

A gold skull is the central focus, positioned in the upper right. A single pink rose is placed to its left, and a spray of purple flowers is in the upper left. The background is black with some faint floral elements at the bottom.

Dark
ENEMIES

UNTIL DEATH US DO PART

EFFIE CAMPBELL

DARK ENEMIES

EFFIE CAMPBELL

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*For the people who just want to be called a good girl while being anything
but good.*

WARNINGS

This book contains spicy content, depictions of death and sexual assault (not between the main characters). There is also scenes with the discussion and threat of trafficking.

It is also written in the UK, and I use British English for spelling. If you are from elsewhere - forgive me! Remember that these are hot Scots and just imagine it in their voices, it makes it all better.

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DARK OBSESSIONS

CHAPTER ONE

MAEVE

It felt like an eternity as I waited for the clock's hands to move.

And waited.

I must have spent half of my life waiting for the men in my family.

Raised voices crashed against the door, causing Gregor to shift awkwardly from foot to foot.

'You could just let me in.' I narrowed my eyes at my minder and tapped my acrylic nails on the table.

'You know I can't do that, Maeve. Your brothers would have my bollocks off.'

'I should be in there. Esther is my sister, too.' I didn't blame her for running from the arranged marriage between her and the creep that is Harold Thompson, but to ditch me for love, twice? Ugh. She'd fallen for the guy my brothers had trusted to haul her arse home and left us all to deal with the fallout. I couldn't entirely blame her. She was expecting a baby, and I wanted them to be safe. I'd thought that Alec, the enforcer who stole her heart, would have dealt with Harold before fleeing. Instead, my father was half dead, and the situation was worse than ever. The bitter rivalry between the two biggest crime families in Glasgow had mutated from trying to broker peace to an all out war.

'You know the rules, lass. It's men's business.' Gregor, at least, had the decency to avert his eyes at the utterly sexist statement.

A familiar white fiery anger bubbled up from my stomach. My life may have been pretty gilded. The best education, the finest clothes, the swankiest parties, but it was all just smoke and mirrors. I was just another pawn.

My brothers Logan, Ewen and Mac would be behind the door making

decisions which would affect all of our lives, while they left me out in the cold. The baby. The girl.

Useless.

There was nothing to do but wait. I'd hoped that with my father being in a coma, my brothers would have relented on the old-fashioned nonsense. But no. Patriarchy still ruled.

They emerged almost an hour later as I was dozing against my arm. A simmering undercurrent of excitement surrounded them. Mac ruffled my hair as he took a seat beside me while I grimaced and flattened it back down. I'd never admit it, but he was my favourite sibling. With only two years between us, we'd grown up in cahoots, forever causing mischief at our parents' soirees before snatching a plate of desserts and disappearing to stuff our faces. As we grew into our twenties, the family business had truncated us somewhat. Dad expected Mac to be ruthless, to enact orders without hesitation. The few years he'd been a vital part of the business had already worn on him.

'What's the plan?' I asked as my other brothers, and their closest organisation members, drifted off.

'You know I'm not supposed to tell you anything.' The glint in Mac's eyes told me he very much wanted me to keep prying.

'Come on,' I wheedled. 'I'm as mad as you guys are about Esther having to be on the run. I want her to come home.'

'They have invited us to a party. To make amends allegedly.'

'Why do we want to make amends? Dad had made the deal about Esther marrying that sleaze-ball. It's not looking likely he will wake up. Logan should cut ties once and for all with those arseholes.' I was torn about whether I wanted Dad to wake up, however heartless it made me. Living under his iron fist had stifled us all. He made enemies as fast as dealers sold coke. I didn't wish him dead, but I'd far rather have my brother, Logan, at the helm than him. Maybe it would save me from being promised to someone I hate, too.

'Logan wants to make allies. Hopefully Harold will pass over the reigns to his eldest son soon, and if we can be on good terms, it would be better for everyone.'

'It sounds like a stupid fucking plan to me.' My shoulders slumped.

Harold's power had grown in the city, and far beyond, in the years since Dad and he had fallen out and disbanded their joint organisation to go their own ways. Their bitter rivalries had led not only to my mother's demise but also to my eldest brother Malcolm Jr's death and now our father's coma. Trying to make ties while Harold was still in charge wasn't just stupid. It could lead to more of us six feet under.

'Me too,' Mac sighed. 'Me too.'

Light streamed from the kitchen as I walked through our home, followed by the low chatter of voices and the pop of a cork being pulled from a bottle.

I stalled by the ajar door and watched as Logan poured some red wine into a handful of glasses.

'What are we going to do?' Ewen said, after taking a deep swig of the wine and swallowing hard.

'We're going to have to play their game. Harold is still furious about Esther, not to mention the knife he took to the shoulder.' Logan ran a hand over his jaw as he spoke. Being thrust into leadership was difficult at the best of times, never mind when your family was teetering over a war with your rivals.

'What does he want with this party?'

'He wants Maeve.'

My stomach dropped into the pits of hell at his words. Over my dead body.

'No fucking way is she marrying that piece of shit.' Mac's chair clattered as he stood up abruptly, his face reddening with anger.

'I'm not Dad, of course I won't marry her off to Harold. But we need to buy time until we can hit them hard. They have stronger connections locally, and a lot more money to bribe their way out of shit. We need to either build some alliances or find some way to ruin their existing ones.' Logan swirled his wine in his glass, staring into it as if it might hold an answer.

'So you want to parade her in front of him to appease him, but draw out any deals long enough to fuck him up?' Ewen said, looking from Logan to Mac.

'We need time.'

I took a deep breath to steady my nerves before stepping into the marble laden kitchen. 'I'll do it.'

‘Maeve... you weren’t supposed to hear that,’ Logan said as he glanced over my head to the cavernous hall behind me.

‘Don’t worry, Gregor went to check the cameras and touch base with the others.’ I poured myself a glass of red wine and leant back against the countertop. A small sip was about all I could manage without screwing up my face. No matter how hard I tried, I just couldn’t like the bitter drink. ‘I’m not the baby anymore. I want to help.’

‘You can’t. I won’t let you go throw yourself in front of that arsehole as bait.’ Mac’s jaw tensed as he spoke, the words laced with fury.

‘You guys can’t keep me wrapped in bubble-wrap forever. I’m a part of this family and if I can help, I want to. As long as I don’t actually have to marry the pig, then I can do this. You’d all be there, right?’

Logan nodded.

‘Then what’s the harm? As long as the party is in neutral territory and we have our guys there for protection, then no-one is going to hurt me. He wants to marry me, not abduct me. I can string him along for a few weeks while you guys do your thing.’ I tried to sound confident and convincing, despite my stomach flip flopping and a terrible taste of sick at the back of my mouth. Even the thought of being near Harold made my body shrivel. His obsession with my mother had led to all of this. And since he couldn’t have her, only dad’s daughters would do. I’d seen him hurt my sister, consoled her after he tried to force himself on her. It was risky to even play at the game.

‘No.’ Mac slammed his glass down onto the gold flecked marble as the red wine sloshed out and pooled around the base.

‘Do you have a better plan?’ Logan eyed him coolly.

‘We go in there and take them all out. Every one of those Thompson fucks. Then we’ll be done with them for good.’ Mac’s voice had raised to a near shout as anger poured from him.

Ewen grabbed a cloth and mopped up the wine. ‘I’m with Logan. If Maeve wants to help, we need to let her. We don’t have another choice and we need time to get into Harold’s contacts. It’s three against one Mac. Sorry.’

Mac sent me a pleading look and I let my gaze fall into my still full wine glass. I was hurting him, and I hated it. He was the closest I’d ever had to a best friend. I cleared my throat as he threw up his arms and left the room.

‘I don’t like this either, Maeve. You’ll need to do exactly as we say. Never be alone at the party. And this is a onetime thing. Once it’s done, you’re out of it and getting on with things as usual.’ Logan spoke with an

absolute authority he'd clearly been practicing since Dad's absence, each word firm and final.

I'd hoped offering to help would solidify my place as one of them, but as always, I was still on the outskirts. Demoted because of the misfortune of being female.

I'd prove to them I was just as essential to the business.

But first, I had a party to prepare for.

CHAPTER TWO

CAMERON

All I wanted to do was get out of there.

As much as I enjoyed lilting jazz music and glasses brimming with vintage Dom Perignon, my father's party was the last place I wanted to be.

'Bide your time, lad,' my father muttered at me as I looked again toward the exits, ever alert when McGowans were around. So far, only Ewen had arrived. The middle son of the McGowan clan, and probably the most laid back from what I'd seen.

He'd gone to the exclusive finishing school, St Guinevere's, that anyone with money attended. He'd been in my year, but we spent our time with much different circles. Whoever said that crime doesn't pay was an idiot. We had money in spades. And money bought influence. The McGowans had money too, but nowhere near to the extent that Father did.

'Do you really need the girl?' I asked, keeping my eyes moving through the packed room. Everyone who was anyone was there.

'Yes.' Father's stare fixed on me. 'Malcolm McGowan promise me a wife, and a wife I will have.'

'You hate the McGowans.' Why he wanted to be attached to one was beyond me.

'All the more reason to have them in my pocket. I've spent years eroding their influence in Scotland and I finally have them where I need them. Controllable. Bedding the bitch is merely icing on the cake.'

I clenched my fist at my side and took a slow, steading breath through my nose. I'd seen what happened to my father's women, and however much I hated the McGowan's, I couldn't help but feel for what Maeve was going to be put through. I had enough scars to know how it felt first hand under my

father's ire, and that was without his dick being involved. He had destroyed my mother, and countless others since she fled.

'There are surely other means to control them.'

'You're not feeling bad for the bitch, are you? The whole family is fucking scum and you know it. If her sister hadn't run off and shown me up in front of my business associates, she wouldn't be in this mess. It's their fault. An agreement is an agreement.' Father knocked on the elaborate mahogany bar and the barman instantly sloshed a large dram of whisky into his empty glass.

'I don't give a shit about her. I just don't think we need a wedding to control them. We don't want scum in our family. There are plenty of others with eligible daughters and sons.' Not that I wanted to marry anyone anytime soon. A quick fuck with a willing woman was enough to sate my urges with no ties. The last thing I needed was another person at home trying to control me.

'My word is final, Cam. As well you know.' Father took a hearty swig of his whisky before a slick grin crossed his face. 'Speak of the devil and here she comes.'

Maeve wasn't just a girl anymore, like she'd been the last time I'd seen her a few years previously. She was a knockout. I'd expected her to slink through the door behind her brothers, terrified to face my father, but she walked into the room with her chin high and her brothers walking a few paces behind her. The scarlet dress she wore cut almost to her navel, revealing an expanse of tanned skin. Her hair shone in dark curls about her shoulders and she wore a look of utter domination on her face.

I stole a glance at my father. He surely hadn't expected this? She had no right to look like the cat who got the fucking cream. Father was practically salivating at the chops, a dark expression of want dogging his wrinkling features.

'She's showing us up.'

'No, she's come to play. Who knew the little wallflower had it in her?' Father stood straighter as the crowd made way for the McGowans, more than one pair of eyes glued to Maeve as she passed.

A wave of anger flushed through me as they neared. My father had hospitalised their dad. The wars between our families had led to two McGowan deaths, and they had shit on their agreement with us. They should quake in their fucking boots. Or stilettos. But Maeve's legs, her shapely,

tanned legs, were not quivering in the slightest.

‘Good Evening Harold, Cameron, thank you for the invite to your little gathering.’ My father’s shoulders tensed as her honeyed words greeted us. She may as well have kicked him. He loved to show off his wealth, and the glittering ball room decked with thousands of pounds worth of flowers, and thousands more worth of delicate morsels and bubbling champagne, was a direct display on his behalf. She tore it down with one seemingly pleasant sentence. She must have had a death wish.

‘Maeve,’ he said, taking her hand and placing his lips against the back of it, ‘What a pleasure to see you. The men in your family seem to keep you out of the limelight. And I’m not surprised. It’s a wonder someone hasn’t snatched you up already.’

On the surface she seemed to maintain her composure, but as Father had kissed her hand, she’d briefly flicked her eyes to her eldest brother, Logan, for reassurance. Maybe she wasn’t as self assured as she wanted us to believe. Was she playing a game? I checked the positions of my men, and spied one of her other brothers, Mac, near the exit. Why wasn’t he up there with the rest of the McGowans?

‘Oh, I’m not so easily snatched,’ Maeve said. ‘A woman likes to be wooed.’

My father dropped her hand, which she quietly wiped against the side of her dress. Not that Father noticed with his eyes glued to her tits.

‘Enjoy the party, and we’ll see if we can usher in a new era for the Thompsons and McGowans. Cam and I have some business to attend to.’

‘We’d be delighted to make some friends.’ Maeve slipped her arms through Ewen and Logan’s and smiled.

‘Come find me later, Logan, and we can discuss you rectifying Esther’s mistakes.’

Logan’s shoulders tensed as he nodded before heading into the crowds.

‘We are going to have to act faster than intended, Cam. Go take the youngest McGowan lad.’

I raised my eyebrows, ‘Take Mac? Why?’

‘Do you see the way people are looking at them? Not just Maeve, but the lads too? They know that there is fresh blood at the helm of their ship. Young, fiery blood. They’ll be sizing up the McGowans and deciding whether they need to make new alliances. And we need to crush any chances of that.’

‘By taking Mac?’

‘By forcing their hand until we can keep them in check.’ Father’s fingers tightened around his glass as the barman shifted nervously behind us.

Mac lingered at the edge of the room, looking like someone pissed on his chips. You’d think we had invited him to a wake, not a party. I needed to get him outside if I was going to steal him away without being seen. Thankfully, he was a smoker, and smokers smoked even more when agitated.

I stole outside into the chilling evening as the warm day turned into a cool night. The back entrance led to a dingy back alley between the historic buildings of Glasgow’s centre, a towering sea of grey and brown. The front of the hotels and shops were littered with modern accoutrements, sparking lights and glossy signs, but the back was as dank as ever. Much like the organised crime world, really. On the front, our businesses were good, tax paying, legitimate and clean, but beneath the surface it was a sea of illegality, violence and bribery.

It wasn’t long before Mac lurched into the alleyway and leaned back heavily against the stone wall, taking a cigarette from his pack and taking a deep drag on it. From the three attempts to light the thing, and the way he dropped his pack when he tried to put it back in his pocket, he’d already had one too many champagnes. Should be an easy enough job.

Costa and Tommy, two of my more trusted guys, already waited where the alley met the road with an idling van ready for me to drag Mac’s sorry arse into. All that left was incapacitating him without drawing too much attention.

I bided my time, waiting for him to finish his smoke, watching as his shoulders relaxed and his eyes drooped slightly. Attacking when someone was on their highest guard was foolish. Waiting until they believed any danger had surely passed was the way to go.

Mac threw the end of his cig down onto the ground and flattened it with his brogue. As he turned to open the door, I made my move.

I tore up behind him and clamped an arm around his throat, landing three hard punches into his gut with my other fist. His feet kicked backwards at me, catching my shins with the wooden heel of his shoe as I grimaced. Fucking McGowans. I may have stood taller and broader than him, but shit, he was like a demon possessed. It was a shame I needed him alive, really. It’s

much easier to just take a guy out. So much cleaner.

His breath became more ragged as I increased the pressure around his neck, his fingers gripping desperately at the arm of my suit jacket as I squeezed the remaining breath from him.

Just as his body finally went limp, I let go of him, grabbed my gun, spun him and clocked him on the temple with it.

Lights out kiddo.

CHAPTER THREE

MAEVE

Harold Thompson stared at me from his spot at the bar, though Cameron had disappeared. He was a sullen piece of work, that one.

I'd thrown up twice in the car on the way to the party, but I had to admit walking in and feeling all those eyes on me felt good. Being younger than Esther had always left me feeling somewhat overlooked. But walking in filled with as much fake bravado as I could muster sent electricity through me. I could only imagine feeling like that every day.

Sure, I'd known what it felt like to be desired. I'd had my share of flings over the years, but never had I felt imbued with power. No wonder people got addicted to it.

It had taken every ounce of tolerance I'd had to let Harold lay his lips on me without slapping the shit-eating grin off of his face. The utter contempt his son, Cameron, had looked at me with gave me chills. He was like a man shaped ice sculpture, beautiful but utterly devoid of humanity.

We'd left the party after an hour of schmoozing, with Logan ensuring he didn't agree to any of Harold's requests, but didn't outright deny them, either.

The car ride home was quiet, all of us exhausted from the charade of being in control when we were anything but. Mac had disappeared long before we left and I looked at the text I'd received again.

Found some entertainment for the night - see you tomorrow. M.

Mac was always a bit unpredictable and hell, we knew he was furious. I'd half expected him to try to take out the Thompson clan at the party all on his own. But to just leave? Well, it wasn't like him to go without a bit of dramatic flair. Maybe he'd gone beyond furious. The weird little M signature was passive aggressive as hell, too. A night to cool off would probably be best.

'You did good, Maeve,' Logan said from the seat across from me. 'I didn't know you had it in you.'

'Full of surprises. Maybe you should let me be involved more.'

'No. This was a one off to keep him hoping until we can get to the skeletons hiding deep in his closet.' Logan glanced at his phone before shoving it in his pocket. 'I can't believe Mac just took off.'

'You know him. He just needs to cool off,' Ewen said.

'Still, we were supposed to be showing a united front.' Logan's mouth turned down at the corners. He was still trying to perfect his new control. Our brother Malcolm Jr was meant to take the reins, and although it wasn't unheard of for a second son to end up at the top, he certainly hadn't expected to be there.

'United when it suits you,' I said as I watched the changing cityscape whizz past as we headed to the suburbs toward our gated mansion.

'Leave off it, Maeve. Don't ruin it by sulking.'

I sighed as I pulled out my phone and scrolled through Instagram. My feed was awash with pictures from the evening. Mostly couple shots or groups of girlfriends smiling at the camera. I even saw one or two of me in the background. Maybe if Esther saw that I had raided her wardrobe, she'd be mad enough to come home. The dress had been new with tags on it and I'd coveted it since Esther had tried it on once at home. I hoped she was furious.

Then I spotted Cameron behind a group of smiling people in a photo on my feed. His face was in that tense, dour expression he always seemed to have had in the few times I'd seen him. He had never directed it my way, heck I didn't even know if he'd realised I was there. As much as it pained me, I had to admit that he wasn't bad to look at. He had the air of a young Sean Connery, unfortunately with none of the charm.

As the car turned into our long driveway and made it past the security and double locked entries, I slid further into my heated seat.

The evening had been for nothing. My brothers still didn't want me to be a cog in their machine.

The next morning, a host of commotion rampaging throughout the house woke me with a start. Raised voices clashed with slammed doors and the sounds of many footsteps filtering through the large open foyer below. Pulling on some clothes, I popped my head out of my bedroom door and looked out at the circus below.

Men swarmed in far greater numbers than were ever in our home. Most of the business undertaken here was for our closest circle of people, my immediate family, and our trusted men. They talked any other business out in the myriad of backrooms of our various business fronts.

Something big must have happened. With a dry mouth and a hollow feeling in my stomach, I headed down into the foray.

I found Jack, one of our security guys, leaning next to the main entry.

‘What’s going on? Did Dad die?’

‘No.’

‘Tell me what’s happened.’ His shrug in response set my nerves on edge.

‘Logan is heading toward the meeting room if you want to catch him.’ He was throwing me a bone. If he couldn’t tell me what was happening, I’d sure as hell force it out of Logan.

His longer legs carried him quicker than me, but I caught up with him without having to break into a full run as he reached the ornate door to the meeting room.

‘Logan, what’s going on?’

‘I’ll fill you in later... I need to head up this meeting.’ Tension marred his face. He already looked five years older than he had a few months ago.

‘Like hell you will. This must be something big, and I’ll be damned if I’m the last person to find out about it.’

He ran a hand through his hair while he let a guy pass him and go into the room beyond.

‘Please?’ I asked, touching his arm. ‘Don’t freeze me out.’

With a deep breath and a hard stare, I thought he was going to dismiss me once more, but his shoulders dropped as he gave in. ‘It’s Mac. The Thompsons have him.’

With that one sentence it was like someone had wrapped me in ice, unable to move, yet inside it was like every part of me burned with white furious rage. I could not lose another brother to those fuckers. I would not

lose Mac.

‘I’ll kill them,’ I whispered.

‘You won’t. But I might.’

‘Are you planning to go there? Is this what this is about? I thought he was trying to make peace?’ My words were a flurry, a quick tumble of thoughts.

‘Not exactly. He’s sent a messenger. He’s due to arrive soon.’

‘I’m coming in.’

‘No, you’re not. You know the rules.’

‘Logan, so help me god, if you try to stop me I will go over there right now.’

‘Don’t be a twat, you’d get yourself killed.’

‘All the more reason to let me in. He’s my brother too.’

Logan groaned, but relented, holding the door open and letting me pass through. ‘Fine, but stay at the back and keep your emotions out of it. Keep quiet and don’t make me regret it.’

I slipped into the room, with its wood-panelled walls and elaborate hung chandeliers. It had once served as a dining room to entertain guests who really needed impressing. The mansion was old, built long before even the industrial revolution turned Glasgow into a thriving city. I often wondered about the former owners. Maybe they were movie stars of the forties or from old money, with ancestors spilling back into the country’s ruling history. Or maybe they made their money from illicit means too. The atmosphere was thick with testosterone and barely contained anger, perhaps even excitement. A lot of the men gathered hadn’t been brought up like we had, in the lap of ill-gotten luxury. Many had seen prison time, had come from shitty parts of the city where education was poor and crime was an appealing career choice. But they were loyal. Fiercely so. My Dad had been as firm with them as he was with us, but the hierarchy worked well with so many of them. They wanted to belong.

There were no windows in the room, placed as it was in the centre of the home, but there were curtain lined alcoves along two of the walls to help the room echo less. I tucked myself into one and leaned back against the soft fabric. A few eyes glanced my way, the odd eyebrow lifting in a surprised salute. They all knew better than to challenge my brothers publicly, though.

Logan and Ewen took their places, Logan at the top of the table next to Dad’s vacant seat. It was a customary reminder that he was an acting boss, and that Dad was still alive.

He spoke with a cool, level tone, though his tight posture gave away his inner turmoil.

‘As many of you will have heard, Harold Thompson has taken Mac.’

A murmur broke out amongst the gathered men until Logan lifted a hand to silence them.

‘We believe this is in retaliation for Esther’s reneging on the wedding agreement, although we had been trying to work out an alternative deal to calm the situation.’

My palms became increasingly more clammy as he spoke. The thought of Mac being held by those monsters made me want to march over there and demand answers.

‘A representative of the Thompson family will be with us shortly to enlighten us about their demands.’

Ewen spoke up. ‘I’ve a mind to kill the fucker.’

A loud babble of agreement rang out throughout the space until Logan once more raise his hand.

‘We will hear their demands, and then we will let him go with our response. We don’t need anyone doing anything rash,’ he said, glancing at me, ‘while they have Mac.’

I pressed myself more firmly back against the wall and crossed my arms over my chest.

Before long, the door opened and Jack nodded at Logan before letting a man walk through the door and into the room. He must have been absolutely shitting his pants. Dozens of eyes turned his way, and the atmosphere took on an even thicker, more insidious vibe. To his credit, he squared his shoulders and stepped up to the long table where my brothers and their closest men sat.

‘Griff,’ Logan said, almost spitting the word at him.

‘Logan,’ Griff responded with one of those stiff nods that guys who don’t want to touch each other seem to do.

‘Every man in this room wants to have your balls off and ram them down your throat, so I’d get to the point. Fast.’ Ewen’s hand fisted on the table as he spoke.

Griff held up his hands. ‘Don’t shoot the messenger, guys. I don’t want to be here any more than you guys want me to be here.’

He visibly swallowed before proceeding. ‘After last night’s get together, Harold has decided he wishes to expedite his courtship with Maeve.’

Numerous faces turned my way as a wave of nausea threatened to

overwhelm me. It was supposed to be a decoy. To buy us time. I didn't want to marry a lecherous pig old enough to be my grandfather, who'd already cost me half of my family.

'She won't marry Harold. Not now, not ever. I am not my father and I won't allow it.' Logan pushed back his chair and stood, his hands resting on the polished table as he glared at Griff.

'Harold feared you may say as much, and he agrees that, though lovely, Maeve is a little young even for his tastes. So he has offered an alternative. If Maeve would prefer, she can marry his son Cameron. One way or another, he intends on having the McGowan bride, and the ties to your family, that your father promised him.' Griff's voice shook a little at the end as he watched my brothers' faces darken more with each word.

'No,' Logan and Ewen said in unison.

'He thought you may say that. So he had me bring you a gift.' Griff reached into the inner pocket of his jacket and took out a small Tupperware tub. He slid it toward Logan. Logan lifted the lid and paled. I inched closer until I saw the tip of a finger resting inside on a bed of quickly melting ice.

Ewen was on his feet with a gun pointed at Griff's head as I steadied myself on the edge of the table. It was the top of Mac's pinky finger and I fought back the surge of vomit which tried to make its way into my mouth.

Griff held his ground, despite the barrel of Ewen's gun being metres away.

'If you agree quickly, the finger will be reattached. If you do not, there are plenty more which can join it.'

I looked desperately at Logan. His jaw twitched as he looked from Ewen's gun to Griff and then down to the finger between them. On his word, Ewen would blow Griff's brains out, but Logan knew he was only the messenger. Time was clearly no longer on our side.

Marrying Cameron and being part of the Thompson family wasn't what I wanted. While they had a lot of power and connections, rumours had it they flouted the rules we kept between the organisations. They were double-crossing, downright awful human beings. Being shackled to either of them made me want to wretch, but undoubtedly Cameron was the lesser of two evils. Largely because of his utter disinterest in me. He'd want the match no more than I would. Not only that, but I could use my position in his home as leverage to take the whole Thompson syndicate to its knees. I'd finally get revenge for Mum and Malcolm's death. I'd still be under a patriarch, but one

who I had no problem not listening to.

Ewen's finger twitched against the trigger and I couldn't hold back anymore.

I stepped forward and put my hand over Ewen's gun, slowly lowering.

'I'll do it. I'll marry Cameron.'

'No.' Logan's eyes were wild.

'It's the only way.'

'We just need time...' he said, his voice softening as I turned to face him. 'I can't let them have you. They've taken enough.'

'You'll lose someone either way. At least this way we both live.'

Logan leaned in closer to me, dropping his voice low. 'You cannot trust them Maeve, you may not have to marry Harold, but he'll use you to get to us.'

'Not if I use them first. Mac would do it for me. I'd never live with myself if they killed him and I could have saved him. It's the only way,' I whispered back to him.

'You'll be in danger. Every moment of every day.'

'Until we get rid of them once and for all,' I whispered. Logan closed his eyes for a few seconds before opening them again and giving me a small nod.

'You have your deal. She'll marry Cameron. Now get this back on my brother,' Logan said while shoving the finger-box back at Griff. 'And get out of my house before I change my mind.'

Griff nodded while gathering up the box. 'Harold thought you may agree. I've to let you know the wedding is a week tomorrow.'

'You can't arrange a wedding in a week,' I stammered, expecting to have had more time with my brothers before having to leave.

'He's already got special dispensation from the registry office. You won't need to plan anything, just show up. An invitation will follow.' Griff gave me a tight smile as he tucked the box back into his jacket.

'I want Mac back before the wedding.'

'That will not happen. See him as a wedding gift, of sorts.' Griff nodded once more at the room before turning to excuse himself.

I slumped into Dad's empty chair as the surrounding men filtered out, following my brothers from the room.

When I was alone entirely, I gave way to the tears.

I had never had a serious boyfriend, and I knew I was likely to end up marrying for connections rather than love, but the thought of being with a

man I hated tore a hole through my chest.

There was no choice but to bring about the ruin of the Thompson family as quickly, and hopefully as painfully, as possible.

CHAPTER FOUR

CAMERON

Visions of the floor opening up and swallowing me whole engulfed my brain as people flitted to and from around me. All of them were asking inane things about colours, cake flavours, decor and other bullshit.

I tensed every muscle in my torso as a wave of rage built up in my chest. Slowly, I breathed it out, imagining the anger leaving me and being replaced by calm.

‘Relax please.’ The small man with the measuring tape tapped my stiff shoulders.

I did as told, knowing the man hadn’t chosen to be there any more than I had. I didn’t want a tux, and I was sure he hadn’t wanted to have to create and fit one in a manner of days. Though Father would pay a fine sum for him to do it. Refusal would have likely ended with him having a couple of broken bones. So I stayed my anger and packed it back down inside, as I did all too often.

‘You look like someone’s thrown up in your cereal,’ my sister, Katie, said. She propped herself on the edge of the Chesterfield sofa and picked up one of the champagne filled glasses that someone had left. As though my suit fitting was a celebration.

It was not.

My father hadn’t even let me into his plan before the agreement with the McGowans had been made. It was bad enough that he wanted to marry her, but expecting me to do it?

I gave my sister a level stare, but as usual, it had no effect on her. If there was one person in the world who didn’t fear me, it was Katie.

‘Come on Cam, it won’t be so bad. I’ve always wanted a sister.’ She

tipped the glass upwards and drained it before reaching for another with a grin.

‘She will never be your sister. I don’t know what Father is planning, but the whole thing is a sham. She’s not going to be a part of the family.’

‘She could be. Would it be so bad having someone else on our side?’ I dismissed the tailor with a flick of my head as Katie spoke.

‘Our side is not her side. She’s on a whole other planet.’

‘She hates Father too.’ Katie toyed with the stem of her champagne flute.

‘Shush,’ I said, glancing to the far side of the room where vendors of various sorts still pored over flowers and other unnecessary nonsense. ‘We respect him. We don’t hate him.’

‘I hate him. What’s he going to do? Break my arm again? I’m not six anymore.’

‘Being an adult won’t stop him. I’ve seen what he will do to grown men while he smiles like a hyena.’ I suppressed the internal shudder. I’d done enough unsavoury things since reaching my majority, but I didn’t delight in inflicting pain the way Father did. I only ever did what was necessary.

