“The McCrae International Research Institute has been successful for decades,” he cut her off. “If you don’t want to be here, I can arrange for you to return home alone.”

“No!” Color drained from her face and then flooded back again. “I’m sorry, Mr. McFann. I was thinkin’ out loud. I just want what’s best for you...for your business.”

I’d spent a lot of time working with people, *and* winning money off them, which meant I knew how to read them. Ms. Flitton was embarrassed, but she was also furious. What I didn’t see in her face at all was any sort of apology. She said she was sorry, but she didn’t mean it.

But that was none of my business.

Also none of my business was the way I noticed her touching his arm. How she angled her body toward him. The ways she looked at him when he wasn’t looking at her.

Well, damn.

She was in love with him.

Or, at least, very much in lust with him.

I had a feeling he had absolutely no clue, but I didn’t think it mattered. He wouldn’t have slept with me if he felt anything for her. Even the short time I spent with him told me that. Now, I was even more glad that she didn’t recognize me. Still, something about me had set her off. Maybe she was like

this with every female she met. Hell, maybe she didn't like people in general, and right now, I was 'people in general.' No matter what her reason, I had a bad feeling she could make things difficult. I could only hope her feelings for Baylen and her desire to do a good job would keep her in check. This was going to be difficult enough as it was.

"Tell me about your product."

"I thought you read all about it," Ms. Flitton said. "Wasn't that what you were doing all that time?"

I refrained from pointing out to her that I'd barely been gone for fifteen minutes. "I did, but I would like to hear from the person who created it. Not just about it specifically though. The reasons behind it. Who you see as your target market."

"Women, obviously," Ms. Flitton said under her breath.

"Not all women are the same," I pointed out with as friendly a smile as I could muster.

"Which is what makes my product so great," Baylen said.

I couldn't tell if he interrupted because he caught on to the tension, or if he was simply responding to my statement as was. Either way, I motioned for him to continue, listening as he explained the patent and how he thought it would benefit all women, though some builds more than others.

The way his gaze dropped just the slightest bit made me think I knew what he meant...and that he was remembering just *exactly* what my 'build' looked like without clothes. My eyes met his for a brief moment and I caught a glimpse of heat before a more professional expression took its place. Still, the tips of his ears were red, which made it hard not to smile.

As he finished, however, I focused on my job. "The notes focus on marketing specifically in the UK, but I think you should expand marketing to the US. I can provide those numbers to both you and the marketing department, and determine if my idea has merit."

I was honestly surprised how natural it felt to pull together my thoughts and narrow the scope of what I was going to research.

I could do this.

The annoyed expression on Ms. Flitton's face made me think that she wasn't going to make it easy, but I'd dealt with a hell of a lot tougher people than one lovesick assistant. As long as she continued to not recognize me, everything was going to work out just fine.

Fourteen

Baylen

The humor of a Scot attending an Independence Day party thrown by another Scot wasn't lost on me, though Brigh didn't seem to be amused by it. I told her that she wasn't obligated to come with me. The picnic was for all MIRI employees, but no other clients would be there.

My invitation was from a friend. I told Brigh however she wanted to spend her Saturday was her choice, and she said that she wanted to tag along, but as the car dropped us off at Lincoln Park, she didn't look as if she thought the picnic would be fun.

Alec told me where to meet him, and I was grateful that he had when I saw how large the park was and how many people were here. The weather felt like we were back home. Bordering between warm and hot, a cloudy sky but no rain, though I thought that might change if the day progressed.

"My mother's family is descended from General Howe," Brigh said as we walked between a pair of metal bins. "Mum's been obsessed with the details. She has a whole room dedicated to it."

"Mine are the same," I said. "My parents used to quiz us kids. There's an actual tapestry of our family tree in their sitting room."

I didn't tell her which names were on that tapestry. If she didn't already know, she could find it easily. I didn't feel the need to share my history, especially when I'd spent my life with the weight of those ancestors on my shoulders.

"Uncle Bay!"

Evanne's excited shout made me turn, a smile spreading across my face as the little girl ran to me.

"Evanne! Wait! Your dad said you have to stay with me!" Soleil appeared only seconds later, looking both concerned and annoyed. As soon as she saw

me, her eyes narrowed, and the anger I saw there made me take a step back to ensure she had the space she needed.

“Soleil.” I smiled at her. “I’m Baylen McFann, Alec’s friend. You had dinner at my house while you were in Scotland.”

The anger faded, and her hands unclenched, but the wariness remained on her face. “Right. I remember you.” She came up to Evanne. “You need to stick with me, or your dad is going to make you stick with him the whole time.”

Evanne sighed. “You’re right. I’m sorry. I was just so excited to see Uncle Bay. You said I can call you that, right?” She grabbed my hand before focusing on Brigh standing next to me. “Who are you? Are you Uncle Bay’s girlfriend?”

“Brigh’s my assistant,” I said quickly, not wanting to embarrass Brigh any more than the question already had. “Will you take us to your Da?”

Evanne nodded. “Follow me.”

Wearing a serious expression that would have fit granting nobility safe passage through an angry throng of peasants, Evanne led the way, Soleil at her side. I had both younger and older siblings, so I understood her frustration and I smiled at the childhood memories that flashed through my mind.

Then Alec came into view, and I remembered what it was like to have family I chose. I loved my biological siblings, but I’d never been able to be myself among them the way I had with my friends.

“Daddy!” Evanne yelled. “Uncle Bay’s here with a girl!”

I groaned and shook my head. At least the others weren’t here. Alec wouldn’t have a go at me the way Colin, or even Cirion, would have. He knew who Brigh was. Unlike Angie, where the attachment had merely been unwise, Brigh was my assistant. It would have been beyond inappropriate.

“Glad to see you,” Alec said, chuckling. “Evanne’s been waiting for you, tellin’ everyone who’ll listen that her ‘Uncle Bay’ is coming.”

“You’d think she doesn’t have enough uncles already.” Lumen came behind Alec, taking his hand as he reached for hers.

They looked good together. Not just physically. When I'd seen them in Edinburgh, they'd been the same. At ease in a way I'd never seen with my parents or even my siblings. All of them—all of *us*—constantly considered every action, every touch, in every situation.

One of my clearest childhood memories was at my tenth birthday party. One hundred and thirty-seven people had been there. I remember the number because Mum had been disappointed that fourteen fewer people had come for my party as had attended Arran's. Almost all those people were friends of my parents. They brought their children, of course, but none of *them* were actually my friends.

"Are you all right?" Alec asked, concerned.

I smiled. "Just a memory. Not important." I gestured toward Brigh. "You remember my assistant."

"Ms. Flitton." Alec nodded at her. "My girlfriend, Lumen Browne."

"Should I call you Ms. Flitton?" Lumen asked as she gave Brigh a warm smile.

"Brigh is fine."

"Well, Brigh, welcome. Let me show you where everything is."

* * *

I had to give it to the Americans. They did know how to throw a party. And my friend had an excellent taste in alcohol.

Well, technically, it was Alec's brother with the excellent taste. I met Brody a time or two, and I sampled various labels from Shannon's. Right now, I was working on my second beer and wondering if Alec brought any of the fine whiskey Brody had made.

Every function or party I went to, I was either hosting or had another purpose, even if that purpose was to be seen and give due to the McFann name. Here, virtually no one knew who I was, and those that did had no expectations for me, which meant I had the luxury of simply blending into the background. I sat, ate, drank, occasionally talked to Alec, and watched people.

I watched people playing Frisbee and volleyball. Others swimming and waving 'sparklers' around. Evanne solemnly explained to me how to use one safely and then demanded that I try lighting one. I knew better to argue with Alec's daughter. She had his stubborn streak.

And that was when it happened.

As I stood with a burning bit of sparkly stuff, feeling quite foolish waving it around at Evanne's insistence, I heard a familiar laugh. Not a laugh I heard often, but one that was far too memorable considering to whom it belonged.

Harlee Sumpter.

I hadn't been able to stay away.

Since I met with Alec for lunch both Thursday and Friday, I stopped in her office both days and chatted with her about her progress, the conversation between us so easy. Both times, I was reluctant to leave despite knowing that she had work to do. Work that she was doing for one of my closest friends.

But that didn't change the fact that I wanted to stay and talk about things that weren't work-related. All the things that I hadn't been able to talk about the night we spent together.

Considering how my last relationship had begun and ended, I knew even entertaining the notion of spending more time with her was a bad idea. Not only that, but I lived in a different country. I was here in Seattle only as long as I needed to be.

I didn't know if she felt the same way though because by the time the sparkler was done and I turned to find her, she wasn't there.

Then, about two hours after I arrived, she suddenly appeared next to me with a beer in each hand.

“Would you like a refill?” she asked, holding out one of the beers.

I shocked myself with the words that came out of my mouth. “Only if you join me.”

Her cheeks flushed, but she looked pleased as she sat on the bench next to me. She handed me a beer and took a long drink of her own.

“Thank you,” I said.

“You’re welcome, *Mr. McFann.*”

“Baylen, please.” I shook my head. “While we’re here, at least, call me Baylen.”

“All right.” She picked at the label on the bottle. “Baylen.”

I liked how she said my name, liked the memories it brought back, which should have made me change my mind, keep the distance between us, but I didn’t. I wanted to be near her, even if it was just for the holiday.

For several minutes, we sat like that, the silence between us strangely comfortable, though I wondered if that was because it wasn’t actually silent. We had the noise of everyone else around us, but I’d been in plenty of situations where I was surrounded by sound and sitting quietly with another person was awkward.

Especially when sex was involved.

But not with Harlee.

I caught myself looking at her more and more, quick little glimpses. The contrast between her golden blonde hair and its dark blue streaks, without the black she had the night we met. The multiple piercings in her ears. The tattoos I saw that first night, but only caught glimpses of since.

The ivy around her left ankle and the butterfly coming out of a cocoon on her right shoulder. And then, she leaned forward to brush a bug off her sandal, and I caught a hint of something colorful on her back. The fire that ran along the small of her back, with a single lick of flame going up her spine and under her shirt.

“Mind if I ask why you don’t have any tattoos?”

The question startled a laugh out of me. “I have a problem with needles.”

“That’s why no piercings then, huh?” she teased.

“Definitely not.”

While the silence between us had been comfortable, this exchange was decidedly *not* comfortable. What felt like static electricity crept across my skin, but it wasn’t unpleasant. In fact, I liked it. This was something new. This woman intrigued me, and I couldn’t think of the last time that had happened. All I knew for certain was that it hadn’t been Angie.

We continued to talk, occasionally pausing to speak to someone who approached or excusing ourselves to get something else to drink or other such necessary excursions, but we always returned to sit together. I lost track of the time and how much I ate and drank. I had no responsibilities or obligations aside from Brigh, and she long since vanished. If she needed to speak to me, I wouldn’t be difficult to find.

I didn’t spend much time thinking about my assistant, though. I was far too busy learning all I could about the delightful woman at my side, even if most of the conversation was about simple things like the movies we watched or the music we listened to.

“I want to stretch my legs,” Harlee announced. “Walk with me?”

I glanced up at the darkening clouds in the sky. “It may rain.”

“Are you worried about a little rain?” She shot me the sexiest little wink. “Made of sugar?”

I stood up and held out my hand. She took it and let me help her to her feet even though she was entirely capable of standing on her own. For several seconds, we stood like that, neither one of us making a move to release the other’s hand. Then, as color flooded her cheeks, she let go. I waited for her to say perhaps we should part ways, but she didn’t.

“Do you want to walk along the lake?”

“I’ll follow wherever you lead.” It took me a few steps to realize that what I’d said could have been construed in a romantic manner, but as Harlee didn’t appear bothered by it, I didn’t apologize for being so bold. It wasn’t as if she and I weren’t flirting.

Like a good Scot, I could hold my liquor. It wasn’t possible that *American* beer had gotten me the least bit drunk. I could walk a straight line, after all. I frowned as I remember that, while this beer had been made in America, the person who’d made it was a Scot.

Still, how much had I drunk?

“Is something wrong?” Harlee asked as we made our way past the largest of the groups of people. “You look upset or annoyed.”

I shook my head. “I feel a bit strange. Not drunk, exactly.”

“Pleasantly buzzed?” She laughed. “Not surprising. I mean, you’re a decent-sized guy and all, but you had twice as much as I did, and I’m a little tipsy.”

“Perhaps I should call for a car.” I didn’t want her to leave, but if she was drunk, better to keep her safe.

“I’m fine,” she insisted. “Like I said, just tipsy. Everything’s kind of blurry at the edges.”

“I like that description,” I said with a laugh. “It’s oddly accurate.”

She shrugged. “When I saw that Mr. McCrae offered a ride service so no one had to worry about driving under the influence, I figured I’d take advantage of it.”

“Work hasn’t been too stressful, I hope.”

We continued to joke, and yes, flirt as we walked along a path leading into a wooded area. The sounds of the picnic were still audible, but the trees cut us off visually, giving us the illusion of solitude. We walked more closely, our hands brushing against one another, and I fought the urge to take hers. My control wasn’t as ironclad as usual, but as long as we kept moving, I could be content with just this.

As if sensing my inner conflict, the sky, which had been growing steadily darker, opened and rain poured down.

“Shit!”

Spotting a spot just off the trail where the trees offered some shelter, I grabbed her hand and pulled her after me. Ducking under the trees, we both paused to catch our breath. The canopy of branches kept out most of the rain, but we were both soaked through from the sudden downpour.

“That’s almost enough to sober me up completely,” Harlee said with a laugh. She looked down. “I’m glad I didn’t wear anything white.”

My gaze followed hers automatically, heat flooding my body as I took in the way her clothes clung to her curves. Curves I remembered all too well. I jerked my head up and found her watching me.

“Sorry.”

“Don’t be.” She slid her gaze down my body as she added, “I’m enjoying my own show.”

Before I could figure out how to answer that, she shivered. I mentally kicked myself. “I’m a right bastard. Of course, you’re cold.” I pulled off my shirt. “It’s wet too, but it should help a bit.”

She put it on, wrapping her arms around her middle. The way she was staring at my torso told me it wasn’t a gesture of embarrassment but rather that she was still cold. As I reached for her, I knew it was a bad idea, but what sort of man would I have been if I let her shiver simply to keep myself from being tempted?

I put my arms around her, smiling at the surprise on her face as I pulled her to me. “Sharing body heat.”

“Ah,” she said, tipping her head back to allow her eyes to meet mine. “Is that what this is?”

I nodded. “Of course.”

“Nothing else?” She leaned into me, full breasts pushing against my chest.

If she wasn't wearing my shirt, would I have been able to feel her nipples too? I had no doubt she could feel my own response to her. No amount of willpower would make my erection go away, not when she was right there, looking up at me with those smoky blue eyes. Not when I could still picture what her face looked like when she came.

I cupped the side of her face, and she closed her eyes, lips turning up in a soft smile. Running my thumb along her bottom lip, I tried to talk myself out of what I desperately wanted to do again.

"Kiss me." She spoke so softly that I almost thought I imagined it. Then her eyes opened, and I saw the hunger in them. "Kiss me, Baylen. Please."

With a groan, I bent my head and took her mouth. Eager, she parted her lips and let my tongue inside. She tasted of beer and chocolate and fresh rain. Her hands slid up my chest, and I buried my hands in her hair, lost in the scent and taste of her. The sensations of chilled palms and fingers on my overheated skin. The heavy weight of her wet hair.

There were so many reasons why this was wrong, but I didn't have the strength to bow to them. Instead, I poured myself into a kiss that I shouldn't have, but that I gratefully took.

Fifteen

Harlee

I'd been cold only a couple minutes ago, but now I was so hot, I wouldn't have been surprised if the rain was turning to steam the second it hit my skin. Every inch of me was flushed. And wet. Very wet.

I already knew the man could kiss, but all week I told myself to forget. His lips were soft, but they knew how to make demands. The sort of demands that made my knees weak and made me remember just how good his tongue had felt in other places. His hands slid down my back, cupped my ass, and pulled me even tighter to him. He was hard, and my stomach clenched at the memory of him inside me, all that thick goodness stretching me in all the right ways.

I wasn't blind. I knew how attractive he was from the moment I first saw him. Hell, it was why I slept with him. But I worked hard from the moment Mr. McCrae gave me the account to see Baylen as more than the best lay I ever had. And when I couldn't help picturing him naked, I told myself I was just admiring an attractive man, nothing more.

His teeth lightly scraped my bottom lip, and I moaned, wanting more. I wanted to drop to my knees right here and go down on him until he exploded in my mouth, find out if his cum tasted as sweet as champagne. Tear off his clothes and lick the rain off his skin the way I had with the alcohol that night. I wanted to ride him again until my thigh muscles couldn't work anymore and then beg him to take me so hard that I'd feel him for days.

All of those sounded like wonderful ideas. But while I enjoyed a bit of risk with my sex from time to time, fucking here under the trees would make a muddy mess. We needed a bed.

Or at least a car.

And then I remembered that I hadn't driven here.

And that he was a client.

Sh-

A knock on my door jerked me out of my daydream slash memory to find the object of said daydream slash memory standing there.

My face burned, and I knew there was no way both Baylen and Ms. Flitton couldn't see how red it was. I didn't acknowledge it, though. While I knew they were coming, thanks to my wandering attention, they caught me by surprise, so I accepted my embarrassment and worked on keeping them from figuring out what caused it.

"Sorry, got lost in my thoughts for a minute there." I smiled. "Come in, let me take a minute to tidy up."

"Shouldn't you have been working on our account?" Ms. Flitton asked as she sat down across from me. "Not staring off into space."

I wanted to snap that I didn't work for her, and that it was *Baylen's* account, not hers, but I just smiled at her and then turned to Baylen as he sat in the other chair. His expression was completely blank, but I wasn't offended. After all, we pretended that we hadn't had sex. Twice. Pretending we didn't kiss two days ago seemed to be the smart thing to do.

If I wasn't interrupted a few moments ago, I would've eventually gotten to the point in the memory where we'd stopped kissing and groping. Where a clap of thunder had jarred us both back to reality.

We had an awkward moment, and then I said we probably shouldn't be under trees if it was going to start lightning. We hurried back and were separated as people crowded under more practical shelters. Everything had become a bit of a blur after that, and the two of us didn't see each other again until just now.

"Ms. Flitton, I believe we're early and Ms. Sumpter is on her lunch."

His tone was gentle, but the fact that he'd stuck up for me made my stomach flip. Seeing the scowl on Ms. Flitton's face just made it all the better. Sure, it was probably petty, but she had been snippy with me all week.

He looked back at me. "Should we come back later?"

“I was just finishing up.” I shook my head as I packed up the container that had held my chicken and pecan salad. “Can I get either of you anything? Coffee? Tea? Water?”

“No, thank you,” Baylen said politely.

“We brought our own.” Ms. Flitton’s tone was pleasant but just as fake as the ‘smile’ on her face.

“Friday afternoon, you mentioned a few results you would be getting this morning,” Baylen prompted.

“Friday afternoon?” Ms. Flitton shot Baylen a sharp look.

I didn’t know what it meant that he didn’t tell her about seeing me Friday, or now that I thought about it, the fact that he brought her today. I was just as interested in his response as I was.

“I spoke with Ms. Sumpter Thursday and Friday after Alec and I had lunch together,” Baylen said. His tone was easy, but I could see the tension in his body.

Somehow, I doubted it had anything to do with Ms. Flitton’s question. Things had felt off from the moment I saw him in the doorway, and the most logical reason was because of the kiss on Saturday. Sure, there were some awkward moments during the last week, but we seemed to put all of that in the past. The kiss, however, just brought the past back, reminded us how good it we were together.

And what we couldn’t have again.

“As I said then, I was waiting for some information to come in before I could finish this particular portion of my research.” I pulled my thoughts out of the past and back to work where they were supposed to be. “That came in this morning, and I was able to finish compiling the results.”

The next fifteen minutes were spent going over everything I just finished. It should’ve been business as usual. All of us were polite and professional, but something was off. Anyone looking or listening in would think that this was an ordinary business meeting, and I couldn’t put my finger exactly on why it wasn’t. And I didn’t know if it was just me or if they felt it too.

“Ladies,” Baylen said suddenly. “If you’ll excuse me, I need a minute.”

He didn’t wait for us to respond, just got up and walked out, leaving me and an annoyed Ms. Flitton. Which, of course, was just peachy.

“You’re not the sort of woman he dates.” Ms. Flitton didn’t look at me as she spoke. Instead, she was examining her perfectly manicured nails. “A kiss when no one’s around to see it means nothing.”

I caught my breath. How did she know about that?

“Neither does some one-night stand after he was probably drunk.”

Shit. She did recognize me from my morning after exit at the hotel. Since she hadn’t said anything, I assumed she didn’t know.

Apparently, I was wrong.

“I wasna sure at first. You tried to clean up for work.” The sneer was in her voice, though not on her face. “But when I saw you kiss him on Saturday, I realized it was you.”

I opened my mouth but then shut it again because I didn’t know what to say. For once, my mind was completely blank.

“Whatever you have planned in a desperate attempt to seduce him, forget it. If you so much as speak to him about anything other than work, from here on out, I’ll tell Alec what I saw. *All* of it. You’ll lose your job before you can blink. After all, Baylen is one of Alec’s closest friends, as well as a client.”

My stomach churned, and I was beginning to wish that I hadn’t eaten anything today. The way she said their names, *Alec* and *Baylen*, made me wonder if she was close enough to them that she was only formal when they were at work. Close enough that Mr. McCrae would take her at her word. Not that it mattered. True, Baylen and I having slept together happened *before* I knew who he was, but the kiss, I knew that was wrong when it happened. And I didn’t come clean about my previous interaction, so I looked dishonest.

If she said a word, I was royally fucked.

Baylen

I sighed as I washed my hands. I didn't really need the toilet, but I couldn't handle another awkward, uncomfortable minute in that office. Brigh had been acting strangely, with no explanation as to why, but I believed it was more than her odd behavior causing the tension in the room.

Harlee and I hadn't spoken since we kissed, but I thought we at least parted on good terms. It wasn't as if our one-night encounter ended badly either. I thought the kiss proved that.

This morning, I was tempted to leave Brigh at the hotel so that Harlee and I could speak freely, but as this was a business meeting, I reconsidered and decided to treat it as such. I needed to continue to do so, no matter how awkward things were.

Except it had been harder to sit and pretend that everything was the same now that I knew she still wanted me. I was barely able to concentrate. Every time she said something, I found myself watching her mouth, remembering how she tasted, both that first night and in the rain. It'd taken far more self-control than I liked to refrain from sampling another.

My cracking self-control, in fact, was why I was currently staring at my reflection rather than still listening to Harlee sharing the information she compiled so far. I didn't think I would've kissed her right there in her office in front of my assistant, but the mask I was wearing began to slip. I didn't exactly know what expression would have come through, but whatever the result, it would have been too much. Too real.

Only after I was certain my armor was once again in place did I return to Harlee's office. She paused the business discussion while I was gone, of course, but I assumed that she and Brigh would have been chatting. Except the office was dead silent, and both women were stiff and appeared irritated, though I was unsure if I was the one who caused the problem. My presence did nothing to relieve the tension, which made me believe that I was

somehow responsible.

Dammit.

Fortunately, Harlee finished up in a little over a quarter hour, giving me the time to decide that I wanted to do something about the situation rather than ignoring it. The idea that I could return home with her feeling negatively toward me bothered me, but I couldn't see how to do it without rousing Brigh's suspicions, and that was the last thing I needed.

"And that's everything I have right now." Harlee's tone was perfectly polite.

I hated that with a passion.

"Do you have any questions?"

I had one, but I wouldn't ask it with Brigh here. "Not at this time." I stood.

"Then I'll bid you a good day."

After a moment, it became clear that she wasn't going to say anything else, so I excused myself and Brigh, my brain going a hundred miles an hour, trying to figure out some way to handle what was happening between Harlee and me. When we reached the hotel, I had a partial plan.

"I'll make dinner reservations," Brigh said as we entered the lobby. "Is there something specific you'd like?"

I shook my head. "I have a bit of a headache. I think I'll stay for the rest of the evening. Order some room service after I take a bit of a lie down."

"Is there anything I can get for you?" Brigh asked, concern in her voice.

"No, but thank you." I gave her what I hoped was a polite but pained smile. "You should go out somewhere nice, have a good meal, maybe some dessert."

"Oh. All right."

She didn't sound all right. In fact, she sounded annoyed, but I wasn't going to concern myself with that. It wasn't my job to entertain her or spend time with her. I was her employer, not her friend, and if the way she was acting recently was any indication, she was beginning to blur that line.

But that was an issue for another time.

“I believe I’ll stay in as well,” she said. “There’s work to be done back home.”

“Aye. Send me an email with anything I need to handle.”

She nodded, disappearing into her room without a word. As soon as I was in my own room, I took out my phone and called the direct line to Harlee’s office.

“Hello?”

“Harlee, it’s Baylen.” Using our given names was perhaps unwise considering I was going to try to come at this from a business standpoint, but I was tired of hearing her call me Mr. McFann, so I hoped I could set the standard with my simple introduction.

“Oh. Can I help you?”

“I’d like to go over some of your ideas. Could you come to my hotel?” I winced even as I said it. Perhaps I should have thought more before I made this call, but it was too late now. “I had some time on the ride over to do a bit of thinking and I’d like to speak with you as soon as possible. I thought if you stopped by here on your way home, we could have a chat.”

“I – I’m not so sure that’s a good idea.”

Fuck. I knew something was wrong.

“Ms. Flitton wouldn’t be joining us.” I hoped my tone was convincingly nonchalant. “She has other business matters to attend to.”

After a moment of silence, Harlee spoke, “Okay. I’ll be there in about an hour.”

“Brilliant. I’ll meet you at the hotel bar, if that will be all right.”

“Sounds good. See you then.”

She hung up before I could add anything else, but that was fine as I didn’t have anything else to say. Not over the phone anyway.

After the longest forty minutes I could remember, I headed downstairs to the bar, sparing only a quick glance at Brigh's door. The odds of her opening it at the exact moment I was leaving my room were low, but I didn't want to be caught off-guard. I already had an excuse prepared, but didn't need to use it as I made it to the elevator without any sign of my assistant.

I ordered a beer and settled into the seat with the best view of the entrance and waited. It wasn't long before Harlee appeared, and I hoped the fact that she was early meant she was as eager to see me as I was to see her. With her expression carefully masked, however, it was impossible for me to tell.

"I'll have the same as him," she said to the bartender as she took the stool next to me. "So, what did you want to talk about?"

I saw no better way than to jump right in. "In your office today, did Brigh say something to you?"

She took a sip of her beer before answering. "I don't know what you mean."

"Bullshit." I didn't raise my voice, but the curse still startled her. "Something was off."

"Fine." She turned on her seat to face me. "Brigh saw me leaving your hotel room Sunday morning."

Shit. That was bad.

"Apparently, she didn't recognize me until she caught us kissing at the picnic."

It kept getting worse.

"She told me that if I even spoke to you outside of work-related conversation, she'd tell Mr. McCrae and I'd lose my job."

"Fuck," I muttered.

"That pretty much sums it up," she agreed and took a longer drink of beer.

"Alec won't fire you for sleeping with me," I said. "That was before we knew who the other was."

"True," she agreed. "But, we shouldn't have kissed. You're my client."

“Technically, I’m MIRI’s client,” I pointed out. “You just happen to be handling my account at this point.”

“Does it really matter?”

The question sounded simple on the surface, but I knew what she was truly asking. If I brushed it aside as if I didn’t understand, that one night and one later kiss would be all we had. As good as they had been, we had the potential for better.

And I wanted that.

“I would like to take you to dinner.” I brushed some hair from her cheek, fingertips grazing her soft skin, and she caught her breath. “Not for work and with just the two of us.”

“I can’t.” She grabbed my hand. “Not while I’m working on your account.”

Disappointment was like a punch, but I couldn’t deny the truth of her words. While I made a vow to not mix business with pleasure anymore, it wasn’t just about me. Her job was on the line. “Aye. You’re right.”

She placed my hand on the bar and broke contact. If she thought I was giving up so easily though, she was about to learn just how stubborn I could be. To hell with my promise and to hell with my telling Alec I wouldn’t even flirt with Harlee. To hell with all of it.

I wanted her more than I ever wanted anyone.

“When will your part of the project be finished?” I asked.

She gave herself a mental shake. “Uh, Thursday, if things keep going the way they are now. I should hand off my findings to marketing and only get involved if they have questions or want me to research another angle.”

I could wait that long. “Will you do me the honor of accompanying me to dinner on Friday evening then?”

Her eyes met mine and warmth curled in my stomach. Any contact with her was like holding on to a live wire. This quiet moment was more like sitting in front of a fire on a dreary winter day. Safe and comfortable...with the occasional spark to remind us that fire, no matter how pretty, could be

dangerous.

Damn.

“Friday is my friend’s birthday.”

“Oh.” I didn’t try to hide my disappointment.

“But I was going out to dinner with her and her boyfriend. Instead of me being a third wheel, you could...be my date.” Her smile was almost shy.

“I’d love to.”

Harlee

What the hell had I been thinking, accepting a date with a billionaire from Scotland who happened to be the best friend of my brand-new boss at my amazing new job? A job where, until yesterday, I'd been working on a project for that same guy's company.

Memories flashed through my mind. Licking champagne off his muscled chest. Laughing with him. Those heated blue eyes of his on me. The feel of him inside me. The taste of rain on our lips as we kissed. The gentle way he'd touched my face at the bar.

Right. *That* was why.

The oldest member of my department, Augustus Lane, had gone over everything before I handed it over to marketing, so I knew it was up to par. Today, I sat in with Janie Vignon, the head of marketing, as she went through my work. To my surprise, she had no questions or even suggestions for what I should have done. In fact, she complimented how organized I was and how logical my conclusions were. If the thought of tonight's date wasn't hovering in the back of my mind, I would've enjoyed it even more. Instead, I was fighting the nerves that had crept up at the weirdest times.

The traffic had kept it at bay for the drive home, but the moment I walked into my apartment, I felt like my stomach was going to jump out of my mouth. I spent my entire shower trying to figure out what to wear, but by the time I got out, I'd realized that it didn't matter what I picked because absolutely nothing in my closet could be worn on a date with a billionaire.

Fortunately, it wasn't going to be just the two of us, so I said fuck it and chose my outfit based on what I wanted to wear and the fact that it was crazy hot tonight.

Since Baylen was about a foot taller than me, I wanted to wear heels that gave me at least a couple inches, and I'd bought a pair to go with a crimson

cross-v backless dress I'd found on sale. With a hem that hit mid-thigh and a neckline that showed off just a hint of cleavage, it was the perfect combination of classy and casual.

Plus, the entire outfit revealed most of my tattoos, and I was in a mood to show them off. I pinned my hair up to get it off my neck and touched up what little makeup I wore. A dab of my favorite vanilla perfume in a few places, and I was ready to go.

Half an hour later, when I opened the door to greet Baylen, a thought popped in my mind, enough to make me laugh, which earned a confused look.

"Sorry," I said as we walked to the elevator. "I'm not laughing at you. Well, not *at* you, but you're the reason I was laughing."

"Is that good?" His lips held the hint of a smile, and the memory of what they felt like on my body made warmth curl in my stomach.

"It's actually more the circumstances," I said. I've been learning how to play the bagpipes. He just looked more confused, so I tried to explain, "My mom's favorite movie was *Brigadoon*. Since she died, I can't bring myself to watch it, but bagpipes...they'll give me a way to think about her that isn't as painful."

Shit. That was more revealing than I meant it to be.

"I'm sorry for your loss." His voice was gentle, and I could hear the sincerity in every word.

"Thank you," I said as we stepped out into the hot July evening. "I was a kid when it happened, but it still hurts."

A sleek black car was parked at the curb, and as we approached, a man got out of the driver's seat and came around to open the back door.

"I thought it would be nice if no one needed to worry about what they drank tonight," Baylen explained as he slid into the backseat.

Once both of us were settled, I spoke again. "I'm sorry."

"For what?" Baylen frowned.

“Talking about my mom dying,” I explained. “That’s not exactly good ‘date’ conversation.”

He reached over and took my hand, threading his fingers between mine. “I want to get to know you. All the parts of you.” He raised our hands and kissed the back of mine. “Thank you for sharing with me.”

This guy couldn’t be for real. Gorgeous, an amazing lover, insanely wealthy, *and* a genuine gentleman? That was pure mythology there. And more tempting than anything I’d ever had in front of me.

“Tell me about your family,” I said.

“You didn’t research them?” he asked, a teasing tone that didn’t quite reach his eyes.

“Only what came up when I was looking at business statistics in the UK,” I answered truthfully. “Which means I know that the McFanns are a well-known family in Scotland with a lot of connections.”

“And a lot of money,” he said.

I shrugged. “Wealthy is a relative term. What might be a big sum to one person could be just a little to another.”

“You didn’t want to know my net worth?” Again, that same amused tone that wasn’t reflected in his eyes.

I could see that my answer was important to him, and I wouldn’t sound so blasé about it like I had about his family. “I do know it. Evaluating the financial worth of everyone involved is part of my job.”

“And?” Still light-hearted, but I could hear a hint of wariness.

“And I won’t insist on splitting the dinner bill.” I matched his light-hearted tone.

He looked at me hard, as if he was trying to read my mind. My soul. “You are quite different from any other woman I’ve ever known.”

Before I could decide if that was a compliment, we were pulling up in front of The Pink Door. Jin and Quaid were already there, with Quaid looking

distinctly uncomfortable in a pair of dark slacks and a white button-down shirt. Jin looked like she took her outfit straight out of Joan Jett's closet, nice enough for the restaurant, but with the same attitude and style that she always had.

“Happy birthday,” I said as I leaned in for a quick hug. “Jin, Quaid, I'd like you to meet Baylen McFann.”

“Hey, I'm Jin Renshaw.”

My friend's gaze ran over Baylen, a look that some people might've thought was checking him out. She was 'checking him out' all right, but it was about her making sure he was okay for me.

“Happy birthday, Ms. Renshaw.” Baylen put out a hand.

One corner of Jin's mouth tipped up in a half-smile and she shook Baylen's hand. “Do you moan in that accent?”

“Jin.” I smacked my friend's arm as she laughed.

Baylen's lips twitched in amusement. “You'll have to ask your friend.”

My jaw dropped. Before I could say anything in response though, the hostess came over to show us to our table. Once there, our conversation turned away from teasing.

Baylen told us about what it was like having four siblings, and Quaid told him how it'd been growing up as an only child. Jin and I kept things vague about our childhoods. With the exception of my first eleven years with my mother, neither Jin nor I had many happy memories to share. I asked what Scotland was like, and he wanted to know our favorite things about living in Seattle.

We ate great food and enjoyed the live music and, despite the presence of two other people, the chemistry between Baylen and I was crackling until I could almost hear it. Then the pianist hit a couple wrong notes, which caught some attention. Not as much as when he stood up, swayed, and then drunkenly lurched toward the edge of the stage, barely stopping in time to prevent himself from falling off.

The manager apologized profusely, and Baylen turned to me.

“You said that you played the piano?”

Then, somehow, I ended up on the stage sitting at the piano, Baylen sitting next to me, his eyes on me. Jin and Quaid cheered from our table as I tapped out “Happy Birthday.” When I finished, I attempted to leave, but Jin shouted out that she wanted more.

I decided to mix it up a bit and do some Elton John next. In the middle of “Rocketman” I saw Baylen’s fingers moving on his thigh, matching the movements I was making. I looked at him, and he grinned.

I transitioned into “Your Song” and nodded at him. Smoothly, as if we’d been doing this for years, I dropped one of my hands, and he took over. By the time we finished, half of the restaurant was on their feet, and I was remembering what other things our bodies could do well together.

* * *

Kissing was good.

Better than good.

But I knew that already. Just like I knew how much I liked his hands on my body. Not just his hands, either. I wanted his mouth. The weight of his body resting on mine. We hadn’t kissed yet tonight. Hadn’t really even touched much. But when he said the word *hotel*, we both knew what it would mean if I agreed.

Of course, I said yes.

I wasn’t an idiot.

So now we were in his very nice hotel room helping each other out of our clothes. And, damn, he was just as hot as I remembered.

“Do you work out?” I asked as I ran my hands over his broad shoulders, traced the muscles in his arms. “Or are you one of those guys who just wakes up in the morning looking like that?”

I didn’t know which I liked better: the way his eyes lit up when I said something that made him happy, or the way they went to that velvety midnight blue when he was turned on.

“I’m glad you like the way I look.” He cupped my chin and ran his thumb along my bottom lip. “And you,” he shook his head, “I canna think of a word strong enough to express how beautiful you are.”

I darted my tongue out, lightly touching the pad of his thumb. “Beautiful’s a good word.”

He wrapped his arm around my waist and pulled me tight against him, his erection pressed against my stomach. The reddish-brown hair on his torso chafed my nipples, sending little shivers of pleasure through me. I didn’t remember that from our first night together, but I had considerably less to drink tonight.

“It’s not good enough.” His voice had dropped to a pleasant rumble. “But since I don’t have the words, let me show you.”

His mouth crashed down on mine, hard enough to bruise, but I didn’t care. I flexed my hands on his chest, marking his skin, making him growl. He didn’t make that particular noise before, and boy, did it do things to my libido.

Then he was moving, kissing my chin, my neck, my collarbone, as he went to his knees. His hands slid from my hips up to my breasts, cupped them, brushed his thumbs across my nipples. They tightened as a jolt of pleasure went through me.

His mouth found one next, and his tongue moved back and forth across the tip before he began to apply suction to the tightening flesh. The first pull made me moan, and the second had my head falling back, my eyes closed. His mouth was amazing. Hot and wet, he worked over the sensitive skin with teeth and tongue. A slightly sharp bite of pain, followed by a soft pass of his tongue over the throbbing flesh.

And then he did the same thing to the other one.

The most exquisite pain and pleasure I'd ever felt, and it almost took me to my knees.

Then his mouth was gone, kissing between my breasts and down my stomach. Laughter bubbled out of me as his tongue circled my belly button, and then the sound turned into something more like a groan as his head moved lower.

"I'm...I'm gonna fall," I managed to gasp out as he kissed just above my mound.

"Sit."

I did, sinking down on the bed. In one smooth motion, he pushed my knees apart and buried his face between my legs. The noise I made would've been embarrassing if I'd been able to think about anything other than what his tongue was doing. I squirmed, desperate to get away but equally as desperate for more. His fingers dug into my hips, holding me in place, forcing me higher, further, until my body couldn't take it anymore, and I came, calling out his name.

From inside a blissful, post-orgasmic haze, I was dimly aware of falling back onto the bed, of Baylen moving me so that my legs weren't hanging off the side. By the time he climbed onto the bed, condom in hand, however, I was completely aware and ready for more.

"Let me." I sat up and held out my hand.

He handed over the condom, smiling as I reached for his cock. Silky smooth and thick, I took a moment to enjoy the feel of him, the weight. He groaned as I stroked him, so I did it a few more times before finally taking mercy on him and rolling on the thin layer of latex.

"Lay down," I said as I got to my knees. "It's my turn to do the work."

He laughed but did as I asked, folding his hands behind his head as he stretched out. His gaze stayed on me as I moved to place a knee on either side of his waist. I ran my fingertips along the length of his shaft, from base to tip, studying each minute twitch of his facial muscles, each sharp intake of breath. Later, I'd use those to explore how long I could drive him crazy. Right now, I didn't have the patience.

Wrapping my hand around him, I held him in place and slowly lowered myself onto his cock. I was wet enough to keep the friction from being painful, but not enough to make it easy. I had to take him only an inch at a time. His hands slid up and down my thighs, the tension in his touch telling me he was being tortured as much as I was.

When I finally had him all inside, I let out a sigh, my only movement a slight rocking back and forth, as if it was too much for me to stay completely still. Baylen's grip on my legs tightened, and he muttered something I couldn't understand, his accent too thick, the words too quiet.

"What?" The word came out breathless.

"You're amazing." He sat up, wrapping an arm around my waist. Most of his height was in his legs, but I still had to tip my head back to look at his face now. "The way you feel. The way you look. Fuck, Harlee, I...I don't have the words."

I put my hand on the side of his face. "I get it. Completely."

He nodded and leaned back enough to give us both space to move. Quickly, the tender moment gave way to the screaming need inside, and we stopped talking. We didn't look away, though, and despite not using words, as we chased pleasure together, I felt as if we were still communicating. Though what we were saying, I wasn't sure, only that it came from a connection I'd never experienced before.

I came first, still sensitive from my previous orgasm, but only seconds after I tightened around him, he followed, pulling me close. I buried my face in the spot between his shoulder and neck, breathing in the masculine scent of him. His hand moved up and down my spine, a soothing touch I didn't realize I needed, and at that moment, I knew that something had shifted between us, and it was going to change everything.

Eighteen

Baylen

Harlee had been as surprised as I when she woke up in my arms this morning. I had a vague memory of us cleaning up some after we had sex, but I couldn't remember if I asked her to stay or if we were both so tired, we just fell into bed together and didn't stir until it was morning.

Either way, things hadn't been as awkward as they could have been. I asked if she wanted to stay for breakfast, but she declined. She did, however, accept my offer of calling for a car.

I expected to feel at least a bit of relief when she left with a simple 'thank you for a lovely night,' but that wasn't the case. My room was too quiet. A shower refreshed me, but the restless feeling didn't leave. Feeling slightly guilty for how much I ignored her this week, I called over to Brigh's room, and we went to the hotel restaurant for breakfast. I had no intention of bringing up anything about Harlee to Brigh. She knew I had slept with Harlee, but she didn't know I knew she knew. Better ignore it than risk her saying anything to Alec, getting Harlee in trouble.

Over bacon and eggs, Brigh convinced me to take in a few sights with her, places she said she didn't feel comfortable going alone. I didn't really mind, but at lunch, I saw that my parents had called three times already that morning. Brigh wanted to go shopping, but I told her that I needed to call my parents before it was too late back home. I managed to avoid talking to them since I left Scotland, but it needed to be done.

Now, I sat at the desk in my room and steeled myself for a conversation I wouldn't enjoy.

I dialed my father's number and tried not to make any assumptions about why they were trying to reach me so many times today. If it was a true emergency, they would have left me a message.

“Baylen, I was beginning to wonder if you’d call before it was too late here. The time difference and all.”

I could hear the reprimand.

“My first time in Seattle,” I said evenly. “There’s a lot to see.”

“You’ve been there for two weeks.” Mum didn’t bother with a greeting. “Surely there isn’t *that* much to see there.”

One of the things I learned when it came to keeping things from my family was to offer as much truth as possible, changing only what was absolutely necessary. Which, in this instance, meant that they knew I came to Seattle to see my friend from university and to forget Angie. They didn’t know why I chose to visit Alec at this point in time or that Brigh had come with me.

They didn’t approve of the McCraes having left Scotland for America or that Alec had moved the MIRI headquarters to Seattle, but at least they were in the right social circles. And anything that took me away from Angie was good.

Now, I’m worried they learned that Brigh was with me. They would either conclude that I was here for business reasons, or they would think that I was dating my assistant. The latter would earn me a lecture about inappropriateness and discretion. The former would be worse since they would know that I wasn’t following their orders of dropping the brassiere business.

“I’ve never been to America before,” I reminded her. “There’s more to see than just the city of Seattle.”

Mum made an inelegant sound that encompassed everything she thought about the US, none of it good.

“Have you been to see your friend’s company?” Da asked. “Perhaps you could learn something about business.”

I clenched my teeth and swallowed a sigh. I supposed I should have anticipated that comment. “Alec showed me around MIRI. He’s doing great work here.”

“His father must be proud,” Da said.

I tried to ignore the implication of his statement, that the reverse was true for how *he* felt about *me*.

The pressure I had been able to set aside this trip immediately returned, feeling heavier and more suffocating than it ever had. All the enjoyment I experienced while spending time with Harlee and with Alec disappeared.