‘Either way, we should give her a chance. Imagine if Father had forced me to marry a McGowan?’

‘That would never happen. I’d take out every single one before I’d let that happen.’

Katie sighed before standing up. ‘I’m going to try to be her friend.’

‘No, you won’t.’

‘Father has arranged for me to take Maeve dress shopping tomorrow and you won’t be there to stop me. The groom isn’t allowed in.’ If she was anyone else, I’d want to wipe her cocky grin off of her face.

‘It’s not like it would bring anymore bad luck to the wedding, would it?’

‘I don’t suppose it would, but you know how Father likes tradition. Just try to remember she doesn’t want to be coming here either.’

‘I’m well aware. It changes nothing. She is, and will always be, the enemy.’

Katie shrugged as she left the room, abandoning me to the returning tailor and the swarming wedding vendors. It took a lot more deep breaths to get through the afternoon while maintaining my composure.

Unfortunately, it was Wednesday, and that meant the non-negotiable family

dinner. With Mother having fled, and Father having no current squeeze, that just left Katie, Father and I. Not a single one of us actually wanted to be there, yet there we were, making pleasant.

I'd long found myself a penthouse apartment that looked out of the glittering lights of Edinburgh, but my room in the stark white mansion remained. Our childhood home had always reminded me of a tv psychiatric hospital. Stark and white, with far too much leather padding. On my eighteenth birthday, two days after Mother had left, I flipped and painted my room dark grey in a rare outburst of anger. Father had never shouted at me, but the next day I came home to it painted freshly white. As much as I detested it, I still spent far too much time in the cold, blank mansion. On the surface, it was easier to be closer for business. In reality, I stayed close for Katie.

Alberto, our butler and general house manager, brought numerous platters to the table and set them down in front of a bored-looking Katie. Father didn't hesitate to pull slabs of pork onto his plate before piling the side with roast potatoes.

'Thank you, Alberto,' I said, waiting until Father had filled his plate before choosing my meal. Even the order we filled our plates was down to hierarchy. No women first in our home. I took a small portion of pork and loaded up my plate with honey mustard carrots, sauteed cavolo nero, and saffron spiked wild mushrooms. Father always piled on the meat, but our chef made the most delicious side dishes I'd ever had the pleasure of eating. Hopefully Father's meat obsession would land him in an early grave. The world would be a better place for it.

Katie picked at the food, never deigning to actually fill up on anything Father expected her to eat. Her own minor rebellion every family dinner. Chef would cook her up whatever she asked of him later. She'd had him under her thumb in the ten years he'd worked for us. He'd so often seen her bruises, and she reminded him of his own daughter. What small amount of healing his food might bring, he lavished on her.

'Looking forward to the wedding?' Father asked, as though he hadn't strong-armed me into it.

'No.'

'She's a good-looking lass. She reminds me an awful lot of her mother at her age. You could do worse.'

'Do worse than someone we've hated our whole lives? I doubt it.' I

stabbed at my mushrooms, impaling them being the only ounce of anger I'd allow to be seen.

'I'm not asking you to love her. Just tolerate her and keep her in her place until I figure out what to do with her. If they'd marry off their youngest sister to get Mac back, what would they do to ensure Maeve is safe?' Father topped his wine glass near to the brim and grinned. 'They'll have no option but to toe the line.'

'Why can't you just take her like you took Mac?' Katie slid a piece of potato around her plate idly as she spoke.

'There are rules. Taking the daughter of another syndicate would bring us more heat than I'd like. Taking Mac upset enough people. They get antsy to work with me if I push too far, and if they think I'll take their own daughters, it suddenly gets much messier to deal with them. A wedding is perfect. Publicly signing a McGowan into our family is irrefutable.'

'What do you expect me to do with her?' I asked.

'Whatever you like. Just keep her in one piece. Fuck her, ignore her, leave her here. I don't care as long as she's there when I need her to pin those McGowan boys in place.'

That familiar surge of anger flamed my insides. I'd seen how little regard he'd paid to my mother, and I didn't want a marriage at all, never mind like that. It took longer than usual to temper the internal inferno, swallowing it down and locking it back up where it couldn't bring me trouble. I may have grown too tall, and too fit, for Father to beat me, but he'd find plenty of other ways to punish me if I stepped out of line. I'd started working out until I ached every single day when I was a teen to protect myself and my sister. It had taken a few years to get to where father stayed his hand, and I still felt a gush of glory at remembering his face. The realisation had washed over him like a bucket of paint to the chops.

'I've had someone book you both in for a week-long honeymoon on the island,' Father said with a grin, as though he was doing me a favour. It took multiple breaths before I could form a response.

'That won't be necessary.' Sure, the island Father owned was the height of luxury. Fully staffed tropical paradise at its finest. It had been years since I'd been there. Going with a woman I had no interest in was the farthest thing from what I needed.

'See it as a wedding gift. The only people who will hear her screams won't give a damn about them.' I shuddered at his words. 'There are some

celebs in the main house, so it's just the beachfront cabin on the southern tip.'

'I don't think I should leave while everything is in turmoil here. The McGowans are furious and there is a big shipment due next we--' Father cut me off.

'I wasn't asking you.' His eyes narrowed and his voice grew tighter. I dropped it. Arguing wouldn't change his mind.

Not only would I have to marry Maeve, but I'd be stuck in the arse end of nowhere with her too.

CHAPTER FIVE

MAEVE

The sea of white and ivory threatened to drown me.

Enormous racks of tulle and silk and lace and taffeta surrounded me, towering overhead like great white ghouls. I wanted desperately to burn it all to the ground, so that I didn't have to go through with trying them on.

Wedding dress shopping was supposed to be exciting, but the bubbling in my stomach made me want to puke.

A sprightly woman practically bounced her way over to me, holding two glasses of champagne. She passed one to Katie, who took it with a strained smile. I stared at the pale, golden liquid, then shook my head. I didn't need it reappearing in a sea of bubbling vomit over a dress.

Logan had insisted that I had to attend this little shopping soiree with my soon to be sister-in-law, though he was no happier about it than I. My pleading to just have them pick something fell on deaf ears. The threat of another of Mac's fingers from Harold had ensured I had attended in the end.

Katie walked across to a rack and ran a hand across the varying materials. She kept stealing small glances my way between shaky sips of her champagne. Had they had forced her into attending as well?

'Right,' said the sales assistant, 'What would you like to try on? Is there a style you've fallen in love with? Something you've spotted and dreamed about wearing.'

'I don't care.' My voice was more hollow than I'd meant it to be, but I had no intention of playing the smitten bride.

The woman's brow furrowed as she looked at Katie, then back to me. 'There must be something you want to try? Perhaps some lace?'

'Honestly, I don't care. Just pick a dress and I'll wear it.'

‘Is there a budget you’d like to stick to?’

I shrugged, but Katie spoke up. ‘No budget, whatever Maeve wants.’

The woman gave me another perturbed look before nodding. ‘How about you two have a look around and I’ll go pick out a few of my favourites from the storage rooms?’

I slumped onto one of the sparkly, uncomfortable sofas and stared up at the ceiling.

‘I think you’d knock them out in something like this.’ Katie held up a dress much like the one I’d worn at the party, but in an ivory silk.

‘Why are you here?’

Katie stiffened with the dress draped over one arm, the other sifting through the rack.

‘I thought it might be nice to meet you properly before the wedding.’

‘Why do you care? Don’t you hate me?’

‘I don’t even know you.’

I laughed. ‘As if that matters when you are from our families. Hate is a game the whole family get’s to play together. Has to play together.’

‘My father has enough hate to go round.’ There was a deep sadness in her voice, which caught me off guard. Shit, maybe she really didn’t hate me.

I sat up in the chair and inspected Katie Thompson. She was shorter than me, and curvier. Her hair was a red so dark that I couldn’t decide whether it came from a bottle. She was fair and freckled, though, so chances are that the red was real at some level. Cameron wasn’t a redhead, and neither was Harold. Did she take after her mother? Katie held herself as though she were desperately trying to make herself as insignificant as possible. Her father was one of the richest men in Scotland, if rumours were to be believed, yet she didn’t have the confidence of someone who grew up with anything she pleased.

‘You know I don’t want to marry Cameron, right?’

‘I do.’

‘So why pretend like this is normal? Why play act?’

‘Because you still deserve to feel beautiful. And you need to go into the ceremony acting like you own every single man there, no matter how terrified or angry you are. My father will exploit any weakness he finds. You need to show him none.’ She picked up a princess style tulle dress, and I shook my head. ‘Plus, Cam isn’t so bad. Not underneath. Maybe you won’t hate him.’

‘I hate him. Does he share your feelings about me?’

Katie hesitated before shaking her head. ‘No, he doesn’t. He’s mad about being forced to marry you.’

‘Then he should refuse.’

‘No one refuses Father without consequences.’ Katie visible shuddered before steadying herself against the rack.

‘What are Cameron’s consequences?’

‘I don’t know, but they are bad enough for him to marry someone he despises.’ Katie shrugged. ‘Sorry.’

The sales woman arrived and ushered us toward a plush room surrounded by mirrors and a podium. There were a lot more seats available than we had filled.

She led me to a large dressing area where the woman had me out of my clothes and being strapped into a dress before I could argue. As the corset back tightened and constricted, I held back a sob. I wanted out. So very desperately. But Mac needed me.

I kept my gaze low until I was on the podium and the woman encouraged me to look. The dress was undoubtedly beautiful, but the staring at myself in the dress was too much. Too real. I looked like a fucking bride, and not even a fake one.

Blinking furiously, I tried to stem the bitter tears that pricked my eyes. The saleswoman grinned and clapped her hands.

‘Oh, I just knew you’d love it once you got it on!’ Her voice took on a pitch that would frighten rodents away. ‘It’s a mermaid fit with a--’

‘Get it off.’ It was cutting off my air as panic set in. ‘Fucking get it off.’

My nailed rasped at my back as the woman gawped at me like a paralysed fish. Hot flushes swept over me as I blinked through the tears.

Katie was on her feet and undoing the corset before the woman figured out I was serious.

I reached out to steady myself against the mirror as my vision blurred through my wet eyes. ‘Please. Please get it off. I can’t breathe.’

‘It’s okay. It’s loosening.’ I took a deeper breath as Katie yanked at the stays.

‘I’ll give you two a moment.’ The woman said, backing toward the door with wide eyes.

As soon as it was loose enough, I dropped the dress and hauled it off of my legs, letting it crumple into a heap on the podium. Left in nothing but my pants, I wrapped my arms around myself and crumpled into a heap on top of

the dress. The tears came like a downpour that I couldn't stop. I cursed myself as Katie slid off her coat and wrapped it around my shoulders. I couldn't do it. I was going to let Mac down and my brothers would blame me. Harold would torture him and kill him all because I just couldn't face it.

Katie slid down beside me and wrapped an arm around my shoulders, pulling me toward her. I tried to resist it, but I'd not been hugged properly since Esther left and her arms reminded me of my sisters.

I gave into the comfort and fed on it like a half starved vampire.

'Listen to me, Maeve. You can get through this. It's shit and it shouldn't be happening, but you are strong enough to weather this storm. I promise I'll help to make it bearable.'

'I'm not strong enough. He's going to kill Mac.'

'We won't let that happen. You are going to dry your tears, find a dress that will leave every jaw in that room on the floor and then say I do. Because we are stronger than they know and we will not let them win.' Katie pushed my wet hair away from my face and gave me a nod.

'It's only a marriage on paper. Your life won't be so different from how it is now. Just a different man to obey.'

'I don't intend on obeying your brother,' I said, wiping my eyes on the back of my hand.

A genuine smile lit up Katie's face. 'Good.'

Despite my utter intentions to hate her, I was finding it difficult.

A strong cup of coffee and two glasses of champagne later, my resolve had returned. Katie was right. I was going to wipe the floor with the Thompson men. It was a shame I was going to destroy her family in the process.

'What is your most expensive, most risqué dress?' I asked the saleswoman, who I'd since discovered was called Fiona.

She bit her lip. 'I know the perfect one. It's over twenty thousand pounds, though.'

I looked at Katie, who grinned.

'Perfect. Bring it out.'

If Harold intended to make me marry his son, the least I could do was hit his deep pockets.

CHAPTER SIX

MAEVE

The monitors beeped calmly, just a steady chirping which belied the turmoil that roiled inside my head.

I sat across from my dad, who looked like he was sleeping peacefully. Over the weeks, his face had mostly healed where they'd patched it back together, but his brain remained static, broken. He'd never really looked peaceful before his coma. It was awkward visiting him, but we did it out of obligation. It was expected. I just didn't really know what to do with myself once I was there. We weren't very close as I grew up. He was very much the figurehead who directed our lives, a strict headmaster, more than a dad.

Anger still scraped at the back of my mind every time I looked at him. If he hadn't promised Esther to Harold, none of us would be in the mess we were. He must have believed it to be the best course of action, because why would he make a deal with a man he detested so thoroughly?

I sighed and scooted my chair closer to the bed. The room was plush in the private hospital, and there were always at least two of Dad's men stationed outside. The hospital had security too. It was exactly the sort of place people with money and a need for protection used.

'Dad,' I said, lowering my voice in case Ewen came back from grabbing us coffee, 'I'm getting married today. This afternoon to Cameron Thompson. Please wake up and stop it. He has Mac and I'm just so scared. Marrying him brings Mac back, but then I'm stuck with them. What should I do?'

The only response was that same rhythmic chirping.

'I know I need to be strong, and I'm putting a brave face on for Logan and Ewen so they don't feel too guilty, but it's so hard.'

I slipped my hand beneath his, needing some sort of human contact for

comfort. The warmth of his fingers caught me off guard, not realising how much I needed the tender touch.

‘I’m going to tear them down though, Dad. For Mum, for Malcolm, for Esther, for Mac, and even for you. I’m going to drag their very worst skeletons from their closets and use them to burn the family to the ground.’

A twinge of guilt bit at me. Katie had seemed like a nice person. It could all have been a ploy to fuck with me, though, and I couldn’t afford to be soft. Take no prisoners.

‘I wish Esther was here.’

Dad’s skin wrinkled as I smoothed my thumb over the back of his hand.

‘Me too,’ Ewen said, opening the door with his shoulder as he balanced two paper takeaway cups of coffee. I swiftly removed my hand from Dad’s and sat up straight. ‘Come on, kid, we need to go get you ready for today.’

‘I’m never going to be ready for today.’

‘I know, but Logan says the make-up artist is losing her shit about timings, so we’d better get a move on.’ He passed a cup to me and nodded at our dad. ‘We’ll tell you about it later, Dad. You’ll not be sad to miss it, I’m sure.’

I took one last look at Dad before closing the door. As much as we’d been distant, I’d never imagined him not there to walk me down the aisle. The level of sting which attacked me surprised me as I swallowed down a sob.

Get it together, Maeve. Dad not being there is the least of your worries.

My reflection was utterly misleading.

I gazed at myself in the large mirror in my parent’s bedroom where I’d just been fastened into my dress. Credit where it was due. The seamstress had done an impeccable job of fitting it to me like a glove at such short notice. The designer had exquisitely positioned the embroidery that went from my neck to my feet to be both extremely revealing, but also keeping the important bits covered. It had the effect of making me want to peer around the embroidery to see what hid beneath. Taunting and teasing and utterly perfect. The dress was backless down to near the base of my spine and tightly fitted to my knees where it flared out dramatically. I looked like something from the runway, with the precise glossy waves of brown about my shoulders and the intricate makeup. It had taken the make-up artist a surprising amount of time to paint my face, but I had to admit the look was flawless. I might

have to put her on Harold's payroll to make me look fantastic every day.

A veil finished the look to bridal perfection. I'd tried to argue against it in the shop, but Katie had been right. The sheer length of material added a little more mystery to the back of the dress while still revealing enough to see how low of it dipped. It was never the dress I'd have chosen for my wedding. I preferred light florals and flouncier fabrics, and definitely wouldn't have braved the sheer spots at the front, but the effect had been exactly what I had been seeking. Powerful. Confident. Defiant. Devastating.

I would go in fighting if I had to do this. I'd go in as I'd go out. All guns blazing.

I'd spent the previous night packing up some clothing, chargers, books, and toiletries. Nothing sentimental would leave my home, as I fully intended to be back as soon as I could. I glanced at the two cases that sat near the door, the only things joining me on my mission in enemy territory.

A light tap on the door pulled me away from the mirror as the hair stylist popped her head in. 'Are you ready for your brothers to come in?'

'As ready as I'll ever be.'

Logan and Ewen walked into the room, and the door shut softly behind them.

'Fuck Maeve. You look incredible.' Ewen grinned before dabbing at the corner of his eye with the back of his hand.

'Christ, it's revealing.' Logan's eyes widened as he took in my dress. 'It's like drizzling yourself in gravy before offering yourself up to the wolf.'

'I was going for impact.'

'Well, no doubt it has that. Just be careful, Maeve. Don't antagonise them. Just do your best to hold tight until we can get you back.' He softened as he walked toward me and gave me a hug about the shoulders. 'You look cracking though, going to knock 'em dead.'

I swallowed hard in my brother's arms, relishing in them. God, I was going to miss them. I doubted Harold and Cameron would encourage regular visits with them.

'Thanks guys.'

'We have something for you.' Ewen took out a square navy box and handed it to me.

'A gift? I didn't think you guys had it in you to be that organis--' My words cut off as I opened the box. Its velvet interior held a ring and a bracelet that I recognised instantly. Tears sprung to my eyes as I gently touched my

mum's engagement ring and the diamond bracelet. There had only been three little discs on it the last time I'd seen it, but now a fourth, shiny metal disc joined the others at the clasp. The tiny initials read MM and joined with the three initials of the women in my family who had worn it on their wedding days, and to many events thereafter. My mother had worn it often, and I still remembered late nights at parties when I was curled in her lap and toying with the bracelet as her arm wrapped around me.

My voice caught as I tried to talk. 'Shouldn't... shouldn't it have gone to Esther?'

'She wanted you to have it. She wished she could have been here for you, wished she could have come back and taken you from it.' Logan took the box from my hands.

A sob fell from my mouth as Logan lifted the bracelet and fixed it around my wrist. My hands shook so badly that it took me a moment to get the engagement ring onto my finger.

They wrapped me in their arms and we stood there together until the make-up artist found us and went into a flap about the state of my face.

Katie sidled up next to me as I stood outside of the ceremony room in the foyer of a grand castle, reaching out and squeezing my hand. Logan directed a foul look at her, which she studiously ignored.

'You're a knockout, Maeve,' she said with a smile. 'Keep your head up and you'll be through it in no time.'

She let herself into the ceremony room, allowing me the briefest of glimpses beyond the doors. There wasn't a spare seat to be seen, people packed in like sardines.. Harold must have invited every god damned criminal family in Scotland.

Logan put his hand on the arm I'd linked through his as I trembled. He was so tense at my side that I could feel the angst radiating off of him.

'It's not too late to run, Maeve. I wouldn't blame you if you did.'

'Mac is in there. We can't let him down.' I steadied my shoulders and used my other hand to smooth down my hair before a lady passed me my bouquet. 'We can do this.'

'We can do this.' He repeated my words, and I wasn't sure they particularly comforted either of us.

The doors opened, and I saw my intended at the end of the aisle. Cameron

Thompson, the ice king himself. His suit was tailored to perfection, skimming his muscled torso just so. I hated him all the more. If he was as ugly as his rotten father, at least there would be some justice in the world.

Muttered voices and gasps followed as we entered the room. I focused on keeping my head high and my posture in check. I wouldn't let them see my despair. My resolve wobbled slightly as I saw Mac seated near the front, his face full of utter fury. He mouthed what I read as don't do it. It's okay, I mouthed back, spying the gun held firmly to his side as one of their men sat close to him.

Taking a deep breath, I approached the front of the room, where the celebrant dismissed Logan, leaving me alone with my soon to be husband.

His eyes met mine only as I took up the space next to him, with a brief glance at my dress. Without even a flinch of reaction or greeting, he turned back to the humanist.

Two could play at that game.

CHAPTER SEVEN

CAMERON

The doors to the room opened, and the buzz from the congregation amplified. I resisted the urge to turn and look at my forced bride, staring straight forward as soft music from the string quartet rose to a crescendo.

It wasn't until the air beside me moved, and the bottom of her dress skimmed my ankles, that I turned toward her.

Fuck.

I expected her to be coming to the altar as a bag of nerves and hate, but she came throwing punches. I only allowed myself the briefest of glances down her dress and back up to her face before I turned my focus forward.

She looked incredible. She had no right to. I expected her to be in some princess number or something simple to avoid attracting attention. I hadn't expected her to show up in a dress that made me want to rip it off of her.

There was zero chance of that. The thought of touching a McGowan with anything other than fists was incomprehensible. My dick didn't seem to get the memo, though.

'Get on with it,' I said to the humanist as he stared at Maeve's chest.

'Yes. Yes. of course.' He cleared his throat before launching into his spiel. I'd ensured it was as brief as possible, focusing primarily on the legal obligations. I had insisted on no frills. No hand fasting, no rings, no drinking from a quaich. We were hardly there to celebrate the joining of two people. It was for everyone except us.

'Face one another,' the man said and reluctantly, we complied.

It was surprising how little you needed to say to get married, really. Only one line each to bind ourselves together, as far as the government was concerned. I'd refused the oaths of love, and forsaking others and honour and

all that shit. I was largely a man of my word, and I had no intention of living by any of those oaths.

Maeve met my eyes with her chin high and a steely determination about her face.

‘Repeat after me, dear.’ The man instructed her to follow his words.

Maeve’s voice was clear and light as she repeated his phrasing word for word.

‘I, Maeve McGowan, solemnly and sincerely declare that I know of no legal impediment to accepting you Cameron Thompson as my lawful wedded husband.’ Only at the husband did her voice falter, belying her nerves.

‘Now you, Cameron.’ The man hurried along after my father glanced at his watch.

My neck was clammy beneath my collar as I watched Maeve. Hoping she’d chicken out and head running for the door. Anything that would get me out of the wedding without it being my fault. But she didn’t. She just kept staring at me like she was cut from stone.

I sighed and gave in. There was no getting out of it.

‘I, Cameron Thompson, solemnly and sincerely declare that I know of no legal impediment to accepting you Maeve McGowan as my lawful wedded wife.’ The word was sour on my tongue. I didn’t want a wife. Marriage was just another vulnerability I hadn’t intended on exposing myself to.

‘The couple have foregone rings, so that leaves me delighted to say that you are now husband and wife. You may kiss your bride.’

Pockets of applause broke out amongst the crowd while Maeve and I about mutually died up on the small stage. There was no way I was kissing her. I didn’t kiss.

Maeve glanced at her brothers and then at my father before inching closer and stepping to her toes so her mouth was level with mine. My heart may well have stopped as I debated whether to let her kiss me, to appease them, or to push her away from me with repulsion.

Maeve deflected at the last moment, looking to all the world like she was placing a chaste kiss on the edge of my lips. Instead, she whispered to me below her breath.

‘I am going to destroy everything you hold dear.’

She stepped back to a rapturous cheer from all but our own families.

I struggled to decide whether to be impressed or annoyed.

Either way, it was done.

Husband and wife.
Until my father tore us asunder, naturally.

The reception was over the top, even for Father. Maeve and I had completely avoided one another since arriving at the glittering black-tie event.

Until the coordinator guided us to the sweetheart table in view of all of our guests for dinner.

‘Cameron,’ Maeve said, taking her seat on the ridiculously ornate thrones that awaited us.

‘It’s just Cam. I don’t like being called Cameron.’

She gave me a level look before smirking. ‘Cameron it is.’

I sighed and sat back in my seat, reaching up to loosen off my tie.

We ate mostly in silence, doing an excellent job of acting like strangers who had to travel on a plane together. Occasionally I’d steal a look at my new wife and wonder how on earth Father had got me into this? There was no doubting that she was beautiful, but it wouldn’t make up for who she was or where she came from. McGowan had been a curse word ever since I could remember. Whether it was Father beating Mother for not being like Jane McGowan, Maeve’s mother, or him steaming at the gills when another of his deals went south because of their interference. Ewen and I had come to blows more than once at finishing school. Even sitting near her had my blood boiling. I just wanted to go. Anywhere but there.

‘What now?’ Maeve asked, while spearing her cheesecake repeatedly. It wouldn’t have surprised me if she was trying to imagine my flesh in its place.

‘What do you mean?’

‘Do I go home? Do I live with you? Do we just ignore one another until one of us dies?’

‘Is that a threat?’ I tensed my jaw.

‘I’m not going to promise that it’s not.’

‘During the week, we will stay with Father at the mansion in Glasgow. On weekends, I go home to my penthouse in Edinburgh. You can join me or stay with Katie and Father. I don’t care either way. He insists we live as a married couple, however.’

Maeve narrowed her eyes, her hand stilled against the tablecloth. ‘As a married couple, how?’

‘In his home, we will be expected to share a room. I’ve prepared a room

in my place for you to have to yourself. I don't intend to spend any more time with you than I have to.'

'Scared of me?'

'Disgusted. Repulsed. Annoyed. Not so scared.' I took another large gulp of whisky, feeling its warmth spread through me. Getting drunk was a poor plan, but I needed something to take the edge off. I was cornered and had no escape. She'd be at home. She'd be unavoidable.

She scoffed and ate a piece of the now desecrated cheesecake.

'First, we have to go on honeymoon.'

Maeve blinked at me. 'I'm not going on a honeymoon with you.'

'You can tell my father that. I tried.'

As one whisky turned to four or five, I found my eyes drawn to Maeve more than I'd like. Fuck, that dress was insane. It exposed her back almost to her ass and I couldn't help but wonder how soft the displayed skin would feel.

I pulled my eyes from her back, and onto the dance floor, which had filled before us. I'd chosen to forego the first dance too, yet a brief part of me imagined what it would be like to dance with Maeve, to feel her against me while I traced the outline of her back.

Quit it Cam.

The alcohol was clouding my judgement. I had no doubt about it.

The evening headed into night, and before we knew it, we were being escorted to the bridal suite. The suite was enormous and decadent, with a sunken-floored bath big enough for multiple people and a bed to rival it. From where I stood, I could see that the bathroom sparkled with dark marble, and the view over the city almost rivalled mine from my penthouse.

A bottle of champagne sat in an ice bucket beside two glasses and a plate heaped with chocolate-covered strawberries. They were the last thing anyone wanted after a night of drinking. I drank so rarely I didn't crave takeout often, but a pepperoni pizza wouldn't have gone amiss.

'At least the bed's big enough that we can avoid one another.' Maeve said, moving over to where her cases had been left by the staff and rummaging around inside.

'It's fine, I'll take the couch.' I threw my tux jacket and waistcoat over the back of a chair and sat down heavily. The room lurched, and I blinked through the fuzz.

After twenty minutes or so, Maeve poked her head out of the bathroom. 'I

really don't want to ask you to do this, but I cannot get the lower stays undone on my dress. Could you take a look for me?'

Fucking hell, did she think I was going to act like her actual husband?

'Please? I really don't want to sleep in it.'

She came over and stood in front of me, her ass at face height. I swallowed as I reached out to unfasten the ties. The knot was stuck fast. Or maybe it was because I was tipsy and thinking primarily with my quickly awakening dick with her perfect ass at mouth level.

'It's stuck. I'm going to have to cut it free.'

'You can't cut it! This is a twenty-five thousand pound dress.' She looked back at me over her shoulder and it sent a shiver through me. Looking up at her like that with my mouth on her would be a treat indeed.

'It's not like you are going to wear it again.' I slid a flick knife from my pocket and pressed the dull edge against her spine, angled down toward her ass.

Maeve let out a squeak as the cold metal touched her. I took my time inching the blade down under the white ribbons, which held the dress together internally until they gave way and spilt. The dress gaped apart, revealing the top of a black g-string.

Fuck.

When she went to move away, I couldn't help myself. The whisky had fuzzed out my hatred temporarily, and I just needed to feel her. For a moment. To get it out of my head so I could get on with ignoring her. I slid my fingers slowly up the expanse of her back as I felt her tremble beneath them. In a flash, she turned and snatched up my blade, holding it against my neck between shaking fingers.

'Do you think you have a right to touch me?'

Darkness settled back over me, snuffing out the drink addled heat which had claimed me for a few mad moments.

'No.'

'Good. Because I don't care who your daddy is. If you ever touch me again, I'll cut your fucking balls off.'

'Calm down, Maeve, you're not that irresistible. Just a few too many whiskies overriding my brain.' I swallowed as the blade bit into my neck. Not quite enough to cut, but enough to know it would only take one jerk to do so. I was going to have to put her in her place.

Before she could register what was happening, I yanked her arm away,

twisting us both so that I trapped her arm high on her back and pressed her against a nearby wall. I pressed myself into her and placed my lips by her ear, speaking into her silken hair. 'If you ever threaten me with a weapon again, I won't hesitate to take one of your fingers, too. Don't forget who I am, Maeve.'

Her back rose with each quickened breath as I became all too aware of how hard I was.

'How could I ever forget who you are? You're the asshole who ruined my life. The son of the cunt who killed my mother, one of the men who led to the death of my brother. You are the reason my father is breathing with machines. You're the piece of shit who stole my brother and forced me to marry you.' I couldn't exactly argue. I'd done some shitty things in my line of work, though the only one of those transgressions I'd been involved with was Mac's capture.

'Do you really think I wanted to marry McGowan scum? I had no more choice than you did.'

'Well, your dick seems to be saying otherwise.'

I pushed myself away from her after taking my knife from her fingers and stashing it back in my pocket. My head ached. I needed air.

'Fuck this,' I said and grabbed my coat, launching myself through the door and slamming it behind me. I leant back against it and rubbed a hand over my face. This wasn't me. My emotions didn't rule me. I needed to get it together until I could find a way out of it.

The sound of a broken sob came from the other side of the door as I moved to leave, to find some air and a place to crash. Katie was staying in the hotel and she'd have a couch spare.

I paused only briefly by the door. The sound of a woman crying was one I hated more than anything. The urge to protect and to comfort had been built into me from the sobbing and despair that frequented my childhood. But comforting her wasn't my place. You don't comfort someone who would happily see you dead.