“When did you say you were comin’ home?” Mum asked.

“I didn’t,” I said.

“Is this really the responsible thing to do?” Da’s tone said exactly what his answer to the question would be. “Especially after what happened with Angie?”

I closed my eyes and counted to five. “I’m handling my business, Da.”

“You need to consider the optics for the family,” Mum said. “Especially with the embarrassment of Angie running off with that other man.”

I wanted to snap that I was sorry her cheating on me and dumping me had embarrassed the family, but I pushed back the words.

“Being the face of a cause means you have a responsibility to more than just our family name,” Da reminded me.

As if I needed to be reminded. As if it wasn’t drilled into my head from childhood that whatever causes we championed would reflect on our family as much as anything else.

Maybe I could extend my trip a little if I looked into expanding one of the family causes using MIRI. I let my mind drift toward the idea of what I could do with some additional time here. Specifically, what I could do with extra time with Harlee. Even once MIRI was finished with my account I would have a reason to stay.

In the back of my head, I knew that was foolish thinking. Once I had a new marketing plan in place, the wise thing to do would be to return home to implement it, ensuring that everything else was working as planned. Staying here indefinitely was not the responsible thing to do.

But I couldn't stop thinking about Harlee.

She was still on my mind when my parents released me from the call. Before I could convince myself that I should just walk away, I placed another call.

"Baylen?"

Harlee sounded surprised, and I understood why. Not much time had passed since I'd last seen her.

"Good afternoon." I felt myself smiling already. "I was wondering if you would care to go with me to Alec's birthday party next Saturday."

"Like a second date?"

I couldn't quite read her tone, but I answered her question honestly, "Aye. A second date."

"At my boss's birthday party?"

Oh. I hadn't thought of that. "If you'd rather not...it could be awkward." Then another possibility suddenly occurred to me. "Unless you're not interested in a second date."

"I am!" she blurted out. "I mean, I just thought it'd be a little weird, going to the birthday party of my boss with one of his closest friends."

"I under—"

"But I'll go. I mean, I want to go. To the party. With you."

Relief and something else flooded me. I didn't look too closely at either. "Brilliant!"

She laughed, and the sound made me forget everything else. The words of disappointment from my parents. The guilt of not doing everything humanly possible to make them proud. None of it mattered.

Harlee

If my life kept going this well, I wouldn't know what to do with myself. I talked to Baylen every single day since Saturday, and not just when he came to MIRI to check out what marketing had been doing with his project. While there, he stopped in for a couple minutes to say hi and see how my day was going. I was working on another project, and he didn't want to distract me, so we kept those interactions short.

No, the real times we talked were on our video chats in the evening, and they were hours of conversation. Everything from our favorite songs to the differences between American and Scottish words. Sometimes we talked about serious things, and sometimes we steered away from certain subjects, but we were getting to know each other better every day.

But, while I loved every minute I spent with him, I couldn't get rid of the knowledge that we were on borrowed time. We made no promises, talked about nothing further ahead than our date for the party. And I was okay with that, even if it did make me a little sad. I intended to enjoy every minute we did have together.

I smiled as I remembered that I would see him tomorrow and kept that thought in mind as I drove home. I was so caught up in my head that I didn't see who was waiting in front of my apartment until I was nearly at the door.

"You're smiling like that cat in the cartoon." Franklin pushed himself off the wall and came walking toward me. "You know, the one that disappeared."

"The Cheshire Cat." Unsurprisingly, it was my smile that disappeared first. Unfortunately, I couldn't vanish too, the way the cat had. "From *Alice in Wonderland*. That movie gave me nightmares for a week."

"I thought all kids liked cartoons."

I bit back a snarky remark about how I doubted he knew anything about what I'd liked as a kid because he'd never been around. I didn't want a debate. I

just wanted to make this encounter as brief as possible. “What do you want?”

“Can’t a girl just be happy to see her old man?”

I glared at him and crossed my arms. If he thought I would let him in my apartment – hell, into my building – he was crazy. If he wanted to talk, we’d do it right here. I didn’t want him in my home. Ever.

“I just wanted to congratulate you on your new job. MIRI’s big-time.”

I fought to keep my expression neutral. The only reason he would have ambushed me in front of my home like this was to catch me off-balance. Him knowing about me working at MIRI was a surprise, but I refused to give him the satisfaction of seeing it.

“Thanks.” I managed to get the word out but didn’t try to say anything else. My gut said there was more to come. He never came to see me without wanting something. Most likely, it was an introduction or my help in some con, but no matter what it was, it was going to get shut down right here and now.

“What do you do there?” he asked. “You a secretary or janitor or something?”

“Or something.”

“But what do you do?” he pressed. “I mean, I don’t know much about what they do. It’s research, right? That’s what the ‘r’ is for? So you just, like, google shit?”

“You didn’t come here to congratulate me on my new job,” I said. “What do you want?”

“I need you to get me information.”

“I’m not stealing anything from MIRI for you.”

“I just want info,” he said. “Bank account numbers used for payments, that sort of thing. You should be able to get it. Anyone who can afford a place like MIRI will have insurance. They won’t miss anything.”

I would've asked 'are you serious' or 'are you crazy,' but I already knew the answers to both of those questions.

"I can't help you," I said, shaking my head.

"You can." He took a step toward me.

"I won't—"

He kept going. "Look, I owe some people some money."

"You've been gambling again," I translated. "And losing."

"It's not like I can go back to what we used to do," he said.

I gritted my teeth. "You better not be blaming me for that. I kept my mouth shut when I got caught even though you took off. You're the one who decided it was a good idea to give that interview to that tabloid."

"I'd just gotten out of jail and needed the money," he countered. "You refused to work with me anymore."

"I was nineteen and wanted a real life," I snapped. "You told everyone I was a criminal. You used my actual name and talked about the fact that I'd been arrested. All of it. And now you want me to feel sorry for you because of it?"

"Not sorry," he said petulantly. "Just thought you'd understand why I have to play cards to earn money. I mean, you do it too. I've just had a run of bad luck."

If he actually knew me, he would've known that, yes, I sometimes supplemented my income with poker winnings, but I didn't play like he did. I certainly didn't wager more than I could afford to lose or – as I suspected he did – borrow from the wrong people.

None of that mattered though.

"I'm not doing it."

"Yes. You are." He took another step toward me and glared down with what I assumed was supposed to be intimidation.

Unfortunately for him, he never scared my mom, and she'd made damn sure he never scared me. "I'm not afraid of you, you know. And the answer is still no. You can stop asking."

His face turned red. "You listen to me, young lady. I am your fath—"

"No!" I snapped, my temper flaring to the surface. "You're *not* my father. I don't care that you let me tag along after Mom died, because *that* was never about being a father. You used me and then when I was in trouble, you left me. You're here only because you want something from me. You can say father as much as you want, but it doesn't make you anything more than what you've always been. A sperm donor."

I didn't wait to see his reaction. My whole life, he never tried to physically hurt me, but he seemed upset, and I wasn't about to test how far he would go to get what he wanted. I didn't run, but sure as hell didn't take my time either.

Once I was inside the lobby, I risked a glance back and saw that Franklin hadn't moved. His face wasn't red anymore either. In fact, it kinda looked pale. Like my words hadn't pissed him off but instead hit something inside him that I hadn't realized was there.

Twenty

Baylen

Alec was turning thirty-four on Monday. In five weeks, I'd be turning the same, and it hadn't occurred to me until now. I was leaving my early thirties and heading for my mid-thirties.

Age had never bothered me before, and it didn't exactly *bother* me now, but I had to admit that this was the first time in a long time that I thought about it. Thought about where my life was right now and the direction I was going. What my future looked like.

Perhaps what was happening now – my broken engagement, problems with business, coming to Seattle – was fate stepping in and giving me a chance to change the path I was on, to make a better future for myself. A future *I* wanted, rather than what my family expected of me.

Picking up Harlee as my date to Alec's birthday party seemed like a good start.

I hadn't made up my mind what to do about Brigh. It was clear to me she only threatened Harlee to protect me. She saw Harlee as a distraction that could take my focus away from my business. So, when I told Brigh that I was going to Alec's party, I didn't mention Harlee, but I certainly didn't invite Brigh to tag along, either. Brigh said she was making plans of her own. There was this young man she was talking to at MIRI.

As I knocked on Harlee's door, I pushed thoughts of Brigh aside. I just wanted today to be about my friend and going on a date with a woman I really liked.

"Are you sure this is okay?" Harlee asked as she opened the door.

I took in the jean shorts and cute white shirt with little blue flowers on it. I didn't know what it was called, but it had buttons, and the bottom part was tied, exposing just a hint of her midriff. Her hair was a tumble of gold and blue, and she'd painted both her toenails and fingernails to match her hair.

Her sandals showed off her ankle tattoo. Desire twisted low in my gut.

If we were going anywhere but Alec's birthday party, I would've said forget the plans and stay in so I could see how many ways I could pleasure her without removing a single article of clothing.

"You're perfect," I assured her before leaning down to give her a light kiss.

"Really?"

"Aye. Why would you think otherwise?" She gestured at me, and I looked down. I was wearing shorts and a collared shirt, nothing special.

After a minute, she took pity on my cluelessness. "You look like you stepped off the cover of *GQ* or whatever the Scottish version of that is. I look like I'm going to hang out at my buddy's house for a barbeque."

I reached out and took her hand. "If you could see the things I want to do to you in that outfit, you'd have no doubt how much I like it." I smiled and bobbed my eyebrows. "Though you might also decide I'm a bit of a pervert."

She flushed and laughed, the sound turning me on even more. "Let me grab my purse."

The drive to Alec's place was pleasant, with an undercurrent of something electric that held promise. Each time our skin touched, even the lightest graze, a shock went through me. It had been a week since we slept together, and the hunger I felt for her touch surprised me with its strength.

I found myself reaching for her, wanting even the simplest, most chaste touch, and I began to consider just how rude it would be for me to turn around and go back to her apartment or to my hotel room, spend a few hours exploring her body before finally going to the party.

I didn't do it, of course, but I was tempted.

We arrived just as Tuesday was getting out of her car. If Harlee's presence surprised her, she didn't show it. She merely greeted us both with a smile and commented on how nice the day was. A bit of the tension went out of Harlee, either due to the other woman's clear acceptance of Harlee as my date or because Tuesday also wore shorts and a casual short-sleeved blouse. I was

grateful either way.

Before Tuesday could ring the doorbell, Evanne yanked it open and grabbed Tuesday in a huge hug.

“Evanne, do you remember me telling you about the nice woman who helped me pick out your birthday gifts?” Tuesday took a step back and turned so she could point to Harlee. “Her name’s Harlee Sumpter.”

“Thank you!” With all her usual enthusiasm, Evanne threw herself at Harlee. “I loved them!”

Harlee looked up at me, eyes wide. “Uh, you’re welcome.”

I was next in line for a hug, and then Evanne was off, shouting for Soleil. I stepped up next to Harlee and placed my hand on the small of her back, keeping it there as we followed Tuesday inside.

“Please tell me I’m not the only person who doesn’t know anyone else here,” Harlee whispered, a hint of teasing not quite enough to stop me from seeing how nervous she still was.

“Most of Alec’s family I know only through stories and pictures.” I managed to reassure her before Mr. and Mrs. McCrae came over to say hello.

After introducing her to Patrick and Theresa, who I had met before, we made our way over to Alec. I pointed out his younger brothers Brody and Eoin, both of whom had lovely blondes at their sides. Though I never met Eoin at all, and Brody only once, Alec shared with me the happenings of the past year, so I was able to tell Harlee that the women were sisters, with the elder of the two having just married Brody earlier this year, and the younger one due with her and Eoin’s first child in just a few weeks.

Surprising me with their attendance were the younger McCrae twins, Sean and Xander. The two were identical, but I’d spent enough time cheering for Tottenham Hotspur to be able to guess with some certainty as to which one was the football player.

“Football?” Harlee looked confused. “I’ve never heard of a football team with that name.”

She was adorable. “Aye. Apologies. You’re thinking of American football. Xander plays *real* football.” I gestured toward a soccer ball in a corner. “Alec might have lived here longer than he did in Scotland, but he still calls it football.”

As we stepped up next to Tuesday, she leaned over to say, “Don’t worry, Harlee, you’ll get used to the weird words they use for things.”

“Baylen, I’m glad you could come.” Alec clapped me on the shoulder. Surprise flickered in his eyes as he saw Harlee next to me, but he recovered quickly. “Good afternoon.”

“Happy birthday, Mr. McCrae.” Harlee’s smile was stiff.

I mentally cursed myself for not thinking how awkward it would be speaking to Alec when everyone else present would be using his given name.

“Outside of a business setting, call me Alec,” he said with a kind smile. “May I call you Harlee?”

“Of course.” She shook his outstretched hand. “You have a beautiful home.”

As we exchanged other pleasantries, Alec caught my eye and raised an eyebrow but didn’t say anything until a half hour later when he and I went to the kitchen to grab a couple beers.

“Before you say anything,” I said preemptively, “I didn’t ask her out until after she finished with her part of my project. And to be honest, waiting was more at her insistence than forethought on my part.”

“And your promise about not flirting with my employee?” he asked, tone unreadable.

“I couldna help myself.”

After a momentary pause, he sighed and nodded, “All right.” He took a long drink and then added, “It’s not as if I haven’t done something similar. Lumen was, after all, my daughter’s teacher. Not exactly the behavior encouraged at PTA meetings.”

“May I ask a personal question?” At his nod, I continued, “How did you do it? How *do* you do it, I suppose, would be more accurate. How do you come

from such different worlds and make your relationship work?”

He leaned back against the counter, his expression serious. I appreciated that he was taking his time to think about an answer rather than just giving me some flippant cliché.

“We made our own world,” he said finally. “We decided that what we had, this family we were making, was more important than any obstacle society could throw our way. We took the things that were good and true from the individual lives we’d led up to that point, and we found that our principles were the same. The things we wanted for our future were the same.”

I nodded slowly, absorbing what he said. It made sense, and the idea of creating something where I took only the best of how I’d been raised appealed to me. Only one glaring problem could prevent it.

I didn’t have the familial support my friend did.

“Should you ever need me, I’ll be here.” His small smile made me think he knew what I was thinking. “For whatever you need. Even if you did exactly what I asked you not to do.”

“Harlee’s not in trouble with you, is she?” I asked, kicking myself for not making that my first question.

He shook his head. “If she makes you happy, I won’t get in the way of that. Plus, I know consent wasn’t an issue with you, which is a big reason for the policy I have.”

“Thank you.” I reached out and squeezed his shoulder.

After another couple minutes, we rejoined the party, and I put aside the solemnity of the conversation to enjoy myself. While I met and spent time with a few of Alec’s siblings before, I never attended any of his family gatherings. The differences between his family and mine had never been more pronounced than they were now.

As Evanne and Soleil passed out cake, Harlee and I settled on an overstuffed loveseat. I put my arm around her shoulders, and she leaned against me, both gestures so natural that we could have been doing the same thing for years. Having her here at this family thing – even though it wasn’t my family – felt

right. From the moment I met Alec's parents years ago, I saw what I always wished my family had been.

As I thought about what it would be like for Harlee to go to something my family had put on, I felt uneasy. And *put on* was definitely the most accurate description.

“Do you want to go?”

I didn't realize that Harlee was talking to me until she put her hand on my arm. “Pardon?”

“You were frowning, and I thought you might want to leave,” she explained.

“No.” I squeezed her hand. “It was a passing thought.” I studied her features. “Unless you want to leave.”

She shook her head. “I'm having fun.” A wistful smile curved her lips. “Growing up, it was always just me and my mom, then just me and my dad.” She gestured at the scene. “I never really got to have this sort of thing.”

“I have four siblings and never had this either.” The admission slipped out before I could stop it. At her questioning look, I added, “My family is... proper. Birthday parties are an *Event*.”

“I can hear the capital ‘E’ in that.” Her thumb soothed my skin. “Even when you were little?”

I nodded. “Every generation has a point where they receive the lecture about the responsibilities that come with our family legacy. Part of that is the sacrifice of certain ‘normal’ experiences.”

Harlee gave me a searching look and then suddenly stood. “Come with me.”

I took the hand she offered and followed her out of the main room. Despite my curiosity, I didn't ask where we were going. I'd find out soon enough, and a part of me liked letting her take the lead.

Down a short set of stairs, around a corner, into a shadowy alcove, and then a turn through a doorway. She flipped on the light, and I saw that she led us to what she would call a bathroom.

“How did you find this?” I asked as she closed the door behind us.

“Unlike you, I paid attention during the tour Evanne gave.”

The smile she gave was pure wickedness, and I half-expected her to push me against the door and kiss me. Instead, she did something that had my dick instantly hard.

Her shorts dropped, and she stepped out of them, revealing a pair of simple white panties. Undoing the top three buttons of her shirt kept it on, but I could see hints of a bra that matched. It wasn't the clothes or her near-nudity that did me in, though. It was the raw desire that turned her eyes as dark as the night sky.

Two steps backward, and she turned away from me, placing her hands on the sink counter. A glance over her shoulder found me still standing in the same place. She leaned forward slightly, arching her back, the invitation clear.

“You're not going to make me take care of myself, are you?”

Any protests I might have made disappeared, and my world narrowed down to this small space and the woman offering herself to me.

Pants down to my thighs, condom on, each motion done with shaking hands. I never wanted anyone this badly before. She took me from zero to a hundred in less than a minute, and I no longer cared where we were or what was proper. I just needed to be inside her.

I didn't want to hurt her, but she pushed back against me when I tried to ease in, both of us cursing as her body reluctantly made way for mine. I closed my eyes, hands clutching her hips, jaw clenched, and I fought the urge to come right then. I didn't wait long, though. This wasn't the sort of situation that made for lazy lovemaking.

I'd be damned if I was the only one who got off, though. As soon as I started to move, I slid one hand down the front of her panties, my fingers finding that slick bundle of nerves. The other arm wrapped around her upper body, my hand delving inside her shirt to cup a breast. I held her tight against me, barely giving myself room to thrust, and used my fingers to bring her along. Whether out of my need for her or the adrenaline from doing something so daring, I didn't last long. As I came, she ground down on my hand and my

cock, taking her own pleasure with a quiet but satisfied cry.

We stood together a moment longer, waiting for our breathing to slow, and I found myself wondering if I would be able to leave her behind when the time came.

Twenty-One

Baylen

I didn't take Harlee home after the party. I almost asked her to stay with me all weekend, but my conversation with my parents came back to me before I could. So instead of spending Sunday in bed with her, I spent it on my laptop, working. I talked to her Sunday evening and last night, but I wanted to see her.

By mid-morning, I decided to do something spontaneous and unlike me. I asked the hotel desk clerk for a recommendation and then placed an order. Twenty minutes later, I was on my way to MIRI with lunch for two.

As I stepped out onto Harlee's floor, I saw other employees leaving for lunch. I didn't see Harlee, which I hoped meant she was still in her office.

Her door was partially open, and I could see her at her desk. I knocked anyway.

"Baylen." Harlee sounded surprised.

"I thought we could have lunch together." I pushed the door enough to allow me to enter the office, holding up the bag I carried. "I was told this was a good place to eat."

She glanced at the bag before turning back to her computer. "Never heard of it."

I tried not to frown at her abrupt behavior. Perhaps I caught her in the middle of something. "I should have called ahead rather than surprise you."

Her attention was still fixed on her screen as she said, "That would've been nice."

"Is something wrong?" I set the bag on the edge of her desk.

"Nope," she said. "I've just got a lot of work to do."

“I’m sure Alec doesn’t require you to work through lunch.” I kept my tone light. “Let’s take a few, have something to eat. Talk a bit.”

She gave me a sharp look. “Just because you’re friends with my boss doesn’t mean you can just stroll in and decide when I don’t have to work.”

My eyebrows went up. “That’s not what I’m doing. I just wanted to spend some time with you and thought it’d be nice to surprise you with lunch.”

“Yeah, well, I don’t have the time for lunch.”

I sighed loudly, hating how this conversation was going. “Well, it’s not as if I have a lot of time left here in America.”

She turned toward me. “How could I forget? Of course, I should drop everything I’m doing to spend time with a guy who leaves Seattle in a week.”

“I never told you I was staying here,” I countered. “You knew from the beginning I would leave. In fact, that’s why you wanted to be with me in the first place. I was something casual that you never had to see again.”

“That’s right, you were.” She stood, crossing her arms. “Nothing has changed, so why should I take time out for you? What can ever become of us when you won’t be sticking around?”

A flash of frustrations went through me. The way she phrased it made it sound as if I made promises. “I’ve hidden nothing about who I am, where I’m from. If this,” I gestured between the two of us, “isn’t what you wanted, why did you continue in the first place?”

“Because I’m an idiot, apparently,” she snapped. “I don’t know what I was thinking. I mean, look at you.”

I took a step back, now completely confused. “What does *that* mean?”

“You know what I mean.” Her cheeks were flushed. “You’re friends with billionaire Alec McCrae. You come from a rich, high-class family. You own companies and give lots of money to big causes.” Her hands curled into fists. “And I’m...well, I’ve got no family. No important name. No money.”

“What?” My mind was spinning. I didn’t understand how an attempt to surprise her with lunch had turned into this.

“The distance between our worlds isn’t just Seattle to Scotland.” Her shoulders slumped. “If we take this further, it’s just going to hurt more. It was a bad idea.”

“Aye,” I said quietly. “It was.”

I was halfway through the lobby when I realized that I left the bag of food in Harlee’s office. I wasn’t about to retrieve it, though. As Harlee had pointed out, I could afford to let her keep it.

As I got into my rental car, I made a decision. From here on out, I’d focus only on the reason I’d come here in the first place. Work. Using voice to text, I sent Brigh a message to meet me at the hotel restaurant for a business lunch. She immediately replied that she would get us a table.

While she could be a bit possessive at times, I could always count on her. When we returned to Scotland, I’d see to it that she received a large bonus.

I didn’t have my laptop with me, but I didn’t bother returning to my room for it.