Man, the honeymoon was going to be horrendous.

CHAPTER EIGHT

MAEVE

It still hadn't really sunk in that I was married.

To Cameron Thompson.

The last thing I'd been expecting the previous night was for him to make a pass at me. He hated me. Then again, men think with their dicks half of the time. Was it really so much of a surprise?

The sea below us was the clearest and bluest I'd ever seen. It glittered underneath the scorching sun as we approached their family island by helicopter. I'd been on many holidays with my family and friends, but never to an exclusive island in the Caribbean by private helicopter. The Thompsons really were rolling in it. Golden beaches appeared in the distance, with the greenery of the island approaching behind. An immense house perched on the highest part of the island, lording over the surrounding views. It wasn't our destination. We continued past it toward the far end of the island where the vegetation was more dense and began our descent toward a helipad in a clearing.

I stole a look at Cameron, who had spent the entire of the first aeroplane flight, and then this one, utterly ignoring me. He gazed icily out of the window. God, it was going to be a long week. I hadn't even had holiday wear available, but apparently I wouldn't need any. They would provide everything I wanted on Harold's dime.

It could have been a dream vacation if I'd been with just about any other human in the world. Instead, I was there with the man shaped glacier.

Two men came to help us with our sparse bags and a golf cart. I smiled at them, hoping for a touch of humanity, but they just nodded and indicated to the cart. No hope of any salvation there then.

It hadn't really occurred to me just how isolated we were going to be. The staff would only be a phone call away, but other than them, it was just us. The cart zigzagged through giant ferns and trees until we finally opened out onto the beach. The view stole my breath right from my mouth.

'Wow,' I whispered to myself as we headed toward the beach cabin. Which was anything but a cabin. The single level house was set back a little from the sea, its rounded roof lined with panelled teak. To the front, the walls were made entirely of glass, giving an unrestricted view of the ocean. A long, slim swimming pool stretched in toward the centre of the building as if inviting us to explore inside. Steps led up to the raised decking on either side of the pool, with a deluxe hot tub set into the decking on the right.

Fucking dreamy.

I'd have been sure I'd have died and gone to heaven if I wasn't with the devil's son.

Cameron walked up the stairs without even a glance around at our surroundings. How could he be so immune to it? Even if I'd been there a thousand times before, I was certain that the beach house would still wow me.

I followed him inside, running my fingers over the opulent finishings. Everything worked so well with the glass and teak exterior. There was a large open plan living area to the right of the property with sunken leather sofas surrounding an open fire with a sleek chimney extending upwards through the space. One wall was covered with twisting, moulded wood to look like roots and vines taking over. The kitchen sparkled in a way which made me a little afraid to actually use it lest I ruin the shine. Not that I intended on cooking. We had a chef at home and I wasn't so gifted in the cooking department. I certainly wouldn't be cooking for my husband. God, even thinking the word made me shudder.

Cameron disappeared through the middle of the building toward the left side, and I followed with my case. He placed his case neatly on the bed and took out his perfectly folded clothes, hanging them in a nearby hidden wardrobe, which magically opened when he waved a hand over a tiny glass square.

'Where's my room?' I asked, awkwardly hovering near the door.

'This is the only room.' He clipped his words in a way that let me know he wasn't keen on the situation, either.

'We can't be expected to share a room.' My grip tightened on the handle

of my case. I could not spend a week sleeping next to him. It had been a relief when he hadn't reappeared on the wedding night.

'Unless you want to take an outdoor hammock or a sofa, this is what we have.'

I looked from the bed to the in-room shower and bath, neither of which was in a separate room. The toilet must have been at least.

Shit.

Cameron unbuttoned his shirt, and I ducked out of the room at the first hint of chest hair.

Nope.

He hadn't looked the least bit perturbed by my presence as he undressed.

I sighed and rolled my case back to the sitting room, abandoning it to go back outdoors. The pool area had an outdoor rain shower with dispensers for shampoo, conditioner, a divine smelling body wash and sun cream. I dolloped some cream into my hands and spread it over my exposed shoulders, arms and legs. There were piles of soft towels in glass covered recesses by the showers and a small bar area loaded with drinks.

I helped myself to a glass of white wine before kicking off my shoes and walking out toward the sea. The water lapped deliciously between my toes as I stared off into the distance, watching as the sun dipped nearer the horizon.

How the hell was Harold funding all of this? There was plenty of money in the crime world, but drugs, bribery and fraud didn't pay to owning an island in the Caribbean levels in Scotland. Harold didn't come from money. His father started off much lower in crime and had reached little higher than the drug dealer level by the time Harold and my dad joined in during their teenage years. When they'd paired up, they'd done pretty well for themselves. They'd climbed to as close to the top as they could get before setting up their own syndicate. Harold had never been one for following rules, and soon enough their own morals had them tearing each other apart. They'd gone their own ways by the time us kids had come along. Harold must be involved in some dirty shit to be so wealthy.

I was going to find that awful shit and upend it all over him. People would turn against him if whatever it was was bad enough. Police bribes could only go so far. Syndicate loyalty had an upper limit.

As the sun gave way to the night, I walked back along the warm sand to the beach house, washing my feet off under the shower before sitting at the edge of the pool and dipping my toes in.

Cameron came out and ignored me, slipping into the pool as I tried to look anywhere except at his abs and thighs. Which was hard as he kept swimming past me. He cut through the water with ease, and he didn't even spare me a glance. It was like we were on two separate honeymoons.

I couldn't help but notice that he had raised strips of skin lacing his back. Old scars crisscrossed from his tailbone to his shoulder blades and by how thick and raised they were, something awful must have inflicted them. Repeated and awful. They were layered scar upon scar. I shuddered as he slipped through the water.

'What happened?' I asked as he stood at the far end of the lane pool and swept the water from his face.

'None of your business.'

His eyes slid briefly to my exposed thighs before he grunted and climbed out of the pool, grabbing a towel and heading back indoors.

Nothing seemed to get to him. He acted like he was an emotionless drone, but I'd seen beneath his facade. Only briefly. But there had been heat there. If it was the only way to get answers, I was going to have to use that internalised lust to get him talking. If there was one way to a man's secrets, it was via his dick. I had no intention of actually sleeping with him. Ever. But if I could trick him into believing I might, it might sufficiently loosen his tongue.

And where better to tease him to the point of desperation than on a paradise island secluded from the rest of the world? Proximity would have to be my ally.

If I could stomach it.

CHAPTER NINE

CAMERON

The gentle slosh of water woke me.

It took me a moment to remember where I was. Not in Glasgow, but in my own private hell.

We'd eaten separately the previous night, and she hadn't come to bed. I'd slept fitfully, worried that she'd slip into bed and slit my throat once I was asleep, not trusting her an ounce.

The splashing continued, and I turned my head to the floor to ceiling window that looked out over the deck and pool to the ocean beyond.

Maeve was in the pool doing lengths. Impressively fast lengths. It explained the toned thighs I'd spotted the night before, swimmers' thighs. The sort of thighs you wanted to get your teeth into.

Her dark hair was pulled up on top of her head as she moved swiftly through the water. I yawned and stretched out, closing my eyes and willing myself back to sleep. The more I slept, the more I could avoid Maeve.

Soon the splashing stopped and though I tried to fight the urge to look at what she was up to, the urge won out.

She pulled at the hair tie, releasing her hair in a cascade of darkness. Then she switched on the shower.

Fuck.

The string bikini she wore left little to my imagination, and my cock awoke as she stepped into the rain shower. Thank Christ she kept the bikini on.

Her hands swept up over her stomach and into her hair before she helped herself to some shampoo and lathered up her long tresses. My gaze followed a soapy rivulet as it traced its way down her throat, between her breasts and

downwards over those fucking thighs.

I wished it were my tongue.

I tore my eyes away from her and stared at the ceiling.

You do not want her.

You do not!

She's just a woman, like the others you've been with. It's just tits and ass. And you are better than that.

The fucking tent in my boxers said otherwise.

God damn Maeve McGowan.

Thompson. A little voice in my head reminded me. My wife.

Mine.

'Fuck off,' I muttered to myself before pushing my hard on down and willing it away. It would be like eating a poisoned cake. Delicious for a moment but deadly in the long run. She'd made her feelings perfectly clear on our wedding night when I'd slipped and touched her. I ran my fingers over the spot where she'd held a blade and took one last glance at her wet skin gleaming in the soft morning light.

I rolled over and stared at the door. Anything to deflate my fucking cock before breakfast.

Breakfast was delivered to the deck table at nine and I begrudgingly got up, showered and dressed before heading out to eat.

She threw a sunny smile at me that stopped me in my tracks. What the hell had gotten into her?

'Did you sleep well?' she asked as she scooped some fruit into her bowl and topped it off with thick yoghurt.

'Fine.'

'If I were you, I'd move here permanently. Away from all the fuckery at home and with views like this. I could get used to this.'

'Well, don't.'

'Aw, don't say you aren't going to take me here for our anniversaries?' She chuckled to herself before running her tongue across the edge of the yogurt covered spoon. It was like lightning hit my fucking crotch.

'I don't intend to have any anniversaries, and if I do you are more than welcome to come back. Alone.' I plated up some salt fish and eggs and tucked in, hoping I'd sufficiently cut her off.

‘So what are we doing today?’ She asked. A drip of yogurt landed on her chest just above the colourful edge of the short sundress she’d put on.

‘Nothing,’ I said, wishing I could grab her and lick the yogurt off.

She followed my eyes down and spotted the yogurt, slipping a finger up under it. I flicked my eyes to her mouth as she licked the yogurt off.

‘I’m going to have this inside.’ I picked up my plate and walked toward the door.

‘I didn’t think Thompson’s were the sort to run away.’ Her words were there to goad me. I knew it, yet I turned back toward her, anyway.

‘No, that’s a McGowan trait.’

‘If we were the types to run, do you think I’d be here?’ Her voice was strained, her fake joviality gone.

‘Maybe you should learn to run. It might have stopped your family from dropping like flies.’

‘But wait, your mother ran, didn’t she? Did it save her?’

My arms tensed as I took another breath. She was pushing a line that she’d better not cross.

‘Leave it Maeve.’

I continued on into the house, my body vibrating with both anger and desire. How could one woman be so bloody infuriating? She needed to learn to sit down, and keep her god damned mouth closed.

A day of evasion in one two-roomed building was exhausting. I fell back onto the soft bed with a groan.

One day down, six to go.

At least at home, I’d be busy working and have far more places to go to get away from Maeve. Everything she did grated at me, mostly because she drove me mad. Either goading me or turning me on. My nerves were shredded.

I took my phone out and scrolled the socials. Katie seemed fine, which sent a wave of relief down my spine. It hadn’t taken much to convince her to stay at her best friend’s house for a few days to avoid being alone with Father.

The door opened, and Maeve let herself in without knocking. I thought that we’d established that the bedroom was mine by her defaulting to the sitting room.

She didn't even flinch when I gave her a hard stare, just slid into the room and walked over to the bed, pulling back the covers.

'What are you doing?'

'Going to bed. You?' She tucked herself in and lay back.

'You were sleeping in the other room.'

'Well, Captain Obvious, it's not very comfortable. My ass sticks to the leather.'

The last thing I needed was her mentioning her ass while in my bed.

'You can't sleep in here.'

'Then you'd better move to the sofa or find us a place with two rooms. We're going to have to at your dad's house, anyway.' She rolled over and looked at me, her face freckled about her nose where the sun had caught it.

'Fine. Just stay over there and keep quiet.'

'Are you afraid I'm not going to be able to control myself? That I'll pounce on you the moment you fall asleep? No worries, Cameron. I think I'll manage to restrain myself.'

'More likely, you'll slit my throat while I sleep.'

'While I'm stuck on your dad's island in the middle of nowhere without my brother's nearby to help me? I'm not an idiot.'

'Good,' I said before staring up at the ceiling, hoping she'd leave if I ignored her.

It took her a long time to settle into sleep, undoubtedly affected by the same strain that I felt. Laying next to her was literally getting into bed with the enemy. I should have got up and left her to the bed, but my stubborn arse didn't want to relinquish the bed to her. It would be like letting her win. I wouldn't let her win.

As her breath steadied out into a deeper, more rhythmic sound, I finally looked at her.

Her hair spilled out around her in a dark cloud, silken strands tangling against the pillow. She'd kicked a leg out from the blankets and her short pyjamas gave me a full view from hip to toes. I swallowed hard and flicked my eyes to her face as I reached out, my fingers hovering just above her thigh.

Would she wake up if I stroked a finger down her leg? Would she scream and cuss at me and lash out? Would I have to pin her to the bed until she calmed down? Fuck. Her writhing beneath me would tip me over the edge. The thought of that leg pinned beneath mine made me groan.

Leave it, Cam.
No good can come of letting your mind go there.
Just a few more days and then you can ignore her.

I flipped over with a grunt and slid to the far side of the bed, closing my eyes and willing sleep to come and take me a step closer to home.

CHAPTER TEN

MAEVE

The first rays of sunrise broke outside, sending a glorious pink and orange light cascading over the bedroom walls.

Morning. At last.

I'd barely slept. Every time I drifted off, I'd awake with a start, my heart leaping into my mouth before I could get my bearings. Being in Cameron's bed was shredding my nerves. He was untrustworthy, dangerous and mean, and sleeping next to him wasn't a peaceful affair.

Not that he did anything. As far as I knew, he slept on through the entire night, his large scarred back to me.

He was still sleeping, and I rolled on my side to face him. He must have turned toward me in the past hour. With a shred of guilt, I surveyed his face as he slept. Without his narrowed eyes and pinched mouth, he looked so much less like a threat. He almost looked sweet. His hair was mussed in a way that made me imagine tiny hairstylist fairies must visit him in the night. Mussed to perfection. Fine lines crinkled at the corners of his eyes, only just visible close up. He must smile sometimes, then.

I sighed and let my eyes drift over his full black lashes and down to his soft, relaxed lips.

I wonder what they'd taste like?

Whoa. Where did that come from?

I rolled over and swung a leg out toward the floor before taking another glance at his face. Hell, he was kind of dreamy when he wasn't awake to ruin it. Letting utter madness consume me momentarily, I laid back beside him. I reached out and slid a finger across his lower lip. As gently as I could, to revel in the softness of it.

His hand grabbed my wrist and forced it over my head against the pillow as Cameron pressed himself over me in a flash.

‘Ouch. Get off!’ I squealed, trying to free my hand.

His bare chest pressed against me, hot and muscled. Fuck. Holy fuck. I tried to wriggle out from beneath him, but stilled when I met his eyes. It was the closest we’d been bar the last time he’d pinned me, and we hadn’t been face to face then. His pupils were wide and bottomless but ringed with absolute fire. Though the outer edge of his irises were the colour of molten chocolate, the inner rim was alight with amber and gold. They were eyes you could write fucking poetry about, and totally wasted on Cameron Thompson.

My breathing quickened as he lowered his face to within a breath of mine, his eyes flicking to my mouth, then back to my face.

‘Don’t fucking touch me.’

He pushed off of me and grabbed a t-shirt from the wardrobe before leaving without another word.

As I took stock of myself, I cursed. What had I been thinking? This wasn’t the game. He was supposed to be the one with a quickened heartbeat and desperate to touch me. I put it down to some weird sort of Stockholm Syndrome being stuck on the island with him.

Breakfast had been an awkward, silent affair, followed by more hours of him pretending I didn’t exist. The plan was not going at all well.

I tried slipping on a tiny red bikini and placing myself right in his eyeline, but he went for a swim and didn’t look once. The shower by the pool hadn’t grabbed his attention either, as I soaped myself up while he swam.

Perhaps I’d overestimated Cameron’s interest in me.

As a last ditch effort when I saw him putting on boots and packing a backpack, I asked to join him.

‘You want to come on a hike?’ He lifted an eyebrow and actually made eye contact.

‘Yes. I’m sure there is more to this island than the beach out front.’

‘No.’

‘Please?’

He didn’t even glance my way. I’d have to pull out the big guns and... apologise.

‘I’m sorry I touched you. Please don’t leave me here on my own.’

Cameron looked up to the ceiling while taking a long inhale and exhale.

‘Fine. But keep up and don’t go running your mouth.’

I barely had time to grab some boots from the stash of clothing Harold had filled the wardrobes with before he was out the door.

My feet sunk into the soft sand before I found my footing as we hit the vegetation. He took long strides that had me almost jogging behind him at first until eventually he slowed a little as we headed uphill.

‘Are there any dangerous animals here?’ I puffed behind him.

He turned and smirked.

‘Oh, fuck off. Like actual animals.’

I barely caught his snicker before he started off again.

‘Nothing too deadly. A few things that will give you a nasty bite. Most of the dangerous ones are in the water around here.’

‘Good. We seem a long way from the hospital.’

‘Not too far by helicopter. It takes around an hour.’

How was he so fit? I swam a lot and prided myself on being in pretty good shape, but the man was like a bloody robot. Not even a hint of breathlessness despite the fairly steep ascent. While I was behind him sweating buckets and huffing like the big, bad, bloody wolf.

‘How far?’ I breathed behind him as we rounded yet another dense plant packed corner.

‘Just around the bend.’

The view that met us took any last breath I had away from me.

The sea gradually went from a turquoise green at the shore to an intense inky blue as it neared the horizon. Other islands dotted the view, from tiny sand bars to other inhabited paradises.

‘Amazing.’ I sat heavily near the edge next to Cameron, ensuring I left a bit of distance between us.

‘It was always my escape when we came here as kids. No-one’s ever followed me up here.’ He gave me a pointed look, and I shrugged.

‘More fool them. What a spot.’

He reached into his bag and took out a water bottle and some cheese sandwiches. My stomach growled, and I blushed. I hadn’t had time to grab anything.

His throat bobbed as he took a long swig from the bottle before he saw me staring and held it out.

I hesitated. ‘I’m not sure we are at the sharing bottles stage.’

‘We’re married. Who cares?’

‘We’re not like married married, though. It’s not like we share germs in any other capacity.’

He wet his lips and shot me a dark look. ‘Are you hoping to be swapping germs with me?’

‘No.’

‘Your choice. It’s the only water I have, and it’s a long way back to the house.’ He had a point.

I still wiped the rim on my t-shirt like a school kid.

‘May as well help yourself to a sandwich, too. Don’t need you passing out before we get back.’

‘Thanks,’ I said before taking a drink of water. It was gloriously cool and very much needed.

We ate in silence as we looked out over the calm below. He handed me a bottle of sunscreen and we topped up after wiping the crumbs from our laps.

I stared over the edge of the summit and sighed. ‘Do you think there is a way we can get out of this without either of us ending up miserable or dead?’

Cameron met my eyes for a moment before shaking his head. ‘No.’

‘Maybe I should just throw myself over the edge now. Save us all some heartache.’

‘It would certainly solve my problems.’ He tossed some crusts to the side where some birds flitted.

‘My brothers would think you’d pushed me.’

‘Maybe I should.’ I tensed, but when I looked at him, he gave me a soft shrug. ‘I won’t, though. Father would be furious.’

‘It wouldn’t fix it. My brothers would come after you.’

Cameron scoffed. ‘I can handle your brothers.’

‘You can when they are playing to the rules. But if all bets are off, I wouldn’t be so sure.’ I handed back the tub of sunscreen and leaned back in the sun.

‘Why can’t you all just fall in line?’

‘I’m sure you’d love for me to be a good little syndicate wife, but you’ve picked the wrong woman.’

‘If your father had just conceded to my father’s victory, then none of this would have happened. But no, he was always so jealous of our success.’

‘He wasn’t jealous.’ The dirt clung to my fingers where the cream had made them sticky and I wiped them against my shorts. ‘He believed your dad

was going beyond the drugs and the fraud to things that would have him killed if anyone found out.'

'Being better at crime doesn't make him worse than your own father.'

'Do you truly believe he wouldn't go to any lows to gain things like this?' I asked, gesturing to the island view.

Cameron's jaw twitched before he pushed himself up from the ground and set back off down the path. I scrambled to my feet and followed him. Fuck, I'd pushed him too far. I clearly couldn't trust him to give up his father.

The descent was less taxing but far slippier than the ascent had been. Cameron stomped off ahead, and I hurried to keep up. The last thing I needed was to get lost amongst the ferns without a way back.

The toe of my foot caught on a root and I went tumbling down, cracking my knee and twisting my ankle. I screamed as I fell, turning over through the plants until I came to a halt.

'Shit,' I groaned as shooting pains sent fire up my leg. Cameron was nowhere to be seen. I pushed myself upwards but couldn't get to my feet, the pain bringing tears to my eyes. Panic bubbled up in my chest as I looked desperately around me. He could just leave me here and no-one would find me.

I rolled onto my stomach and dragged myself slowly back to the path.

To my relief, I heard Cameron shouting my name. Never had I been more glad to see him than when his stupid, handsome, angry face popped out from behind a fern.

He stiffened when he saw me. Frozen to his spot, and it was almost like I could hear his brain whirring. I'd handed him the perfect opportunity for a get out of jail free card.

'Please call for help.' My voice was a pathetic whimper that I hated. 'Please don't leave me here.'

'I'm not going to leave you.'

Before I knew what was happening, he walked over and reached down, scooping me up in his arms.

'I can wait until help gets here. You don't have to carry me.'

'Shut up.'

He lifted me like I barely weighed a thing and started down the path. I had to press a hand against his chest to stop myself from bouncing so much with every step. One hand gripped my thigh while the other held my side just south of my left breast. It was far too close and uncomfortable for my liking,

especially because being pressed up against his warm body wasn't nearly as offensive as I'd been imagining it to be.

I only hoped he couldn't hear how fast my heart was beating.

The way down was thankfully much quicker than the way up without my shorter legs slowing us down, but by the time we got back to the house, Cameron's neck muscles stood out tightly and his breaths were far more shallow than they had been. The sun had long set, and the stars twinkled overhead.

He set me down on the deck stairs before going inside without a word.

I tested my ankle and winced. Shit. I doubted I could even get myself to bed.

Cameron came back with a first aid kit and a washcloth. He loosened my boot, and I bit my lip as he slipped it off.

'Made a right mess of this, haven't you?' he muttered under his breath before slowly tipping my foot this way and that. He squeezed gently down along my calf to my ankle before looking up at me. He was even more attractive with a sheen of sweat and dirt and his hands on my legs. Cameron cleared his throat before letting go of my leg and dragging those molten eyes away from me.

'I don't think you've broken it, just a sprain.'

'Thank god.'

'Or me.'

My cheeks reddened. Apologising and thanking him all in one day. What was happening to me? 'Thank you.'

He cleaned the scrapes on my leg before eyeing me.

'You're filthy,' he said and my heart all but stopped. Then I looked down at my dirt stained skin and clothes and laughed.

'So are you.'

He lifted me up and moved over to the outdoor shower, standing me on my one good leg, sandwiched between the wall and his chest. Before I could protest, he switched the shower on, drenching us both, clothes and all. With one hand, he stripped off his t-shirt and launched it sideways onto the deck. He then reached for the hem of mine.

'What are you doing?' I said, trying to pull the edge from him but needing both hands to balance on my one good foot on the now wet floor.

‘You can’t wash with shorts and a t-shirt on.’

‘Well, I’m not undressing.’

‘You’ve been in a bikini for days. It’s no different than your bra and pants.’ He had a point.

I released my top and steadied my hands against him as he worked off my top and shorts.

‘Turn around,’ he said, and I turned to face the wall with his support, closing my eyes as the warm water soothed my aching muscles. I heard the squeak of the shampoo dispenser and before I could protest, his hands were in my hair. His fingers slipped along my scalp and against the tight muscles of my neck. The surrounding air filled with the sweet scent of the shampoo. His hands were steady and sure, working the lather in while working my stress from the day out.

Fuck. It felt good to be touched.

I let myself just enjoy it, promising myself it was only for a moment. He worked quickly and efficiently until a tiny moan escaped my mouth. We both froze.

‘Sorry.’ Embarrassment burned at my cheeks, and I squeezed my eyes closed.

‘You’ve had a long day. It’s fine.’

He rinsed me off in silence before wrapping me in a towel and taking me to the bedroom, depositing me on the bed with a pair of clean pyjamas. He returned with a plate teeming with food and placed it next to me.

‘If you need any help, give me a shout.’

‘Where are you going?’ I asked as he pulled a clean tee on and headed for the door.

‘I just need some air.’

I struggled into my pyjamas and tucked myself into the huge bed, eating and cursing that stupid bloody moan.

‘It’s just because you’ve not been touched for a while. A little kindness made you forget who he was for a moment,’ I told myself. ‘It doesn’t change who you both are.’

But he’d placed a kernel of doubt inside me.

I’d need to prise it out.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

CAMERON

What had I been thinking?

Sweat dripped down my back as my biceps screamed at me. I ignored them and pulled myself up on the wooden beam in the makeshift outdoor gym behind the beach house. I'd let my guard down and been nice to Maeve. Nice. My fucking dick must have fogged my brain again, and I needed to get it under control.

For two days since Maeve's accident, I had barely spoken to her, avoiding her as best I could once she got back on her feet. The house wasn't big enough for complete avoidance, so I'd spent my time running along the beach, swimming until my body ached and gruelling in the outdoor gym until I eventually crashed into the bed beside her, too exhausted to toss and turn all night.

She had been getting more annoyed as the hours went on, glaring at me every time I'd leave a room as she entered, or as I took off down the beach at a run while she was still too sore to chase me. Not that she would. She was too proud to chase. But tensions were simmering, and I only hoped we could get back to Scotland before one of us blew. The island was too small for the both of us.

I dropped to the floor and stretched out my arms; the muscles quivering in protest. Exercise had always been my best bet at battling demons. Whether it was from arguing with my father, drowning out my parents fighting, or trying to find a conduit to quieten the rage that would build in me. Katie had often described it as self harm, but it was the best option I had. My life was steeped in violence and so many of the men I knew resorted to the bottom of a bottle, drugs or lashing out to cope. The gym only hurt me at least, and in the long

run benefited me. Strength had gotten me out of many a potentially fatal situation when I didn't have a gun or someone took me by surprise. I never, ever intended on feeling weak again. I never intended on not being strong enough to stand up for my sister again. I'd never feel my father's belt buckle across my back again.

I grunted as I heaved the heavy sandbag up onto my shoulders and lunged back and forth from the tree line to the back of the house. A shadow moved at the kitchen window to the rear, and Maeve's pinched face met mine. I turned swiftly and headed in the other direction. Maybe she'd take the hint and leave me alone.

Her face was gone from behind the glass when I turned for my lunges back. I threw the sandbag down and leant against a tree to catch my breath, wiping my head and neck on a towel. I flicked on the rear outdoor shower - a lot less flash than the one out front, and nothing like the touch screen one in the bedroom - and figured I could probably fill another twenty minutes in there before dinner would be arriving. And then what? There were still two nights and one full day before we'd be picked back up. My muscles ached and my body craved rest. I didn't have another avoidance run in me.

I let the water wash over me, soothing my pains as I closed my eyes and pretended that nothing else existed. No father, no criminal organisation, no McGowans, no wife. What would I do with myself if I could be free of it all? The truth hurt. There was nothing else to do. I didn't have friends. I had acquaintances and business partners. The men who worked under me were there for their own reasons, and syndicate loyalty and fear didn't make a solid base for friendships. I didn't have any skills beyond using my fists, sway, or weapons. All I had was Katie and the world we inhabited, and how long until Father sold her off to someone who could offer him more money, or more connections? Then I'd be alone.

As I switched off the water, I heard a grunt and a crash coming from inside the house. I pulled on my trousers, belted them up, chucked on a shirt, and towelled off my hair as I made my way to the window. Nothing in the kitchen or through toward the sitting room. Another angry humph and a crash sounded to my left. She must be in the bedroom, but what the hell was she doing?

I let myself into the house and opened the bedroom door.

It was like a fucking tornado had blown through.

She'd torn my clothes from the wardrobe and thrown them around the

room, leaving them hanging from furniture and lights and strewn across the floor. Coat hangers, toiletries and towels mingled in with my clothing in clumps all over the floor. The chair was upended and Maeve was busy hitting my suitcase furiously with a painting she'd taken off the wall.

Fucking pain in the ass.

A red wave washed up through me as I watched her all pink cheeked and narrow eyed as she laid into my suitcase. I hated my stuff being touched, never mind being thrown about and disrespected.

I'd helped her.

And this was the thanks I got.

Clearly, she still intended to go through with her little promise of wrecking my life.

After some deep breaths, I walked into the room, kicking the discarded duvet out of the way as I headed toward her. I hadn't made my mind up what the hell I was going to do with her as I stormed over the piles of my stuff. Shout at her? Retaliate? Drown her in the fucking pool?

She glanced up through her messy, tangled hair and instead of looking remotely remorseful, she glared at me as if I were the problem. The fucking gall of the woman.

'I'm not invisible now, then?' she said, spitting the words at me as she dropped the wrecked painting. She stood up straight and raised her chin high, begging for an altercation. But I didn't intend on giving her what she wanted. I needed to temper down my anger, like I always did, and be the cool, rock solid man I pretended to be. Letting people get under your skin was a weakness. Letting them drive you to rash words and actions was a weakness.

I scooped her up over my shoulder as she screeched at me, her hands pushing against me as she writhed to escape my grip. Where could I put her to cool down? Outside? In the closet? My eyes fell to the large glass shower with its long silver door handles. The perfect cell for Maeve to calm the hell down.

I opened my belt buckle with my free hand and wrenched it from the belt loops. Maeve stiffened on my shoulders at the distinct sound it made and I wondered whether she had the same horrific childhood memories of someone ripping their belt off in anger as I did.

I forced open the doors and unceremoniously dumped Maeve into the circular glass shower stall, closing the doors and using my belt to fix them together.

‘Let me out!’ Maeve tried to pull the doors apart, but the belt held steady.

I made my way around the room, taking my time to hang each shirt back in the wardrobe, fold up each pair of underpants and neatly store all of my toiletries back in their respective places. My sunglasses were wrecked beyond repair, and so was the painting. But mostly she’d just made a mess. All the while, Maeve banged on the glass and let a stream of profanities out toward me. I took my time putting the room back together, taking steadying breaths while I worked, studiously ignoring Maeve entirely.