Brigh acquired a booth near the back of the restaurant, and the host took me straight to her. After giving my drink order, I addressed Brigh. “I want to discuss scheduling for our return home and our marketing launch.”

Her expression didn’t change in the slightest. “Should I contact the airline?”

“Not yet,” I said. “I’m not yet finished with MIRI, but once I do, we’ll return home the following day.”

She didn’t try to hide her surprise. “You don’t want to have an extra day to... say your goodbyes?”

We both knew she wasn’t talking about Alec. I could have pretended not to understand, but I needed to, well... vent.

“That’s not necessary. She’s made it quite clear that our worlds are too different for us to make any sense.” I hated how bitter I sounded.

“Perhaps it’s for the best.” Brigh’s voice was sympathetic. “We never intended to stay here. Home is Scotland, not Seattle. You have family, your business. Everything is there.”

She was right. My entire life was back in Scotland. No matter how I felt about my parents or how frustrated I was by what happened with Angie, that was home.

“Aye.” I needed to say it out loud. “Edinburgh is home.”

“It sure is.”

“Well, when we’re back home, I’ll be giving you two weeks off, with pay and a nice bonus.” I smiled at her.

Her hand went to her chest. “That’s not necessary.”

“Aye, it is.” I took a bite of my meal, though I barely tasted the savory beef. “Now, for what comes next...”

As we went through the plan, my mind returned to the neat, organized way of thinking I worked so hard to cultivate. Orderly lists, prioritizing the various things I needed to do. Making plans for my future.

In Scotland.

Twenty-Two

Harlee

I was a royal bitch.

I usually hated that word and would've decked any asshole that used it, but there were always exceptions to that rule. One, in particular, was when I myself had been acting like a bitch.

Like I was with Baylen earlier today.

He just wanted to be nice and bring me lunch. Just a fucking nice guy who wanted to bring me lunch.

And I was a bitch to him, all because Mr. Kettle had made some snide, condescending remarks about scoring Baylen's account on my first day.

Now, I continued to sit here, staring at the bag Baylen had left on my desk forty-five minutes ago. I looked inside to make sure nothing in it would spoil and make my office smell the way Sunshine's had when she forgot about the tuna and pickle sandwich she threw into her trashcan after a client left it in her office. Once I saw that I wasn't in danger of stinking up my office, I considered throwing it away. But that would've been a waste. And I didn't like waste.

I hadn't been able to eat it, though. If my stomach wasn't twisted into knots, I would've been hungry, but right now, I'd throw up if I tried to eat anything.

Most of it was guilt. Mr. Kettle pissed me off and I took it out on Baylen. I deserved to feel guilty.

But there was a not-so-small part of what I was feeling that wasn't guilt. It was...grief. Well, maybe not something as intense as grief, but it was definitely sadness.

I knew that Baylen would be going back to Scotland. It wasn't a surprise. We didn't talk about it, sure, but I wasn't an idiot...even if my current behavior said otherwise.

If someone had asked me flat-out if I expected Baylen to stay in America for me, I would've laughed. In no reality would I have been so self-centered to think that a couple weeks of fun and good sex – all right, *great* sex – meant he'd completely uproot his entire life and move to a different country to see if this was anything real.

Not that I even *wanted* that. Because I didn't. I wasn't looking for a relationship, and definitely not a serious one. And even if I was, Baylen and I weren't a good match. What I said about the two of us coming from different worlds had been true.

This wasn't some Cinderella story where the poor little working girl was whisked away by the rich white knight. But it wasn't some tragedy either. I didn't need rescuing. Sure, I didn't have the sort of money the McFann family did, but I didn't need it. I liked the life I had, even more now that I had a job I loved.

I didn't need Baylen McFann for anything.

But I shouldn't have been so rude.

But I didn't *need* him. And everything I said was true.

I could've been nicer, though.

By the time I got home, I was exhausted. My head was pounding, I was hungry, but nothing sounded appealing. After realizing that I wouldn't be able to keep my lunch down, I gave it to Melinda Gleeson. At least it hadn't gone to waste, but it meant that I hadn't eaten anything since the toast I had with my morning coffee. Which probably explained the headache.

I stood in front of the fridge for nearly two minutes, staring at the contents and waiting for something to strike me. When I closed it with a sigh, I opened the freezer.

“Emergency fudge ripple it is,” I said as I reached for the carton.

Ice cream and a new rom-com starring Tatiana Maslany sounded like a good idea. Then a hot shower and bed. A good night's sleep would have me ready for an uneventful day of work tomorrow. The standard for how my life will go from now on.

Twenty-Three

Baylen

I smiled at Evanne as she hurried off to the kitchen to check on the blueberry pie she helped Lumen make. She'd been so excited that it was the first thing she told me when I arrived. It was exactly what I needed too. She made me smile, and that hadn't been happening very often lately.

"She's going to be a terrifying teenager," Alec observed.

"You may need to invest in deadbolts." I chuckled.

"No good." He smiled at me. "She knows how to pick a lock."

"Soleil?" I raised an eyebrow.

"Brody."

"Ah." That seemed about right based on what he told me about his younger brother.

"I meant to ask earlier if Brigh felt uncomfortable coming to dinner this evening," Alec said. "I ken she's your assistant, but she was more than welcome to come."

"Aye, she knows," I assured him. "She had a headache and wanted to sleep."

"Is she sick?" Alec asked, genuine concern in his voice.

I shook my head. "A little homesick, maybe. I promised her a holiday after we get home."

"Oh, I spoke with Janie this afternoon," he said. "Tuesday will be setting up your meeting this week. Will you be going home right away after? I was thinking we could take up a round of golf. I have one scheduled the second of August with Gerick Garland, the owner of the Seattle Sounders."

"I think it'll be for the best if I leave directly after."

“Are you trying to convince me or yourself?” he asked. “I noticed you came alone tonight.”

“Brigh had a headache,” I reminded him.

“I’m not talking about your assistant,” he said. “I’m talking about my employee. One Ms. Harlee Sumpter.”

I looked down and brushed nonexistent lint from my shirt. I hadn’t told him that Harlee and I had parted ways. “With my return home eminent, it didn’t seem wise to waste either of our time.”

“A waste of time?” Alec looked surprised. “The two of you seemed to enjoy being together.”

I shook my head. “I came here for business, and spending time with one of my closest friends was a bonus. Now, business is almost over, and it’s time to say my goodbyes.”

Before Alec could respond, Evanne came running in from the kitchen to announce that dinner was ready. I was thankful for the interruption. In the past, my friend would have let the matter lie, allowing me the luxury of keeping my misery to myself. The look in his eyes as we made our way to the table told me that being with Lumen had done more than make him happy. She changed something in him, something that made me think he’d be bringing the subject up again.

Even with that hanging over my head, I enjoyed dinner. Soleil seemed much more relaxed now that she was in her own home, and the way she interacted with Evanne made me think of how my siblings and I were before our parents’ lectures and pressure changed them.

I hoped the bond between Soleil and Evanne would remain strong.

As I enjoyed my time with Alec’s family, I tried not to think too much about mine. Not the ones back home, and not the one I may have some day in the future. Because if I thought about a future family, that would lead me to who I would have that family with, and I didn’t want to look too closely at that right now. Not with my broken engagement only a little over three months ago or my more recent romantic failure.

The night wore on, and soon, the kids left the adults to have a nightcap and some conversation. Lumen excused herself only a short while later, giving Alec and me time to speak alone. I was unsure if Alec had asked her to go, but even if it had been her own idea, the result was the same.

And, of course, Alec broached the topic of a certain MIRI employee.

“Janie shared the analysis Harlee gave her. I was impressed, especially since your project was the first she’d done.” He poured me another finger of Brody’s best whiskey. “She’s a talented young woman.”

I nodded, my throat tight. “She is.”

“And the two of you got along well at the picnic and my party.”

“We did.” I swallowed the alcohol, barely registering the smooth taste. “But there’s only so much time one can take for fun.”

He studied me for a minute, the searching expression on his face almost intense enough to make me uncomfortable. He and I had always been skilled at masking our true emotions from others, but we also both were able to see past the surface when it came to each other, which meant I could pretend as much as I wanted, but he’d see through it.

“We’re much alike,” he said finally. “You and I. Especially when it comes to our personal lives. Work and our family name are important, more than the things we want for ourselves.”

“Your family wants you to be happy.” I said it without bitterness and knew he’d take it the same way. He and I had talked about our families a lot that first year at university, and we knew the ways they were different.

“You still want your parents to be proud of you,” he replied, “and there’s nothing wrong with that. They’re not bad people. Their priorities are just a little...”

“Fucked up,” I said dryly.

“Aye.” He laughed.

“But I still love them, even if I don’t always like them.” I sighed. “As much as it pains me to admit it, I’ll always want things to be different.”

“That doesn’t mean you have to give up everything you want in pursuit of their acceptance.” He paused and then added, “Or any other excuse you might use.”

“I’m not making excuses.”

He raised an eyebrow, that gesture saying it all.

“I’m not,” I insisted. “I enjoy working hard. Just as you do.”

“Aye, I do.” He nodded. “But I’ve made room for a life outside the office. Once for Evanne, and then again for Lumen.”

“They’re both amazing,” I said. “Soleil too.”

“Aye, her too.” He tipped his glass back and drained the last of his whiskey before continuing. “Perhaps that’s not what you want – a family – but I don’t believe for a moment that what you have now is the only thing you want for your future.”

“It doesn’t matter what I want,” I said. “With you, both your daughter and the woman you love lived here, in Seattle. Your life was already here. You only had to make room for it.”

“Trust me when I say that ‘only’ isn’t a word I would have used for it,” Alec countered. “I almost lost everything. I made some time for Evanne when she was born, but not as much as I should have, not until Keli left her with me. And Lumen? I made mistake after mistake with her. One of those mistakes almost cost us Soleil.” He glanced in the direction of the stairs, as if to ensure Soleil wasn’t within earshot. “I behaved like a right bastard and didn’t listen to Lumen. If I had...some things might have been different for Soleil.”

The guilt in his eyes told me that whatever had happened had been far worse than what I could imagine.

“Lumen has forgiven me for so much,” he continued. “I ken how lucky I am to have a woman like her. I don’t deserve her.”

“No, you don’t,” I said with a smile. “She is a rare woman.”

“Aye.” He smiled back. “That she is.”

“I’m going back to Scotland,” I said after a moment. “That’s where my family is. Where my business is. I can’t stay here.”

“Did she ask you to?”

I shook my head. “It never got that far.”

“What happened?”

“I brought her lunch on Tuesday, and she snapped at me that she couldn’t just drop everything to spend time with me, even if I was your friend. Everything just went downhill from there.” The words poured out. “She said we were from different worlds, that she had no family or name or money, as if that was something I cared about. She said that what had happened between us had been a mistake.”

“Do you regret it?” Alec asked. “Or do you just regret how it ended?”

“How it ended.” I didn’t even need to think about it.

“Do you want her? Not just for sex, but do you want her in your life?”

I put my elbows on my knees and my face in my hands. “I do, but I dinna ken how it can be.”

“Take it from someone whose stupidity almost fucked up his entire life.” Alec leaned over and clapped a hand on my shoulder. “Don’t worry about the details just yet. Go talk to her. Find out why she was upset and if she wants you the same as you do her. Don’t borrow extra trouble; just try to work everything out. If she’s worth it, be willing to be flexible. Don’t throw it all away before you even try.”

He was right. Even if Harlee didn’t care for me the way I did for her, I needed to speak with her. Going back home while things felt so unsettled would do neither of us any good.

And I had to do it now, before I lost my nerve.

I looked at Alec, and he nodded. “I’ll call for a car.”

Twenty-Four

Harlee

It had been a good week at work.

Still, this past week was something I wanted to forget. First, the shit with Mr. Kettle. Then the fiasco that'd happened with Baylen.

Having been able to make it home in one piece from work today, I decided that the best way to spend my weekend was sleeping, cleaning, and eating junk food while watching as many episodes of *Once Upon a Time* as possible. Since it was the first job where I got weekends off, I expected it to take a while to wear off the novelty.

I also hoped that staying home meant I wouldn't accidentally run into my father. I hadn't seen him since he asked me to steal from MIRI, but if he really did need money as much as he said, he would probably come back. I didn't feel like making it easy for him. Still, I hoped he would just go back to ignoring me since I said no.

Men sucked.

A couple minutes later, I jumped when the buzzer next to my door went off, signaling that someone was downstairs, wanting to come in. I sighed and got up, resigning myself to telling Franklin to go away.

Except it wasn't Franklin who answered my greeting.

"What are you doing here?" Not the politest greeting, but I'd already been rude to him once. Why stop now?

"I would appreciate the opportunity to speak with you, if it is not too late."

"You sound like you just stepped out of *Downton Abbey*." I hit the right button. "But sure. Come in."

"I'm Scottish, not English," he reminded me when I opened my door a few moments later. "*Downtown Abbey* is English."

I rolled my eyes as I closed the door and turned to face him. I folded my arms, suddenly remembering that I wasn't wearing a bra. Or underwear. Just my shorts and t-shirt, both of which were fairly thin cotton. In the right light, he'd know exactly what I didn't have underneath.

I really shouldn't have let him in.

"It's late, Baylen," I said with a sigh. "You wanted to speak, so speak."

"I handled things...poorly on Tuesday," he said. "I didn't think about what position I might be putting you in by stopping in as often as I did. I should have spoken to you first."

"Thank you." I honestly appreciated the apology, but I was the one in the major wrong. And I needed to admit it. "But all that was on me. I had a bad morning, and I took it out on you. I'm sorry."

"Thank you."

The silence that followed was uncomfortable, to say the least. We might've apologized for the way we did things, but neither of us had addressed the truth about some of what had been said.

Like the fact that Baylen was going back to Scotland. And he was rich. I wasn't. Two big reasons that we didn't work. *Couldn't* work.

Right?

"I do intend to return to Scotland." He broke the silence with a softly spoken statement. "And that raises some questions that will eventually need to be answered, but that's the future. Right now, I'm here, with you, and I think there's something between us."

I swallowed hard as he came toward me. "What about the rest?"

"The rest?"

He was close enough now that I could smell his body wash. Being this near to him threatened to crack my resolve. "Just because I said it rudely doesn't mean it's not true. You and I aren't just from different countries. And a difference in worlds isn't fixed by a change of location."

“Aye, if we want there to be something real between us, there aren’t any easy answers.” He reached out and tucked some hair behind my ear, the tips of his fingers brushing my cheek. “But I think it could be worth the work.”

“And if it’s not?”

He shrugged. “Then we go our separate ways. But I don’t want to look back on this and wonder what could’ve happened if I’d just been willing to take the risk.”

I didn’t have to ask myself if I wanted the same thing. I wanted him so badly that it almost hurt. No amount of ice cream or television fantasy could be a replacement. And it wasn’t just physical either.

If all I wanted was an orgasm, I could take care of that myself. If I only wanted sex, I could find someone to hook up with. But I didn’t want just anyone. I wanted *him*. I wanted a *connection* with him.

“Is there anything else you want to say?” I asked, tilting my head back so my eyes could meet his.

“Not at the moment.”

“Good.” I grabbed the back of his neck, pulling him down as I went up on my toes to bring our mouths together.

For a moment, I surprised him, but it didn’t last long. His hands went to my waist, and I felt the heat of them through my clothes.

I wanted skin on skin.

He seemed to have the same idea, and as his tongue teased my bottom lip, his hands slid under my shirt. A shiver went through me, and I moaned. He swallowed the sound, pulling me closer. My nipples were tight little points, and I could feel his cock hard against my stomach.

“Bedroom?” he murmured the question against my lips.

“Aye.”

He chuckled at my response and picked me up, his hands squeezing my ass as I wrapped my legs around his waist. He carried me to my room while I kissed

his jaw and down the side of his neck. Just before he put me on the bed, I bit down on his earlobe, and he cursed under his breath.

“Is that how it’s going to be?” He dropped me on the bed and fell over me, catching himself on his elbows so he didn’t crush me. “You’ve had a taste. It’s my turn.”

I lost sight of him for a moment when he pulled my shirt over my head, and the smile I saw as he took off my shorts had me smiling right back. Then his eyes were on my body, devouring every inch. Damn, I loved the heat in them.

His mouth moved over my skin, lips and light touches of his tongue, the sharp bite from his teeth. Along my collarbone and then down to the softer flesh of my breasts. I gasped and squirmed, absorbing each and every ripple and jolt of pleasure.

When he took my nipple into his mouth, it was like a straight line ran from that sensitive flesh to the throbbing between my legs. Then his fingers slid down there, slipping over the slick bundle of nerves.

“Come on my fingers,” he said as he pushed two digits inside me.

I cried out, my back arching. He drove them into me with quick, twisting thrusts, his thumb pressed on my clit, his teeth working over my nipple. I felt like I was on fire, every inch of me burning, building toward an explosion. My climax hit me hard, and I grabbed at my blanket, needing something in my hands.

He kissed his way down my stomach, gentle brushes of his lips that barely registered amid the intensity of my orgasm. Then his mouth was between my legs, and another wave of pleasure rolled over me. I reached down, burying my fingers in his hair, unsure if I wanted to press him closer or drag him up my body until I could get his cock inside me.

I didn’t have time to make a choice as his very talented tongue and lips scattered my thoughts, leaving me only with what I felt. My eyes closed, and my head fell back, everything narrowing down to the delicious friction giving me so much pleasure.

My second orgasm left me limp and panting, but not yet sated. I felt the bed dip and opened my eyes. As he undressed, I watched, enjoying the sight of

his body being revealed in such a casual manner. It felt more intimate, somehow, the lack of any sort of finesse or sensuality.

By the time he turned back to the bed, I was back to myself enough to smile at him. The pleased expression on his face made me feel warm inside, something deeper than mere physical desire. I let myself feel it for a moment before dropping my eyes to watch him roll on a condom and then crawl onto the bed with me.

With his eyes locking on mine, he settled between my legs. We came together with a sigh, our bodies fitting perfectly. He reached for my hands, threading his fingers between mine, pinning my hands to the bed. Unable to reach for him, unable to move much at all, I had no way to release the pressure building with every stroke. No choice but to feel it all.

“Bay, Bay, Bay.” I was barely aware that I was chanting his name, begging him for more, but he understood exactly what I needed.

Faster and harder, he thrust into me, his jaw tight, body taut with tension, and when I finally went over the edge, he was only a few seconds behind. We hung in that space where two people were the closest they could ever be to becoming one person, that place where only this moment and us existed. His body slumped over mine and his face pressed against my neck, breath hot on my already overheated skin. I wrapped my arms around him, running my hand over his shoulders and back, not thinking, not planning, just drifting until we both fell asleep.

Twenty-Five

Baylen

I'd been waking up in a bed that wasn't my own for more than three weeks, but the moment my brain turned on, I knew something was different. Then I felt the mattress shift and a warm body press up against mine.

Harlee.

Memories came forward, images and sounds that had my body responding almost immediately. For a minute, I was tempted to wake Harlee with an orgasm or two but ultimately decided that to let her sleep a while longer. If my getting up to use the toilet woke her, then I'd see if she was game for another go.

After I finished, I peeked in on Harlee to find her still sleeping and then went to the kitchen for a glass of water and to check the time. She didn't have a clock in her room, and I didn't want to wake her up by trying to find my pants to get to my phone. The microwave said it was a quarter of eight, which surprised me. I rarely slept past seven, even on the weekends.

Then again, I never had a night like last night, even back when Angie and I were together.

I just finished drying my glass when I heard a noise from the main living area. Nothing alarming, but enough for me to investigate. Due to the overcast day, the room was dim despite the curtains being open, and it took my eyes a moment to spot what I hadn't seen before.

A large yellow envelope was on the floor near her work bag. I didn't see it last night, but I was focused on something else when I arrived. As I picked it up, intending to return it to her back, papers spilled onto the floor.

"Dammit," I muttered. I must've picked it up by the bottom.

I tried not to look too closely at the contents, not knowing if what the papers contained were confidential or not. The front of the envelope was blank, but

it made sense for it to be work-related. Still, I couldn't stop my eyes from catching a word or two, and when I saw 'encryption key required,' my interest was piqued.

I went to the kitchen, where a light over the stove was sufficient to read by. I almost wished that hadn't been the case. There was no way for me to unsee what was here.

Proprietary information about some security account.

Bloody hell.

I leaned on the counter and began to read more carefully. One page held a list of names of people. Investors. Board members to organizations, some I recognized. Potential clients. The next page held specs. Not blueprints, but information about various systems used by the security account. Statistics about them. Marked with different color highlighters.

What the hell was this?

The third page offered something of an explanation.

It was another list, but this one with handwritten notes. A messy, sprawling hand, difficult to read, but I could make out enough to know that it was bad.

...security codes...systems in what buildings...noted flaws...blind spots...love dad

Dad.

We'd talked about our families, but she always said that she didn't have a father. I'd assumed that meant she didn't know who he was or at the very least wasn't in contact with him. But this sounded as if she'd talked to him, and recently too.

And it seemed that the things she'd been talking about would have been covered under MIRI's strict NDA policy. I had many questions, but the leading one was this: why was Harlee's father asking for information from her about Bulwark Security Systems?

And then the final page, a printed magazine article, which didn't seem to fit at all, but the headline grabbed my attention.

Father / Daughter Con Team

I frowned and kept reading.

Convicted con man Franklin Cook knows he hasn't always been the best father, but he swears he had his daughter's best interest at heart when he taught her to gamble as a young child. "After Harlee's mother died, I couldn't give her what she needed, not without breaking the rules sometimes." Except Cook didn't just break the rules. He brought his daughter into his schemes, a decision that eventually landed the fifteen year-old in court on theft charges. While she only received probation for that, an incident at the foster home she was sent to resulted in the teenager spending the next two and a half years in a residential unit for troubled youth. When asked if he regretted leaving Harlee behind to face the charges alone, Cook swears he always meant to come back for her. Unfortunately, shortly after his daughter's second arrest, Cook himself was apprehended during—

"I don't mind if you want to wander around naked." Harlee sounded amused. "I like a good show. Just don't sit on my furniture bare-assed."