When she accidentally turned the shower on and got a face full of cold water, I had to suppress a laugh. Watching her desperately trying to figure out the menus on the touch screen pad out of the corner of my eye was a joy. Hearing her squeal as it cycled from hot to cold, to top-down rain spray, to direct body spray made it almost worthwhile.

‘Stop ignoring me! Let me out.’ She was becoming less frantic and sounded far less angry. The room was almost back to the way it was, and I only hoped she’d be reasonable when I let her out.

I was making the bed, ensuring the sheets were back to their crisp places, when I noticed she’d slumped into a corner and curled up into a ball. She was sobbing and muttering under her breath. Was it a ploy to get me to open the shower door?

I stopped and watched her for a minute, and soon realised she had descended entirely into herself in a way that I knew had gone beyond her rage.

I’d been there plenty of times in my youth.

Fuck, I hadn’t thought she’d crumble. I thought she’d just rage a bit, then cool down enough to stop throwing my stuff around.

She didn’t move when I removed the belt, nor when I opened the doors. She didn’t move when I turned off the water and scooped her into my arms. She didn’t protest or react, and it sent a shiver through me.

Shit.

‘I’m not invisible,’ she muttered as I sat on the edge of the bed and held her to my chest. Her clothing was soaked through and drenched both me and the bed while she took sharp sobs as breath. ‘I matter. I’m not invisible.’

‘Maeve.’ I pulled her wet hair from her face and looked down at her. ‘I’m sorry. I just wanted you to cool off a bit.’

‘I’m not insignificant.’ Her voice was worrying small against my chest. ‘You were just like him.’

It was like I'd short circuited something inside her. She shivered against me.

I didn't want to be her husband, but neither did I want to break her. She'd been feisty and daring and unafraid, and I didn't want to be the man in her life who ruined her like my father had ruined my mother.

'I was like who?'

She blinked up at me through wet eyelashes, though from the shower or tears I couldn't be sure. 'Like my dad.'

As far as I had known, Maeve's family had always been pretty happy. I'd seen her and her brothers running around at parties, pinching food and laughing together as children while Katie and I had to sit beside my father, straight-backed and tight-lipped. Jealousy had always nipped at me when we'd been forced to share a space with the McGowan's, because they were our enemies, but they looked so damn happy.

'Your dad hurt you?' I asked, still smoothing a hand across her back as I held her.

'No. He ignored me. He acted like being a girl made me invisible. Like a second-class citizen. He wasn't mean exactly, he just always made me so inferior. He made me hate being female. He made my sister leave after promising her to your father. He'd never have done that to my brothers. They mattered.'

Realisation settled over me as solidly as the wet woman currently residing in my lap. She may not have been physically hurt, but she'd been neglected.

'It wasn't so bad when Mum was around, as she included Esther and I as much as the boys. But after...' she trailed off with a hard swallow, her eyes flicking up to me.

'You were young when she died. It must have been hard.' Tension thrummed between us. The fact my father had had her killed didn't escape either of us.

'It was. It still is.'

The occasional shudder still quaked her shoulders, but her breathing had calmed to a more even rhythm, leading me to believe it was more likely to be the cold, wet clothes than the panic affecting her.

I slid Maeve off my lap and set her back on her feet. 'Go get into something dry while I change these sheets, and then I'll bring us both a hot cup of coffee

and something to eat.'

CHAPTER TWELVE

MAEVE

I was still a little shaky as I climbed into the bed, tucking the blanket around me. Once the panic had worn off the embarrassment had set in, lighting my cheeks aflame.

I wanted to hide.

But he'd gone past his hatred of me to scoop me up in his arms and held me until I felt better, and that confused me more than anything. I'd flipped out and trashed his room when his ignoring me had driven me past the end of my tether and rather than reacting with anger, he'd just acted like it wasn't even strange. Like it was something he was used to.

'Here,' he said, coming into the room with a mug of coffee and a plate piled high with cheese, crackers, cold meats and fruit. He passed the hot cup into my hands, where the familiar wave of comfort slipped through my fingers and up into the rest of me.

'Thank you.' I didn't want to look at him, keeping my eyes on the rim of the cup as I took a sip. Everything had been upended, and it left me feeling like I wanted to climb into the closet and hide until home time.

He took the spot next to me in bed with his own coffee and we sat in an awkward silence for a few minutes, sipping and looking anywhere but at one another's faces.

'I get it, Maeve. My father is a shithead, too. You don't need to be embarrassed. These past few weeks have been a lot.'

'Are those scars on your back from him?' I snuck a look at him, just a tiny one, and saw him grimace.

With a sigh, he leant back against the headboard. 'Yeah.'

'And you were forced into this marriage like I was.'

‘True,’ he said, swiping a hand through his hair and looking like he wanted to escape the conversation.

‘Yet you didn’t melt down like a jelly left on a windowsill.’

Cameron met my gaze, his eyebrows knitting momentarily. ‘Why do you think I was out punishing myself in the gym? It’s my version.’

‘Oh. I thought you were mad at me.’

‘I was mad at myself. For helping you, for not hating you hard enough to leave you on that trail, for sleeping next to you without wanting to hurt you. I don’t know what my father’s plan was sending me here, whether he was fucking with me or whether he hoped I’d man up and put you in your place. But it’s been hard.’ He toyed with the handle of his cup as he spoke. ‘I thought I’d just ignore you for a week here and then ignore you back home until you left me alone.’

‘It’s just all shit, isn’t it?’ I said, putting my coffee on the side table and twisting my fingers into the blanket.

‘Pure shite.’

‘I’m not sure I still completely hate you. Your father is the worst man I’ve met, and I’ve met a fair share of absolute whoppers through the family business. But I can’t like you either,’ I said.

‘You said you wanted to destroy me.’

‘Yeah. I still do. Not you so much, I suppose. And not Katie. I found myself warming to her a bit. But I want to blow up your father’s world and tie him to the top of the burning pile. I want him to suffer. I want him to hurt.’ My voice shook as rage spilled into my words.

Cameron smiled the first genuine smile I think I’d ever seen from him, and it was like being hit with a ray of pure golden sunshine. Fuck, he was hot when he was moody, but he gleamed with a smile. ‘Katie is the only reason I’m still here. I couldn’t leave her. As for my father, you’ll need to join a long queue. You’re not the first and you won’t be the last to want to take him out.’

‘Will you tell him?’

‘No.’

‘Would you help me?’

‘Take down my father? No.’

It had been a long shot. I only hoped he was telling the truth and wouldn’t tell Harold. I probably wouldn’t live long if he did.

Cameron put down his coffee and leant back against the headboard. He put his hands behind his head and watched as the sun set outside.

‘God, our lives are shit, aren’t they?’

‘Yeah,’ he agreed.

‘I can’t believe I’m on my honeymoon with a sworn enemy, and all I’ll have to remember it by is a sore ankle and some scratches.’

He let out a throaty laugh and flicked those amber lined eyes at me. ‘What did you want to remember it by?’

My cheeks heated at the memories of his fingers in my hair and tracing over my neck, not to mention on my thighs. I sent those thoughts packing as soon as I could. I didn’t want that. But the connection, could I brave asking for that? He’d held me twice and neither of us had burst into flames. My stomach tensed as he stared at me.

‘Do you think that, just for tonight, we could pretend like we aren’t kids of crime lords destined to hate each other for the next, however many months? Maybe just for tonight pretend that we are normal people, with normal families?’ He raised an eyebrow as I hesitated. ‘Do you think, just for one night, we could cuddle?’

‘You want to cuddle me?’

‘I want to cuddle a theoretical version of you. Like if we were in an alternative universe and had met in less crappy circumstances. I just miss kindness, you know?’

His shoulders had tensed as I spoke, and I waited for him to reject me.

‘I can do one night if you can, but no shanking me in my sleep.’

‘Deal.’

He moved the plate of food and lifted an arm for me to scoot under. Just one night. Forget who he is. I slid over and tucked myself against his side, my head resting on his chest. His skin was warm beneath my cheek and as firm as I’d expected. I tentatively placed a hand on his stomach, feeling the ridges of muscle below his t-shirt. Knowing the pain that went into creating his body made it all the more powerful. Muscles forged from the glass of a broken heart.

He fished a remote out of the drawer and pressed a button. A TV descended from the ceiling and he flicked on an old movie while we lay there. I think we were both glad of something to fill in the silence that gaped between us.

‘You’re telling me I could have been watching TV this whole week? Why didn’t you tell me?’ I lifted my head and gave him a little mock glare.

‘Shush.’ Cameron pressed my head back onto his chest, leaving his

fingers in my hair, idly letting them drift over my scalp and along my neck. Tingles shot up and down my back as he did. ‘Don’t ruin it with your chatting. We’re not us, remember?’

He smelled like sea salt and the summer breeze. It had been a while since I’d just snuggled up to a guy, probably not since my brief stint at university. It was more glorious than I remembered, and I closed my eyes to just feel the moment. The steady thrum of his heart danced against my ear, while his breaths made my head raise and lower ever so slightly. I let myself relax, one finger tracing the valley of an ab muscle unconsciously while the rest of me just sort of sunk into him.

My eyes soon felt heavy, and I began to lose the battle to stay awake. But I wanted to stay in that one blissful evening for as long as I could. His fingers drifted down to my hip, drawing little circles against my pyjama shorts. Soon they began to ebb, the circles slowing to a stop in time with his breathing settling into a slower, deeper pace.

His eyes closed, and the thick lashes sat against his cheeks. His face back in that sweet, relaxed place, I never see it when he’s awake.

I should roll over.

I should.

But I don’t.

The cold side of the bed doesn’t compare to the warm, comfy nook I’ve found under Cam’s arm. And just for one night, I intended on taking full advantage of his cease fire.

With thoughts of an alternative world where cuddling Cam Thompson was okay in my mind, I gave in to the land of nod.

Tomorrow’s Maeve could figure it all out.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

CAMERON

A soft moan grabbed me from my sleep.

The sun still hid below the horizon, so it must have been the middle of the night, but my head was groggy.

I closed my eyes to try to sink back into sleep, comforted by the warm arm thrown over my chest and the press of a leg against mine.

Another soft moan had me jolting my eyes open with the memory of who it was who pressed against me.

Fuck.

I hadn't meant to fall asleep with Maeve snuggled into me. It was bad enough I'd given into cuddling her for a truce, but I'd be giving her ideas if I wasn't careful.

I needed to extract myself without waking her, but she had me practically pinned beneath her. Was she a deep sleeper?

I slid a hand under her arm and lifted slowly, sneaking a look at her face as I did.

'Cam,' she moaned, all breathy and needy. My heart just about stopped. She never called me Cam, always Cameron, and she definitely didn't use a voice like that when she said my name.

Maeve pulled her hand back and smoothed her fingers up over my chest, whimpering as she did.

Was she dreaming? About me?

Her dark hair lay tousled over her forehead, and her shorts rode high over her delicious thighs, particularly the one which pinned mine to the bed.

Damn, she smelled good too, like spiced soaps and suntan lotion and summer air.

My dick responded to her moans, and I tried to counteract it with thoughts of everything unsexy. The fact she was a McGowan, what it was like to see someone's brains blown out, the fact I'd need to face my father... none of it worked. When she ground her hips against me, my crotch doubled down in its excitement.

Why did she have to be hot?

It would have been much easier to be married to someone I hated if she had the decency to be unattractive.

What was going on in her dream? God, I'd have loved to see that on TV. Was I touching her? Tasting her? Fucking her? My dick twitched against her thigh.

She rolled onto her back, her fingers against her upper thigh as she writhed against the bed. Goosebumps ripped over my arms, and I couldn't help but reach out and drag a finger across the sheen on her collarbone. Her breath caught, and she tilted her face toward me. I froze, but she slept on.

'Cam... don't stop.' Her sleeping murmur was barely a whisper, and I grinned at her words.

I ran my finger down over her sternum and followed her stomach down toward her hip. Her muscles flinched as I passed them, a little gasp escaping from her lips.

One of her legs stretched down the bed as she slipped her fingers between her thighs, her breath quickening. A pang of jealousy at whatever dream me was up to shot into me as I watched Maeve half heartedly touch herself, not awake enough to do it properly.

She wasn't pinning me to the bed. I should have left. I should have walked out of the room and left that door between us firmly shut. But that made it even more appealing to stay and watch her.

The half whimpers and moans made me want to tear the real ones from her. I wanted my name on her lips in the real world. Deep down, it was madness and would only lead to more trouble, but would fucking the enemy be any worse than being married to her?

I placed my fingers over her own as she moved them against her already sodden pyjama shorts. I followed their movement as she woke.

Her eyes were slitted with lust and sleep when they first found my face, before widening as she felt my hand over her own. A red flush stole over her cheeks, more evident with the just lightening sky spilling in over her.

'What are you doing?' She pulled her hand from her crotch, leaving mine

resting where hers had been.

‘You were having a dirty little dream about me. I was enjoying the view.’

‘I was not.’

I pressed against her wet shorts, and she gasped before covering her mouth.

‘We are going to play the pretend game from last night and pretend we aren’t who we are. And you are going to tell me about your dream.’

‘And if I refuse?’

‘Then I’ll stop touching your wet little cunt before you get a chance to come.’ Maeve swallowed hard as I took advantage of her hesitation to tell me to stop and slid my fingers beneath the pyjama shorts, drawing them up against her. She fisted her hands in the duvet below us and met my eyes.

‘I don’t think this game is a good idea.’

‘Me either. We can pretend it never happened tomorrow.’ My dick was fighting against my joggers as I rolled myself against her, manoeuvring my fingers to her clit and rolling it in a lazy circle. The way she bit her lip was like fucking crack to me.

‘All I have to do is let you touch me?’ Her thighs slackened against the bed as her hips lifted slightly against my hand.

‘And tell me about the dream.’

She was quiet for a minute as I continued to toy with her, the battle between lust and danger playing out across her face. ‘You understand I’m not going to fuck you?’

Not yet, I thought. The fact she was off limits to me emotionally only made the thought of driving her insane with pleasure even more tempting. It may not be reciprocated, but the thought of my enemy writhing desperately at my touch was a heady mind fuck.

‘I never said I wanted to fuck you.’ I said, slipping my fingers lower to the entrance of her, but refraining from delving them inside.

‘You told me you were hungry, and that you needed to taste me,’ she said, her throat bobbing as she swallowed.

‘Hmm.’ I tried to just let her talk, to see where she was going to go with it.

‘You started to lick me, and kiss me, and bite me all over.’ Maeve squirmed at the admission, and I rewarded her with a firmer craze of my thumb over her clit.

‘Where?’

‘You...’ she paused as I slid one finger down into her, her warmth greedily accepting it. ‘Fuck.’

‘Keep going.’ I prompted her as I stilled my finger.

‘My neck. You started at my neck.’

‘Like this?’ My mouth pressed against her pulse and I grinned as she tipped her head upward with a delightful groan. I kissed her hot skin before nipping it lightly between my teeth.

‘Yes. Just like that.’ She ground a bit more desperately against my fingers as I continued to taste her throat. ‘Then you moved downward.’

‘Say it Maeve.’

‘To my chest. My nipples.’ The embarrassed strain in her voice just made me harder.

I followed her description, licking and nipping my way down to her chest. She gave a most pitiful whimper when I took my hand out of her shorts to pull her top down and set her tits free.

‘Greedy girl.’

She spread her thighs all the more to welcome my fingers back to toying with her. Her tits were everything I’d imagined them to be beneath the skimpy bikinis she’d been sporting all week. Full enough to slip a little apart while on her back, but not too big as to not mostly hold their shape. The paler flesh, which hadn’t tanned, was topped with two brown nipples. I groaned as they hardened beneath my breath. As I set my mouth over one peak, she moved her hand into my hair.

‘Oh my god,’ she groaned, as I slipped a second finger inside her while exploring her tits idly with my mouth. A bite against her nipple rewarded me with a loud gasp and her arching herself off of the bed.

Shit, she was hot when worked up.

‘What else did dream Cam do?’

‘He took off my shorts and got between my thighs...’ I continued my trail down her stomach, swirling my tongue about her belly button.

‘...and then you...’

I waited, focusing my fingers back on her clit as she moaned between breaths.

‘Spit it out if you want it, Maeve.’ I wanted to taste her, and it was taking every fibre of my being to restrain myself.

‘You tasted me. Not tenderly. It was rough and decadent. Like you couldn’t get enough.’

I slipped her shorts over her hips and down over her legs before tossing them on the floor.

Kneeling between her thighs gave me a fucking epic view of her, from her spread eagled thighs on those killer legs, to her slender stomach and tits pressed high where I'd pulled her top down, right up to her messed up hair and pink cheeks.

Taking a taste would complicate everything. My brain was screaming at me from behind the thick fog of lust. The following day we'd have to go back to the real world, back to my dad and her brothers and the syndicate. Back to family loyalty over everything and everyone. Back to extortion and plotting and dealing out pain.

Maeve whimpered as she looked down at me, my face inches from her glistening pussy.

'Please?' she pleaded. And any last morsel of restraint crumbled.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

MAEVE

My heart thundered in my chest as Cameron paused with his face between my thighs, looking up at me with those deep brown eyes.

‘Say it again,’ he said, dragging his tongue over his lips as he watched me. The heat already suffusing my cheeks intensified as I squirmed. I’d never been made to ask for pleasure before. Guys had always been so desperate to get to the main action that toying with me wasn’t high on their list. I had absolutely no intention of it going any further with Cameron, but I had woken up so fucking horny that rejecting my hot, if despicable, husband was proving impossible.

I always thought I was above begging, but it had been so long since I’d had someone go down on me. Begging for it only made me even more hungry for him.

‘Please, Cameron?’

He glanced down between my thighs once more and smirked before reaching out and dragging one finger down over the slippery flesh.

‘So wet, Maeve. Who knew you’d be so desperate for my tongue?’

I wanted to hide my face under the duvet, to hide from the guilt that sat just beneath the surface. Maybe I should stop? It was such a bad idea. I should...

Cameron leant forward and used the flat of his tongue to lick a wide arc over the entirety of my vulva, and I quaked. From top to toe I full on quivered with need, leaving me breathless.

‘You wanted it rough and dirty, didn’t you, Maeve? Not nice and gentle and teasing. No, you want it from your enemy, not a lover.’

‘Yes,’ I groaned as I bucked my hips toward his mouth, his breath

stealing over my wetness as he spoke.

‘It makes it easier if I hate fuck you with my tongue. You can forgive yourself for enjoying it.’

‘Please... Cameron... Don’t make me wait any longer.’

I thought I was ready for him, for the feel of his mouth on me. But no past experience had prepared me for Cameron Thompson.

He ate me like he was a man starved, his tongue not just focusing on my clit but delving into me and slipping over and between my lips.

‘Holy fuck,’ I muttered, my head tipped to the side and buried into a pillow.

I really, really wanted to hold out and enjoy the feel of his tongue on me, his fingers digging into my hips with the tiniest bite of pain only heightening the pleasure. There was no way I was going to withhold his onslaught.

My thighs tremored against his cheeks as an intense wave of pleasure threatened to tip me over the edge. And then he stopped.

I sat up a little as a bubble of fury erupted from me. ‘Don’t stop!’

Cameron chuckles when he looked up at my face. ‘You didn’t ask if you could come.’

‘Fucking hell.’ I pushed myself up to a full sit, ready to take my angry ass out to the shower to cool off. Before I could go, he set his mouth back over my clit and looked up at me with a gleam in his eyes as he resumed my torment. I stayed sitting while he worked me back up to a steaming mess.

He added two fingers, slipping them inside me and curling them forward, adding another level of delicious torture.

‘Oh god...’ I moaned, pushing a hand into his hair as he pulled us to the edge of the bed, dropping to his knees to get better access to me.

My dam was near bursting again, but I had no intention of asking for an orgasm. I threw my legs over his shoulders, writhing my hips as he slipped a third finger inside me. I teetered on the edge of orgasm and grinned as he tried to pull back. I laughed as I gripped my legs behind his neck and rode his face, taking myself over the precipice and into a full body orgasm. The previous denial only making it even more intense.

Cameron moaned against me as I held him tight between my thighs, my fingers coiled in his hair as I eked out the final tremors of my orgasm. As I relaxed my hold on him and flopped back onto the bed, he watched me.

‘Are you angry I didn’t ask?’

‘No,’ he said, wiping his face on the back of his hand. ‘I’m impressed. I

didn't take you for the type who would take what she wanted. It was hot.'

The sudden realisation of the situation we were in brought another suffusion of shame roiling through me. It was one thing to lay splayed out and panting before a guy while you're horny, but once the moment had passed, it left only the repercussions to bite at me.

Cameron stood, his own excitement still very visible beneath the soft material of his trousers.

'We can't do that again,' I said, pulling the blankets over me and righting my top to cover me up.

'We shouldn't,' he said, 'But we can.'

'We won't.'

Cameron slid a hand back into his hair and shrugged. 'If you say so.'

'We go back to reality tomorrow. Back to your dad and my brothers and our families trying to destroy one another.'

I saw the moment reality hit him. A coolness swept over his face, bringing it back to his former distant self. A small pang of dismay rang in my chest. I stuffed the feeling down and pulled my protective walls up around me. Holidays can do weird things to people, no matter how wrong they are for one other.

'I'm going for a run,' Cameron said, turning away from me and heading for the door, his fingers gripping the handle hard as he wrenched it open.

I wanted to say sorry. To smooth over the past day. But nothing would fix it. So I let him go before sinking back into the bed and cursing.

As much as I wanted to not be married to a Thompson, and to not be trapped in a life I hadn't chosen, I had to admit that Cameron had driven me to a high I hadn't known before. And while it was only a quick dalliance, it had left me wanting more.

More that I couldn't have if I was going to destroy his father.

We largely went back to avoiding each other for the rest of the last day. He ran while I ate; I showered while he worked out; he ate while I slept. A new tension had taken place of the old one, a more intense and more devastating one. It was for the best, though. It would be easier to fuck him over if he went back to hating me. Maybe I'd proven his beliefs about me right. I'd taken my pleasure and left him hanging, and even worse, I did it knowing it couldn't go on once we got back.

As the sun set on our final evening in paradise, I sat alone on the couch, staring out over the glorious cacophony of colours. I should have kept away. Trying to seduce him into helping me had only made everything worse. And within a day, I'd have to face Harold. To live in the pig's house with him. The thought sent a shudder through me.

I needed to find a way out, and fast.

Hopefully, my brothers would have had more success with their own plans than I had had. Maybe they were right, maybe I couldn't save myself. Maybe I was just born to sit back and let the men deal with everything.

A tear rolled down my cheek as the sun dipped below the horizon. Both the day and myself about to enter the darkness.

I just hoped it wouldn't swallow me whole.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

MAEVE

The Thompson mansion lay a few miles out of the city, surrounded by rolling hills and green, leafy trees. It looked picture perfect, from the manicured lawns that straddled the long, winding driveway to the polished granite that sparkled in the morning sun. Claws ravaged at my stomach as the chauffeur-driven car approached the oversized building and I swallowed hard. It was one thing to be married to Cameron and a few thousand miles from reality, but being so close to Harold made my intestines feel like they were made from jelly.

Benny, the driver, pulled the luxury car up to the main entrance, but Cameron threw open his door and stormed out toward the house before it had even fully come to a stop. Without so much as a word to me. Shit. I was going to have to face it on my own. The door next to me clicked open and extended outward before Benny proffered a hand. But those internal claws had pinned me to my seat, reality washing over me with waves of dread.

‘Are you alright, Ma’am?’ Benny asked, his face appearing in the gap between safety and Harold Thompson.

‘Not really. I don’t think I can do this.’ My breath seemed to escape me, like it was just out of reach as I gasped, trying to remember how to breathe normally.

‘Hey.’ Benny crouched down with a glance toward the house before resting a hand on my arm. ‘You can do this. Cameron won’t let Harold hurt you.’

‘Cameron doesn’t give a flying fuck about me. Why would he care?’

‘I know he comes across as an ice-brick, but he’s not his father. He’s a good kid. I’ve known him since he was a tyke, and I’ve seen him defend

those who need defending. You'll be okay with him around.' Benny's face was open and honest. He spoke softly in a way that settled over me like a calming balm.

'I'm not someone he cares about. I'm the enemy who his dad forced him to marry. It's not the same.' The damn claws tried to reach up and drag me further down.

'Come on, I can escort you over if you wish? They'll be waiting.' He stood and straightened out his perfectly pressed black trousers before offering the hand once more. The last thing I wanted was to enter the devil's house, but what choice did I have? I took his hand and let him help me out of the car, giving him a tight smile as he squeezed my hand a little tighter than would have been customary.

'Thank you. I'll walk in myself, though. I can do this.' I had to do this. Showing weakness would only please Harold and Cameron. Vulnerability was not an option.

Benny smiled before making his way around to the trunk to start on the luggage. 'I don't doubt it for a moment, Ms Thompson.'

The name made me shudder. I needed to go in there and find a way out. As soon as possible. Legally I may have been Mrs Thompson, but inside I was still one hundred percent McGowan. And I'd show them all.

The inner hall was like something from a hotel. A really, really grand hotel. The double staircase rose from the ornate marble floor and my eyes followed it up to another story, and up again to the triple height ceiling, topped off with a huge oval window that showed the bright skies above. I was no stranger to mansions, hell we'd lived in one since I was young, but nothing as grand as Harold's. Every inch of the space sparkled, from the patterned marble flooring to the sleek, dark wood of the stairs, to the paintings and artwork which intersected the space. It would be like living in a museum. Not like the McGowan home where I'd spent years hiding in nooks and crannies, sliding down the staircases on pillows and causing havoc with my brothers and sister. Our childhood had filled the home with laughter and love, chaos and life. The Thompson mansion was resplendent, but with a sense of sterility. Of harsh, imposing, untouched beauty. Unloved and devoid of life, or of the good things in life.

Cameron came into the space from the left and met my eyes. His face was

still stony, so much like the beautiful, cold surroundings. The silence stretched between us until it was pierced with a high-pitched squeal that had us both jolting and glancing to the top of the staircase.

‘Oh, my god! You’re back!’ Katie took the stairs at speed before launching herself into her brother’s arms with a grin on her face. The room around her burst to life as she entered, and even Cameron couldn’t help but smile as he hugged her briefly before holding her back with two hands.

‘Are you okay? Were things okay when I was gone?’ Cameron asked her as I stood awkwardly watching them, feeling every bit out of place. Katie’s face beamed when she looked at her brother with a childlike idolisation I’d rarely seen on anyone past the age of ten. She lived with Harold. How on earth could she be that peppy?

‘It’s been okay. I went to Macey’s for a few days and Father’s been busy with work.’

Cameron’s shoulders relaxed a little, and a touch of the hardness left his face. ‘Good.’

‘Did you have a good time?’ Katie said, turning and directing the question at me.

‘Umm. I mean, it’s a nice place,’ I stuttered back, not ready to have the attention turned my way.

‘There were some bits she found pleasurable,’ Cameron said, bringing images of his mouth on me, burrowing into my head. Heat crept up my cheeks as I gaped at him. ‘Me? Not so much.’

The prick.

The heat left my face soon enough when another voice wafted down from the upper floor. I looked up and sure enough, Harold stood leaning against the balustrade, looking like the fat cat that he was.

‘Well, isn’t this the sweetest fucking reunion?’

Cameron’s jaw clenched as he looked up at his dad, and Katie subconsciously moved herself just a little behind her brother. Any warmth fled the room as Harold looked down at me, like a roman emperor ready to give me the thumbs down.

‘Father.’ Cameron’s voice was tight and hard.

‘I’d have thought a week with your bitch below you would have mellowed you out a bit more, still got a face like a slapped arse.’

Shame washed over me as my jaw dropped, having no idea what to say. Cameron’s fists tensed at his side as he glanced between me and his father.

‘It’s not that kind of marriage,’ he eventually said.

Harold laughed, the sharp bark ringing out through the cavernous hall. ‘Don’t be a pussy Cameron, she’s your wife. She can’t say no. May as well get your fill while she’s here. If you don’t, someone else will.’

An ache filled my chest as his words careened into me. He’d wanted me for himself after Esther had run. He’d settled for Cameron having me to punish my family. I’d hoped that being his son’s wife would be enough to protect me from him. I guessed not.

I waited for Cameron to say something, but he remained a cold statue beside his sister, his ticking jaw all that gave his fury away. He may be mad at me, but was he going to let his father talk to me that?

‘You’ll all be at dinner on Friday. No excuses.’ Harold gave one last, long look over my exposed thighs and grinned. ‘Welcome home, Maeve. Don’t get too comfortable. I imagine your stay will be short.’

The three of us stood fixed to the spot as Harold retreated out of view above, and I only relaxed when a door slammed closed behind him.

I couldn’t believe Cameron would let his father talk to me like that. We may not have been in love, but I was still his wife. Fire shot through my veins, renewing my purpose. I was going to take Harold down, whether or not it took Cameron down too.

I turned on my heel and walked toward the door.

‘Where are you going?’ Cameron asked as I wrenched at the handle.

‘To see my brothers.’

‘You can’t.’ He stormed over and placed a hand on the door near my face and pressed it closed. I turned my face to him, setting all my rage glaring into his face.

‘Am I your wife or your prisoner?’

‘You’re not a prisoner...’

‘Then you’ll have no problem with me seeing my family. Like you got to see Katie.’

His face was only inches from mine, and I watched as his gaze momentarily dipped to my lips before meeting my eyes once more.

‘You can’t keep me locked up.’ I was painfully aware of his heat as he stood so close, and I swallowed hard, my body reacting in ways I had no intention of acting on. My heart rate stormed through me as I remembered the last time he was this close...

‘Fine. Go. But if you try to run, you better hope I find you before he does.’

Benny will take you, make it somewhere public in neutral territory.'

'Thank you,' I said, before turning toward the door, and waiting for him to release the pressure he was exerting on it. I froze as he grazed my waist ever so lightly with a fingertip while leaning close, his breath warm at my ear. Then he moved, and the warmth was gone.

I was out of the door before I let myself think about the touch any more.

I needed a way out. I needed revenge. I needed to deal with Harold once and for all.

I needed to do it before I fell back into Cameron's arms.

McNally's bar was in the Brown syndicate's area, who were about as neutral between us and the Thompsons' as could be found in Glasgow.

I spotted my brothers as soon as I stepped into the dingy pub with its harsh strip lighting and sticky floors. They were squashed into one booth nearing the back, with Mac sitting facing me. A grin washed over my face as he spotted me and I quick-walked over to them, so ready to feel safe, even if only for a little while.

'All right, Maeve?' Mac asked, standing up to let me shuffle in between him and Ewen, giving me a squeeze on the shoulders as I sidled past him.

'Still alive,' I said, giving my brothers a shrug that belied how terrified I actually was of having to live in Harold's house. 'Please tell me you've got good news?'

Logan, our stand in patriarch, shook his head before rubbing a hand over his chin. 'Sorry Maeve, we're still working on it. You're going to have to hold tight a bit longer. Every way we can see brings a full on war and we're already still reeling from Dad's coma and our change in leadership. I don't think we can go in heavy-handed without it costing us too dearly.'

I sighed, letting my shoulders drop as I leaned heavily back against the cigarette smoke stained leather behind me.

'They haven't hurt you, have they?' Mac asked, narrowing his eyes as he checked me over.

'No.'

Ewen's voice was strained as he spoke up. 'Has he... forced you?'

'God no. He's... not a bad guy. Not like Harold anyway. He's kind of like us.'

My brothers looked at me sharply, as though I'd kicked them beneath the

table and proclaimed Cameron a messiah.

‘He is nothing like us,’ Logan said, his jaw tensing as he spoke. ‘Are you going soft? Is he trying to turn you against us?’

‘No. He’s just not all bad. He hasn’t hurt me. He loves his sister, he hates his dad, he’s suffered.’ Heat bled into my cheeks as I spoke, my brothers’ glares making me squirm. I’d so rarely held all of their attention that it felt like I was on trial.

‘Don’t go sympathising with him, Maeve. He’s done shitty things--’ Logan started.

‘Haven’t you all? You do the same things as he does.’ I clenched my hands tight enough that my nails dug into the flesh of my palms. Why was I even defending him? It’s not like I liked him.

‘He cut off my god damned finger,’ Mac said, waving the healing wound where his fingertip had been sewn back on at me.

‘Listen to me, we will be ripping this marriage up as soon as we can. This is why we didn’t want you going in there. We knew you couldn’t handle it.’ Logan thrummed his fingers on the table as he spoke, punctuating each word with a finality that beat into me.

‘I can handle it.’ My heckles raised at that familiar sensation of being discredited, and being seen as so very weak. Just a woman. So soft. So stupid. ‘I just think Harold needs to be the one to pay. He killed Mum, he shot Dad, he forced this marriage. He is the one trying to bring us down.’

‘The apple never falls far from the tree, Maeve,’ Mac said as he got up from the booth and nodded at the others. We stood and made our way out of the booth as Benny and two other goons of Harold’s watched on from the doorway.

‘Then where does that leave us? Are we like dad?’

Logan shrugged as he and Ewen walked toward the door after giving me a brief hug that did little to make me feel any safer than I had before. ‘Just hold on, kid, we’ll get you out of there.’

Mac hung back beside me, dropping his voice low. ‘You need to avoid falling for pretty words. Remember, Maeve, they are our enemies. He’ll use whatever he needs to flip you against us. He’ll do what his father tells him. He’s just another of Harold’s puppets. Don’t let him play you. I thought you’d be hard enough to cope.’

‘I am hard enough to cope. I can find a way out.’

‘No, you’re not Maeve. But we’ll figure it out.’ Mac pulled me close and

squeezed me against him, but it felt anything but reassuring after his words. Nothing had changed in their eyes. Despite sacrificing myself to help them, they still saw me as their useless little sister. ‘Just don’t go fucking anything up until we sort it out.’

So much for a rewarding reunion. On both sides of the battle, I was just an inconvenience and a pawn. They needed to stop underestimating me. I was going to find the key to bringing Harold down, because I had something they didn’t possess. I had an in in the enemy’s home.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

CAMERON

The screech of the rolling doors rang out through the cavernous space below my office, where my men were opening and checking the shipment we'd just received. A pile of torn open, discarded footballs lay off to one side as they extracted each bag hidden within. Last time the supplier had tried to shortchange us, but after a visit with him he'd soon promised to buck up his ideas.

I pulled the blinds closed with a sharp tug on the cord before sitting behind the desk and pushing my face into my hands. The pressure of my fingers against my eyes was little comfort. Every muscle in my body ached from the absolute beating I'd been giving myself in my home gym. Between catching up with business and brutally working out, I hadn't seen Maeve since she went off to see her brothers. It had been the best part of a week that I'd ignored her, and although I told myself I didn't care about her, how she was faring in Father's house niggled at me. I'd thought about inviting her to my apartment in Edinburgh, but being that close to her made my blood run hot and cold. Seeing her so often would only make it more difficult when she left... or was removed. Despite the thoughts of her plaguing my head, the memory of her thighs imprinted on my cheeks and seeing her glow with pleasure, she wasn't mine to keep. She was still a McGowan in all but name. She was like one of those poisonous exotic animals, beautiful but that would ultimately render you dead, inside if not physically. I'd lost enough already, I didn't need anyone else to fail.

With a groan, I pulled out a bottle of amber fire from the cupboard below the desk. I wasn't a huge drinker, but I'd had more than I cared to admit in the days that had gone by since the honeymoon. I topped up a glass and

sipped, letting the heat suffuse through my tense muscles and overwrought mind.

Just as I finally relaxed into my seat, closing my eyes and letting the whisky lull me into a moment of calm, my door burst open, slamming against the yellowing walls of the old office. I jolted upright, losing my footing and nearly careening off of the side of my chair.

‘What the fu--’ I started, before seeing my sister at the precipice of the room, looking sceptically at both me and my whisky.

‘So this is where you are hiding out?’ She said, coming into the room and plonking herself onto the edge of the desk, taking my whisky bottle and tipping it out into the bin.

‘You know I have plenty more, right?’ I watched the liquid slosh out of the bottle. It was good stuff, too. I steeled myself against the anger bubbling up and breathed ice back into my veins.

‘Yes. But you probably don’t have more here, so I can make my point all the same.’ Just about anyone else would have ended up with a broken nose, but Katie knew I’d never be able to hurt her. ‘Why are you avoiding Maeve?’

She set the empty bottle down and crossed her arms over her chest, raising an eyebrow at me. ‘I’m not.’

‘You are.’

‘I’ve just had a lot to catch up on since I’ve been back.’

‘Uh-huh, I’m sure. But you’ve got to find time to eat and sleep and you could have come home for that. Leaving Maeve to fend for herself is hardly going to aid in wooing her.’

I spluttered out a cough and stood up, brushing off my suit as I glared at my sister. ‘I have zero intention of wooing Maeve. The sooner she’s gone, the better.’

‘You don’t mean that. I saw the way you reacted when Father spoke to her. You were mad. Like you are when he talks to me. I don’t know what went down when you were away, but something changed. You care, a bit.’

‘I don’t. I just know she wants to be here as much as I do - as in not at all. We both want out, and that gives us some understanding. But I still hate her. She’s still one of them.’

Katie tipped her head at me and sighed. ‘Mhmm, you keep telling yourself that. I’ll be out in the car. You’d better be out in five. Father want’s you home for dinner, and he’s not taking no for an answer.’

The door closed behind Katie as she let herself out of the office, and I

slumped back against the shelving behind my desk. I needed distance, but there was no way dad was going to let me have that. Being close to her was going to be torture, especially with my dad on hand to fuck with us both. I closed my eyes to another flash of her in the outdoor shower; the shampoo streaming down between her tits and over her fucking delicious thighs.

Damn, I needed to get laid. Needed to erase the memory of her with images of someone else. Cleanse the palate. I wasn't the sort of guys who got het up over a woman. I gave them a good time and had a good time in return before sending them off without another thought.

The wedding vows niggled at me from somewhere back in my treacherous brain, reminding me I'd promised to remain faithful. It wasn't like it was a real wedding. Except that it was. There was a lot of morally fucked shit I did in my life, but lying was never my thing. A promise is a promise. And until Maeve was removed from my life, I couldn't go fucking around on her. I'd seen enough of that happen to my mother, and I never wanted to be anything like my father. My word meant something to me, if no one else.

It was normal to get turned on by being around a hot woman. I was a red-blooded male, and she was an attractive woman, the exact type I'd normally go for. It was only natural to be experiencing arousal. Yes, that's all it was. Just an urge.

But I'd also been wrapped up in a fierce protectiveness when she'd crumpled in my arms. That had nothing to do with arousal... and it wasn't so easy to explain away. The need to damage the people who hurt her had been overwhelming, and made no sense given that I had no reason to care for her. Her own father and mine, too. But loyalty is the core of what we do. My family is everything, no matter how shit they are. I can't betray it for my fake wife, no matter how much the idea of hurting her more brings a wave of nausea washing over me.

I groaned as I turned off the lights and locked up the office. I would rather have done just about anything other than go to a family dinner, but Father never took no for an answer.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

MAEVE

I tried to focus on my phone as I scrolled Instagram, but my eyes may as well have been full of sand. It had been the best part of a week since Cameron had abandoned me at the Thompson mansion and all but scarpered. Bar occasionally going to source food. I'd barely left my room. Well, Cameron's room, really. My room was still in my father's home.

It had been long days full of boredom. I'd scrolled through my socials a billion times, only to be reminded how much fun everyone I knew, and many that I didn't, were having while I was shut up in my new prison. I'd binged enough box sets to be reluctant to engage in any more TV, and the books I'd brought were long finished.

Footsteps sounded outside the room in the long marble laid hallway, and every muscle I had tensed. I'd been dreading Harold coming to my room, especially with no Cameron or Katie there to be a buffer. I knew his morals were about as solid as a fucking jelly. Nights were the worst, they were the times I'd figured he was more likely to be home, so I'd barely slept. Everything ached, and I just wanted to turn my brain off somehow. To escape into a dream. To escape from real life for just a little. But sleep had been all but elusive.

The footsteps receded, and I sighed, rubbing at my eyes. Every part of me ached and my legs were gripped with the urge to stretch them out every twenty seconds. Even some in-room yoga hadn't helped. I missed swimming and laughing with my brothers and just having my day to myself, mostly. My father had always had expectations and rules, but I'd figured when I'd eventually married I would have gained more freedom, not lose it.

Maybe it was all my fault... maybe I shouldn't have pushed Cameron

away after he'd gone down on me. It's not like I hadn't considered more with him. Maybe I needed to keep him sweet for my protection. Maybe I'd need to seduce him when he showed up. There was a family dinner that evening. Perhaps I could dress up and flirt with him, make him unable to resist me.

Or maybe I was doomed to a life of jumping at every closing door and voice outside of my room. Fear and broken sleep could be my future for as long as I was still valuable to Harold.

Katie has been the one light in the dark. So sweet and bubbly and welcoming. She'd not been around much, avoiding her father while Cameron was absent as best as she could, but she'd made an effort to see me when she was here. She'd brought brownies and a book and tried to cheer me up without there being any benefit to her. It would hurt to bring her family down around her. I could only hope that she would survive the fall undamaged. Katie had been full of fun until I mentioned her father's skeletons and if she knew what he'd been hiding, but she had shaken her head and lowered her voice and let me know there was nothing she knew. Even if she had, she was too petrified of her father to stand against him. She did tell me that if there was anything incriminating, it would be in Harold's office and likely under lock and key. The situation seemed to get more impossible by the day.

Another yawn stole over me as I threw my phone down on the bed beside me. I needed to sleep, but every part of me kept fighting against the ability to relax. I got up and checked the lock on the door, relieved to find it still securely shut.

There was one surefire way to drop off into sleep, and that was an orgasm. I pulled the curtains and turned on some music, dialling it up to drown out the outside, and keep them from hearing me.

I flopped back against the bed, pulling off my yoga pants and laying back with just my baggy t-shirt covering me. God, the bed was like a cloud, a pity I'd not been able to shut off my brain enough to actually enjoy sleeping in it.

Letting the world fade away behind the loud music and my closed eyes, I slid my fingers to the bundle of nerves that would get me off the quickest. Try as I might to avoid it, Cameron slipped into my mind, reminding me the last time I'd been chasing orgasm had been with him in between my thighs. A moan escaped at the memory while my insides clenched with pleasure. Oh yes, my body held onto the memories of him I'd rather forget.

Soon the circling of my fingers had me writhing against the bed and trembling at the approaching wave, but before it could wash me away, I heard

a click at the door. I opened my eyes and saw Cameron standing there, keys in hand and his face awash with that solid cold he emanated so often. Until his eyes flicked to my hand on my clit and a flash of hunger gave him away ever so briefly. I should have covered myself, let the embarrassment that washed over me win out. But I didn't. I needed to come and having those hateful eyes watching me sent a tingle down my side.

Fuck him. I needed this. He could either watch or leave, but I wouldn't cower for him.

I slipped two fingers inside myself and groaned as he leant against the door, neither approaching nor leaving. My t-shirt rode up as I reached up to toy with my nipple as I fucked myself slowly, enjoying his eyes on me far more than I should.

Alternating between fucking myself with my fingers and rolling them around my clit, I was soon nearing an orgasm. He never took those dark eyes off of me and I arched my back to give him a better view. He was rapt, and it made me feel powerful. Like this was one thing no-one could take from me. My pleasure was in my hands and he could do nothing but watch from the sidelines. A glance at his trousers brought a grin to my face. Despite his cold, hard stare, Cameron was enjoying the view.

Threads of pleasure twisted through me, knotting in my groin as they built. I never took my eyes off of Cameron, letting him see the desire I felt, letting him see that I refused to be trodden down. He subtly shifted against the door, pushing his rock solid dick to the left in his trousers, it looking almost painfully restricted with how stiff he was.

Fuck, why was he so goddamned hot? I slid my eyes from his dick to his face, where he licked at his lips. A bolt of desire at the memory of his tongue sent me over the edge and rocketing into a body quaking orgasm.

My moans rang out unfettered as I rode the waves, riding my fingers until the last tremors subsided. If cartoon stars could have appeared over my head, they would have. At last my body relaxed completely and if Cameron hadn't been there, I would have slipped into a dream for sure.

But he was there. Still staring, still hard, still cold.

'If you are quite finished, dinner is in twenty minutes,' Cameron said before turning without another word and letting himself back out of the room, locking it back up on the outside. Shit, of course he must have another key.

And just like that, the powerful feeling fled, leaving me angry and ashamed.

I launched a pillow at the closed door before burying my face in the sheets and letting out a scream.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

CAMERON

Holy shit.

What an unexpected welcome home it had been to find Maeve fucking herself on my bed. I'd expected her to stop and cover herself, but she'd looked me right in the eyes and kept going. Fuck, if anything, she'd seemed even more into it with me watching. My poor cock had ached as it strained to join her, to feel her twitch around me rather than her fingers, to know that her moans belonged to me. So much for keeping her off of my mind.

She sat beside me at the table as the staff poured our wine, looking every bit like catching her in the act had been a figment of my imagination. Her mussed hair had been pulled into a neat bun at the nape of her neck, and her flushed cheeks were now only the faintest tinge of pink. She'd put on jeans and a sweatshirt despite it being pretty warm. To deflect my attention maybe?

Katie slipped into the seat across from me, leaving the head of the table for our father, as always. The dining table could seat sixteen people comfortably, but since Mum had left, it had only even been Father, Katie and I. The rest of the seats remained unused. Our family may have been powerful, and held long acquaintances and business agreements with other syndicates, but none of us ever felt like inviting friends round. Who would willingly inflict our fucked up family life on other people? Well, Father would. Thankfully, he preferred to entertain elsewhere.

I watched as Maeve took a sip of her wine, her eyelids fluttering closed for a second as she let the rich red swirl over her tongue before swallowing. My dick twitched against my thigh and I stifled a moan with a cough. Like a goddamned teenager. What was she doing to me?

Her eyes flicked to mine as I watched her, and she cocked an eyebrow at

me.

Katie cleared her throat as she set her own glass down with a grin. 'Finally managed to drag Cam's ass back to the house for you, Maeve.'

'I couldn't give a rat's ass if he was here,' Maeve said, shrugging a shoulder.

'Well, I care that he's abandoning you here. If he does it again, I'm going to whisk you off somewhere hot with me and we'll drown ourselves with cocktails and flirt with the locals.'

'You will not.' I shot Katie a look that I hoped said cut it the fuck out.

'If you are too busy sulking off in Edinburgh, you'll have no idea we've even gone.' Katie shot back, and I took a steady breath. Why was she trying to bait me? Why did she care if I was there for Maeve?

'Why would you even care if I did?' Maeve asked, her fingers toying with the stem of her glass idly as she met my eyes.

I opened my mouth before closing it again. Why did I care? Was it because she was my wife and appearances mattered in our business? Maybe a little. Or was it because the thought of her paying positive attention to another man made my intestines recoil. The thought of someone else luxuriating in her laughter or watching her lips and picturing them on him made me want to throttle something. The idea of her showing that vulnerability she'd briefly let me see to someone else... Shit. I was in deeper than I let myself believe. In deeper than just wanting her physically.

Father joined us before I had to figure out a response to Maeve's question, with all three of us visibly tensing at his arrival.

'Ah, look what the cat dragged in. I was thinking you'd all ran away from me.' Father's eyes slid to Maeve as he licked at his lips. 'And we couldn't have that, could we?'

'Benny says you've been pretty busy yourself this week too,' I said, trying to deflect my father's attention from Maeve and onto me. 'Got something big in the works.'

'Nothing that you're ready to deal with yet.'

The staff brought in the starter, a delicate mushroom soup with a side of olive packed sourdough, giving us a brief breathing lull.

My father loved this soup, so the chef served it up often on our family dinners. Father and Katie tucked in, while Maeve looked at the plate wide eyed before glancing at the rest of us. She tentatively picked up her spoon as I ate and dipped it into the broth, purposely avoiding the mushrooms and

putting the tiniest amount of liquid on her spoon. I'd nearly finished my bowl by the time she'd stomached the small mouthful, looking pale about the face.

'You don't have to eat it,' I said under my breath as Father spoke to Katie about what he expected from her the following week.

'I was always taught it was rude to leave a full plate of food,' she whispered back while staring at the bowl. 'I really don't like mushrooms, though.'

'They won't care.'

'I'll care.' She tried to eat another spoonful, and I watched as her shoulders heaved a little.

'Here,' I said, quickly switching my empty bowl with hers. 'Now no-one will know.'

Maeve gifted me with a sunny smile that sent bolts to my chest. Damn, seeing her happy did unspeakable things to me. What I'd do for another sunny smile.

'So,' Father interjected as Maeve dragged her eyes from me, her smile faltering. 'What have our two lovebirds been up to this week?'

'Working. Just the usual.'

'Not been taking care of your new wife? You should be in that honeymoon phase where you are showing her her place, left, right and centre.' Maeve paled even more as Father spoke.

'And where exactly is my place?' Maeve asked quietly, but with steel beneath her words. I had expected her to cower.

'On your knees, as far as I'm concerned. Looking at those bags beneath your eyes, I'd been hoping my boy had been taking advantage of his situation well into the night.'

I tried to breathe slowly, my fist clenching beneath the table as I glowered at my father. Fuck, why did he always have to be such an utter cock?

'That's enough,' I said through gritted teeth, but father just laughed and shook his head.

'Look at her. The girl looks like she hasn't slept in a week. If you haven't been keeping her up, then who has?'

I glanced over at Maeve and saw that he was right. She looked exhausted. Guilt ripped at me. She had slept best in my arms when we were away, when we'd been playing at being normal. Then I thrust her under my father's roof and left her. She probably hadn't slept much while I'd been away.

'If only I were so lucky to be kept up all night,' Maeve said, a malicious

grin sweeping over her face as she stared point blank at my dad. ‘Has Cameron always been one to arrive so early at destinations... Maybe it runs in the family?’

I didn’t know whether to laugh as my father’s face turned beet red, or to be offended. Logically I knew she didn’t have any experience of my in bed prowess, but I still didn’t fancy it getting out that I was a two pump chump.

Katie spluttered on her wine, and father glowered at Maeve.

‘I heard that McGowan women were nothing to write home about in the sack, so you should watch your mouth, girl.’ My father was a pile of suppressed rage, a vein throbbing by his temple.

‘I think it says more about the Thompson’s if a woman is so bored in bed that she can’t even muster a moan. I guess taking things into my own hands is something I’ll have to get used to around here.’ Maeve picked up her glass and took a sip, her hand trembling ever so slightly being the only giveaway that she perhaps wasn’t as brave as her words led me to believe.

Father was out of his seat before she’d set her glass down, slapping it from her fingers before grasping her face in his hand. Maeve let out a squeak of surprise as Katie rose to her feet, looking set to flee. We’d seen Dad like this, and it never ended well. Fuck, I shouldn’t have let her goad him. She was going to get herself killed.

‘You disrespectful little whore,’ my father spat out into her face, ‘I’ll show you just how much I can make you moan in bed, you bitch.’

‘Dad, stop.’ I stood and grabbed his wrist, squeezing enough to let him know I could remove him physically if I had to.

‘Are you going to defend her? Against me? I made this union and I say when it ends. It’s not going to work out having this little cunt in my house.’

‘She’s my wife. I will sort her out.’ I put as little emotion as I could into my voice. Settled the ice into my veins so he thought me impassioned and angry at her rather than trying to protect her from him. He released his fingers from her face, the red marks remaining where his nails had dug into her. I wanted to hurt him so badly, but breathed through the rage.

I grasped Maeve by the hair, slipping my fingers in beneath her bun, grasping near her roots so that hauling her up to me looked a lot rougher than it felt. She yelped in surprise as I dragged her face up to mine and wrapped my other hand around her neck, pouring as much cold fury into my voice as I could muster. ‘I’m going to take you home and make you regret stepping out of line.’

I expected fear, and there was a tinge in her widened eyes, but then her pupils dilated and her mouth opened in the softest of gasps that sent shockwaves of lust right to my groin. Fuck. I didn't think she was into the rougher stuff. Maeve was going to be the end of me.

'She better have a fat fucking lip the next time I see her, or I'll be giving her one myself.'

'Come on, we need to get out of here before he changes his mind,' I said, whispering into her ear as I turned her and released her hair. 'Katie, I'll drop you off on the way. Get Benny to bring the car round.'

I strong armed Maeve until we were out of Father's eyeline and halfway to the front door before twisting her and pushing her against the wall.

'Have you lost your fucking mind?' I asked her. 'Are you trying to get yourself killed?'

'I will not take that shit from him.' She trembled against me as she spoke, her body betraying her words.

'You've got no choice. None of us do. You stood up to him. And he'll make me pay.' I let out a breath and stared down at her, her cheeks flushed as she stared back up at me.

'Are you mad at me for what happened upstairs? Are we going to talk about it?'

I sighed and dragged a hand through my hair.

'I'm not mad that you didn't stop. I'm... frustrated.'

'You left me on my own without a word. Here with him. I couldn't sleep and I've been on edge ever since, well, since we left paradise. I won't apologise for taking my pleasure in my own hands, nor for relieving stress in the only way I can here. I will do whatever I have to to survive this.'

'I'm sorry. I shouldn't have abandoned you here. I just... didn't know what to do.' I was close enough to see her pulse thundering in her throat as I stood pinning her between myself and the wall. Her tongue snaked over her lower lips as she held my gaze. Her pupils were still blown and I wanted nothing more than to take her mouth and steal a kiss. To taste her and feel her heat against me. 'There are other ways to relieve the pressure. If you want to.'

'Yeah? What are you suggesting?' Her voice dropped as she blinked up at me through her long lashes.

I reached up and tilted her chin up a fraction, running a thumb over her soft, pink lips. Fuck it. I needed to kiss her. The world could take a flying

fuck. I wanted her. I wanted her steel and her vulnerability, her joy and her tears. I wanted her on my lips, on my fingers, on my dick and in my bed.

I inched my face towards hers and took a breath, psyching myself up for a moment that could change everything.

‘Come on, you two.’ Katie’s voice shook me from the reverie as Maeve turned her head to the left. I watched as Katie reached between us and grabbed Maeve’s hand, dragging her out of my arms. ‘We need to go now. Father is apoplectic and you’ve got about a minute before he finds Maeve.’

I didn’t know whether to hug Katie for reminding us that Father was about to blow, or curse her from ruining the moment.

I followed them to the car and slid into the back, nodding at Benny, who held the door. As I slid into the seat, I tried to figure out where Maeve was in her head, but she averted her eyes and stared out of the window as Katie nattered on at her.

Maeve was going to be in my apartment, and I had no idea how to be around her without wanting to drag her on top of me.

I groaned and closed my eyes. What had I gotten myself into? I was doing a shit job of hating her.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

MAEVE

The further we drove from Harold's house, the easier I could breathe. It was like a weight had been sitting on my chest for the past week that had been slowly suffocating me.

I had come too close to pushing Harold over the edge. It was stupid and rash, but I had just been so sick of him trying to crush my spirits even further. I wanted to watch his world burn so badly. He'd been close to punishing me with his fists, or his cock, and I could only thank my lucky stars that Cameron had intervened. After everything he'd told me about his father, and seeing the physical scars left etched across his back, it must have been difficult to stand up to him. He hadn't meant what he'd said. Despite our differences, there was no way Cameron was the type of guy to beat up his wife. I'd seen the way he looked out for Katie, and although I wasn't family in any way that mattered, he wouldn't abuse me. He was capable of violence, of that I was sure, but to ensure power in his work, not to make a woman cower beneath him.

We'd dropped Katie off at a friend's house to lie low until Harold simmered down. I let my eyes fall on Cameron on the other side of the plush car. His face was unreadable, like a wall that concealed his true feelings. But I'd seen otherwise. There was passion and fear, longing and anger, even happiness simmering below the surface. I'd felt his indecision as he'd held me in his fists, his deep eyes searching me for my reaction. My cheeks warmed at the memory of his fingers closing in around my hair. I couldn't hide my arousal despite wanting to. As much as I didn't want to face it, Cameron Thompson made me weak at the knees.

There had been a spark. I'd felt it. But I'd been so brazen in front of him

and he'd brushed me off entirely. He could have come into the room and joined me when he caught me touching myself. It hadn't been my intention, but with that intense glare of his, I'd have been loath to resist his touch.

I dragged my eyes back to the world outside as we approached the lights of Edinburgh. What was I doing? Maybe my brothers were right. What if I couldn't handle it and was just thinking with my knickers rather than my head? Nothing but a lust-addled fool.

I had to face the fact I wasn't a vital cog to getting the takedown of Harold moving into action; I was just a pawn to be manipulated. My sister Esther had had the right idea fleeing from the lot of them. She'd even found someone who loved her. I should have run while I had the chance.

Harold had been working on something that he wasn't willing to let Cameron be involved in. As his second in command, he was involved in pretty much all of his father's business affairs. It had to be something he wanted to keep secret. Perhaps it was the key I needed to unlock his sordid deeds. Shit Maeve, I scolded myself. You should have just kept your mouth shut and tried to find out what he was hiding. Now I'd be miles from Harold's secrets and stuck in an apartment with Cameron.

Would I be able to smother the growing sexual tension that seemed to bamboozle my brain whenever I was near him? I hoped so.

It was late when we finally reached the gated apartment building, Benny dropping us off with a quiet nod as I gaped up at the yellow stone exterior. The building was big and old, the outer facade richly decorated with Victorian flare. When the doorman let us in with a deferential bow to Cameron, it was like walking into another world. The interior was sleek and glamorous, full of glass and stonework, mirrors and gilded frames. He led me to the elevator and ushered me inside.

'What floor?' I asked as I looked for the button pane. There were no buttons at all, only a hand print pad.

He stepped up against my back as my breathing hitched while he reached around me, pressing his hand to the pane. 'I own the basement level and the top two floors. This is a private elevator. I'll get your hand print signature added tomorrow.'

'Aren't you afraid I'll run?' I said as his breath tickled at my ear as he failed to move away despite a green light flashing and the doors closing, sending us upward toward his domain.

'I'd find you Maeve.'

‘Why?’

‘Because you're mine.’ I glanced over my shoulder at his words, surprised to hear him be so possessive of me. I waited for the wave of indignation to hit me, but was surprised to find myself awash with a mix of other emotions at his words. Was it lust? Pride? Desire?

Damn, I needed to get it together.

I turned to face him and swallowed hard as he reached up and tucked an errant strand of hair behind my ear.

Wracking my brain didn't help me produce a response, and relief flooded me as the doors sprung open, allowing me to duck away from him and into his apartment.

I say apartment, but it was like an apartment on steroids. The rooms were enormous, with high ceilings and endless windows, the city glittering beyond.

The lights drew me like a little moth, and I stood at one window watching the cityscape twinkle before me, my eyes following it up to Edinburgh Castle, gently glowing up above. It took my breath away and filled me with wonder. I'd been to Edinburgh before, but to see it from such a high vantage point and so close to the castle was a treat. I could get used to it.

‘Your room is this way,’ Cameron said, drawing me back into the room as he spoke. He showed me the kitchen and dining area, the sitting room with its huge sofas and wall size TV, and along a corridor to a series of suites.

‘This is you,’ he said, opening a door into a beautiful lounge room, with multiple doors leading off of it. ‘You should be comfortable here. There is a bathroom, kitchenette, walk-in wardrobe, the bedroom is through there. I've called ahead and had the kitchenette stocked for you and some clothing put into the wardrobe. You can order in anything else you need, just call the concierge using one of the house phones.’

‘Thank you. Your home is beautiful, Cameron.’

Everything was perfect, and comfortable and the lap of luxury, but I'd have been lying if a pang of regret didn't set my tummy aflutter. There's be no having to share a bed. No pretending. I was safe, and finally had a private space to myself, so why did I sigh when he let himself out of the room? The click of the door feeling like a mini-rejection all over again.