I looked up from the papers in my hand to find her smiling at me. She'd pulled on a short purple robe, but I didn't think she was wearing anything underneath it. Under other circumstances, I might've wanted to take advantage of it. Pick her up and set her on the counter, spread her open, and go down on her until she begged me to fuck her.

Considering what I'd just discovered, however, I wasn't in the mood for sex.

"What's that?" she asked, nodding toward the papers.

"You tell me." I set them on the counter. "Take a look while I put some clothes on."

When I came back into the kitchen a couple minutes later, she was frowning at the papers. "What the hell are these? Where did you get them?"

Ignoring her questions, I asked my own. "Am I correct in assuming that those files belong to MIRI?"

"They do, but where did they come from?"

“MIRI, where else?” I snapped.

She gave me a disgusted look. “I’m not an idiot. Who got them, and how did they get here?”

“Your father’s note gives a big fucking clue.” My control over my voice slipped as I gestured toward the handwritten paper.

“My father?”

I really wished I could believe the confusion on her face. “He signed it ‘love dad.’”

She laughed, a harsh sound with little joy in it. “Trust me, if you knew anything about Franklin Cook, you’d know that’d be the last thing he’d ever say to me.” The color drained from her face as she looked at mine. “Seriously, Baylen, the man’s a criminal. He only ever contacts me when he’s feeling guilty, or he wants something.”

Her words didn’t exactly make me think better of the situation. “Aren’t you one too? A criminal, I mean. That article says you were arrested. Twice.”

The color drained from her face as she picked up the page. “I was.” She set her jaw. “But that doesn’t tell the whole story.”

“What’s the whole story?” I didn’t think it would make a difference, but I still asked.

“My father’s a con man. Always has been. After my mom died, he basically made me his partner. When I was fifteen, I fucked up on a con. I got caught. He didn’t. He left me behind. The second arrest was because some asshole bullies put Jin in the hospital,” she said. “And no one did shit about it. So I stole my foster parents’ car and ran them off the road.”

If she told me that before, I would have been on her side, told her that he was an awful person, but she didn’t tell me any of it. But this way, with everything else...I couldn’t just ignore incriminating evidence like that.

“Are you stealing for him now?”

A flash of hurt crossed her eyes before disappearing behind something...cold. “He asked me to get information from MIRI, but I told him no.”

“Then why do you have a list from him along with papers that contain proprietary information from your employer?” A part of me hoped that she had a reasonable answer for all of it, but I couldn’t imagine what it could be.

“I don’t know where that came from,” she said. “Where did you find it, anyway?”

“By your bag.”

She looked a little surprised by that but not overly concerned. “Someone must’ve put it in there at work or something like that. Or maybe they slid it under my door while we were sleeping.”

“Do you often get mysterious deliveries under your door?” My question had an edge to it, but I couldn’t curb it, not when a picture was beginning to present itself.

“Look, I can’t tell you what I don’t know.” Her eyes sparked angrily. “All I can do is say that I didn’t take any papers from MIRI, for Franklin or for me.”

“Prove it.”

She scowled. “How do you want me to do that, you asshole?” She glared at me. “If I would’ve known that I needed evidence that I refused to help Franklin, I would’ve recorded the conversation, but unfortunately, I’m not psychic.”

I shook my head, feeling sick to my stomach. I wished I could believe her, but the evidence was overwhelming. She had a note from her father asking for information. She had pages of information. American courts required only reasonable doubt to convict. Any doubt I might have wasn’t reasonable. It was based on the fact that I didn’t want her to be involved in corporate espionage because I liked her.

“If you can offer no viable alternative explanation, then I have nothing else to believe but what I see in front of me.”

“Wow.” She took a step back, clearly shutting down. “Get the fuck out of my apartment.”

“I was just about to suggest I do that as well.” I checked my pockets for my phone. “I’ll be speaking to Alec later today, and after that, I’ll be going back to Scotland, like I should have done weeks ago. Staying this long was a huge mistake.”

“You’re right,” she said, her voice tight. “It was. Now get out.”

I left.

Twenty-Six

Harlee

My legs went out from under me as the door closed behind Baylen. The hurt and anger doubled me over, and I struggled not to throw up. His accusations were awful but, as the shock began to fade, the true impact of what this meant hit me.

I was going to lose my job.

Fuck. I'd be lucky if I didn't get arrested or sued. Or both.

I had absolutely no doubt in my mind that I just lost everything. Including things I hadn't known I wanted so badly. MIRI. Friends like Tuesday and Lad. Baylen.

A future.

In less than five minutes, it blew up, and I still didn't understand, really, what happened. I understood the actual words, but why he said them...

No. No. I couldn't break down now. Not if I wanted to fix this.

I squeezed my eyes closed and buried my face in my hands. I needed to think. I knew I was intelligent, that my brain worked faster than a lot of other people's. I could put pieces of information together quickly, come up with conclusions that would take other people hours if they found them at all.

It was why I was good at my job.

A job I wouldn't have much longer if I couldn't figure out what the hell had just happened.

The papers. Right. I needed to start there.

I forced myself to focus on my breathing, to think of nothing but those slow, deep breaths. A couple minutes passed before I was able to pull myself together, but I felt relieved that I managed at all. I could do this. Start with

those papers and move on from there.

I thought Baylen might've taken them with him, but I found the envelope and the papers on the counter where I'd put them during the argument.

Everything I read just pissed me off because I knew most of the information. I either put it together or checked it. Some bits were ones I knew I had access to, but I never looked at personally, which meant this wasn't just a matter of papers I didn't print, but things I didn't even access. A part of me wished that I knew that before Baylen had left, but I had a feeling it wouldn't have made a difference. If he didn't believe me about one thing, he wouldn't about something else.

Not that it mattered.

I grabbed a bottle of water from my fridge and took the papers over to the table and spread them out to compare them. All but one had been printed, and they were all formatted the same, but that didn't necessarily mean that they were sent from the same computer. None were creased or crumpled, which I took to mean that they weren't pulled out of any trash cans or anything like that. All of that basically meant I wasn't really going to learn anything from them.

The handwritten page, however, might give me something to work with, even if I couldn't say for sure that it was his handwriting. It was too faded, like it had been soaked and then dried. Weird, but that wasn't what I was trying to figure out at the moment.

Who had he given this note to?

And why the hell had he signed it *love dad*?

What I called him growing up all depended on the con. If I was supposed to be his daughter, his niece, an orphaned ward...as an adult, I stuck with Franklin. It was the *love* part that was the strangest, though. Even when he called himself my father, he never said that he *loved* me. Not for real. I honestly couldn't think of a single time he ever said it when it wasn't part of a con.

Even that was over now because there was no way in hell I was ever going to speak to him after—

I stopped mid-thought.

If I wanted to figure out what was going on, I couldn't cut Franklin completely out of my life. Not yet, anyway. He was the only person I knew who *was* involved. Even if the handwriting on that note wasn't his, it had to have been written by someone who knew that he'd approached me in the first place.

I re-read the note, going more slowly this time. I only could think of one reason why that envelope showed up at my apartment; someone was trying to make me look guilty.

That brought up the second question.

Why?

If the papers in the envelope were supposed to be information I collected from a list my father gave me, then why was that magazine article about my past in there? I wouldn't have printed it myself. I hated it. Why would I want something to remind me of that awful time in my life? And why would my dad want to give me something that he would've known would piss me off?

Shit.

That article proved I was being framed. The only purpose of it was to expose my past and spread distrust. From the beginning, I should have realized what was going on. Maybe Baylen would still be here with me if I had.

Sadly, no. He refused to believe me. A single sheet of paper wouldn't have made a difference.

I had to fix this. Once I figured out why, I could figure out who.

Or vice versa, I guess.

If Franklin could work alone, I would've just assumed he was pissed at me for saying no, and he wanted to ruin my life. However, he couldn't have done it all by himself. I knew that when he came to me to get the info in the first place. For Franklin to have the handwritten letter and the private information in the same place, he must have gotten the info from someone else.

It would have to be someone who worked at MIRI. There was no way for anyone else to have gotten it. He knew the names of other employees and had ways to contact them. And someone had done what I hadn't.

I didn't know every person at MIRI, but to access information about BSS, they most likely had been working on the project alongside me. I supposed department heads might've been able to get into everything, but I had a feeling they'd be harder to bribe.

I couldn't think of anyone who would want to help my father, but maybe I needed to think of who wanted to hurt me. I wouldn't have thought I was there long enough to make any enemies, but some people were just assholes, I supposed.

I needed to talk to Franklin.

If he'd purposefully tried to frame me, it could be dangerous, but with everything that I had on the line, I was willing to risk it. Even with his threat, I didn't truly think that he'd hurt me, but if he did, I'd at least know for certain that he was as big of an asshole as I always thought.

I wouldn't think about what would happen if he actually managed it.

I had enough shit on my mind already.

Now resolved about what I needed to do, I sent a text to my father, asking to meet, and then took a shower. By the time I was done, he replied with an address to a warehouse he said he owned.

Twenty-Seven

Baylen

My shoulders slumped as I tapped my key card against the lock on my door. I managed to stay stoic on the ride to the hotel, not betraying even the slightest hint of my inner turmoil to the overly talkative driver. I gave a generous tip and hoped that I told him to have a pleasant day. The desk clerk had gotten a nod and as polite a smile as I could manage.

After that, I was gratefully alone.

Despite my plan to tell Alec where I was last night, I needed to clean up and change my clothes. It was one thing for him to know I slept with Harlee last night, but quite another to show up while I still smelled like her and sex. Maybe he wouldn't notice, but I would. And I needed to get her scent off me before I could pull myself together enough to do what needed to be done.

I didn't want to do it. I knew once I told Alec what I saw, he'd fire her. If he was able to find physical proof of her breaking her NDAs, MIRI would sue her. If he found enough proof, he might even press criminal charges. And as much as I hated the idea, perhaps that would be for the best for everyone.

I tried not to think of how I had physical evidence in my hand but had left it behind when I exited the apartment. It wasn't a conscious act on my part, or so I told myself, but it happened, and I took responsibility for it.

Shit.

I stripped in the bathroom, leaving my clothes on the floor, and got into the shower. Placing my hands on the cool tile, I let the hot water and white noise soothe me. Considering the state of my mind, it didn't help much.

How the hell had I allowed things to get so out of control? *Again*. Was I truly that incompetent when it came to choosing who to trust? Could I even rely on my own instincts anymore?

By coming to America and speaking with Alec, I thought I had taken the first step toward resolving the enormous blunder that had been my relationship with Angie, both professionally and personally. I may have just screwed things up even more now.

I didn't believe Alec would blame me for what Harlee did, as I didn't provide her with access to any of the information she took, but all I needed was one person asking questions, and my parents would completely write me off. It would be one incident too many.

I sighed and reached for the shampoo. I was foolish to think that something as simple as a shower would be able to help me clear my head. Accepting that I couldn't stop thinking, I tried to turn my thoughts to something more positive. Anything.

Like the fact that, while I felt the anger and hurt at having my trust broken, my being involved with Harlee hadn't contributed to her betrayal. In fact, if I looked at the situation objectively, I could say that my relationship with her, brief as it had been, had actually brought her actions to light far sooner than they might have been.

My stomach clenched, and I was grateful I hadn't eaten yet this morning.

BSS was a security company Alec recommended to me specifically because he thought it would provide better protection for institutions I supported, most of which dealt with providing safety and resources for victims of domestic violence. He told me that the new software MIRI was helping BSS develop would make it harder for the abusers to locate and access their victims.

Harlee's father could sell the information and code from the software to the highest bidder. Or bidders, plural. While it would most likely benefit those who would need to eliminate competition, possible witnesses, and the like, I could see not only thieves wanting to get ahold of the same information but also the egomaniacal cowards who considered their family to be property.

The very people I wanted to protect could be hurt by what Harlee did. I talked to her about the work I did, and she was far too intelligent to not put things together, just as I had. That betrayal hurt worse than the rest. It also steeled my resolve about what I needed to do.

I cared about her, even after all this, but I couldn't justify downplaying her actions when they had put innocent, vulnerable people in danger.

I just finished dressing when someone knocked on my door. A quick peek revealed it to be a concerned Brigh. I really didn't like the idea of having to explain to her what was going on, but she'd been with me through all the recent turmoil, and she proved that I could trust her. I needed that right now.

"Good morning," I said as I opened the door and stepped aside to allow her entrance. "Is something wrong?"

"I was going to ask you the same." Her gaze moved around the room quickly, taking in the neatly made bed as well as my clear, just-out-of-the-shower appearance. "I tried reaching you this morning, but you didn't answer your mobile or the room phone. Did you stay overnight with someone?"

I sighed and sat down on the end of my bed. "Other than a headache, I'm fine."

"Let me get you something for that." She rummaged in her purse for a moment and then handed me two pills. Before I could thank her, she went to the sink, filled a cup with water, and brought it back to me.

"Thank you," I said sincerely.

"Do you have a schedule for the day?"

I rolled the now-empty glass between my hands. "Aye. I'll be going to see Alec in a bit. While I'm gone, please make arrangements for us to return home. I have everything I came for."

The last statement wasn't entirely true as Alec hadn't yet given the final documentation to me, but he assured me that it would be ready by Monday, and we planned to meet either that day or the next. Once I told him about Harlee, I'd ask him to send me everything and set up a virtual meeting to discuss the results. However, as I told Brigh that I'd be speaking to Alec, I'd let her infer that I would, indeed, have everything I needed before we boarded the plane.

"When would you like to leave?"

“As soon as possible.” I stood and set the glass on the desk.

“I’ll contact you with the specifics,” she said. “I’ve been thinking, it might be a good idea to invest in a private air service if we’ll be flying more often. We wouldn’t be subject to availability, and we’d always have the privacy to work.”

Even as rattled as I was, I caught her use of the words *we* and *our own*. She’d been invaluable to me this past month, especially since we’d been here, and I truly appreciated everything she did. None of that, however, changed the fact that she was my assistant. She worked for me – at my side, yes – but was still an employee. Not my partner. I didn’t have a partner.

Even though she seemed to be bidding on the job, regardless of the fact that the position didn’t exist.

“I’ll take your suggestion under advisement,” I said mildly. “Once you’ve completed the preparations for our return, the day is yours. If you have any places you wish to visit, shopping you wish to do, do so. Make any necessary adjustments to our baggage and have your things ready prior to our departure time.”

Once we’d arrived back home, if need be, I’d address her overfamiliarity. Resuming our normal lives should be enough. Brigh hadn’t been like this in Edinburgh, speaking of *us* and *our*. My hope was that, when we were there again, things would return to status quo.

I missed status quo.

“I don’t ken how long I’ll be,” I said as I walked toward the door. I held it open for her, the gesture meant to be both polite and dismissing at the same time.

Leaving her alone in my hotel room would send the exact opposite message of professional distance. I had at least enough presence of mind to understand that.

“I’ll make us dinner reservations,” she said with a smile. “Hotel restaurant? Or is there somewhere else you’d like to eat tonight?”

“I may eat with Alec.” I gestured for her to step into the hallway. “Enjoy the rest of your day, Ms. Flitton.”

I didn’t wait to see how she reacted to any of what I said but walked straight for the elevator instead. No more than forty-eight hours from now, I’d be on my way home. Everything would be all right once I had my feet back on Scottish soil. I could put all of this behind me and move forward, prove to my parents that what occurred with Angie was a solitary error that would not be repeated.

I’d had my fill of romance.

Twenty-Eight

Harlee

Franklin's text was an address on Airport Way, so that was easy enough to find, but what I would do when I got there, I hadn't quite worked out. Only a basic idea, but that was it. I would set my phone to record, and then try to get my father to tell everything. Get him to admit that he asked me to steal for him and I said no. Then, I would ask him who had actually stolen the papers for him. Why was that envelope pushed under my door? And why the *hell* was there a copy of *that* article?

Honestly, I would be satisfied with him just saying that I didn't agree to help him. If nothing else, it should be enough to make Alec – Mr. McCrae – consider that I might be innocent. I was sure, if he just gave me the benefit of the doubt, there'd be actual evidence to show I hadn't done it. The security at MIRI was tight, and there had to be proof that I hadn't accessed or printed those files. All I needed was something that would compel Mr. McCrae to look for the truth.

I frowned as I saw the building the address had taken me to, but I didn't hesitate to pull into the cracked and neglected parking lot. It looked like a factory or warehouse, but I couldn't tell exactly. It was run-down, and I assumed, empty. Parts had been graffitied, and the two windows I could see were cracked. Branches and other debris were on the roof and in the parking lot. I could see the back end of a car parked behind the building but couldn't tell if it was abandoned. Not that I knew what type of car Franklin drove, anyway.

If circumstances had been different, I wouldn't have even considered going inside, but I had no other idea how to get what I needed. I spent a lot of my life taking care of myself, going places alone even when they weren't entirely safe, but this was one of the few times I actually felt alone.

"Suck it up." I spoke the words out loud, as if that would make it any easier to go in by myself. After a moment's hesitation, I reached over and opened the glove compartment, rummaging through the random junk until I found

what I was looking for.

A knife.

I never liked guns, but my mom drilled it into my head for years that, whenever I was out on my own, I needed to have something to protect myself. We always both carried pepper spray, even when I was as young as eight or nine and Mom liked having a taser. I had one of those at home, but what I kept in my glove box was a knife. One with the special thing on the end to break windows and a thing specifically to cut seatbelts. It also had a three-inch blade that I kept razor sharp.

I didn't think Franklin would hurt me, despite the threats, but I hadn't exactly been the best judge of character lately.

I tucked the knife into the pocket of my shorts, set my phone to record, and then got out of the car. I thought about locking the door since I was leaving my purse behind, but considering how isolated this place was, I decided I preferred the risk of having my purse stolen rather than making it more difficult for me to get into the car in a hurry if I needed to. Besides, it wasn't like I had a lot worth taking.

I put on my best poker face and headed for the only door I could see. The doorknob didn't turn at first, and I had a moment to wonder if I'd come out here only to end up locked out, but then it gave. The hinges screeched loud enough that I was glad I wasn't counting on the element of surprise, and once inside, since I already made my presence known, I let the door slam shut behind me.

The only light came from windows in the two walls I hadn't been able to see from where I'd parked, and with the usual Seattle cloud cover, the space was dim enough that my eyes needed a moment to adjust. By the time they did, it was too late to do anything different.

I'd missed something, and I could only hope that it wouldn't get me killed.

Franklin wasn't the only person here. A skinny guy with salt-and-pepper hair and a face that reminded me of Voldemort took a step toward me with a smarmy smile that made me want to give him a good kick to the balls. Behind him were three massive men who looked like they should be on

warning posters about the negative effects of steroids. All three had guns.

As for my father, he was sitting on a chair between two of the men, his hands behind his back. Even though it should have been obvious from the first, I didn't get that he was in trouble until my brain registered that he wasn't wearing a red shirt. He was bleeding. That was when I realized his face didn't look strange because of the shadows. He was a mess.

"Run." The word came out in a hoarse whisper.

"No, sweetheart. Don't run." The smarmy guy looked me over and what I saw in those dark eyes of his made me want to take a shower in boiling water.

"Leave her alone, Snake." Franklin's voice was a little stronger.

"Shut it." The big guy closest to him backhanded him casually, no different than if he'd been swatting a mosquito.

"Want me to check for cops?" The goon with the dark hair spoke up.

"Len, you make sure she came alone," Snake said. The blond who hadn't hit Franklin shuffled toward the door. "Remy, check her for a wire. Or weapons."

Shit.

"Hands up." The dark-haired guy, Remy, walked toward me. "You reach for anything, and I'll break your arm."

Somehow, I doubted that was an idle threat. They wouldn't be happy when they found my phone and knife, but if I didn't give them any reason to think I intended to use either against them, I didn't think they'd try to hurt me.

Well, for either of those things, anyway. What they'd done to Franklin said they didn't have a problem hurting people. I hoped that me being a woman who hadn't actually done anything to screw them over would keep them from resorting to violence right away.

I half-expected the goon to grope me while he patted me down, but he kept it professional. He was either a better guy than I originally thought – even with the threat to break my arm – or he didn't like women.

“Nice knife.” He shoved it into one of his pockets. Then he found my phone and gave me an unreadable look. “You’re recording?”

“You’re recording us?” A dark flush went up Snake’s neck. “Who’re you working for, you little bitch?”

I put up both of my hands, palms out. “No one! I swear, I’m not working for anyone. I only came here to talk to him.” I pointed at Franklin.

“And record him?” Snake asked, his eyes narrowing. “Why do you want to record him?”

“Because he’s an ass,” I snapped. “Talk to him for five minutes. You’ll agree.”

Remy grunted a laugh. “She’s got a point.”

“She better have more than that.” Snake walked back to Franklin. “She better have what you owe.”

“Leave her out of it,” Franklin said.

I laughed this time. “*You’re* the one who brought me into it, Franklin. I guess that’s why you wanted me to steal from MIRI. It’s them you owe money to.”

“Our boss,” Remy said, helpfully.

“This girl really your kid?” Snake gave me another one of those looks that made me want to squirm.

And not in a good way.

“I take after my mother.” I lifted my chin and dared my father to contradict what I said next. “I’m not a criminal.”

“I don’t care,” Snake said. “Franklin owes money, and you’re gonna get it.”

Dread crawled up my spine. “I’ve got like thirty bucks in my bank account.”

“Don’t play stupid, bitch,” Snake snarled at me. “Take a close look at your dad cuz he only looks that good because you showed up in time to stop my guys from turning his face into raw hamburger. You don’t do what we say, we go back to beating.”

I wasn't a complete monster. I didn't *want* to see Franklin hurt. But, the alternative...

"I'm not giving you guys shit." I kept my tone mild, as much to disguise my relief that I'd left the papers in my apartment rather than bringing them in my car. They were exactly the sort of thing lowlife scum like them could sell to the right buyer.

"Oh, I think you will," Snake said. He stepped into my personal space, and it was all I could do not to step back just to keep him from being that close. "Your father, the money he owes isn't to me. I have a boss. He sends me to do the..." He paused to search for the next words he wanted.