I pressed my palm onto the elevator scanner and sighed happily. The private basement was an absolute dream. There was a fully equipped gym and a fifty

metre pool that I'd spent the afternoon swimming in. My muscles had that glorious post swim achy sensation that I'd missed and I finally felt calmer than I had since I'd learned I'd be married off to Cameron.

I cinched my robe tighter about my waist as the elevator slowed to a halt and opened into the apartment, the afternoon light spilling through the windows and sending glowing gold cascading over everything in the room.

'Hey,' Cameron said, his voice punching through my dreamy countenance. I hadn't realised he'd returned from whatever business he'd been doing for the morning. My hair was damp and unbrushed and I wore nothing but the towelling robe and some slippers. Logically, I knew I shouldn't care that he saw me like that. He had on our honeymoon, but the turmoil in my tummy told me I cared.

'Um, hey. I didn't realise you'd be back so soon.'

Cameron snickered as I joined him in the kitchen, and those golden flecks in his eyes glittered. 'Don't sound too disappointed that I'm back.'

'I just, wasn't quite company ready,' I said as I ran a hand through my hair, trying to detangle it with my fingers.

'I'm not company... you can relax here.' He poured me a coffee and handed it over. 'How was your swim?'

'Glorious. God, I've missed it. I swam every day back at ours. It keeps me sane.' I knew he understood. He used the gym as his own personal therapy. I spied the plate of pastries that had appeared on the counter, courtesy of him or a housekeeper I didn't know.

'Oh, my god! Are those from Patrice's? I'd recognise the Religieuse anywhere.' I didn't even wait for him to answer before nabbing one of the cream filled buns from the plate and taking an indulgent bite out of it. The soft chocolate topping was a dream, and followed by the burst of flavoured cream, I was in heaven. I moaned as the flavours filled my mouth.

Cameron watched me intensely, his fingers gripping at the edge of the counter as I took another mouthful and groaned again. Patrice's was my absolute favourite, and the Religieuse was to die for.

'Fuck, I could watch you eat that all day.' Cameron stepped toward me as a blush heated my cheeks. I was eating it like a woman starved, hardly a ladylike prospect. He raised a finger and swept it over my lower lip, sending a quiver down my spine. He'd scooped up some cream that had been stuck there and slowly licked it from his finger. I paused as he grinned, while I was well and truly rooted to the spot. He was so close that I could reach up and

kiss him, if I had wanted to. My pulse danced at the thought of capturing his lips in mine and tasting that delicious cream on his tongue.

I cleared my throat and took a step back, breaking the tension that thrummed through me. Kissing him would be a stupid idea. A bad, bad plan. It didn't mean that the thought of his lips didn't fill me with heat.

'I should probably go dress,' I said. 'Can we grab a pizza tonight?'

'We can't. We have dinner plans.'

'Why? I'd much prefer to stay in on the couch in my lounge wear.'

His brow furrowed at my question, as though he didn't understand why I'd be questioning it.

'It's expected that we show face around town. We may be out of Father's house, but it doesn't mean that he doesn't have eyes on us. He'll be waiting to hear that we are making an appearance.'

'I don't want to pretend that we are happy. Surely it would be more realistic to seem like we are holed up at home like a pair of sex-mad newlyweds?' I didn't want to perform again. I'd been performing my whole life. Be the good girl, make a good impression, don't step out of line... I was sick of it.

'The wedding happened so fast and with such grim history between our families that we need to show them it wasn't just a farce. We need to show that this is a new bond, a strong tie between your family and mine. It's business.' He leaned back against the counter and shrugged.

'What if I don't want to? It *is* a farce. Our families hate one another and I'm sick of being used like a doll to further everyone else's needs.'

'I know. I'm sorry. But we can do this. We're both good at playing pretend. It's just a dinner.'

'Fine. If that's what you want,' I said through gritted teeth. I thought he'd been being sweet with the pastries and coffee, but no, like all the men in my life, he had an ulterior motive.

Abandoning the pastry, I left for my room, anger bubbling up and threatening to suffocate me. If they wanted a show, I'd give them a fucking show.

My heels clipped loudly as I made my way through to the lounge area from my room, where I'd spent the last few hours putting on my costume. If they wanted a performance, then I knew exactly how to do that. How to play the

boss-man's good girl, there to make the men drool and strive to succeed to the same level as the man on her arm. Lust was a powerful motivator, and the men in the crime world often spent their lives lusting over money, power, women and beautiful objects. Often the latter two were classed as the same thing.

I skimmed a hand down over my hip, smoothing the silky red fabric that clung to my curves. I'd called in the dress last minute from a designer friend of mine in Edinburgh. I rarely had need of anything as daring, but I wanted to make Cameron burn with lust, to leave him hot and desperate and without a chance at anything more. All an act with no follow through for him. I grinned as I felt a heady rush of pleasure flow through me. Instead of sexual desire, it was a rush I'd hardly experienced in my role as a daughter of a mafia boss. It was power. Already I clamoured for more, knowing that the feeling left me wanting more. The polar opposite of all the insignificance I'd ever felt.

The full-length mirror that hung at the end of the hall gave me the perfect view of myself, reassuring me I looked as killer as I felt. The dress was three quarters length, but with a slit that hit almost to my hip, flashing a long section of thigh as I walked. I exaggerated the roll of my hips as I walked and saw the outline of my nipples beneath the satin. I'd forgone a bra to leave Cameron and his associates with all the more to distract them. The trip to paradise had deepened my tan, and I'd scrubbed and shaved everything I could, leaving me glowing beneath the soft lights of the room. I'd fixed my hair into a soft cascade of dark waves that sat over one shoulder, leaving my neck exposed.

Yes, for a last-minute outfit, it would do wonderfully. I was going to make him wish he'd never left the apartment.

Cameron appeared to my left and let out a low whistle. 'Fucking hell, Maeve. You could kill a man with one glance looking like that.'

'Here's hoping,' I said, arching a brow.

He walked behind me, his eyes taking in every inch. A wave of nerves wriggled through me, my bravado not so apparent under that intense stare.

His eyes found mine in the mirror and he slowly approached me from behind until his lips were next to my ear. We looked good together. He wore a tux, perfectly fitted across his broad chest and muscled biceps, and seeing him made my knees weak. Fuck, he looked good. I secretly adored a tux, even more so late in the evening when the bow tie is loosened, the jacket long abandoned and the sleeves rolled up. Heat prickled at my core as I all but eye

fucked Cameron. I wasn't supposed to be the one drooling. I inhaled softly as he ran a finger up the length of my arm before sweeping a tendril of hair back over my shoulder to join the rest of it.

'I have a little something for you.' His breath was hot on my neck as he spoke. 'It was my mother's.'

He produced a necklace and reached around my neck, settling the twinkling diamond onto my chest. His fingers worked to fasten the clasp. His warmth behind me made me want to close my eyes and lean back into him, but it wasn't in the plan. The unrequited lust was supposed to be his punishment.

I dropped my gaze in the mirror, but he reached up from the necklace and tipped my chin back up until he caught my eye with that intense stare once more.

'Look at you, Maeve. You look incredible. Every man in the restaurant is going to want to have you, and every woman is going to wish they were you.'

I swallowed hard as his words mingled with my deepest needs, my need to be seen.

'You are fucking divine. The dress makes me want to see it on the floor, and those dark lined eyes make you look like you'll eat the fucking world alive.'

'It's all a lie though, I'm nothing really,' I breathe out, wanting to roll my cheek into his hand as he held my chin. Craving more.

'It's not a lie. You are the wife of Harold Thomson's son. I'm his heir and one day you'll be wife to the boss and then no one will make you feel insignificant ever again.'

'Your dad will kill me long before then, and if not, I'd still just be a woman, a wife. There is no room in this world for me to have any power.'

Cameron tilted my head, his lips grazing my ear and leaving me breathless. 'When he's dead, I'll make the rules, and you can rule beside me. It's what you want, isn't it? Power, control, no-one to tell you what you can and cannot do.'

Is that what I wanted? To rule? To have everyone at my beck and call, no-one to tell me what my place is. The idea swirled in my head as I closed my eyes, letting myself rest back against Cameron, his heat leaving me wet.

'Look at me Maeve.' I snapped my eyes open and focused on his reflection. 'Tell me it's what you want. To be my equal out there.'

'What about in here?' I gasp as he slid his fingers over my hip, skimming

my panty line ever so close...

‘In here, I’ll own you. You’ll be mine.’

His words should horrify me, but they don’t they make me want to feel his power, to submit to his touch.

‘I see you Maeve. I see what you want, what you need. You can have it. With me. Tell me you want it.’

It was another lie. A lie we both wanted to believe.

‘I do,’ I whispered, ‘But we both know I can’t live under your father’s rule until he dies.’

I step out of his grasp and turn toward him, reaching up and straightening his tie. ‘It’s him or me, and I know where your loyalty lays.’

With that, I turned and walked to the elevator, my heart racing.

CHAPTER TWENTY

CAMERON

Maeve had been icy since we arrived at the restaurant. She looked a million bucks from the neck down, but her face held a blank boredom that it didn't usually. Heads turned as she'd walked by, her legs looking absolutely killer in her Louboutins, the famous red soles matching the red of the dress perfectly. And that slit, fuck, I wanted to drop to my knees and worship at that slit in her dress. The expanse of thigh that it exposed with every step was like catnip to me.

She'd said that it would come down to her or my father. He was a scumbag, an abuser, and had filled my life with nothing but pain, but he was still my father. Loyalty to the family was everything in our world. Blood ties ruled above all. Maeve wasn't blood. Hell, it wasn't even love.

I speared another sliver of tender duck as I watched her pick at her minuscule lobster ravioli packages. We'd already sunk one bottle of red, and she'd not long ordered another, despite her screwing up her face at every mouthful. I'd only had one glass, and the pink on her cheeks told me she was feeling its effects.

'Maybe you should slow down Maeve,' I mumbled, not caring for my words travelling to the other diners, many of whom were the exact people who needed to see us together.

'Maybe you should fuck off,' she replied nonchalantly, taking another large sip, swallowing hard to force it down.

I tensed my fingers around my fork and narrowed my eyes at her.

'Come on, this is a nice place, the best there is in Edinburgh, try to enjoy it. Look like you are having a good time.'

'I'm not having a good time. I've had to sit through idle chatter with

numerous of your dad's potential new colleagues. I wanted pizza, not this fancy food.' Was it wrong that I loved it when she got bratty? Man, what I'd have given to bend her over the table in the middle of the restaurant and show her how not bored I could make her.

'Just loosen up.' I cleared my plate and set my cutlery down as she glowered at me over the rim of the wineglass.

'You want me to loosen up, do you?' Her tone left me with no doubt that that had been a very wrong thing to say. She indicated to our heart eyed waiter who was by her side in a moment, his cheeks flushing red as she set her dazzling smile upon him. A pang of jealousy gripped at my innards. I wanted those smiles for me. The temptation to have the kid taken care of washed through me before I replaced it with some steadying breaths. He's just a kid. I can barely tear my eyes from her, and I'm not a teenager.

The waiter headed off and I focus my attention back onto Maeve. What was she up to? A wicked little grin lit up her mouth as she rolled back her shoulder and set a coquettish gaze on me. Goosebumps rippled my skin at the look, like she was the devil in a delightful package.

The waiter came back and set down two shots of tequila, something I guessed wasn't a regular order in such a top tier establishment.

'You want me to do a shot?' I asked, having zero intention of doing tequila while out to dinner. In a club, sure, but with the soft tinkle of the piano and the low lit atmosphere, this was hardly the joint for it.

'No Cameron.' She tipped some salt onto the back of her hand before holding my eye as she slowly licked it from her skin. Fuck. It was all I could do to stop my boner from springing free at the sight of her looking up at me with her tongue dragging across her flesh. It should be my dick. She quickly tossed back both shots before taking the slice of lime that the waiter still held on a tiny silver platter. A tremble shook her briefly as she bit into the lime, some of the juice escaping down her chin. I wanted to crawl over the table and lick it off. But I didn't. I sat rigid in my seat, watching her.

Maeve stood after dismissing the waiter with a soft smile. Shit, she'd better not be storming off again. She downed her half full wine glass before setting her eyes on me, looking every bit the predator. I'd never felt like the prey, but shit, she looked ready to eat me the fuck up.

'You want a fun, radiant bride, right?' She stalked around the table as my mouth went dry. Oh shit. What had I done? She told me how much she hated to pretend, and there I went, pushing her. I had the distinct feeling I was

going to pay for that.

Before I could block her, she hitched her dress up a little and swung her leg over me, straddling me in the middle of the restaurant. Her breath hitched as her panties grazed at the crotch of my tux, my dick very much making his presence felt.

‘People are staring at Maeve,’ I said, knowing I should stop her, but my dick one hundred percent overruled my brain. She fit so perfectly there in my lap. I ran a hand up over her ass to the dip in her waist, watching as her pupils dilated.

‘You wanted them to stare. You wanted me to be your perfect little doll. Well, here I am. What will you do with me?’ It was taking everything in me not to kiss her, not to wrap my hands up in her hair and pull her mouth to mine. Not to lose myself in her. ‘What’s wrong Cam? Maybe you should loosen up a little.’

Mocking me with my own words. I could barely conjure up a coherent thought as she tipped her hips, grazing herself against my hardness. I wanted to bottle up the tiny whimper she let out. Instead, I gripped hard at her hip, holding her still. I didn’t want everyone else to see her dry humping me like a pair of desperate virgins. Maeve leant forward and set her lips against my ear.

‘What would you do if they weren’t here, Cam? Would you take me right here on the table? Would you stuff your dick in my throat to shut me up? I enjoy sucking dick, you know... can you imagine my lips tight around you?’

Holy shit. I needed to get us out of there. I could imagine her on her knees looking up at me through those dark-rimmed eyes, taking me like a good girl, and it was killing me.

I froze as she slid a hand between us and gripped me firmly. Her eyes widened as she sat back and looked at me.

‘What’s wrong, Maeve?’ I said with a grin, the surprise on her face an absolute picture.

‘It’s thicker than I thought it would be.’

‘It is. And when I finally fuck you, you’ll take every inch like a good girl.’ Her throat bobbed as she swallowed, but the lust was clear in her face. Her lips parted at my words and her eyes glazed ever so slightly. Hmmm, a fan of the praise... good to know. ‘Good to know you’ve been thinking about it too.’

A blush crept over her chest and up to her cheek as she bit her lower lip.

‘Tell me what you’ve been thinking, Maeve.’

She squirmed delightfully against me as the waiter cleared his throat, bringing us both smack bang back to reality. He topped up our glasses, and I grinned as Maeve made to shift off of me. I looped an arm around her waist and held her firm, reminding her that despite her display, I was still the one in charge.

‘Won’t they ask us to leave?’ She whispers.

‘I could lift that dress and spread you over this table and fuck you until you screamed and they still wouldn’t throw us out.’

She whimpered again, and I felt her wetness against me. Right through her panties and onto my trousers. So fucking hot.

‘Oh god.’

‘We own this restaurant, this entire block, in fact. But I won’t, because the first time you have my cock will be after you beg for it.’

I twisted a strand of her silken hair around my fingers and pulled a little, her head tipping back and exposing her neck as she murmured, ‘That’ll never happen.’

‘We’ll see.’ I lifted her off of me and stood, signalling to the waiter to ask for the bill.

‘Come on, let’s get you home before that tequila hits any harder. I think our work here is done.’

Gossip would likely reach Father before we even made it home.

Maeve stumbled against me as I got her into the elevator, blinking up at me slowly as she giggled. The alcohol had well and truly hit.

‘I’m sorry,’ she said, righting herself and then leaning back heavily against the mirrored wall.

‘It’s okay.’ I reassured her, reaching out to take her by the hand as she closed her eyes and groaned.

‘Is everything spinning for you too?’

‘My universe has been spinning since I met you,’ I said, knowing her memory was likely to be sketchy come morning.

Maeve tilted her head and looked down at our hands, her smaller one fitting perfectly as our fingers entwined. The lift slowed to a stop, and I led her into my apartment, sitting her down on the sofa before going to the kitchen to get her some water and pain killers.

‘You’re not as bad as everyone makes out,’ she mumbled after taking a

large drink of the tepid water. ‘You don’t have to look after me, you know. I did this to myself.’

‘I had a helping hand. I shouldn’t have asked you to fake it.’

‘I wasn’t faking all of it.’ She put the water down and stood up from the sofa, slipping her arms around my neck. I had no interest in doing anything with her while inebriated. It wasn’t my style, so I held her gently at the waist as she nuzzled into my neck. ‘I can’t fake how wet I got in your lap.’

Christ on a cracker.

‘Maeve,’ I whispered as she wound her fingers into the back of my hair and tugged my head down toward her. Her perfume lingered on her skin, the sweet scent so very tempting as she pulled my face toward hers. She moaned as I wound my hand into the back of her hair and gripped her. It was like a lust filled arrow to my dick. Fuck, she was so responsive.

‘I want you to fuck me so badly,’ she whispered, her breath tickling over my lips, only a hair’s breadth separating our mouths.

‘Not tonight, princess. If you still feel that way in the morning, let me know. There are so many things I want to do to you. I want to taste every inch.’

Her whole body trembled in my arms, her lips opening as she exhaled and her eyes searching mine. She tried to close the small space between our mouths but I shook my head.

‘Be a good girl for me. It’s taking all of my willpower not to lay you down and fill you with my dick.’

She squirmed against my hold and reached between us, cupping my hardening cock and giving me a shit-eating grin.

‘You want me,’ she said, her voice silky and wanting, ‘and I want you. Why hold back just because I’ve had a few drinks? I thought you were supposed to be bad.’

‘Because when I fuck you, I want you to remember every second afterward. I want you to have watched clear headed as I eat you, and to remember getting on your knees and sucking me down into that pretty little mouth. You’re going to remember every second of me sliding into you for the first time, feeling the stretch. I don’t want a half checked out Maeve. One who’s emboldened by alcohol. I want you aware and needy because you are desperate to fuck me, not because you’re drunk.’

‘I’m not that drunk.’ She pressed her body fully against mine, those tits hot against my chest.

Then her expression changed as she paled. Her hand flew to her mouth as I released her from my grip.

‘Come on, let’s get you to the sink.’ I lifted her into my arms as she held her mouth and deposited her in front of the kitchen sink just in time. I pulled her hair back as she welcomed the tequila back into the world.

After the first round of vomit, I slipped to my knees and loosened her heels, my fingers sliding over her toned calves as I lifted her feet one by one, setting the shoes aside.

‘I’m... so... sorry,’ Maeve said between sobs.

‘It’s okay.’

I held her hair until I was fairly certain there was nothing left to come up. Silent tears rolled down her pretty face, so I got a cloth and cleaned her up, wiping the black makeup streaks away. I grabbed a t-shirt and pair of boxers and held them out to her. She took them meekly, muttering something about her own pyjamas, but I wasn’t about to go into her room and rake through her things. I watched as she tried to pull her dress up over her head, getting tangled in her drunk confusion.

I stepped up and helped her untangle her arms. Her skin was so soft and warm beneath my fingers and I stifled a groan as I pulled her dress over her head, leaving her standing in my kitchen in nothing but a tiny black thong. Christ, she was a dream. Body to kill for. Soft but still strong, those thighs would be my downfall.

I lifted the top and pulled it down over her head before letting her slip her panties off and put my boxers on.

‘Let’s get you to bed,’ I said, grabbing her water and a box of dry crackers and walking her through the corridor to her door.

‘Thank you Cam.’ Her using my preferred name again brought a shiver of pleasure. It was a little thing, but I much preferred to be called Cam. She’d finally given in to it. ‘I didn’t mean to be such a mess.’

‘We’re all a mess really, Maeve. Don’t worry about it.’

She stood up on her toes and placed a soft kiss on my cheek before letting herself into her room.

I cleaned up the kitchen before collapsing on the sofa and switching on the TV, exhausted from the rollercoaster of the night. I’d wanted Maeve so badly, and there was little doubt that she wanted me too. In the cold light of day, her situation gave her more reason to fight the desire. But beneath her reservations, there was a draw to me. I’d been worried it was all a front, or all

in my head, but she'd been so hot and wet for me. Sure, she could just be horny from a few weeks without sex, but there was an energy colliding between us and turning into fire.

An action movie was halfway through, but I'd seen it before so I left it on as I helped myself to a water and sank back into the deep sofa. I heard a shuffling behind me and turned to see Maeve wrapped in a duvet, her eyes wide as she approached. She looked fucking adorable.

'Can I stay with you for a bit? I promise I won't try anything. I love this movie.'

'Come on,' I said, lifting an arm and welcoming her warm body against me, spreading the duvet out over the two of us. She yawned and smiled, leaning heavily against me until she eventually relaxed, her head slipping down into my lap as I idly ran my fingers through her hair.

'I like pretending with you,' she said sleepily as I continued to toy with her hair.

'I'm not sure how much pretending we're doing,' I replied, my voice barely more than a whisper as I listened to her breathing settle into a steady rhythm.

I was in too deep. I'd been questioning it, but I knew without a doubt it was more than just lust I was feeling for Maeve. I wanted to protect her, to care for her and to make her problems disappear. Unfortunately, her two biggest problems were my father and the fact she had been forced to marry me. Neither was an easy fix. I could try to convince Father to let her go, but selfishly, I didn't want to. I wanted to keep her.

She had been correct when she'd said it would come down to her or my father, and it was putting me in a position that made me feel sick to my stomach. Father wouldn't hesitate to use her against me if he thought I cared for her to a point my loyalty to the family was in doubt. How could I expect her to live in that position, though?

I swept an errant piece of hair from her face and groaned as she smiled softly in her sleep. She'd looked killer in her heels and red hot dress, but wrapped up in my t-shirt and curled in my lap was even hotter. The hard edge was gone, and she looked sweet and tender. We both had a hard outer shell thanks to the world we'd been raised in. Gilded cages for us both.

I admitted to myself that I was falling for Maeve in a way that would likely end in disaster. It's why I'd always avoided getting entwined in any real way with anyone. I'd cared for my mum and my sister through so many

tears and so much pain, both physical and emotional. I'd never wanted to inflict our fucked up family on anyone else. Then Mum had left, and it had ripped me apart. If someone who loved me so much could leave, then anyone could. Opening myself back up to that made me want to push Maeve away. And I couldn't. I'd tried, but pushing her away just left her in my father's domain and I couldn't leave her open to his abuse. I understood why my mother left, but I couldn't forgive it. Could I open myself up to that again? With Father there, she'd leave me eventually, either in a coffin or fleeing home and inciting a war. Would dad be happy to just let us be happy? He'd have that union, and if she was happy, her brothers might let her be. Maybe the war could actually end. But my father had killed her mother and maimed her father before forcing Maeve into a marriage with the enemy. A little happiness wasn't enough glue to heal those wounds.

I sighed as I reached down and ran a finger over her wedding band. If only it had been different for us.

CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

MAEVE

Since my drunken night, I'd been avoiding getting too close to Cameron, keeping a chasm between us large enough to fend off the undeniable lust that had been swamping me. I'd awoken the morning after our dinner, tangled in his arms on the sofa, pressed to his chest with him sleeping soundly. It had taken me a few minutes to remember enough about the night before for the shame to swarm through me. The night came back in flashes as I recalled being in his lap, his hardness right there against my underpants. I remembered the tequila, and his dark eyes as he watched me. His softness as I vomited and his reluctance to have me despite offering myself up to him on a platter. Yet still, I'd sought comfort in his touch.

I'd made an ass of myself.

So I avoided talking about the night in any way, shape, or form. If I pretended it didn't exist, then maybe he would, too. I'd been so forward, so wanton. It was no wonder I'd have put him off.

The following days, we'd coexisted in an awkward truce. By day he worked and I swam, shopped and ate. I'd even had Katie round for coffee. We'd eat whatever dinner the chef dropped off together before Cameron would go off and brutalise himself in the gym until he looked ready to drop. Then the stalemate began. We'd both take to the sofa, sitting at opposite ends and trying our best to ignore the sizzling tension in the room until one of us eventually called it a night. I didn't want the space; I wanted to curl up in his lap. Shame prevented me from suggesting it.

We were on the sofa half watching a documentary and doom scrolling on our phones when Cameron's phone pinged. He clenched his jaw as he opened the message before tipping his head back and closing his eyes with a sigh.

‘Is everything okay?’

‘No. Father wants us at a party tomorrow.’

My mind whirred. I did not want to be around Harold. But I needed to find out what he was up to. I needed out. ‘Where?’

‘At the mansion. Want’s us to come along and play happy families. Put on a united front and all.’

‘Do we both have to be there?’

Cameron raised a brow at me. ‘Do I really need to answer that?’

I shook my head. Defying Harold wasn’t an option.

‘He has some new business arrangements that have come about because of the McGowan-Thompson truce. We need to at least show face.’

‘Can we come back home after?’

Cameron smiled at me, and it sent a flutter into my stomach. God, he was gorgeous when he smiled. Who knew those dimples had been hidden under his intense stares? ‘Yeah, we can come home.’

I hadn’t realised I’d called it home. Was it starting to feel that way? My brothers still felt like home, but being here with Cameron wasn’t nearly as dreadful as I thought it would be. Sure, I still had to have his men nearby if I went out, but that was no different to how it had been at home, just a fresh set of guys. Other than that, I had much more freedom than I had before. If it weren’t for Harold’s ever lingering threat, I’d dare have said I could have been happy. If only I could break the walls, I’d put up to protect myself from getting hurt. The walls gave me a sense of protection, and Cameron seemed loath to interfere with the distance I kept creating.

‘What should I wear? Will it be formal?’ I had no idea if it was a casual soiree or a whole black-tie affair.

‘Wear whatever makes you happy. Think I’m going to turn in, I’m beat.’

‘How will I know what looks good?’ I said as he stood up and stretched, a little sliver of his rippled stomach tantalising me as he did.

‘You look good in everything.’ He held my gaze while warmth crept into my cheeks. Damn, I should just walk over there and kiss him. Every part of me longed to do it, to give into the desires that wracked me day and night. It would be foolish, though. Fucking would only add even more complications to our situation. I had a feeling giving into him physically would end with a pair of broken hearts when I had to face up to where the relationship was headed. On a fast train to disasterville.

‘Thanks,’ I said as he walked out towards his room, leaving me in the

dark. Alone again.
Always alone.

There were bodies everywhere in the mansion, filling it with music and chatter and more life than I'd felt in my time there. The entertaining rooms had been decked out to the nines, and I was glad I opted for a more formal dress, knee length and sleek, a lot more demure than my split to the thigh number.

We strolled through the rooms as I marvelled at the huge floral displays that encased just about every available space. Man, Harold didn't hold back. He must have really wanted to solidify whichever deal he was aiming for.

I had a hand through Cameron's bent arm as he guided me about the room, swapping pleasantries with guests. Some I knew, and many I didn't. We had some overlap in our business ties, but most people picked a side when the disputes were as volatile as our families had been.

Both Cameron and I smiled our first genuine smiles of the evening when Katie bounded toward us and pulled us into a three-way hug before slipping two tiny delicate hors d'oeuvres into our hands.

'These are Cam's fave, and there were only a few left, so I snagged them.'

The little pastry packet was a bomb of flavour on my tongue, a richly spiced meat centre making my mouth water even as I ate it.

'Oh my god,' I moaned.

'I know, right? Chef is the best. They were the only thing that got us through Father's parties when we were younger.' Katie grinned as I nodded.

'He is clearly the best.'

'Do you want a glass of something? There's a stack of champagne over on the table?' She indicated to the far side of the room.

'No, thank you.' After the last evening out, I was erring way on the safe side.

'Cam?' she asked.

'I'm okay Katie. So what's happening? Where's Father?'

'He's around here somewhere. Don't worry, you'll feel the atmosphere change whenever he gets close enough, it's how I avoid him. Speaking of which, I need to dive out for a bit.' Katie's eyes twinkled.

'Dive out where? You can't leave. Dad will be furious.'

‘He’s seen me. He knows I’m here. With this many people, he won’t notice me stepping out for an hour or two.’

‘And where are you going?’ Cam narrowed his eyes at his sister, his arm tensing beneath my fingers.

‘I have a date.’

‘With who?’

‘Do you know The Gilded Knife?’ she said, looking like she’d bust out of her skin with excitement.

‘No,’ Cameron said blankly.

‘I do. They’re a band. My sister loves them.’ They were a pretty big deal in the rock circuits.

‘I met the singer, Tommy, through a friend and he asked me to meet him for dinner.’

‘Fuck, Katie, you cannot be going getting involved with someone in the public eye. Dad will kill you if it brings journalists snooping into our affairs.’

‘We’ll be discrete. I’ll have Dad’s minions with me too.’ Katie shrugged at her big brother. She looked thrilled. Whether it was about Tommy, defying her Father or annoying her brother, I wasn’t sure.

‘Don’t be late back, and be safe,’ Cameron said. ‘I’ll kill him myself if he fucks with you.’

We watched her go as she bobbed through the crowd until I felt a tug against my hand. Cameron walked us over to a corner and smiled down at me. He held out his other hand and showed me the remaining pastry. He hadn’t eaten his.

‘Open up.’

‘But they’re your favourite.’

‘Watching you eat yours gave me more pleasure than eating one ever has.’

I flushed and bit my lower lip as his eyes darkened. He reached up and ran a thumb over my lower lip where my teeth had just been. ‘Open.’

I did as he said, a little thrill making me squirm as I stood there, mouth open for him. It felt dirtier than it should have.

He slid his thumb over my bottom teeth and I groaned and let my eyes flutter closed. I craved his touch so much more that I was admitting to myself.

‘Look at me, Maeve.’ His voice had my eyes springing open, wanting to please him.

He slipped the pastry into my mouth before taking his finger to his lips and licking it clean. I bit down into the delightful canape and moaned again. We needed to steal Harold's chef and make him live in the kitchen just to make these canapes for me every day.

Cameron watched me intently as I chewed and swallowed before giving him a shy smile.

'I'm obsessed with your mouth,' he said, making me want to squirm all over again. What the hell do I say to that? 'I'm going to grab some water. Can I get you a bottle?'

I nodded dumbly, feeling like a pile of jelly whenever he focused all his attention on me.

'Stay here. I'll be back in a few.'

I lost sight of him as he headed toward the exit of the room, presumably to find a bar or the kitchen, I guessed.

He'd barely left when an arm slipped tightly around my waist and pulled me back into the recess behind where we'd been standing. I squealed before a hand clamped over my mouth.

Harold's voice filled my ear as his clammy fingers dug into my hip. I froze. I wanted to run, but I had a feeling it wasn't in my best interest, so I steeled myself and waited to see what he was after. 'Well, well, well. Look what we have here.'

'Harold,' I said as he released my mouth, hoping he couldn't hear the quiver in my voice. He grazed his hand down the length of my arm as I fought a wave of pure rage. How dare he touch me?

'I just wanted to let you know you need to keep that pretty mouth of yours shut tonight. I don't want another repeat of that shit you pulled last time. I'm guessing my piece of shit son didn't give you the beating you deserved.'

His fingers dug even tighter into my hips and I wanted to cry when I felt him stiffen against my ass, but didn't want to give him the satisfaction of my tears.

'You'd better hope I don't find a reason to expedite my plans to dispose of you, my dear, because when I do, you are going to beg for a bullet by the time I'm through with you. And I'm going to enjoy every second--'

A vibrating from his pocket broke off his words as he dropped his hands. I swivelled away from him and ducked around the corner, taking a deep, shuddering breath. I needed to get away from him. I followed the corridor

around to the left, away from the loud voices and flowing music, until I slipped into an alcove half covered with a monstrous potted plant.

The tears came silently as I focused on breathing. Harold had meant every word. Telling Cameron would be the wise choice, but what would it do other than make him angry? He'd never defy his father for me.

Footsteps sounded outside the alcove and I stilled, cowering back against the wall as Harold's hushed voice neared.

'Yes, I'll be there to pick up the cargo myself. You know the way I work.' I listened while barely daring to breathe in case Harold caught me there. 'But it better be of better quality this time. The last pair barely had any meat on them and no-one wants to buy meth-heads. I need them to be good quality to make this worth my while. The buyers expect top tier.'

My heart all but stopped as I went over his words in my head. He was talking about people. Fuck. My father-in-law was truly the worst of the worst. Dealing in human trafficking was too morally debased even for the worst of the mafia around there. They'd be furious if... no when... they found out. But how could I prove it? Overhearing two sentences on a phonecall wouldn't be enough proof. I needed solid evidence. Determination steeled my resolve. I would watch him burn all right.

Harold paused and listened to whoever was on the other end of the call as he opened the door across from the alcove I hid in. Beyond the door lay what could only be his office. There was a solid gleaming wooden desk with a well-worn leather chair visible, along with a ceiling height built-in bookcase running the full length of the wall behind the desk. He moved off to the right and out of view. I needed to see what he was doing. Walking on the toes of my shoes to minimise the noise, I snuck forward from the alcove and moved to my left until I could just see him, praying he didn't look up and spot me.

Sweat slicked my palms as I listened to him talking and watched as he pulled open some drawers, grabbing a pen and a notepad and jotting something down. 'Yeah, I'll be there. Same way as usual, even though we've changed the pickup point. You come in alone, make sure no-one else knows. I'll bring the money in cash. Make sure they are well secured. The last one scratched me and I ended up knocking out a tooth. Toothless bitches aren't worth as much. Don't let that happen again.'

'Maeve?' I jumped as Cam touched my arm, having been so engrossed in hearing what Harold said that I didn't even hear him approach. My pulse thundered as I took one last glance in the office, seeing Harold tuck the

notepad back into his desk. I needed to get in there and get it.

‘What are you doing?’ he whispered, dropping his voice as he spied his father beyond the partially open door.

I pulled him back over toward the alcove, narrowing my eyes at him and keeping my voice low. ‘Are you sure that your dad’s not up to something worse than drugs and weapons?’

‘He has his fingers in most of the criminal pies, Maeve. Everyone does. Nothing worse than your family does.’

‘You promise me?’

I searched his eyes, looking for an inkling that he knew about trafficking. If he did, he wasn’t the man I was beginning to believe he was.

‘I promise. Why? Are you still out here trying to take him down?’ Cameron drew his lips into a line, and I couldn’t tell whether he was annoyed or worried. I couldn’t go throwing out accusations until I had proof. Hopefully, proof would be enough to sway his familial loyalty. If it didn’t, I’d be forced to take him down to. Even the thought of hurting him sent a pain to my chest. I was in too deep.

I opened my mouth to respond right as the door opened. I squeaked as Cameron swung me into the alcove and pressed me hard up against the wall, one hand on my throat. The pressure was light, but boy did it send mixed messages to my nether regions. My brain took a moment to catch up, realising he was giving us a reason to be there, to avoid suspicion at why I was lurking outside his father’s office. I squirmed beneath his grip, playing my part in the charade, forcing him to grip me tighter. Electricity rampaged through me at his touch, his breath hot against my cheek as he pressed his face threateningly against my turned head.

I heard Harold laugh through the mist of my desire, sending my tummy roiling.

‘That’s more like it, Cameron. Take advantage while you can, son. She could be done with a lesson in submission.’

Cameron tensed against me, from rage or arousal, I wasn’t sure. Maybe both. Both combined in me, the rage at Harold and the heat of being so close to Cameron for the first time since I’d drunkenly straddled him.

I heard the door shut, and to my dismay, he turned a key in the lock, too. Shit. I’d hoped to lose Cameron and grab the paper before we left. Telling Cameron wasn’t an option yet, and I was doubtful he’d have a key. I’d have to come back again and find a way in.

As Harold's footsteps petered out, I expected Cameron to let me go. Instead, he dragged a thumb over my jawline, his hand slipping from my throat and moving up into my hair. With a tug, he tipped my head upward, my lips so near to his.

I blinked up at him, losing myself in those gold-flecked eyes.

'He's going to kill me, isn't he?' I said, moaning as he ran a finger over my lower lip.

'No. I wouldn't let him.'

His thigh pressed between my own, sending a thrill through me as I fought the urge to press harder against him. 'Why do you care? You hate me, right?'

His glare intensified as he pressed his already hardening dick against my stomach.

'I hate that I was forced to marry you.' His lips brushed my cheek as he spoke, his voice strangled. 'I hate that you were forced into my life, and my home, against my will. I hate that I have no control. I hate that you are hot and cold with me. I hate that you are used as a threat to hurt me.'

I whimpered as he ground his thigh against me, his actions and words colliding in a way that filled me with confusion.

'But most of all, I hate that you've wriggled beneath my skin and that I can't get you out of my fucking head. I hate that I don't hate you anymore. It would be so much easier if I did.'

My pulse quickened as my heart ached for him, realising he wanted me just as bad as I wanted him.

'I hate that I want to hole up in my bed with you and never let you leave. I want to forget that anything else exists beyond us. I hate that I want to kiss you so badly that it hurts.'

He took a ragged breath as he stopped talking and looked into my eyes.

'So kiss me,' I breathed.

He slid his other hand into my hair to join the first and rested his head briefly against mine before I closed my eyes, breathing him in. Up close, I could smell his spiced aftershave and soap, and beneath that, an addictive smell that could only be him. Then our lips met, ever so tentatively at first. It was soft and searching, both of us exploring one another as we knocked down an emotional wall together.

Cam trembled against me as he pulled me full against him, his chest pressing into my tits as he enveloped me entirely between him and the wall.

My body responded with an increasing pulse between my legs. His tongue caught mine and I moaned into his mouth as he deepened the kiss. Tingles sweep over my skin, bringing goose bumps to the surface as I lost myself in him. He dragged his fingers down my throat and traced them over my collarbone as he broke the kiss, leaving me bereft of his hot mouth.

We breathed hard against each other as his lips explored my neck, heat following wherever he touched. I was on fire, his touch burning through me and igniting deep inside of me.

'Fuck,' I whispered as he nipped at my earlobe, my legs jellifying below me. He groaned against my neck and I couldn't resist taking another taste. I pulled his mouth back to mine and feasted on him, giving in fully to the desires that had wracked me since our honeymoon. I nipped at his lower lip before slipping my tongue back into his hot mouth, whimpering as he dragged me up the wall with his hands beneath my ass, wrapping my legs around his waist. The kiss could have gone on for seconds, minutes, fuck hours. I'd lost all track of time and complete control of myself.

'Let's go home,' Cameron said when I finally allowed him to pull back, 'otherwise I'm going to end up screwing you right here against the wall.'

'Benny better drive fast. I'm not sure I'll make it all the way to Edinburgh.'

Cameron's lips were swollen from kissing and he'd never looked sexier as he smiled at me. That full smile he so rarely shared.

The Harold problem would have to wait. I wanted him so fucking badly. Wanted to experience joy with Cameron before I went and ruined it all.

CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

CAMERON

We'd kissed.

She was everything I'd imagined she'd be. Soft, sensual, so responsive beneath my lips. I'd barely been able to contain myself, my senses so full of her.

The atmosphere in the back of the car was thrumming, so thick and palpable that even Benny seemed to feel it as he drove us home. It took every bit of willpower to keep to my side of the back seat, to keep my hands off of Maeve. She was like an addiction, and I wanted to surrender entirely to her thrall.

The lights of the city enveloped the car, my pulse quickening as we neared the apartment. I wanted to kiss her until my lips bruised, until she melted into me, until there wasn't a single inch of her that my lips were unfamiliar with. One taste hadn't even touched the surface. I needed more. So much more.

As we pulled up to the building, I'd ripped my door open before Benny could even fully come to a stop.

He stepped out, but I was at Maeve's door before he could reach it, helping her out myself. She blushed as she slipped her fingers into my hand and allowed me to steady her.

Benny looked a little lost at my theft of his job, but fixed us both with a warm smile. He's always been a favourite employee, a truly good person, despite being embroiled in a dirty business. I tried to have him assigned to our Edinburgh area as much as I could, so he didn't have to be involved with Father too much.

'You two have a good night.' His eyes crinkled as he grinned. Before

giving us a gentle nod and getting back in the car.

‘We will, thanks Benny.’

Maeve practically dragged me toward the building, squirming with need as the doorman exchanged pleasantries. I liked a woman who wasn’t afraid to let her needs be known.

The elevator doors had barely closed before she was on me. Our lips meeting in a clash of fire. Tongues dancing as she whimpered low in her throat. Fuck, her little whimpers and moans drove me insane.

The ride ended all too soon, the doors to my apartment opening as we stumbled out, still wrapped up in one another. I pushed her up against a wall as I tasted her neck, licking and nipping my way to her collarbone as she dug her nails into my shoulders with fiery little pinpricks of pain.

‘Please tell me we’re going to fuck?’ She said breathily as I teased at her throat.

‘All in good time. I want to take my time with you.’

She pouted at me, which made me laugh, and the delight in her eyes warmed me through.

‘You have a lovely laugh,’ she said, reaching up and stroking my cheek. ‘You should do it more often.’

‘You make me want to smile more than I ever have, Maeve.’ I dipped my head and placed a kiss on the edge of her lips, rewarded with her trembling beneath me. ‘You are the best punishment I have ever had.’

I ran a hand down to her waist and pulled her flush against me. Her pupils dilated as she pressed against my erection, and she bit her lip in that sexy way that made me want to groan.

‘You’re so fucking hot, Maeve. You drive me crazy.’

‘You’re not so bad yourself.’ She pulled me back onto her lips and we lost ourselves in one another, making our way through the apartment in a tangle of tongues and limbs until we ended up in the sitting room in front of the wall of windows with the city lights stretching out in front of us.

Begrudgingly, I stopped kissing her to turn her around, pushing her hair over one shoulder as I found her zip, slowly inching it down and revealing the smooth skin of her back inch by glorious inch. My mouth followed the zip as I spread kisses down her spine, her gasp sending a series of pangs directly to my dick. If I got any harder, I’d end up exploding in my fucking pants.

I slipped her dress from her shoulders and let it drop to the floor, leaving

her standing in nothing but a tiny pair of lacy underwear. I stood up and pulled her back against me, watching our reflections in the window. She met my gaze there, and I smiled at the sight of us. We looked good together, so perfect with her in my arms.

I'd known she was attractive before we met, but I hadn't realised how fucking amazing she'd be. She'd gone through a shit upbringing with fucked up family ideals and an overbearing father leaving her feeling inferior, but despite it, or maybe because of it, she was stronger than she knew. She thrummed with a desire to succeed that made me weak. Her drive to prove herself was wasted on her brothers, but could flourish with me. If I found a way to make it work. And I would. Somehow. Because I was all in with Maeve, even if I hadn't convinced her to be all in with me yet.

I grazed my fingers over her throat as they trembled, leaving me feeling like a virgin discovering a woman for the first time. I'd been with enough women in my time, but it felt different when you cared about the woman you were with, and I'd never had feelings that went beyond lust before. I was falling for Maeve big time, and I wanted to drag her over the cliff with me.

'Look at you, Maeve,' I said to our reflections, my mouth at her ear as she leaned back against me. 'So very pretty. So needy.'

'I've dreamt about this,' she admitted wistfully, and I closed my eyes for a moment, trying to steady myself. It would be insane to be jealous of dream me, right?

'Me too. Every night I'm plagued by wanting you, filling my dreams with what could be. What I want.'

She blushed in the reflection and I reached down to cup a breast, her nipple hardening beneath my fingers as I teased it. Her pulse quickened against my lips as I kissed her neck while my hands got acquainted with her body. I loved the way she gasped when I twisted a nipple, sending her ass back into my cock, those little panties grinding against my tented trousers.

'I want to taste you,' she said, turning to take my mouth once more, giving me a delightful view of her ass in the window. And those fucking thighs that had pulled me in right from the start.

'Ladies first,' I replied, dipping my hand between us to graze over her already wet knickers. She moaned into my mouth before pulling away and dropping to her knees, kicking off her heels as she knelt.

'What if I asked nicely?' she said, running her hands up my thighs and over my crotch. I bit back a moan as I looked down at her. The sight of her at

my feet looking up at me with those glittering eyes was one I'd happily go to my grave, having seen. Fuck.

'I suppose I could make an exception, if you ask nicely.' Who was I kidding? She could do whatever she wanted to me. She owned me in every way that counted.

'Please, Cam, can I suck your cock? I'm desperate to taste you. I've been dreaming about you fucking my mouth. Please?'

Holy shit. I had to close my eyes for a second to centre myself. I was on the verge of coming before she'd even taken my cock out. I'd never been so worked up and didn't know how I was going to let her wrap her mouth around me without making an embarrassment of myself.

'Yes Maeve,' I said through gritted teeth as she flew to my zip, releasing me like I was a buffet and she a woman starved, 'Go slow though, I'm on the edge.'

Her eyes widened as she sat back on her knees and looked at my dick. I was still fully clothed other than my cock sprung free from its zipper prison, while she was all but naked at my feet. It was a heady sight. It amplified her vulnerability and made me weak.

I waited until she'd had her fill of the view, taking the moment to think non-sexy thoughts, hoping it would calm me down. It didn't work. My head was full of Maeve and she wouldn't be pushed out.

When she leant forward and placed a long lick from base to tip with her wet tongue, I had to reach out and steady myself against the pillar nearby. Fuck. I wouldn't last five fucking minutes beneath that tongue.

She grinned, evidently pleased with the shudder that roiled through me as she continued her attack with that hot little tongue of hers. Every time it rolled around the near bursting head, I had to try not to explode. I moaned as she fisted my cock, running her hand up and down the length while licking the tip, all the while keeping her eyes on my face.

'You're so thick,' she moaned, her lips still on my cock as she spoke.

'My cock, I hope?'

She giggled up at me before wrapping her lips around me, taking me into her mouth for the first time. Every nerve ending in my body was on fire. Fucking hell, her mouth felt like home, like it had been the place made for me. I let out a strangled moan as she moved her mouth on me, taking me further along her tongue.

'Holy shit, Maeve. Your mouth--' I cut myself off as she slid her hands

onto my ass and pulled me deeper into her mouth, groaning as the head of my cock grazed the back of her throat.

‘Such a good girl. Look at you swallowing me down.’ Her eyes watered as she blinked up at me, her mouth stuffed full. I wrapped my hands in her hair, making it seem like I was holding her so I could fuck her face, but actually hoping to control the pace so I didn’t blow before I had the chance to please her.

She whimpered as my fingers applied pressure at her roots, pulling her back off of me. My eyes widened when she gripped her nails into my ass and pulled her mouth right back onto me, pulling a little too hard and gagging as my dick speared her throat.

My thighs trembled as I tried to pull back again. She released her mouth with a pop before fixing me with a glare.

‘Why are you holding back?’

I ran a finger over her swollen lips. ‘Because if I let go, I’m going to cum in two seconds flat like a virgin. I can’t take it Maeve, you’re so fucking hot and I’ve dreamt about this for weeks. I want you so fucking bad, but I’m so close to the edge already.’

She licked her lips and looked up at me with a wicked grin. ‘Good. I want to taste you. I want you to lose control.’

I groaned as she licked at the head of my cock before moaning onto it. ‘I want you so fucking needy, Cam, that you’ll never let me go.’

When she slipped her mouth back over me, I lost myself in the haze, gritting my teeth as she sucked me down. I gave in, gave up, gave control over to her.

Her nails trailed sharply down my thighs as she took everything I offered and drove me to exasperation, wild with desire for the beauty at my feet. I didn’t stand a chance.

With the next onslaught of her tongue against the head of my cock, I lost the battle, gripping her hard against me as I bucked into her, the tension in my balls loosening with each thrust into her hot mouth.

‘I’m sorry,’ I mouthed to the sky as a flush heated my face. Fuck, I’d barely lasted a minute. I rode out the final, glorious strains of my orgasm as I looked down at Maeve. Her eyes streamed and as I slipped my cock from her mouth, a load of cum followed it as she spat it out, letting it drip down over her chin and onto her tits. Hottest fucking thing I’d seen.

‘Don’t be,’ she said with a wicked grin. ‘I enjoyed every second.’

‘It’s not normally like that. I’ve just been thinking about you for weeks. Every day has been torture, being close to you but unable to reach out and take you.’

She flushed happily and dropped her eyes to her knees, her dark lashes skimming her heated cheeks. ‘I’ve got a feeling I’ll fare no better.’

I ran a hand through my hair and closed my eyes for a second, waiting for the blood to come back into my head and legs, feeling like she’d stolen all of my vigour.

I reached down and pulled her to her feet, pulling her against me and kissing her tenderly, holding her closer when she tried to stop her cum-slicked tits from touching my shirt.

‘I’m a mess.’

‘I know. I don’t care. I want to kiss you. We’ve got lost time to make up for.’

An unfamiliar feeling warmed me as she wrapped her arms around my neck and let me kiss her, tasting myself on her lips as she moaned ever so prettily in my arms. If I wasn’t mistaken, it may well have been happiness, something that had evaded me for a very long time.

‘Come on,’ I said, fastening my trousers before pulling her up into my arms and carrying her through to the kitchen, setting her down on the cool countertop beside the sink, laughing as she squealed. ‘Let’s get you cleaned up.’

I took out a clean cloth and put it under the water, waiting until it got hot before squeezing it out and using it to wipe up the mascara that marked her cheeks, and the cum from her face and chest.

‘We are going to get messy again, though, right?’

‘You bet your ass we are. I’ve barely begun with the things I intend to do to you.’

She wriggled against my touch, tilting her head back in a way that had me halfway back to hard.

Time for round two, and this time, I wouldn’t be tapping out so early.

CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

MAEVE

Every single part of my body craved Cameron.

His lips, god his lips drove me fucking bananas. I needed them everywhere. I'd never been so brazen in my desires with a man before, but there was no holding back with Cam. I didn't just want to have him in my mouth. I'd felt like I had needed it, like I needed food when starving.

For the first time, he'd really let his guard down and let me take what I wanted, and the rush of power had been delectable. Knowing I could drive him to losing control with my mouth made me so bloody wet that my panties were sodden. He hadn't even really touched me yet.

I'd been unsure whether he was just going through the motions for a quick lay, but feeling him tremble beneath my touch and seeing him war with wanting to cum and wanting to hold off to please me had sealed it. It was more than just a fuck. There was a new warmth to Cam that hadn't been there before, a softness behind his dark eyes that made me melt. I was playing with fire and I didn't care if I got burnt. I wanted to incinerate beneath him.

Cameron dropped the cum-stained cloth into the sink and replaced it with his mouth, pulling me forward on the counter so that my thighs spread around his waist as he teased at my jaw with his lips. I arched my back, pressing my tits in to him as he lowered his mouth, kissing down my neck, tipping me back at an angle where he could capture a nipple between his teeth.

The contrast between his teeth as he nipped and then his hot tongue as he soothed drove a coil of want into me. I panted against his mouth until he drew back, leaving me needy all over again.

'Are you on birth control?' he said, tipping my face to his and meeting my eyes.

‘Yes. And I’m clean.’

‘Me too. Do you want me to use protection?’

‘No. I want there to be nothing between us.’

He let out a growl that delighted me, sounding utterly animalistic. I wanted to be his prey, wanted him to pin me beneath him and lose ourselves to instinct.

‘Such a dirty girl,’ he said as he leaned into kiss me, the tenderness gone and replaced with heat. He hardened against me as I arched further, grinding myself against him, the friction making me tingle. ‘I need your knickers off. Now.’

I wriggled down from the counter and slipped them down over my thighs. The moment I had them off, he placed me back on the counter and dropped to his knees. Cam reached up and spread my thighs wide, surveying my slick folds as I squirmed beneath his gaze. A picture of the last time he’d been between my thighs brought a shiver before he’d even touched me.

He started with my thighs, placing fervent kisses from my knee up to my crotch, only his breath reaching the spot where I needed him before he moved to the other thigh and repeated the long line of kisses.

‘I fucking hate these thighs. From the moment I saw them, I dreamed about being beneath them. Between them. Cumming on them. They have consumed me no matter how much I tried to deny it.’

I slid my hands into his hair and attempted to pull him onto me, so desperate for his touch.

‘Patience, Maeve. I want to savour every second of this. I love how needy you are, though.’

‘Please?’

I whimpered as his breath skimmed my wetness, and shuddered hard when he licked me hard to the right of my pussy, then to the left, missing the centre where I wanted him. The fucker was toying with me.

He reached up and cupped me in his hand, making me squirm to gain more friction, but frustratingly, it didn’t help.

‘That’s it, Maeve, show me how badly you want my tongue in you.’

My cheeks heated as I did. I gave in to it and ground against his palm, dropping any pretence of being above begging for it. And my whole body suffused with pleasure at his words. I’d never been spoken to like Cam spoke to me, nor had sex teased out into delightful torture. Perhaps it was the one place where I was happy to let him take control.

‘That’s it Princess, you’re doing so well, showing me just how badly you need it.’

I narrowed my eyes when removed his hand, only to lose myself when he replaced it with his mouth. It was like instant fireworks. My body lurched as he tasted me, dipping his tongue inside before dragging it up to where I needed it the most. As it grazed my clit, I all but saw stars.

Fucking hell.

He hummed low at my reaction, sending the vibration along his tongue and against me.

‘I’m going to cum.’ I didn’t want to cum. I wanted to enjoy his tongue for so much longer, but my need was too great. He rolled his tongue around my knotted flesh until I came apart, my hips bucking against his face as I lost control, wracked by wave after wave of pleasure.

‘Good girl,’ he groaned against me.

I expected him to stop, but he didn’t. He deepened his motions, shifting from my clit to the area around and below it, giving me a few moments to catch my breath while the intensity died down. My clit would be too sensitive for direct action, but he knew to give it a break while he wound me back up.

As I relaxed into his mouth, letting the sensation of his tongue beckon forth another wave of arousal, I touched his face. We were a far cry from the first time I’d tried, back in paradise after we’d shared the bed for the first time. After we’d started pretending. But when had the pretending turned into wanting him for real? Was it seeing him with his sister? Realising he wasn’t completely stone. Was it when he cared for me, even though we were at odds? Was it in the way he looked at me, like I was precious and wondrous and perfect?

I gasped as he slipped his finger into me, lancing me deep. He curled it forward as he took my clit fully into his mouth, leaving me fighting for breath. I was warned about the enemy’s slick tongue and how they’d use it against you. I always thought they were talking about manipulation, but riding the enemy’s face would be my downfall. The tingles he sent through me were delicious. I could live right there on his face had I the choice.

‘More,’ I groaned as he slowly fingered me, kissing and licking at me and making me desperate for him.

‘My dirty girl wants more?’ He slipped a second finger in as I let out a breath between my teeth. Fuck. I’d only just cum, how could I be so needy for him already?

‘Yes... Please...’ I shifted forward on the counter, wanting more, and more, and more.

When a third finger joined the others, giving me that slightly wonderful stretchy ache, I shuddered. As he pulled back and filled me again, I came to the edge once more. I tensed around his fingers, but much to my derision, he stopped.

‘Don’t stop!’ I looked down at him, only to see a smirk cross his face.

‘I told you I want you desperate before I’ll give you my cock.’

‘I am desperate.’

‘I want you to need it as bad as I do. I want every nerve in your body at bursting point when I fill you. I want to see you take me in like a starved woman.’

I whimpered at his words, inhaling sharply as he speared me on his fingers once more, his tongue setting me alight.

By the time he’d started and stopped me a handful of times, denying my orgasm every time I got close, I could barely speak. I quaked with need, my pulse quickening with the intensity of it all.

Cam slipped his hands beneath my ass as he stood, pulling me up against his chest as I wrapped my legs around him. I kissed him, pouring all of my desperation into his mouth. I could taste myself on his swollen lips, and it only made me all the more wanton.

‘My room or yours?’ he said against my mouth.

‘I don’t care. Anywhere.’

My mind felt almost addled with lust. I wanted him inside me. Immediately.

I devoured his lips as he walked through the apartment, flinging open a door. It was his room. I’d never been in it before, never even seen it.

He deposited me on the bed, the smooth sheets crumpling beneath me. His room was immaculately clean and filled with glass, chrome and dark colours. It was luxurious, but sterile. Much like the cool demeanour Cam showed the world.

Cam stripped off his clothing as I watched, practically salivating. His muscles bulged as he dropped his trousers and pants, leaving him gloriously naked. Both of us naked. At last. I stood up from my spot on the bed, wanting to see him before he was on me.

When he reached for me, I took his hand, but shook my head.

I ran my other hand up over his stomach, enjoying the hills and valleys of

his abs. His cock jumped as I touched him and it made me grin. I wanted more than anything to climb on it and take my pleasure, but held off, knowing that it would come soon enough and be another dam forever broken between us.

His skin was smooth beneath my fingers as I walked around him, staring once more at the patchwork of large scars that criss-crossed the entirety of his back. Harold would pay for them. Even if it cost me. My hatred for him deepened as I pictured the young Cam, and the man who Harold tried to turn him into. He'd been punished for caring, for loving, and Harold had turned him into the icy, cruel man I'd feared. But he hadn't diminished that flame deep down. Beneath the scars and the hate, there was a man so ready to love and be loved. And as much as I'd tried to fight it, I was falling for him.

He shivered as I placed my lips on his back, kissing my way over each stripe of scarred flesh. I ran my tongue over them and moaned against them.

'Fuck Maeve. You're killing me.'

He let me explore his body, despite his taugth muscles and clenched fists, letting me know he was holding himself back from throwing us on the bed.

'Tell me you hate me,' I whispered against his back.

'I hate that I'm not inside you.'

'I hate that you're not inside me too.'

'I hate that I'd give anything to stay here with you. To ignore the rest of the world and live between your thighs.'

He turned and took my lips with his own, kissing me slowly, slipping his tongue against mine. I pressed my body against his as he picked me up and drew us down onto the bed together.

'I hate that I am so obsessed with you, Maeve. You're like a drug. I can't get enough.'

I slid my thighs open as he lay above me on his elbows, enveloping me in him.

'I hate that I need you so fucking bad,' I whispered against his lips.

Then he was there, the length of his cock pressing against the length of me. He pulled back and slid back up, sending shocks vibrating through me. Each time he slipped past my opening, I hated him a little. Wanting him to fuck me. But then the head of his cock would press against my clit and slide gloriously over it, and I'd want him to never stop.

'So wet for me, Princess,' he grunted against my ear as he kissed my neck. I lost myself in the sensation. If he kept going, I was going to cum

before he was even inside me.

Then his fingers were there, two, three, fuck four. Stretching me and spreading my wetness around me. I quaked beneath his fingers and he grinned.

‘You want it bad, don’t you? It’s so sexy. I love how you respond to every touch.’

I nodded, my tongue seemingly unwilling to cooperate in any cohesive way.

Then he was there, the tip of his cock nudging against me. I tipped my hips to line us up better, and hissed as the head slipped inside. It was so fucking thick.

‘You can take it. We’ll go slow.’

‘I don’t want slow,’ I whimpered as I adjusted to him, the stretch feeling both sore and fucking delightful.

‘All in good time.’ He groaned as he slipped slowly into me, both of us losing ourselves in it. ‘Fuck, you feel so good.’

I’d had previous partners, but never someone with so much girth, and it was a heady feeling to feel so full, so entirely speared upon him. Every tiny movement shook me to the core.

He closed his eyes and made the final push into me as I let out a mewl. Finally. Finally, I had him and he had me.

It drove me to the edge almost immediately as he rocked his hips slowly, grinding without thrusting as he kissed me feverishly. I gave into the sensations of him against me, upon me, inside me. My entire world was nothing but Cam at that moment, and I luxuriated in him. His skin was hot against mine, both of us hot against one another.

‘Such a good girl. Look at your little cunt taking all of me.’

I squirmed at his words; them filling me with a wave of pleasure. I should have hated them, but I craved his praise almost as much as I craved his cock.

He sat up on his knees, pulling my hips up to keep us together. The angle meant I could see him inside of me, my pussy stretched around him. I moaned at the sight as he loosened my hips, his cock pulling back to almost the tip before he snatched my hips back up and sank the full length back into me.