"Dirty work?" I suggested.

"I was going to say 'fun stuff,' but that works too." Snake reached out and patted my cheek. "I enjoy it either way."

"Don't touch her!"

The back of Snake's hand collided with my cheek, the sharp sound registering a millisecond before the pain exploded across the side of my face. I rocked back in shock.

"Fucking bastard!" Franklin shouted.

"No one but the boss tells me what to do." Snake's voice was low, dangerous. His gaze ran down my body and back up while I fought not to cringe. "Here's what we're gonna do. I'm going to give you three days to clear the debt. What's owed, plus five percent for the extension. I don't care how you get it. Just get it."

"It's not her problem." My father coughed, then spat some blood on the already-grimy floor. "I'll get you what's owed. Tell Lucius I'll get it."

SNAKE turned from me to Franklin. "She's here and she knows who I am. That makes it her problem too. I don't give fuck which of you gets it, only that you do. So get gone."

"We're lettin' 'em go?" Len looked confused.

“We’re letting them go get what they owe the boss,” Snake said. “And if they don’t get it to us in three days, we’ll take Franklin apart, a piece at a time.”

“And her?” Remy asked. “What happens to her if they don’t pay?”

A smile curved Snake’s lips, one that I really didn’t like the look of. “She can work it off. Mr. Alesini has lots of uses for pretty girls like her.”

“No!” My father made to get up, but the gun in Remy’s hand stopped him. “I won’t let you do that to her.”

“Don’t worry,” Snake said. “If you get the money, nothing bad will happen to her. And if you don’t, you’ll be dead and won’t care.” He motioned to Remy and Len. “Let’s go.”

Snake went first, with Remy and Len following, the guns in their hands leaving no doubt that they were both still prepared to shoot us if either of us tried anything stupid. I was still too stunned by what was happening to do anything. But as soon as I heard the closed door, I walked to Franklin.

“How bad are you hurt?” I asked. I made no move to touch him, to help him, but I needed him if I was going to get out of this.

“I’ve been worse,” he said, gingerly touching his split lip. “You gotta get out of here. Run far away where Alesini’s guys can’t find you.”

“I’m not running,” I said. “That’s more your style than mine.”

He winced, but I wasn’t sure if it was his injuries or what I said. “This is all my fault.”

“Yeah,” I agreed. “It is.” I crossed my arms. “This is why you wanted me to steal from MIRI for you. To pay off these guys.”

He nodded. “I needed a big score and I thought I could either sell it off or trade it.”

“It wasn’t enough then?”

His head jerked up, confusion in his eyes. “What?”

“What you got, it wasn’t enough? Or they didn’t want it?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he said. “You never gave me anything.”

I frowned. “But someone did. Right? I mean, those papers you or someone else dropped off at my place. They’re meant to frame me when MIRI realizes someone got into their system, right?”

He slowly shook his head. “I don’t have any papers. After you told me that you wouldn’t help me, I looked for something else to steal. I knew I wasn’t going to get into that place on my own.”

“You wrote me a note.”

“I’m telling the truth, Harlee. I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Shit. I believed him. I’d been able to tell when he was lying since I was a kid and he wasn’t lying about this. But if he didn’t know who stole the information or why it was given to me, I didn’t know who could have done it.

“We need to get you out of here,” he said, struggling to his feet.

Right. That envelope wasn’t the only thing I needed to worry about. I might lose my job pretty quick, but it was just work. I had no doubt Snake and his boss would sell me in one way or another to pay off Franklin’s debt if we didn’t find the money.

First thing first then.

“Lucius Alesini,” I said, “is that the poker player? The mob boss who plays in his own games?”

“Yes.”

I closed my eyes and resisted the urge to ask how fucking stupid could one person be. “Did you borrow the money from him or lose it to him?”

Franklin looked embarrassed, but answered my question, “Lost it to him.”

“How? I mean, what exactly were you gambling on?” An idea was starting to form, but I needed more information to be sure it would work.

“Poker,” my dad said. “High stakes poker at his club.”

I nodded. “All right. When’s the next game?”

His eyebrows went up and I saw the understanding in his eyes. “No—”

“Yes.” I cut him off. “You’re going to tell me how to get into a game and I’m going to get the money to pay off that debt...from Mr. Alesini himself.”

“I don’t like it.”

“I don’t care.”

We glared at each other for a minute before he sighed. “All right, but we need buy-in money. What can you get?”

I snorted a laugh. “I think I have two hundred bucks in my bank account right now.”

“We need ten grand.”

I cursed. “Any bright ideas?”

He nodded. “I know someone we can get the money from.”

“I’m assuming that someone will charge interest,” I said dryly.

“You have some rich boyfriend who can give you the money?” he asked.

The knife twisted in my heart. “Not anymore,” I muttered.

“What was that?”

I shook my head. “Nothing. Let’s go.”

“Did you drive?” Franklin asked as we walked outside.

I didn’t bother asking why he didn’t have a car here. Honestly, I didn’t care. I didn’t have the energy to even be curious. “Yeah. I’ll take you to your ‘friend.’”

“You don’t have to,” he said. “I can drop you off somewhere—”

“I don’t trust you to have ten thousand dollars and not lose it.” We both knew I didn’t mean he’d misplace it, and he didn’t even pretend to be offended.

As we got into my car, he told me where to go and I put the address into my

GPS. Even before I left the parking lot, he began telling me everything he knew about Lucius Alesini's playing style. Franklin had only played against him once since my father rarely won enough to afford the fifty-thousand-dollar buy-in for the main table Alesini played at, but he still had useful information.

"Now, you'll want to get out as soon as you win enough money," Franklin continued. "Alesini will be pissed that he lost and if you turn around and hand him back the chips to pay him off, he'll lose it. You need to leave with the chips, and we'll lay low for a couple days. Then I'll take the chips and cash them in. I'll pay off Alesini and the guy we're going to see."

I nodded but didn't say anything. Maybe Alesini would be suspicious if my father came in with the same number of chips I won a couple days before, but maybe he wouldn't. As long as Snake, Len, and Remy weren't at the game, I thought I had a pretty good chance to not be connected to Franklin.

"I won't get in this deep again, Harlee. I promise."

I glanced at him but didn't respond. What would I say? That I didn't believe him? That he was still the same man who once gave me a sling and walked me around the mall at Christmas so he could tell some sob story about I needed surgery? That he was the same man who left me behind to save his own skin?

"You're a good girl," he said quietly. "You've turned out really well."

No thanks to him, I thought, though I kept the words silent.

"You've made yourself a good life."

"I have." I put as much pride as I could in those two words.

"Are you still friends with that girl? Jane?"

"Jin," I corrected him. "Yeah, we're still friends. Before you ask, she doesn't have any money."

A glance at him showed guilt, but I didn't know if that was guilt because he was thinking about asking or because his past behavior made me believe that he would.

“What about a boyfriend?” he asked. “You have someone to take care of you?”

“I take care of myself,” I snapped, feeling that twist of pain again. “And no, I don’t have a boyfriend. I got involved with a guy I met through work but it’s over since my job’s obviously fucked now. Not that it matters because he was going home to Scotland anyway so it’d been stupid of me anyway...” I suddenly realized that I was talking too much.

“I’m sorry if I caused you trouble at work,” Franklin said.

“You said you didn’t get anyone else to steal from MIRI, right?”

“Right.”

For some stupid reason, I believed him. “Then that part isn’t your fault.”

“Thanks.” He smiled.

I pointed at him. “*That* part might not be, but this sure as hell is your fault.”

“You’re right,” he agreed as I pulled up to a small brick building with thick bars on the windows.

Lovely.

“Don’t you forget it,” I said as I turned the car off. “Now, let’s get this money and get this shit over with.”

Twenty-Nine

Baylen

I sent Alec a message to ensure that he was home before I went over and was relieved to find that he was. I didn't want to wait any longer than necessary to break the news to him. I just needed it all to be done.

Not knowing how long that would take, and needing the distraction, I used a rental service and drove. Concentrating on where I was going, as well as driving on the opposite side of the road, kept my mind occupied enough that I didn't dwell on what had happened or what was to come. For the first time since I saw those pictures, I was able to keep Harlee out of my mind.

As soon as I punched in the gate code Alec had given me and drove up to the house, however, it all came back, the weight of it settling on my shoulders. It must have been written on my face because the moment Alec opened the door, his expression changed from one of happiness at seeing me to concern.

"What's wrong?" He stepped back to let me inside.

"We should speak somewhere private."

Once he closed his office door behind him and we both sat down, he gestured for me to speak.

"I went to see Harlee last night," I began with something he knew, and then moved on.

Fighting to keep my voice even and unemotional, I explained what had happened from the time I found the envelope until she kicked me out, including as many of the details from the papers as I could remember, including the article that gave evidence of her criminal past.

When I finished, I waited for him to say something, but he kept silent for another few minutes before leaning back in his chair and sighing. "A note from someone claiming to be her father and four or five sheets of paper with information from MIRI, and a magazine article about her ex-con father who

forced her to run cons with him?”

“I’m sorry I didn’t bring it with me. I wasn’t at my best.”

He offered a sympathetic smile. “I wasn’t criticizing you for not having it. Just wanting to be sure I understood what you saw.”

“Aye, that’s right.” I felt some relief at having told him, but my stomach was still a knot of tension.

Another minute or so of him saying nothing, and then he shook his head. “It doesn’t make sense.”

“Even people who seem decent can do unscrupulous things when a large enough sum of money comes into play.” I tried not to think about what Harlee might have done to me if her father had learned about our relationship.

“You misunderstand me.” Alec leaned forward again, an intense expression on his face. “How things happened. The information you say she had. That is what doesn’t make sense.”

I frowned, not understanding.

“Baylen.” Alec sounded annoyed with me. “I understand that Angie screwed you up, but believing this without actually thinking it through is all on you.”

“I dinna ken what you’re havering on about.”

He shook his head. “No, you don’t, do you?” He sighed. “If Harlee stole all of those things from my company and put them in an envelope to take home and give to her father, why would she have included a copy of a magazine article where her father was confessing to crimes that she and he committed together?”

Shit. He was right.

“The only reason I can think of for that article being there at all would be for someone else to read.”

Fuck.

Before I could respond, a knock came at the door.

“Alec, someone’s at the gate.” Lumen’s voice was muffled, but I could still hear an odd note in her voice. “He’s asking for you by name.”

“Excuse me, please.”

Alec left the office, and I followed, more to avoid being left with the new questions I had than any real curiosity about who was here. That disappeared when I saw the car on the security monitor.

“That’s Harlee’s car,” I said.

“Aye,” Alec switched to another screen, “but that’s not Ms. Sumpter.”

This angle showed through the driver’s side window where a man with a battered face sat, his anxious expression evident even through the mess.

“Who the hell is that, and why does he have Harlee’s car?” Something like panic sliced through me. I’d only left her a couple hours ago.

“That’s Franklin Cook.” Alec glanced at me. “Harlee’s father.”

His words hit me with an almost physical blow, and I took a step back. Her father. The man who had asked her to steal from MIRI. She said she didn’t do it and now he was here in her car. What the hell was happening?

“You recognize him?”

“I run thorough background checks on all of my employees,” he said as he pressed the button to open the gate. “And I read all of them. Including the one done on Harlee Sumpter. My people are thorough and found that same article. I already knew about her past.”

We reached the bottom of the front steps just as the car came to a stop. Franklin got out of the car, and we met halfway. He looked like shit and moved like someone in pain, but I couldn’t quite find it in myself to feel any sympathy.

“Mr. McCrae.” He held out an envelope. “I’m Harlee’s dad.”

“I know who you are,” Alec said mildly. Are you ok? You look like you've been through a lot. He took the envelope, glanced at it, and then held it out to me.

"I'm fine, but the envelope is for you," Franklin said, irritated.

"I'm dyslexic." Alec looked at me. "Take a quick look and tell me if it's worth the trouble."

I blinked at the admission, almost as startled by it as I was by everything else. I'd suspected that Alec had some sort of learning disability. We had, after all, been at university together, but he'd never said anything. Not surprising.

Like him, I understood what it meant to hold close any vulnerability. Alec had always been in line to take over MIRI and should others have learned that he struggled in reading, it would have been used against him. I wondered if it was Lumen's influence that made him comfortable enough to share that information now.

All of this went through my mind in a few seconds, but I didn't dwell on any of it. This wasn't the time or place. Especially since I wanted to know why Franklin was here with Harlee's car.

I swore when I pulled the papers from the envelope. "It's everything I found at Harlee's place." I took a step toward Franklin. "What did you do to her?"

"Nothing." Franklin put up his hands. "Mr. McCrae needed to know that Harlee didn't take anything for me. She didn't steal from MIRI. She really loves you and I know this made things bad between you but if you ever loved her—"

"Wait, what?" I interrupted. "She and Alec weren't...I mean...what the hell are you haverin' on about?"

Franklin frowned. "She said she was dating a rich Scottish guy from work." He pointed at Alec. "McCrae International Research Institution."

"She meant me," I ground out. "I'm the one who was dating your daughter until you fucked it all up."

He shook his head. "I swear, I didn't."

Alec held out his hand and I gave him the papers. I kept my attention on Franklin. "You're the one who wanted her to steal in the first place."

“I did,” he surprised me with the admission. “But she said no. And that was it. The subject was dead in the water.”

“Then who did it?” I asked. “And why?”

“They’re fake.”

Franklin and I both turned to Alec who held up a couple of the papers. “I just looked at it a bit, but that’s enough to tell me that these papers are fake. The specs are made-up and the account names I saw are wrong.”

“Why would someone do that?” I asked. “Go to all the trouble of faking documents to frame Harlee when you’d be able to look at it that quickly and say they’re false?”

“Because I dinna think this is about my opinion of her.” Alec held out the paper I recognized as the magazine article. “Tell me if you see anything else on this page other than the interview.”

I took it, looking not at the words of the article, but at the rest of it. I noticed before that it was printed from an online format, but what I didn’t see then finally registered this time. At the top was an account name, the sort of thing that a person would have to use to get full access to a story. And the account name was one I knew.

Brigh F.

“Fuck.”

“Aye,” Alec agreed. “The only person who’s going to be able to answer your questions is your assistant.”

I was tempted to call her right now and demand she tell me what the hell she did, but my need to confront her came in second to my need to find Harlee and make things right. I turned to Franklin.

“Where is she? You have Harlee’s car. Where is she?”

Franklin rubbed the back of his neck. “About that. See, I owe some people some money and they decided that she’s responsible for it now too.”

“Bastard!” I took a step toward him, stopping only when Alec grabbed my arm.

“We need him to keep talking,” Alec reminded me. “He canna do that if you break his jaw.”

As much as I hated it, he was right. “Go on.”

“She’s going to win it,” Franklin said. “She’s a great poker player and she’s going to play in a game and win the money from the guy I owe, then use it to pay him back. Except...he’s really good and I’m worried she might need back-up.”

“And you’re too cowardly to do it,” I said. The expression on Franklin’s face answered my question.

“I can’t do backup. He knows my face.” Franklin said. “He’ll recognise me and Harlee will be made.”

“Who is it?” Alec asked. “Who is she playing against?”

“Lucius Alesini.”

Alec swore.

“Is that bad?” I asked even though I suspected the answer.

“Aye,” he said. “It’s bad.”

I didn’t even need time to consider what I was going to do. I moved closer to Franklin, my hands curling into fists. “Where is she? I need to know everything!”

Thirty

Harlee

Even though it was Saturday and Pulse was open, it was too early for there to be a line already. That wouldn't be the case in a couple hours though. Pulse was one of the city's best high-end gentlemen's clubs, too classy to be called a strip club, but definitely designed to bring in men who had money to spend on beautiful women.

It was also Lucius Alesini's base of operations apparently.

He owned a lot of clubs in Seattle, and not all were like this one. In fact, I had a feeling that working at one of his less respectable establishments was what Snake had in mind when he said I would work off Franklin's debt if I didn't get the money in time.

Not that I was going to let that happen.

In my purse I had ten thousand dollars, which Franklin got from somewhere. I didn't want to know so I didn't ask. The fact that he could get that much, and it still wouldn't be enough to pay off what he owed Alesini just pissed me off. If my own life wasn't on the line too, I might've just walked away then. As it was, when this was over, I was done with him completely. If he wanted to be an irresponsible asshole and get himself killed for it, that was on him.

Tonight though, he was my responsibility, which meant I would need to win ten times what Franklin borrowed, plus change, in order to pay off the mob debt and pay back this ten grand. If I pulled this off, it'd be the biggest payday I ever had.

And not a penny of it would be mine.

As I approached the entrance to Pulse, I suddenly realized that I recognized the bouncer.

"Bear!"

“Harlee!” He grinned at me.

“What are you doing working here?” I asked. “The Catch-all better not have fired you.”

“Naw.” He shook his head. “I just needed to pick up a few extra shifts and they didn’t have them. I have a buddy who works here, and he messed up his shoulder, and needed someone to cover for him. What are you doing here?”

“C’mon, Bear. You know why I’m here.”

His expression turned serious. “Find another game, kid. Seriously. You don’t want this one.”

“Why?” I asked even though I hoped I knew the answer. Getting Bear to confirm it would mean one less thing I had to do inside.

“Lucius Alesini is playing tonight. You don’t want to go up against him.”

I felt a grim smile curve my lips. “That’s exactly what I want to do.”

Bear’s eyes narrowed and he lowered his voice, “Don’t say I didn’t warn you, Harlee.” He shook his head. “There’re easier ways to make money than playing poker against a mob boss. Lucius hates to lose.”

“So do I.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Yeah, but people who beat you don’t end up in the hospital with broken legs. If they don’t flat-out disappear.”

My stomach twisted, but I squared my shoulders and gave Bear the hardest look I could manage. “I’m doing this.”

He sighed. “Yeah, I didn’t think I could talk you out of it.” He opened the door. “You have the buy-in?”

I nodded.

“All right. Follow me.”

The music was blasting in the near-empty club as we walked through the front. A few waitresses in skimpy, but not sleazy, uniforms took drinks to the handful of men who were already at tables. No one was on the stage right

now, but I had no doubt there'd be an act of some kind up there later. Probably one with lots of skin but all the essential bits covered.

Like I said, this was one of Alesini's classy joints.

I followed Bear past the stage to the far left where another massive man stood next to a door that said *Authorized Personnel Only*. He looked at me, then nodded at Bear, opening the door and motioning for us to go through.

It looked like something out of a Bond film. The front of the club was nice. This was...ostentatious. All fancy carved stuff along the bar and art on the walls. Apart from the main poker table at center stage, four other tables dotted the scenery. While a couple spots were still empty, the place was fuller than the main club.

I did a quick scan of the security at the edges of the room, breathing a sigh of relief when I didn't see Snake, Len, or Remy among them. That was something I worried about when I came up with this plan, that one of the men who saw me in the warehouse would spot me here. Fortunately, they didn't seem to be around.

"Just tell me you'll be careful," Bear said.

"I will," I promised. And I intended to keep that promise...as much as it was in my ability to do it. Some stuff was just out of my hands.

Bear looked like he wanted to give me a hug, but since we weren't at The Catch-all, where no one would think twice of me hugging one of the security guys, doing that would just draw attention to me. In a place like this, with these people, it wouldn't be good attention either. I wanted them to underestimate me, but they couldn't think I was too weak, not without putting myself in danger. So Bear just gave me another concerned look and then headed back out to the front to do his job.

Instead of going straight to a table, I went to the bar and ordered a shot of tequila. My stomach was in knots, and I needed to ease my nerves, or I wasn't going to be able to do what I came here to do. I was good at keeping my head in tough situations, but even I hadn't gone up against someone like Alesini before. And never with these sorts of odds. The heat from the alcohol helped and the bartender gave me the run-down about the tables.

“The main table won’t open until Lucius Alesini arrives,” he said with the air of a man who gave this lecture often. “That’ll be later tonight. His table has a fifty thousand dollars buy-in. The other tables have a ten thousand dollars buy-in, and you can work your way up.”

The look he gave me said he thought I was going to lose big and early, but he valued his job too much to warn me off. Games needed people to lose, after all.

A dangerous night laid ahead of me, and the sooner I got started, the sooner it would be over. Having scanned the tables, I found a seat open at table four. I sat down and exchanged my bills for chips, ignoring the surprise on the faces of the men as I settled in to do some damage.

As the game started, I came out strong, and was up twenty-five thousand within half an hour. The guys I won it off of were pretty pissed, probably more than they’d have been if they lost to a man, but I wasn’t here to make friends. Besides, it wasn’t my fault they underestimated me.

I could only hope word wouldn’t spread too fast. The buy-in for the main table of fifty thousand dollars was within reach and I didn’t want everyone hearing about the girl cleaning people out. I definitely didn’t want Alesini to hear about it. I wanted the first time he saw me to be when I sat down across from him.

Drinks were free while playing, so I ordered a martini. Straight up with an olive, shaken not stirred. Not because I liked it, but the Bond thing made me smile and anything that could help take the edge off was an advantage. Unlike some of the other players, I drank slowly in order to remain alert. It helped that I wasn’t actually fond of it. Another good reason for me to order the martini.

While some people would say to stay away from alcohol while playing, having a bottle of water instead of indulging in free alcohol was definitely a sign of a professional. One of the first things Franklin taught me about poker was to recognize the amateurs at the table and focus on them for the most part, never going against another professional, unless I had a great hand.

Right now, the biggest amateur was sitting right across from me. I dubbed him Mr. Big Spender. He was the main contributor to my growing piles of

chips, and it looked like he was about to lose it all. As I watched, he wagered everything with a Queen and a King. Not the best hand when his opponent had a Queen and an Ace. In this match-up, Mr. Big Spender would lose eighty-five percent of the time.

Dammit.

A straight. By some miracle, he won the hand and piled up his winnings.

But any luck, the stack of chips in front of him would shift my way soon enough.

* * *

I didn't know how much time passed, but I finally made it to the main table, helped along by Mr. Big Spender and his inability to quit while he was ahead.

So after a brief break, here I was, sitting across from Lucius Alesini, mob boss and avid poker fan. I heard about Alesini before this, of course, but I never actually met him. Although my games may not have been legal before, there was illegal and then there was *his* kind of illegal.

As I sat across from him, he looked just as badass as I expected. About forty, dark eyes, thinning dark brown hair, and a scar running across his chin. Tall with broad shoulders, and slightly overweight, he was an intimidating man. And one of the best poker players in the city. I'd have to be at my best to beat him tonight. And I had to win. Losing was not an option. My father's life and my future literally depended on it.

As the game started, I played safe and folded the first couple of hands, using the time to study the players. In particular, Lucius Alesini. He was, after all, the one to beat. Everything I heard said that he rarely lost. I just needed to determine how much of that was actual skill and how much was people just being too scared to beat him.

I hoped he'd think I was one of the frightened ones, assuming that's why I kept looking at him, rather than reading him.

He was aggressive, playing most of his hands, even with weak cards. Then I noticed a slight twitch over his left eye whenever he bluffed, which surprised me. A player of his caliber rarely had such an obvious tell. He either was honestly unaware of it or was unable to control it. Or both.

Now that I found a tell, I figured the best strategy was to wait for a good hand, then, if I saw him twitch his left eye, gamble all my chips. Get in and out with a big wager before anyone asks questions. As for beating Alesini, all I had to do was win enough of his money to pay Franklin's debts.

I didn't have to wait long. Two hands later, I was glancing down at two Jacks. Then I raised my head and saw Lucius raise ten thousand. A large bet and everybody folded, except me. I waited and evaluated my options. I had a great hand, especially if he was bluffing. But was he? I hadn't seen any twitching this time around. I almost folded my hand, then I noticed it. A very slight twitch above his left eye.

Then another.

Here went...everything.

"I'm all in," I announced, and pushed my stack of chips into the middle of the table. Fifty thousand dollars.

He immediately called and turned over two black Kings.

Shit.

My Jacks were no match. I'd need another Jack to win and there were only two Jacks left in the whole deck. Less than five percent chance.

Sometimes I really hated how good I was with numbers.

And, of course, with just my luck, I didn't get any help from the deck.

It was all gone in one hand. Fifty thousand bucks.

Fuck!

I was duped. Like a fucking beginner, I fell for one of the oldest tricks. He pretended to have a tell, then used it against me when the pot was huge. I pushed back my chair and stood, feeling completely deflated.

Alesini really was as good as everyone said he was.

And I was completely and totally fucked.

My only hope now was to leave. Tell Franklin that he had to hide. Get myself out of Seattle and make a new life somewhere else.

Then, suddenly, out of nowhere, a thick Scottish accent broke through the chatter. "I'll take her place, aye?" Baylen stepped up next to me, but didn't look at me as he flashed a fifty-thousand-dollar chip.

Baylen? What the hell was he doing here? How did he find me?

Why did he find me?

"Of course. Please." Alesini made a dismissive gesture at me.

I stood without really thinking, moving out of pure self-preservation. My mind was still whirling with questions, all focused on the man I never expected to see again.

"Just don't be dealing me the 'Dead Man's' hand," Baylen said as he took my seat.

People at the table laughed, but his words hit me like a punch.

The dead man's hand was the famous poker hand that gunfighter Wild Bill Hickok was holding when he was shot in the back. Pretty much anyone who knew anything about poker or Old West history knew about that. Baylen using it, however, considering his background, was...odd, to say the least. That, plus the way he used it told me it was something else.

It was the code Franklin and I used to signal that we were doing his "Peekaboo" con. I was a kid and good at looking innocent. He would bring me to some game and tell me to go amuse myself. I would take a book, position myself behind the person we thought was the "whale" at the table, and sneak a peek when he looked at his cards. If he then bluffed, I would discreetly touch my nose to indicate he didn't have a hand. Just a kid scratching the side of my nose while reading a book.

Franklin spent months rehearsing with me before I could work the con flawlessly. I had to be able to time a glance at the cards the same time the

player did without making it obvious that I was looking anywhere other than my book, see all of the cards, and remember what they were. I also had to know the game well enough to know if it was a good hand or not.

I could still do it, even without the book, because no one here knew that Baylen and I knew each other. I just hoped he knew how to hold up his end of things, because if he didn't he was just as fucked as I was.

Thirty-One

Baylen

The moment I realized what sort of place this was, I just wanted to grab Harlee and get her out. I had no issues with women who worked at any sort of club, as long as it was consensual. Considering the threat Franklin told me the men made against Harlee, I wondered just how many of the women here were under duress.

That, however, wasn't why I was here.

Franklin told me that Harlee was good. More than good, actually, but this Alesini guy was better. And apparently a poor loser. Not knowing what I could find or what I would need to do, I prepared as best I could. Alec gave me cash – money he would have willingly given Harlee to pay the debt – and Franklin told me about the “Peekaboo” con that he and Harlee used to run, as well as the code phrase to get her to run it with me. I had hoped to get to Harlee before she entered the club, but I was too late. Instead, I had to get her out safely, without catching any attention.

I managed to get to the back room with little difficulty and spotted her almost immediately. It was as if I was drawn to her, an almost physical tug that I couldn't ignore. And if I was honest, I didn't want to ignore it anymore. If she forgave me for the shit I said to her, I wouldn't ignore it. I'd find a way to make it work.

But first, I had work to do.

And it appeared I arrived just in time.

Her shoulders slumped as Alesini swept the chips into his pile, a self-satisfied smirk on his face. I wanted to put my arm around her and tell it would be all right, that I would take care of her, but I knew her too well, knew that she would never take Alec's money or mine. But, she might take some help, and if the two of us worked together to win the money, she could use that without feeling like it was charity.

I, of all people, understood what it was like, not wanting people to do things for me.

And so, I said the words to start the con and hoped that she would go with me on it. I couldn't afford to look at her just yet, even though every fiber of my being wanted to do just that.

Only after I sat down at the table and exchanged my large chip for smaller denominations, did I let myself look around, hoping that my expression was as bland as it needed to be. I quickly found Harlee standing some fifteen feet behind Lucius Alesini with a couple other observers, probably men who'd been playing at the other tables. She looked pretty far away, but I had to trust that she was close enough to give her a clear view of Alesini's cards. She was the one who'd done this before. Then, she scratched her nose, signaling she was ready.

* * *

The other tables emptied out as we went through hand after hand, more observers joining the group around me, but Harlee still managed to keep her place without looking suspicious. If the circumstances had been different, I might've had the time to appreciate how insanely talented she was.

The place was relatively quiet, with most of the noise coming from the club, the sort of pulsing music that conjured images of half-naked bodies and flashing lights. A few of the men had ventured back out there when they lost, but most of the people back here were more interested in those little chips than they were in whatever the women out there had to offer.

Me, I was only interested in one woman, and the way to help her was through these chips.

A new type of hush fell over the room as I called Lucius for a bet of a hundred thousand dollars. I could feel every eye on me, and I wanted to look over Alesini's shoulder at Harlee. I didn't though. I already glanced her way a few seconds ago to see her scratch her nose and confirm that Alesini was

bluffing. If I looked again, especially with so many people watching me, someone was sure to notice something.

I controlled myself and laid out my hand. A gasp went through the audience as I revealed a Queen and a Ten. Not a great starting hand, but it connected with the board and gave me two pairs, which was all I needed. Still, I had to pretend that I was waiting to see what Alesini had. A moment later, Lucius threw his hand down, showing nothing. A murmur made its way around us, surprise evident even in the low voices.

Unable to stop myself, I smiled as I counted. I now had over two hundred thousand, twice the amount Franklin said we needed. I glanced over to where Harlee was, but she'd suddenly vanished. She must have been keeping track too. Franklin said that was the signal to cash out and leave, quickly.

“Well, this has been brilliant,” I said with a feigned yawn. “But I think that’ll be it for me.”

“I don’t think so,” Alesini said with a smirk. “At least, give me a chance to win my money back.”

“Of course.” I looked at my watch and tried to pretend that my pulse hadn’t picked up. “But can we pick it up tomorrow? I’ve got a wee bit of jet lag.” Not entirely true, but believable. I hoped.

He didn’t answer and I took advantage of the moment to stand, picking up the small stack of chips. I was glad I remembered Franklin’s advice to make sure I kept trading in the smaller amounts for larger ones to keep the number of chips I had smaller and easier to manage.

In case I needed to make a quick exit.

Which, as I watched out of the corner of my eye, I might need to do. Alesini was gesturing to the security guys who’d been hanging around the fringes all night, and I didn’t need to be a professional poker player to know what he was telling them. I kept moving nice and slow, like I was just as tired as I claimed, like I had no idea what he was up to, but I knew where everyone was.

The problem was, all but two were now standing close to the entrance to the main room. The other two were at the emergency exit, arms crossed and all

imposing.

Shit.

I came into this knowing that Alesini wasn't going to like losing and it might be a little dangerous, but I apparently underestimated the seriousness of the situation. Or I was simply more focused on getting to Harlee and helping her. Either way, I needed to figure out a way to get out of here with my winnings.

Just as I decided I would make a run for it, a piercing alarm shattered the backroom silence, cut through the music, and created instant chaos. I shoved the chips into my pocket and turned toward the emergency exit. I figured I stood a better chance against two guys than I did against the rest, but I didn't need to test that theory because I didn't go more than a couple steps before a hand clamped down on my shoulder.

Fuck.

I made a fist.

“Harlee sent me.”

I looked over, startled, and found the bouncer from the front door looming over me.

“We have to go,” he said. “Now!”

He said Harlee sent him which could have been a lie, but I really didn't see any other option.

“Let's go.”

Everything happened in only a few seconds, so everything was still chaotic. The other players were all rushing for the exits too, giving us the cover we needed. He grabbed my arm and pulled me the opposite direction of the emergency exit. I had no idea why we were heading for a solid wall, but I wasn't going to argue. He had to know something I didn't.

I heard shouting behind me that I thought was directed at me rather than just people yelling about a fire or whatever, but I didn't even steal a glance behind me. I had a feeling this was one of those times where even a little hesitation would get me killed.

“Here.” The man pushed aside an elaborate wall hanging to reveal another door.

Under other circumstances, I would’ve found a hidden door very cool. Now, I just wanted to get through it to the other side. A moment later, I was in a short, dark hallway, lit only by emergency lights above another door.

“You’re lucky the buddy I’m covering for told me about Mr. Alesini’s secret exit,” the bouncer said as we moved toward the door. “This goes out into the alley. Go to the left and disappear into the crowd. In a half hour, meet Harlee here.”

He shoved something into my hand. and I stuck it in my pocket without looking at it. I needed to get out of here first. Then I’d see where I was going next.

“Won’t he be pissed at you?” I asked.

“When the first alarm goes off, every employee is supposed to help evacuate. I’ll say I didn’t know I wasn’t supposed to let you go,” he said. “Now get gone.”

He pushed open the door and I hurried out into the humid July night. Before I could thank him, the door was closed, and I was alone. I could hear sirens coming closer and headed in that direction. Once I got a few blocks away, I’d take a look at the paper the bouncer gave me and find out where I was supposed to meet Harlee.

We had a lot to talk about.

Thirty-Two

Harlee

What the *fuck* happened?

The question circled my mind the same way it had been almost since the moment I realized Baylen was at Pulse to help me. Right then, though, I had to push it back and focus on the con, not on how he knew about it, how he knew where I was.

Or why he came at all.

As soon as I signaled for Baylen to call Alesini on his bluff, I left, hoping Franklin told Baylen about that last sign. I wasn't about to just leave him there to get out on his own though, not when I knew Alesini wasn't going to let it go that easily. Fortunately, I came up with a plan pretty quick.

After telling Bear I'd give him a couple hundred bucks to help, I explained what I needed him to do, and pulled the fire alarm before I ran. Bear said he'd do it for free, but I knew it would be dangerous for him if Alesini was as pissed at losing as I thought he was. I didn't want Bear to get in the middle of it all, but I couldn't see any other way to ensure Baylen got out safely. Money seemed like poor compensation for what might get Bear killed, but it was something at least.

What I didn't realize was how hard it would be to wait. I told Bear to give Baylen the paper with the diner's address on it and say to meet me in a half hour, but I didn't stop to think that I would be stuck for thirty minutes, not knowing if he made it out okay, not knowing if him showing up actually meant anything.

I must've walked for twenty minutes, not really paying attention to where I was going, just needing to move, and then I finally flagged down a cab and had them take me to the diner. By the time I got there, it'd been thirty minutes since I asked Bear for his help, but I reminded myself that didn't mean Baylen was late. I had no way of knowing exactly how much time

passed between my giving Bear the message and Baylen getting it.

So there was no need to panic. No need to worry about all the things that could have gone wrong. No need to wonder if he changed his mind at the last minute and simply gave Alesini the money back.

No, there was no *need* to think about any of those things, but I still did. All the way up to the moment the door to the diner opened and Baylen walked inside.

The rush of relief that went through me made my legs so weak that I was glad I wasn't standing. I managed to raise a hand to catch his attention and saw on his face what I felt. My heart lurched, demanding to know what it meant.

I told it to wait. Other things had to come first.

“Are you okay?”

We blurted out the question at the same time, then shared an awkward laugh that turned into awkward silence. I motioned for him to sit down, and he did. The waitress came almost immediately, and I ordered the first thing on the menu. Baylen did the same, his fingers tapping against the tabletop the only indication of his own impatience.

The waitress barely stepped away before Baylen spoke, “I'm sorry.”

I pressed my hands together under the table and tried not to let anything show on my face or in my voice. “I think I should be thanking you.”

He shook his head. “You wouldna needed me tonight if I hadn't fucked things up this morning.”

I couldn't disagree with him there.

“I should have believed you, even if I didna understand what happened,” he continued. “I could make an excuse, blame what happened with my...it doesna matter. You're not like any woman I've ever known before, and you should have had my support from moment one.”

I swallowed hard around the lump that formed in my throat. “Thank you.”

“To make it worse, Alec didn’t believe it for a moment.” A pained look crossed Baylen’s face. “I told him everything I saw in that envelope and his first response was that it didn’t make sense. Which I would’ve seen if I hadn’t been so bloody stupid.”

My chest tightened, my emotions making it difficult to breathe. Alec believed me. He barely knew me, but he believed me.

“I was scared,” Baylen said. “Scared that I’d made another terrible mistake. That I’d been fooled again.” He shook his head, his eyes haunted. “When I think of what could have happened to you because I was behaving like a right bastard...” His voice trailed off, as if he couldn’t put into words everything that was going through his mind.

“I’m okay.” I reached across the table and put my hand on his. “And we all do stupid shit.”

The corner of his mouth quirked up into an almost smile. “Aye, but my shit was stupider than most.”

“I’ll agree with that.” I squeezed his hand. “But I also forgive you.”

“You do?” He turned his hand over, fingers closing around mine in a grip that was almost painful. “I don’t deserve it.”

“Then it’s a good thing forgiveness doesn’t depend on whether or not we deserve it,” I said. I pulled my hand back as the waitress returned with our food, waiting until she left again to change the subject. “Now, how about you tell me how in the world you knew where I was and what I was doing. I know my dad’s involved somehow, since that’s the only way you could’ve known about the dead man’s hand con, but I have questions.”

“Aye.” Baylen nodded.

As I ate, he told me about his conversation with Alec, how Alec’s argument for my innocence started to make sense, and then Franklin showed up. He explained that Franklin gave them the envelope with the papers in it and how Alec saw they were fakes because the information was wrong.

“I knew something was off about them,” I said. “I just couldn’t put my finger on it.” Then something else hit me. “Franklin was telling the truth. He didn’t

hire anyone else to steal from MIRI.”

“Aye. And it was the article from that magazine that really solidified that Franklin didn’t have anything to do with it at all.” Baylen’s face flooded with color, piquing my curiosity. “It was Brigh.”

It took me a moment for it to click. Brigh. Ms. Flitton, Baylen’s assistant.

“Fuck.” I sat back in my seat, torn between shock and the realization that it actually made sense. “How’d you figure it out?”

Baylen rubbed the back of his neck, his embarrassed expression growing. “The article was printed from an online version of the magazine. The kind you need to create an account to access. If I had just looked closer...” he shook his head. “It was right there. Brigh F. Top corner of the page.”

I felt a flare of anger at his words, realizing that this all could have been avoided. And then I remembered that I looked at that page too, and I didn’t see the name. Even if I hadn’t recognized it as her name, I would have had a point to start.

The raw emotion on Baylen’s face told me how much he was beating himself up over what happened and that melted away the last of any negative feelings I had.

“We both could’ve looked harder.” Hope lit up Baylen’s eyes. “I meant what I said about forgiving you. No more blame, all right?”

“Aye.” He looked like a weight was lifted from his shoulders.

“Now,” I said, “back to my father and how you ended up at Pulse tonight.”

“Right.” He took a drink and ate a few of the fries on his plate. “Franklin told us about the money he owed and that you decided to win the money in a poker game with a mob boss.” The look Baylen gave me said exactly what he thought of my plan, but he didn’t comment directly on it. “He said you were good enough to win, but that he was worried your skill wouldn’t be enough. He wanted you to have back-up.”

“Which he couldn’t do because Alesini knows what he looks like,” I said. When Baylen shifted in his seat, unable to meet my eyes, I knew that wasn’t

all. I opened my mouth to ask, but then realized I didn't need to. "And because he left."

"Aye." Baylen's gaze met mine. "I'm sorry."

I shook my head. "It doesn't surprise me." And it didn't. Though it did still sting. After all, the entire reason I was in there was to save his ass.

"He left your car at Alec's place, by the way."

That explained how he had the envelope. I should've been annoyed about my car, but he didn't still have it, so I just let it go. I learned a long time ago I couldn't hold onto shit when it came to Franklin. Not without making myself bitter and angry. Back then, I decided that I wasn't going to make myself miserable over him, and that was still true now.

"Good. I would've hated to have to buy a new one." I didn't think for a moment Baylen believed it was that simple, but he didn't call me on it. Then another question popped into my mind, and I brought the subject back to something I actually *wanted* to talk about. "Do you know why Franklin came to Alec's house? I mean, why would he go to Alec instead of Jin? As far as I know, she's the only one in my life he knows about."

"Aye, about that." Baylen looked amused...with a hint of irritation. "Your father seemed to think that you and Alec were...involved."

My jaw dropped. "What?! Why would he..." Suddenly, I remembered the questions Franklin asked me on our way to see his loan shark buddy. "Motherfucker."

"Harlee?"

"He was asking me all these questions about people in my life, including whether or not I had a boyfriend. I said I had been involved with someone at work and that he was going back to Scotland." I rubbed my temples. "He assumed I meant Alec."

"Well, it's a good thing he did," Baylen pointed out. "Because that's how I knew where you were and what to do."

Right. Back to what was actually important. Where things went from here. “He had a plan of what to do after we got the money. We need a new plan.”

“We have one,” Baylen said. He cleared the last of his food from his plate. “And the first step is the same.”

“Hiding?”

“Aye.” He took out his wallet and tossed a few bills on the table. “We should probably go. I have the names of a few decent hotels where we can pay cash and lay low for a few days.”

A thrill ran down my spine as I realized what that meant. Baylen and I were going to spend at least a couple days holed up in a hotel room with not really much of anything to do. Maybe that shouldn’t have been the first thing in my mind, but there it was. Still, I tried to refocus.

“After that?”

Baylen stood and held out a hand. “Let’s get to that room.” After a brief pause, he added, “Unless you want two rooms.”

I slid my hand into his. “No. One room. One bed.”

The smile that broke across his face took my breath away. As we walked to the closest bus stop, Baylen quickly filled me in on the plan Alec, Franklin, and he had come up with for getting the money where it needed to be. It sounded like a good plan to me, but I was still more interested in what would happen when we reached our hotel.

The bus wasn’t full, but there were enough people that neither Baylen nor I did much talking. Less than twenty minutes later, Baylen was handing over several bills and getting a key in return. Then we were outside our room, and I felt a burst of nerves as I wondered what would happen next. The minute I stepped inside, however, I decided that I didn’t need to wonder.

I was completely capable of taking the initiative myself, after all, and as the door clicked closed behind me, I did just that.

I felt his surprise as my mouth crashed into his, but then his arms went around me, and relief flooded me. His skin was hot and his lips fierce as they

moved with mine. He may have still been worried about where we stood, but with this, he knew what he wanted. Fortunately, it was the same thing I wanted right now.

I tugged at his shirt, and he caught my bottom lip between his teeth. I groaned and fisted the soft material, desperate to just tear it off. We had been together only last night, but I wanted him again. Now. Not in ten minutes. Not after a half hour of amazing and torturous foreplay. *Now.*

His tongue stroked mine, his hands greedy as they slid under the back of my shirt and then around to the front to push up my bra and palm my breasts. My own hands were busy between us, yanking at the button and zipper to his jeans.

“Condom?” I pulled my mouth away long enough to ask.

He blinked at me for a moment before my question registered. “Aye.” While he dug in his back pocket, I pulled off my shorts and underwear. By the time he had the wrapper in hand, I was pushing him back onto the closest piece of furniture: a chair that looked like it’d seen better days. Not that I really cared about anything other than getting him inside me.

My hands shook as I rolled the latex on, my stomach fluttering with anticipation. He cursed, his hips jerking under my hand. His cock was thick and hot. I could almost feel his pulse against my palm as I held him in place and climbed onto his lap. Straddling him, I put my free hand on his shoulder to steady myself.

“I don’t want to go slow,” I warned him.

“We’ll have time later to go slow?”

The vulnerability on his face as he asked the question nearly did me in. I brushed my lips across his. “Many. Many. *Many.* Times.”

And then I sank down, my eyes closing with the intensity of sensations that ran through my body as he stretched me inch by inch. As I took all of him, a shudder went through me.

“Look at me.”

My eyes flew open at the command. Baylen grasped my hips, his gaze burning into me. I rocked back and forth, my nails digging into his shoulders even though I'd meant to avoid hurting him like that right now. Except the way he filled me was nearly overwhelming, and I needed a way to release at least a little of that energy, or I was afraid I'd fly apart.

Then his thumb pressed against my clit, and I cried out, a jolt going through me. His other hand moved to the small of my back, guiding me as we began to move together. Short, jerky movements designed to push us toward climax as fast as possible. And we didn't last long, our mouths fusing together as we gasped out our pleasure only seconds apart.

My body went limp, collapsing onto his like all the bones had gone out of me. His hands slid up and down my spine, and I pressed my face against the side of his neck. Damn, he smelled good. Unable to resist, I darted out my tongue, tasting the salt on his skin. He chuckled and then groaned as the vibration reminded us that we were still joined.

"I don't want to move, but..."

"Yeah," I said. "Give me a second. My legs still aren't working right."

Another laugh and this one sent a shiver of pleasure through me. If he kept that up, I would say to hell with the condom and see if I could get him ready to go again right away. Maybe this time with my mouth...

He moved first, picking me up and depositing me on the bed before kicking off his pants and underwear. I watched as he walked away, not feeling the need to say anything, just enjoying the flex of those phenomenal ass muscles. For as uncomfortable as the silence before had become, this one felt natural.

He broke it when he came back. "This feels strangely familiar."

I raised an eyebrow in question as he settled back on the bed next to me, as comfortable in his nakedness as I was in my own.

"The first time we met and went to a hotel, we didn't make it to the bed either."

I laughed. "I seem to recall champagne was involved too."

“So it was,” he agreed. “I’m hoping the lack of it won’t be the only difference this time.” His expression sobered as he reached over and cupped my cheek. “I don’t want to wake up alone.”

“You won’t,” I promised. After a moment, I asked, “And you’re staying with me until it’s safe for us both, right?”

“Aye.” He brushed hair back from my face. “I’m through running. I’m going to fight for the life that I want.”

“And what is it you want?”

“Right now,” a wicked grin curved his lips, “I want to make you scream my name.”

As he pulled off my shirt and bra, his lips kissed across the exposed skin, teeth scraping and nipping. When he reached my breasts, I moaned, the pull of his mouth a straight line to my still throbbing core. Then his fingers were between my legs, slipping inside me, stroking me, slowly bringing me to the point of climax before backing off.

“Bay,” I whimpered. “Please.”

“Shh,” he murmured as he pressed his lips against the inside of my thigh. “You said I could take my time.”

He was right. “Dammit.”

“I’ll get you there. Trust me.”

“I do.” I gasped as his mouth joined his hand and he worked me back toward orgasm...before stopping again.

And once more.

Only then did he let me tip over the edge, and while I was still shaking with that white-hot pleasure slid back inside me, that feeling of joining like nothing else could ever be.

Home.

Thirty-Three

Baylen

The morning after everything happened, a man came to our room with two bags of clothes, introducing himself as a friend of Alec's. He didn't give us a name and I didn't ask. Anonymity was part of what made Alec's plan work. As discussed, I handed over the chips and then all Harlee and I could do was wait.

The hotel where we spent the next few days was a decent one, though we barely noticed much about it. We spent most of our time in bed, not even bothering to dress except when the food we ordered was delivered. When we weren't making love, we watched television and talked, learning about each other.

One thing we didn't talk about was what would happen when we finally left the hotel.

Then, Monday night, Alec sent a text saying that his 'friend' cashed in the chips Baylen won and then gave Alesini what he was owed, with a little extra to emphasize that Franklin and Harlee were now off-limits. Franklin's loan shark was also paid off with his small bit of interest. At Harlee's request, the bouncer, Bear, was given a small sum, as well as a job offer from MIRI, which he wisely accepted. The man Alec hired to do all the work was given what was left of the winnings.

We were free to go.

Since we already paid for the night, we stayed, both of us saying that we didn't want to waste the money, but I suspected Harlee's motivations were tempered with the same thoughts I had.

Once we left, we would need to deal with all the complications the real world presented.

Neither of us spoke about that, even as we checked out and got into the car Alec sent for us. We had one more thing left to do, and Alec agreed that it

would be best to do it at MIRI. I managed to put it all out of my mind since Harlee and I talked about it at the diner, but now it was the only thing I could think about.

“Are you sure you want me there for this?” Harlee asked as we pulled up in front of MIRI. “She’s your assistant and she doesn’t like me.”

“That’s an understatement,” I said. “And that’s exactly why you should be here. She came after you and you deserve to confront her about it.”

“Is it petty of me to actually be glad about it?” Harlee threaded her fingers through mine as we walked to the entrance. “Not about what she did, but that she isn’t getting off without any consequences?”

“Not at all,” I said firmly.

Harlee never said it, but I suspected her need to see justice served was greater than a lot of people would have been. She had, after all, been a victim of a system that failed. Technically, Jin was the one who hadn’t gotten justice, but it was because of that failure that Harlee had done what she’d done, and everything that came after it was a direct result. I couldn’t change the past, but I could make sure that Harlee saw that I wasn’t going to let anyone get away with hurting her.

Tuesday was waiting for us when we stepped off the elevator, the grim expression on her face telling me that she knew what was happening. She confirmed that by saying, “I’ll show Ms. Flitton to Mr. McCrae’s office when she arrives. He said to send the two of you right back.”

We made small talk with Alec for a few minutes, mostly thanking him for his assistance, and then Tuesday was knocking on the door. Brigh was smiling when she stepped inside the office, but the smile faltered when she saw Harlee. She caught herself quickly though and came straight to me.

“I’ve been worried about you, Baylen,” Brigh said. “You didn’t answer any of my texts or calls and Al – Mr. McCrae said you were going to be out of touch for a few days. I even thought about calling your parents.”

“I’m glad you didn’t,” I said. The last thing I needed was them to start digging around into where I was and why I’d gone off-grid.

“Our flight’s first thing in the morning and we have things to discuss before then,” she continued. “I was worried I’d need to come to the hotel and get you just so we wouldn’t miss it.”

“I’m not—” Her words clicked. “Wait, did you say you’d need to come to the hotel?”

Brigh’s cheeks turned pink. “Aye, well...I mean...”

I suddenly remembered something she said before and a suspicion reared its head. “Brigh, you asked me once before about staying overnight with someone, but it wasn’t an actual question, was it? You knew where I was then, and you knew where I’ve been these last couple days.”

“And you knew he was at my apartment the other night.” Harlee quietly entered the conversation. “Didn’t you? That’s how you knew if you slid that envelope under the door, he’d most likely see it.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Brigh folded her arms, a mutinous expression on her face.

“Aye, you do.” I shook my head. “How? Why?”

“I think I can answer both of those questions,” Harlee said. “Can I see your phone, Bay?”

The color drained from Brigh’s face as I handed over my phone and Harlee began to go through it.

“Look, we should really go,” Brigh said, tension making her voice rise. “I’ll make us lunch reservations and we can talk about what needs done before we go home.”

“I’m not going home tomorrow.”

“That’s crazy! We have a business to run.”

“*Baylen* has a business to run,” Harlee cut in. Brigh glared at her, but Harlee didn’t even seem to notice it. “You might have been a good assistant, but your recent actions prove you have your own interests at heart, not his.” Harlee looked at me. “There’s a tracking app on your phone.”

My jaw dropped. “What?!”

“We just wanted to keep you safe.” Brigh took a step toward me, but I put up my hand. I was shocked enough that even the hurt that crossed her face at my gesture couldn’t make me feel guilty. “We needed to know where you were, what you were doing.”

“We?” Alec asked in a low voice. “Who is the *we*, Ms. Flitton?”

Red flooded Brigh’s face. “Baylen—”

I cut in. “Answer the question.”

“Your parents.”

I stared at her. “You put a tracker on my phone for my parents? You work for me, not them.”

Something snapped and Brigh’s entire countenance changed. “Yes, I *work* for you. I do *everything* for you. And I always thought you couldna see me as anything else because of work. Then you go and fuck that total cow, Angie.” The words spilled out of her as if they’d been building for a long time. “It wasna fair! I *love* you! Then Angie left you and I thought you’d finally see me. But you didn’t. I went to your parents because I thought I could have the one thing Angie never did. Their approval. If I had that, they could get you to notice me. So, aye, I put a tracker on your phone.”

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing.

“Of course, it didna make a difference because you went straight for her.” Brigh sneered at Harlee. “Barely in the city a day and you found someone else to fuck. And not even someone with a bit of class. Some tattooed, pierced slag—”

“Enough!” I practically yelled the word, startling even Alec. “You’re never to speak of her that way. I don’t plan on seeing you after today, but if I hear a single foul word uttered about Harlee, you will regret it.”

“What are you talking about?” Brigh’s anger turned to something unsure.

“You’re flying home tomorrow morning and I never want to see or hear from you again. My family will know that to hire you will be to lose me forever.

My friends will know that. Everyone in Edinburgh will know. I canna make you leave the city, but you won't be finding decent employment there. And I doubt you'll have many friends left either."

"You canna do that."

"Oh, I can." I took a step toward her. "You betrayed my trust, and that alone would be enough for me to fire you. You tried to come between Harlee and I with that stupid article about her past, and that would be enough for me to never want to see you again. But you tried to frame her for stealing. Get her fired from her job, perhaps worse. That's unforgivable." I shook my head. "I'm quit of you. Leave."

"Baylen—"

"Ms. Flitton," Alec interrupted, "if you don't remove yourself from my premises, I will have security escort you out, and I dinna think you want the sort of scene that will create."

Brigh's mouth opened, then closed again. She turned on Harlee. "You—"

"Just go," Harlee said, her tone mild. "Because if you touch me, you'll be flying home with a black eye and possibly a few less teeth."

Something in Harlee's face must've convinced Brigh that Harlee wasn't bluffing because Brigh turned and stormed out.

"Ms. Boswell, please see that she leaves the building," Alec called out before turning back to Harlee and I. "I could go for something to eat. What do you say we order in some brunch?"

Thirty-Four

Harlee

I hadn't seen Baylen since we left MIRI on Tuesday, but we talked every night and texted throughout the day. It wasn't easy, being away from him, and that should have scared me, but it just made me realize just how much he meant to me. How hard I'd fallen for him.

And he was leaving.

We didn't talk about it, not when he was going or what it would mean for us, but I knew we needed to have that conversation, and soon. We were going on a date tonight and I planned to bring it up. I didn't want things to end, not when I was fairly sure I was in love with him, but I couldn't keep going with our future up in the air. I had to know there was a chance this was going somewhere.

While I dressed, that thought kept echoing through my mind, making me wonder if this would be the last time I put on something because I thought Baylen would like me in it. The last time I imagined him taking it off me. But even with that bit of negativity, I couldn't help smiling when I opened my door to find Baylen there with a multi-colored bouquet of dahlias.

"They're beautiful!" I exclaimed as I brought them into the kitchen to find a vase.

"You're beautiful," Baylen said, the sincerity in his voice making what could have been a cheesy line into a lovely compliment.

"Thank you." I felt myself blush. "You look great too."

I felt him come up behind me, standing close enough that when I turned, I was staring directly at his chest. It was a very nice chest.

"Do you have any idea how tempted I am to take you right here on the kitchen counter?" Baylen bent his head to brush his mouth against my ear. "To stay in tonight and see how many times I can make you come?"

I let out a shuddering breath. “I won’t complain.”

He sighed and straightened. “Aye, but I promised myself that I’d take you on a proper date. Treat you well.”

“Orgasms count as treating me well,” I countered, tipping my head back to look at him.

He laughed, then brushed his lips across mine. “Dinner first. Orgasms later.”

“I’m going to hold you to that,” I informed him before pulling his head down for a longer, more thorough kiss, the kind that left both of us breathless and wanting.

My knees were still weak when I took his arm and we headed out to my car. Baylen, after asking my permission, drove us to Altura, one of Seattle’s most romantic restaurants. Beautiful, with great food, it was one of those places women were always thrilled to go, and I was happy to be there, but I was pretty sure I would’ve been happy anywhere as long as I was with him.

“Have you spoken to Jin yet about what happened?” he asked as we settled at our table.

“I finally got through to her this afternoon,” I said. “She and Quaid are visiting the world’s largest ball of twine, apparently.”

“That’s a real thing?”

I laughed. “Cawker City, Kansas. Jin’s always wanted to see it, so when Quaid said they should go on a road trip, she said that’s where she wanted to go.”

“I’m not sure that’s the sort of holiday I would want to take, but everyone’s different.” He chuckled. “How long to they intend to be gone?”

We spent most the next hour talking about Jin and Quaid’s trip, both where they’d been and where they still planned to go. I showed him pictures of the pair with all of the crazy things they’d gone to see, some of which were even stranger than the ball of string. That led us into talking about travel and, after our waiter took our dessert orders, I thought it was time to bring up the subject we’d avoided all week.

Bracing myself, I asked the hard question. “Have you decided when you’re going home?”

“I actually wanted to talk to you about that,” he said. Reaching over, he took my hand. “Perhaps this is too soon, but after almost losing you once, I don’t want to risk anything happening before I can tell you how I feel.”

My heart skipped a beat.

“I love you, Harlee.” His fingers tightened around mine. “I think I started falling for you the moment I saw you on that stage and I knew I wanted more than that one night before it was even over.”

“I love you too.” The words came out in a whisper, but they were full of all the emotion I was feeling.

Relief and joy lit up Baylen’s eyes until they almost glowed. “Then I guess I can ask this with at least a little more confidence: will you come back to Scotland with me?”

I wanted to yell *of course* but I knew I had to be practical about it. “I can’t ask Alec for a vacation.”

Baylen squeezed my hand. “I don’t mean for holiday. I want you to move to Scotland. Live with me there.”

I stared at him, thinking I must’ve misheard, misunderstood, because there was no way he’d just asked me to move to Scotland to live with him. Shit like that just didn’t happen, not to women like me. That was fairytale stuff.

“Harlee? Say something.” The light in Baylen’s eyes dimmed. “It’s all right if you don’t want to. We can figure this out.”

“I want to,” I blurted out the truth. “I’m just a little shocked. I wasn’t expecting that.”

“But you want to?” There was hope and happiness in that question.

“I do.” Something inside me shifted and I knew what I had to do. The only thing I could do. “Yes, I’ll come to Scotland with you.”

Before I could blink, he had my face in his hands and his mouth on mine. For a moment, I forgot we were in public, forgot everything but the pressure of his lips and the rightness of being with him. Then the kiss was over, and I was second-guessing getting dessert.

“We have a lot to do,” Baylen said, “but let’s not get into any of that tonight.”

I agreed as the waiter set our desserts in front of us. Before I took two bites, however, a thought occurred to me, making me laugh. “One thing though. I think you should be the one to tell Alec. I don’t think he’ll be too happy that I’m leaving after he went to all that trouble to help me.”

Baylen smiled. “Trust me, my friend will put my happiness above work.” Then he tilted his head, as if something had just come to him. “Though, perhaps it needn’t be a resignation. MIRI does have offices in Scotland, after all.”

I blinked at that. “Do you think he would transfer me?”

“I think he’d be a fool to lose you,” Baylen said. “Anyone would.”

Was it possible? Could I actually have this amazing man, a new home in a new country, *and* keep a job that I loved? Yes, I’d be giving up the people I worked with at MIRI here, ones who might’ve become real friends. Yes, I’d be leaving Jin behind, leaving the only city I’d ever known. But it wasn’t as if I couldn’t visit. And keeping in touch with Jin would be easy.

And I’d be gaining so much.

She’d be happy for me, I knew. Just as I would be for her if our places were changed.

And with that, beneath the excitement, I felt a real peace, as if I’d finally found exactly where I belonged.

Wherever Baylen was.

Thirty-Five

Baylen

Mid-August in Seattle wasn't like mid-August in New York City. That much was obvious from the moment Harlee and I stepped out of the airport to hail a cab. Muggy and hot, it had me longing for the much cooler – though often as wet – of my home. We were on our way, at least, stopping here for just a day before we left the States behind.

We.

I still felt like this was too good to be true. I had Harlee at my side and knew she could hold her own against my parents. The fact that she would be working for MIRI, heading up the newly created statistical analysis department at the Scotland office, would be points in her favor, of course, but I had no doubt one look at her and my mother would choke on all the things she wanted to say about Harlee's appearance.

I didn't care. And it wasn't a case of me simply saying it while a small part of me still longed for their approval. I was through with that. If I had learned one thing in Seattle, it was that I needed to trust my instincts, and every part of me knew with all certainty that Harlee Sumpter was it for me.

My instincts were also why we were in New York.

After MIRI finished with their marketing plan and presented me with everything they did, I decided to do my first set of investor inquiries here in the States. That led to a conversation with Alec and then a video conference with his younger brother, Carson McCrae, a fashion designer who lived in the Big Apple. Carson asked me for a trial basis exclusivity contract where he would pay for an initial order of the bras to be produced in various sizes and styles. Once he received them, he'd make a more permanent decision.

They arrived at his place on Friday. Since Alec already offered us the use of his private plane so that Harlee would be able to take her things rather than ship them separately, he was more than willing to add a detour to New York

for us to meet with Carson. Now, we were on our way to Carson's place of business, and I was about to learn if I was right about this product.

"Carson wasn't at Alec's party, was he?" Harlee asked as our driver worked her way through the city traffic.

I shook my head. "None of the New York McCraes were."

"How many are there?"

I thought for a moment before answering. "Three. Carson, Maggie, and London. Carson's twin, Cory, lives in California somewhere."

She frowned. "I thought the twins were Sean and Xander."

I chuckled. "Those are the identical McCrae twins, Alec's half-brothers. Carson and Cory are the fraternal McCraes."

"I'm beginning to appreciate having been an only child," Harlee said with a laugh. "Your siblings better be easier to keep track of."

"Trust me," I said, "most families are easier to figure out than Alec's. I think our friend Colin asked for a diagram at some point."

Our conversation turned to the city itself as we both took in landmarks we'd only ever seen on television before. It wasn't the same as site-seeing would have been, but I promised myself that Harlee and I would come back one day and have a proper time of it. Maybe for our honeymoon.

Would a proposal on our way home on a private plane be romantic or far too soon?

And would we be able to celebrate while we were still in the air?

"All right, I have to know, what has you smiling like that?" Harlee asked as our car pulled up in front of a fairly non-descript building.

"Just wondering what Alec would mind us doing on his plane." I gave Harlee the sort of smile that made her blush.

"We're not having sex on your friend's plane!" She clapped a hand over her mouth as she realized how loudly she'd spoken.

To the driver's credit, she didn't say anything but, "Have a nice day."

"That was embarrassing," Harlee muttered as we walked toward the entrance.

"I'm fairly certain that wasn't even close to the worst thing someone's said in her presence." I considered for a moment, then added, "Or done."

"True." Harlee hit the buzzer by the door.

I would've recognized Carson McCrae anywhere, I thought when he opened the door. His hair was a burnished copper, the sort of wild curls that were impossible to tame, and his eyes were a lighter blue than Alec's. No, what would have made me recognize him was that he looked like a carbon copy of what his father must have looked like at his age.

"Baylen and Harlee?" He held out a hand. "I'm Carson. Nice to meet you." He smiled at me. "Though we have met before."

"We have?" I asked as Harlee and I followed him into the building.

"I came to visit Alec one year at university," Carson said. "I seem to recall the lot of you being extremely interested in the Gaelic Football club."

I laughed. "Aye. Colin and Cirion chased more than one of the lasses on the team."

"But not you?" Harlee gave me a sideways look that held equal measures of curiosity and teasing.

I shrugged. "I dated, but I wasn't one to pursue women." I squeezed her hand. "Until you, that is."

She flushed. "I'm glad you did."

I leaned over and kissed her temple. "Aye. As am I."

Carson, who either didn't hear us or was polite enough to pretend he didn't, took us over to the far corner of a rather large open room. A pair of cluttered tables were shoved against the wall, covered with bits of fabric and paper and whatever else it was Carson used to do what he did. Half a dozen mannequins of various sizes and shapes stood nearby, some draped with cloth, some bare. One wore the bra.

“I’ve been going over design possibilities,” he jumped right into business, “and I think there’s a huge market, both practically and aesthetically.”

As he explained all of his ideas and the ways he could see this bra affecting the fashion world, everything took on a surreal sort of quality. I’d hoped for a good product that could provide something of quality and sustain a business well enough for me to show my parents that I’d been right. I hadn’t expected this level of enthusiasm or this many applications.

“With all that said, I have a business proposition for you.” After I nodded, he continued, “I’m currently working on a line for women with larger busts and I would love to incorporate your bra into it, both to be worn with the outfits I’m designing and as lingerie. My proposal is that, instead of a general investment, we become partners. Fifty-fifty, including me buying into half of the patent.”

I almost asked if he was serious, but the expression on his face left no doubt of it.

“I would introduce the bra with my new line at a show, and then we’d make it available to the public at the same time as the rest of my designs. You would handle the UK side of things and I’ll take care of the US launch. If it goes well, we could have them available worldwide in less than a year.”

It was a great plan.

When Alec connected me with Carson, I expected the creative side of things. I thought he would see the advantages of the bra, maybe offer some design tips to make it more attractive, then invest if he thought it was a viable idea. I hadn’t expected him to be so business savvy.

His proposal alone would have appealed to me, but knowing that he was a McCrae and, as such, I could trust him implicitly, I didn’t have to give it much thought.

“That would be brilliant.” I put out my hand. “We’ll get the paperwork drawn up to make it official, but I think we can seal it with a handshake.”

“Great!” Carson grinned as he shook my hand. “Now, I know it’s early, but what do you say we break out a bottle of my brother’s best whiskey and have a drink to celebrate?”

As he went to get the drink and Harlee pulled me down for a kiss, I felt my world settle into place. Nothing was ever perfect, but this was pretty damn close, and it promised to set the stage for what was to come. Only a few months ago, everything in my life was falling apart, and now, I had a woman I loved more than I would've thought possible, a business partner who not only believed in my product but who I knew I could trust, and a future that was brighter than I ever could have imagined.

THE END

If you haven't yet read Alec's story, you can start here: [*OFF LIMITS*](#)
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