‘I’m so full,’ I gasped as he continued his slow, tortuous thrusts.

‘Yes Princess. Full of me. I hate how good you feel. I’m going to be addicted to being inside you.’

His fingers dug into my hips as he continued to fuck me with deliberate slow strokes that finished with a harder tilt of his hips, sending jolts through me.

I reached up and pulled him back down on top of me, needing his mouth again. No matter how much of him I had, I needed more.

‘I hate that no other cock could ever match up to this.’

Cam grinned against my mouth. ‘Good. You’re mine now. I’m never letting you go.’

Then he started fucking me and I all but lost my mind. Every thrust seemed to be punctuated with that word. Mine. Mine, Mine. I wanted to be his. Wanted this, forever.

He groaned against me, fitting his head in beside my shoulder and wrapping his hands up in my hair as he quickened the pace.

‘I can feel that greedy little cunt of yours tensing around me. You’re going to come for me, Princess, and I’m going to fill you with my cum. And then we are going to eat and sleep and do it again. And again. Until we are both so completely fucking spent in one another that nothing else matters.’

I moaned with every thrust, the pressure so fucking intense that I didn’t know where I finished and he began.

He slipped a hand between us and pinched at my clit as I cried out and toppled over the edge into an abyss of moaning and shuddering and fireworks. With his girth spreading me so wide, I could feel every inch of him as my pussy rhythmically milked at him. It was a toe-curling, full body orgasm that left me quaking beneath him.

‘There’s my good girl cumming all over me.’ His voiced was strained as he gave in to his own pleasure, his thrusts becoming deeper and quicker as I clung on throughout the last shudders of my orgasm.

Then he came hard, his hips bucking against me as I scraped my fingers down the scarred ridges of his back, filling me with a seemingly endless amount of cum. I’d never had someone cum inside me. It was like he was marking his territory, and that made me quiver all over again.

We lay wrapped in one another as we caught our breath, both of us panting. My body was like a gigantic pile of jelly, my limbs seemingly useless.

My pulse still thundered in my neck as we lay entangled, the walls between us demolished around us.

‘Do you still hate me?’ I asked against Cam’s ear, reaching up to run my

fingers through his hair.

He pulled himself up and looked me in the eye. 'I haven't hated you since the moment I first held you in my arms.'

Cam kissed me with such delicacy that I sighed happily against him.

'Now go pee while I make you a sandwich.' He rolled off of me and watched me as I stood up, his cum spilling out of me and streaking my thighs.

Darkness washed over his eyes as his cock twitched again.

'On second thoughts... I'll join you in the shower.'

Hours later, we lay on the couch, snuggled up together eating pizza and watching reruns on the TV. Both exhausted after a night of unadulterated lust. I wanted to freeze the moment in time before we both had to face up to the real world.

'I'm not sure I'm pretending any more,' I said, looking up at Cam.

'I don't think I was ever pretending. I just kept trying to convince myself I was.' He put down his pizza and pulled me toward him, wrapping me up in his arms. 'Are you still going to leave me?'

His face was pained as I watched him, my mind whirring over my options. The temptation to pretend that I didn't know about Harold's trafficking, to just pretend like everything was okay, was overwhelming. I could be happy with Cam. I could have some sort of freedom with him I didn't have at home. I could spend nights wrapped up in him and days loving him. But the knowledge that Harold would continue to hurt people, and continue to get away with it, was too much. He had to pay.

'I don't want to leave you.'

'But you will if you have to, right?'

I nodded and placed a kiss on the edge of his lips. He closed his eyes and leaned back, pulling me with him. 'I'm sorry. I won't be able to live peacefully while he's a threat.'

'It's okay. Everyone leaves eventually. He drives them all away. I'm used to it.'

I lay against his chest, feeling the thrum of his heart against my cheek. The last thing I wanted was to hurt him. But what else could I do?

'I'll fix it. Make Father call off his feud. Make your brothers see how much I care for you.'

'What if I could find a way to deal with your father without it hurting you

or Katie? Could you still be with me after that?’

He blinked down at me and furrowed his brow, making me want to reach up and smooth it out. ‘Could you still be with me after what he did to your mother?’

‘Yes.’

‘Then yes. But there is no way he’d go down without bringing me down too. He’s too spiteful to let me be happy if he’s not. He’d me more likely to use me as a scapegoat and shoulder the blame than to let me take over.’

‘Would you help me?’ When his eyes dipped away from my face, I knew he still wouldn’t. Even after everything.

‘I can’t. I promised my loyalty to my family, and those scars run deep Maeve. I can’t be the destroyer of my family. I can try to convince Father to stop seeing you as a pawn and let us be happy, but I can’t tear my family apart.’

‘I’m your wife. Aren’t I your family now too?’ I whispered, not angry with him. He’d been brought up to be loyal to one thing only, and going against it was huge. He wasn’t ready for it.

‘Fuck, Maeve, I don’t know what to say. Could you turn against your brothers for me? Your sister? Your father? Yes, you are my family now too, but could you go against your loyalty to them?’

I already did. I’d done exactly what Mac had warned me not to. I fell in love with the enemy.

‘I don’t know,’ I said, reaching up and kissing along his jawline. ‘Kiss me until none of it matters.’

And he did. Fiercely, slowly, passionately, softly. He kissed me until I forget about it all.

CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR

CAMERON

Head over heels.

Like a lovesick puppy.

As the days passed with me out doing business, my heart stayed at home, entangled up in Maeve. It was an exercise in willpower to leave her every morning. I dreaded closing my eyes at night, knowing it would bring the morning back to me in a flash, meaning I had to leave her again.

She had become an obsession. Watching her laugh made me weak. A smile from her was enough to bring me to her side, a kiss brought me to my knees.

My whole life had passed, not knowing I could feel so addicted to another human. She was like the most potent drug. No matter how big the hit, I soon needed more of her. The men had noticed a change in me. Not a softening, I still dealt with business with the same no nonsense approach I'd always favoured, but the ice had cracked, a little at least.

I tore open the door before the doorman had opened it, throwing him a grin as I made my way home. Home to Maeve. Each second in the elevator seemed to stretch to an eternity as I waited to hold her again. Back to our little bubble, protected from the outside world. Our own small slice of paradise.

I screeched to a halt when I walked into the sitting room, only to find Katie there. Not that I didn't enjoy seeing my sister, I did, but I'd been so wrapped up in Maeve that I'd been neglecting just about everyone and everything else.

'Katie.' I took off my jacket and draped it over the chair.

She fixed me with a smile that let me know she knew about us. Knew

we'd crossed that boundary from together on paper, to together in the flesh. 'Hey Cam, good day at work.'

'Same old. What are you doing here?'

Katie tutted and shook her head. 'Not the welcome I usually get. What's wrong? Not ready to share her yet? I've always wanted a sister.'

I ran a hand over my face, trying to think of a kind way to tell her to get lost so I could lose myself in my wife.

'Cam, you're back!' Maeve came into the room and kissed me on the cheek, blushing when I gripped her around the waist and pressed her against me, kissing her on the lips. She gave a shy blink toward my sister before relaxing in my arms. 'Katie's taking me dancing.'

'The hell she is.'

Both of their faces fell at my words, and I cringed as Maeve slipped out of my grip and narrowed her eyes at me.

'Yes. She is. If this could ever work, she'd be my family, too. I want to get to know her.'

My resolve softened as I looked at them, from the girl I'd spent my life protecting to the woman who stole my heart. Them being friends would be amazing. Them going out into the city was the issue. It wasn't safe.

'I know. It's just that you both could be used against me. Against Father. I don't want to risk it.'

'We'll be fine. We are going to go to Glasgow, and go to one of Ewen's clubs.' Maeve laughed when she saw my eyebrows shoot up. 'Not his sex club. Just the normal one. To dance and get to know each other.'

Fuck, the idea of her in a sex club sent a wave of jealousy crashing into me. I swallowed hard. She needed the agency, needed her freedom and her own power. Men and rules had crushed Maeve her whole life. It wasn't my place to wrap her up in cotton wool and keep her locked up in the apartment. No matter how tempting the prospect.

'Take Benny and two of the guys. Promise me you'll be safe.'

Maeve beamed at me and pulled me back into her arms, planting a great big kiss on my cheek. 'Thank you for understanding. We'll be safe.'

Katie stood up and stretched out before helping herself to an apple from the bowl on the counter. 'I'm guessing you two don't hate each other anymore, then?'

'Not so much,' I said, smoothing a piece of hair from Maeve's face.

'Only a little,' Maeve said at the same time, before cracking into a smile.

‘I’m going to go have a quick shower. Come through in ten, Katie and we can get ready together?’

Katie nodded between crunches of apple. When Maeve left the room, she turned toward me and crossed her arms.

‘Since when did you think you could boss me around? I’m not a little kid anymore.’ Her voice was accusatory, and I sighed.

‘You know what goes on in that place. It’s not a normal club. I don’t want her anywhere near that.’

‘You’re jealous.’

‘Yes, I’m fucking jealous. I don’t want to let her out of my sight. I don’t want her to be taken away, too.’

‘You can’t keep her cooped up. You need to give her space. Let her keep coming back to you. That’s how you know the feelings are really there.’

‘Just keep to the bar and the dancefloor, okay?’

Katie laughed and rolled her eyes at me. ‘I couldn’t get into the upper rooms even if I wanted to. They are invitation only, and I’m definitely not on their wish list after the things Dad’s done to their family. Plus, I don’t think Maeve wants to see her brother in his sex dominion. I picked the club because it’s the safest option. You know their men are loyal to them. Shit, how many times has Dad tried to infiltrate their ranks? It’s never succeeded. Their men respect them. They wouldn’t see Maeve hurt.’

She was right. I still felt like a sack of shit about it. I wanted to barricade the door and keep Maeve by my side.

‘I could come?’ I said, a last-ditch attempt to stay with Maeve. I knew how pathetic I sounded, but I couldn’t help myself.

‘Shit Cam, you’ve got it real bad for her, don’t you?’

I nodded, my shoulders dipping as I leant back against the wall.

‘Still, no. Girl’s night. I want to get to know her, for her to have fun.’ I opened my mouth, but she held up a hand. ‘Fun that doesn’t include bedroom antics. Have you even taken her out without it being an order from Dad?’

My cheeks heated. I hadn’t. I’d been so wrapped up in getting home to her, being with her, that I hadn’t even tried to date her properly.

‘Thought not,’ Katie said, dumping her half eaten apple in the bin. ‘You can work on that while we’re out.’

‘Fine.’ I slumped into a chair and closed my eyes, pressing my fingers against them to relieve the pressure. Maeve deserved more than I was giving her. She deserved the world and everything her heart desired.

Katie left the room, leaving me to remove my head from my sex addled ass and vow to be a better husband.

I mixed them both cocktails while I waited to see them off. Laughter drifted down the corridor, warming me despite my reservations. Hearing my wife and my sister happy filled me with pleasure. I wanted them both to be the happiest women in the world.

When heels sounded on the hard marble flooring of the hall, I lifted my gaze to take in Maeve as she rounded the corner.

She looked so happy, and so relaxed. I'd been an ass for wanting her to stay cooped up with me.

Her tanned legs were on show, from patent black heels right up to mid thigh where her sparkly black figuring hugging dress clung to her. The dress embraced her curves, skimming her hips and her torso right up to the halter neckline.'

'Come here, Princess.' I swallowed as she stepped toward me, practically salivating at the sight of her. 'You look amazing.'

I pulled her to me and groaned as she pressed her lips to my neck before whispering in my ear, 'I missed you today.'

'I missed you too.' I turned us around until we faced the full-length mirror, like we had before we had gone out to dinner a few weeks before.

She pressed back against me; her ass was a distraction against my crotch as we looked at our reflection together. I growled as she wriggled against me, leaning down to nip at her neck.

'Remember what I told you. You are my wife. You have power. Use it if you need to.'

She whimpered as I reached below the hem of her dress and cupped her sex. 'But remember that this is mine. You are my wife and I will kill anyone who dares touch you the way I do.'

'And I'll kill anyone who touches you the way I do,' she said to me in the reflection. 'You are mine.'

Fuck. Her being possessive of me made my dick throb against her. I slipped my fingers beneath her panties and speared her on them, grinning as she moaned. I slipped my other hand up over her throat, using my thumb to tilt her head to the side so her ear lined up with my mouth. 'Have Benny bring you back to me tonight, Princess.'

‘I will,’ she melted at my touch, responding so willingly, as always.

We heard Katie’s heels before we saw her, righting ourselves as she walked into the room. She looked from my face to Maeve’s flushed one before helping herself to a long sip of the cocktail I’d left on the counter.

‘Don’t worry Cam, I’ll have Cinderella back around two.’

‘Good. Any issues, call me.’

Maeve pulled me into a kiss and smiled at me. ‘We’ll be fine, and thank you. I--‘

She cut herself off before biting her lip. Had she been about to tell me she loved me? We hadn’t admitted that to one another. Hell, I didn’t even know if she felt that way. Hope surged in my chest as I waited for her to finish.

‘I’ll be safe.’

Disappointment flushed me, but I banished it, telling myself it was too soon to be in love. There were still too many obstacles.

‘I’ll be waiting.’

CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE

MAEVE

Katie pulled me in past the bouncers, shouting over the loud music as we approached the bar.

‘I’m so glad they wouldn’t let the stiffs in with us. I can finally relax,’ she half yelled into my ear, leaning her elbows on the bar.

The bouncers were happy enough to let Katie in with me, but drew the line at Harold’s men. I didn’t know whether to be relieved or nervous.

Katie set a dazzling smile on the young bartender, making him blush beneath her gaze as he finished serving another customer. A flip of her hair, with her fingers trailing the ends down over the swell of her tits, had him falling over himself to serve us next, despite the bustling bar.

‘What are you having?’

‘Champagne?’

Katie nodded enthusiastically at my suggestion before turning back to her besotted bar-boy and leaning in close to his ear to place her order.

When was the last time I’d been clubbing? Sometime the previous year, maybe, with some girls from school? We met up every now and again to keep in touch, but with everyone starting their adult lives, we saw little of one another. I missed it. I’d always been close to Mac, but my relationship with my sister Esther had always been different. Closer in a different way, united as we were as women in a man’s world. A pang of longing gripped my stomach as I wondered where she was. She’d disappeared after a confrontation with our father and Harold. The confrontation that left my dad unconscious in a hospital bed even weeks later. I wished she would reach out. I hated that her leaving had forced me into a dangerous situation, but I needed her more than ever.

‘Come on,’ Katie said, tugging my arm and directing me to the VIP area, ‘My little admirer said he’d bring the drinks up to us in here. You can get us in, right?’

‘Yeah.’ One of the perks of my brother owning the place.

Soon enough we were seated at a table looking down over the writhing bodies on the dancefloor with a bottle of champagne and a tray of shots.

‘Are we expecting company? That’s a lot of shots.’ I raised a brow at Katie as she picked one shot up and handed another to me.

‘No, they are all for us. I need to party.’

I grimaced as we clinked the little glasses before pitching the burning drink into the back of our mouths, wincing as the fiery liquid ignited my oesophagus. With a shake of her head, Katie laughed before topping up our champagne. The music thumped behind us as we sipped at the sharp bubbly.

‘Are you going to stick around, then?’ Katie asked, leaning her chin on her hand as she watched me.

‘I want to. Cameron isn’t the man I thought he was. I know he does nasty shit for the organisation, but who in our world doesn’t? But beneath the outer shell, he’s pretty decent.’ I sighed as I took a large glug of my drink.

‘He is. He’s spent his whole life trying to protect me, and I see the way he looks at you. He’s already in too deep to let you go.’

‘You think?’ Physically, we’d gotten as close as humanly possible, but emotionally I still held off giving my all to Cam. It was going to end in heartbreak. ‘If the circumstances were different, I think we could be happy. But between your father and my brothers, it won’t happen. They won’t be happy until one of our families is wiped out.’

‘I wish it had been my dad who had been driven away,’ Katie said, downing another shot and passing one to me. I knocked it back with a hiss. ‘I miss my mum so much.’

‘Does she ever get in touch with you guys?’

‘She knew that the safest option was to disappear. We occasionally get postcards come through, but even that’s a risk. My dad would do anything to get his hands on her and make her pay for leaving him.’

Reaching across, I wrapped my fingers around hers and gave them a quick squeeze. I’d lost my mother too, as well as my eldest brother, because of her father, and my dad lingered on the brink of death. All down to Harold.

Swallowing hard, I braved my next question, the one that had been plaguing me since I’d heard Harold on the phone. ‘If I could get rid of your

dad, would you be willing to help me?’

Katie’s eyes widened as she bit down on the edge of her lip. I waited as she processed what I’d asked, my heart thundering in my chest. If she told Harold, he’d be furious. It was a colossal risk to ask for her help. She looked around us, before answering in such a small voice I had to lean close to her to hear her reply.

‘If you could guarantee he’d be gone and there was no way anyone could trace it back to me, then I’d help. But if there was the slightest chance it could come back to me, then no. I’ve seen what he does to traitors, and being his daughter wouldn’t help me.’

‘What does he do to traitors?’ Did I really want to know?

‘Our cleaner helped mum escape. She’d seen the abuse Mum had suffered for years and wanted to help. She arranged for a new name and new passport through an acquaintance of hers, and gave her enough money to get away. Dad had her tortured in front of Cam and I.’ Her voice shook as her eyes grew glassy and wet. ‘She’d been with us for years, and we were young. We loved her. He made us watch as he... he raped her. And then he cut her, little by little, until she revealed the name on the passport. She held out long enough to let mum get away. He forced us to cut her too with a gun to our heads as we did. Even after everything, she told us it was okay, and that it wasn’t our fault. Cam refused to torture her and delivered the killing blow before Father could draw her torture out any more. Her last words were thanking him. Dad beat him for it, striped Cam’s back to the bone until he passed out before he left us there.’

A wave of nausea threatened to bring my shots back up, followed by rage. Those scars that marred his back were hiding the real scars inside. ‘Fuck, Katie, I had no idea. I’m so sorry.’

‘Cam could have died from the blood loss. Benny saved him. He’s saved us again and again through the years. He took him to a private hospital that asks no questions and had him patched back up. It took weeks to get him home, and I was terrified for every second he was gone. He was my rock, and without him, I don’t know what Father would have done to me.’

‘Why doesn’t Cam just kill him?’ He could get close enough while armed. He’s one of the few people who could.

‘He’s had loyalty beaten into him from a young age, and it’s all he’s ever felt he’s good for. He’s good at his work, he commands loyalty from his men, and killing his own father, cutting off the head of the snake, well, that would

undermine everything he believes in.'

'But he's a monster.'

'He's still our father. He's all we've ever known.'

'And what about you? Don't you want to be free?'

A small, sad smile quirked the corner of Katie's lip before she shrugged and downed another shot, shoving one in front of me. 'There isn't any free. Father is already lining up the bids for me, to see who will barter the most to marry a son into our family.'

'But what about your rock star?'

'I'm just having fun while I can. I know I'm on a time limited leash, soon I'll be dragged back to heel and turned into another pampered mafia wife with a husband she tolerates. That's why you need to try to make it work with Cam. It may have started out shit, but you guys have something real going on. I see it in the way he looks at you. He's totally smitten.' Katie's words had begun to slur, and the room was tilting for me too.

'I know. But your dad would make my life miserable. Every day I'd be worried that it would be the day he decides my usefulness has run dry. He wouldn't hesitate to use me as bait or leverage, or even just to control Cam. That's no way to live. I'm sick of my happiness always depending on whether things are calm between factions, on the men in my life not being controlling arseholes. I want safety. I want freedom.'

'Speaking of arseholes,' Katie said, nodding behind me, 'Your brother is here.'

Before Mac had even opened his mouth, I was on him, throwing my arms around him and pulling him into a hug. 'Oh my god, I've missed you!'

'Shit, Maeve, how much have you had?' Mac said, holding me back by the shoulders and scanning me with a sceptical gaze.

'Oh, don't be a mother hen. We're just having fun.'

Katie gave me a wave as she moved away from us, miming holding herself in the universal girl's room pose. 'Back in ten.'

Mac rounded on me, narrowing his eyes. 'The fuck are you doing out with her?'

'I'm married to her brother. Why wouldn't I be out with her?'

'Because your marriage is a sham, and she's one of them.'

Shit, the drink had made me slip up. I was still supposed to be waiting for them to come up with a plan. Fat lot of use, they were there.

'Katie's not so bad Mac, she's sweet. I like her.' I did like her. She made

me feel welcome from the moment I met her, before Cam and I were even married.

Mac's jaw ticked as he inhaled sharply. 'You are getting too comfortable with them. Being nice to you for a few weeks doesn't erase the past. They can't give Mum back, or Malcolm. It can't wake Dad up, not that you give a shit. I knew you were too naive for this. Too gullible.'

I squared my shoulders and levelled a glare at him. 'I'm not gullible. I'm just not stuck in a place where I can't see that not everything is always as we were told. Harold is a piece of shit, and I will see him brought to his fucking knees. But Cam and Katie? If you hurt either of them, you'll have me to deal with.'

The fucker laughed. My brother, my favourite brother, still looked at me like a stupid little girl.

'You couldn't do anything about it if you tried. Why are you trying to stand up for them?'

'Because they are like us. They've lost a mother to Harold, too. They've been brought up with him bullying them and degrading them.'

'If they had it so bad, then why aren't they helping us?' Mac took a swig of our champagne directly from the bottle, his fingers gripping the neck so hard they whitened at the knuckles.

'It's more complicated than that.' Gods, my head was spinning and it felt like the room was closing in on me under my brother's glare.

'You're fucking him, aren't you?'

My cheeks flamed as I looked down at the floor.

'Fucking hell, Maeve,' he shouted, dashing the bottle to the floor, sending glass and golden liquid scattering over the slick boards. I jumped back, staring up at him wide-eyed. 'All you had to do was keep low, keep your mouth and your legs closed. I'll kill him.'

'Don't!' My heart was in my throat as I tried to grab his arm, to reason with him.

'It's too late.' With a shake of his arm he loosened my grip, fixing me with a look that let me know just how disgusting he found me for being with Cam. 'We were trying to do it without it linking back to us, to limit the fallout. We can't have you fucking shit up. It's time for Plan B, and Plan B will clear Scotland of Thompson's once and for all.'

'I'm a Thompson,' I said, aghast at how little leeway my brothers were willing to show.

‘For now. You’ll mourn for an acceptable amount of time and then you’ll find someone who isn’t a piece of shit, and you’ll be happy. You can choose someone without being forced into anything.’

‘What if I choose him?’

‘You can’t. He’s not an option.’ Mac straightened his collar and stepped over the mess he’d made on the floor. ‘He’s tricked you into believing he’s something he’s not. You were too young and too impressionable and we should have known better. We should never have let you do this.’

‘I did it to save you,’ I said as tears pricked at my eyes, my heart aching at the way Mac was speaking to me. He was supposed to love me.

‘And it’s cost you your loyalty. Hope it was worth it.’

I stood in the puddle of champagne and watched him leave. A mixture of fury, sadness and betrayal mingled in my stomach, leaving me filled with dread. What if they were true to their word and lashed out soon? I needed to speed up my investigation of Harold. Time was running out.

Katie reappeared as I knocked back the remaining shots, clamouring for oblivion. She eyed the mess on the floor and my tear-stained cheeks before pulling me into a hug.

‘Come on, let’s dance. I find it an excellent remedy for dealing with the arseholes in my life. For a night at least, we can just forget them.’

I intended on drinking enough to forget everything.

CHAPTER TWENTY SIX

CAMERON

Sharp trilling woke me up as I dozed on the sofa. With burning eyes, I focused on the screen of my phone, surprised when Katie's name flashed.

'Katie? Is everything okay?' My stomach fell into my shoes as I awaited an answer.

'Yesh,' she slurred over the thumping music in the background. 'But Maeve won't leave. I'm too drunk, and she's too drunk, but she won't leave.'

'Where's Benny and the guys? Can they help?'

'They weren't allowed in. My feet hurt, Cam, and my head is thumping.'

My feet hit the floor before she'd even finished her sentence, grabbing my keys and a jacket and storming down to the carpark to grab my personal vehicle. 'It's okay, I'm coming. I'll be there as soon as I can be. What happened?'

'Mac was mad at her, and she was mad at him, and the bar boy was cute, so I kept buying more drinks. I think I'm going to be sick.'

'Are her brothers still there? Why aren't they looking out for Maeve?' I'd never leave my sister in that state at a party.

'Don't know.' Her yawn pierced the call as I started up the car, switching to hands free as I took the road at lightning speed. It was almost one in the morning, so traffic was light, allowing me to take the roads quicker than usual. If the traffic cops were out, I'd need to pull my name out to deal with them. They knew better than to pull a Thompson for a speeding violation.

Within forty-five minutes, I was abandoning my car at the front entrance to Ewen McGowan's club.

'You can't park there,' a bouncer said to me, stilling when he saw the glare on my face.

‘Watch me.’ Within a handful of strides, I was at the door, where the two bouncers puffed up their chests and barred my entrance. The fuckers.

‘Get out of the way.’

‘We know who you are, and you aren’t welcome here.’ The smaller of the two spoke with a quiver in his voice. If they knew who I was, then they knew they were fucked if they stood in my way.

‘If you know who I am, then I’d stand aside. What will it take for entry? A broken nose? A slit throat? Coming after your family members and mailing them to you piece by piece?’ I gave them a grin that I hoped looked manic. I preferred not to incite unnecessary violence. It was messy and punching people hurt my fists, but using the threats usually got the job done.

‘Ewen will fuck us up if we let you in,’ one of them said in a low voice.

‘And I’ll fuck you up if you don’t. My sister is in there and in trouble, and so is my wife. Ewen doesn’t seem to give a fuck about them, so I’m here to take them home.’

‘You’re just retrieving them?’

I nodded. Their shoulders sagged with relief. If I was quick, Ewen might not even know I had been there.

‘Fine, go.’ He stood aside, and I patted him on the shoulder.

‘Good choice.’

The club was awash with a sea of bodies, most people pretty drunk as it neared two in the morning. Thumping beats crashed into my head and through my chest, so loud it left me feeling a little breathless. Where were they? The dance floor was rammed, and after twenty minutes of searching through sweaty, stumbling bodies, I still hadn’t found them.

Chaos engulfed the bar, and I didn’t have time to wait, so I let myself into the door by the side, eyeing the bar men to figure out which one could be the ‘cute’ one. I discounted the female bar staff, knowing that Katie didn’t swing that way, and settled on a younger guy. He was the only one I think could be considered cute, the other’s were older, more rugged. Not cute. I hoped.

‘Hey, what are you doing back here?’ He asked as I approached.

‘Not looking for trouble,’ I said, pulling out my phone. ‘I’m looking for two women, my sister and wife. They called me in a state and I’m here to pick them up.’

He glanced at the photo of Katie and me I pulled up on the screen and his face softened. ‘Yes, she’s over there.’

I followed his finger and looked in the direction he showed. Eventually

through the bodies I saw Katie, sat heavily against the wall looking like shit. Alone.

‘Thanks,’ I said to the kid-barman. ‘If you ever serve them to the point of being like this again, I’ll be back to teach you a lesson in when to stop.’

He paled and nodded vigorously. ‘I’m sorry. She was really persuasive.’

‘I know.’

I let myself back out and swerved through the dance floor until I reached Katie, who promptly burst into tears.

‘I’m so sorry,’ she said through a drunken sob.

‘It’s okay.’ I texted Benny to get his ass to the door immediately. I’d deal with him and the other two later. ‘Come on.’

I half lifted Katie when she stumbled as memories of all the previous times I’d had to hold her like that stormed through my mind. It was usually after a beating, or after being forced to watch Father torture someone to send us a point. I’d spent my life trying to protect her from the world. And now I had a second woman I burned to keep safe.

‘Where’s Maeve?’ I said in her ear, half shouting over the music.

‘She went to pee. She’d been a while, though. I wanted to go get her, but my head is spinning so fast.’

‘It’s okay, I’ll get her.’

Benny waited at the door, shifting nervously from foot to foot.

‘Sorry boss,’ he said when he saw the state Katie was in. I wasn’t sure the guys being in the club would have persuaded them to imbibe any less. It was Mac and Ewen I was furious with. Mac must have said something to Maeve which provoked her to drinking too much, whatever it was would have had to get her pretty riled up.

I passed Katie over to Benny. ‘It’s okay, just get her back to mine. Get her to drink something and eat something and then put her into the guest room. Stay with her to make sure she doesn’t vomit in her sleep.’

He nodded and loaded her into his car as I made my way back into the club. The bouncers looking sheepish.

Where was my girl? Katie had said the bathroom, maybe she’d fallen asleep in there.

I made my way to the ladies.

CHAPTER TWENTY SEVEN

MAEVE

Everything spun as I flushed the toilet and leaned against the wall. Fuck, I was too drunk. I wanted Cam.

It took me three tries to undo the lock and let myself out of the stall and into the main area of the loos. The soap dispenser wouldn't work and I groaned as I washed my hands. Everything ached.

The door pushed open, and I expected a gaggle of girls, but felt dread when a man walked through the door, his eyes fixed on me.

'Here you are,' he said as I turned to face him.

'Get out.' My pulse quickened as I looked at the door behind him, trying to plan an escape through the haze.

'Now, now. You've been taunting me all night with that short skirt. Riding up against your friend right in front of me.'

I hadn't even seen him. My feet felt like leaden weights as he stalked toward me, thumbing his belt. Fuck, I needed to get to Ewen. My limbs refused to cooperate as fast as my head wanted them to. I tried for the door, but he caught me around the waist and pulled me back against him. Filling my lungs with air, I let out a scream before he clamped his beer stained fingers around my face, making my stomach heave.

'You don't remember me, do you?' he said into my ear, his breath clammy against my neck. 'I tried to kiss you once, at one of your dad's parties, but you thought you were too good for me.'

Who was he? I tried to wrack my brain, but it was too muddled. One of my dad's guys?

'Please,' I begged against his hand, 'let me go. I'm married.'

His laugh sent fear to the pit of my belly. 'I know all about your sham

marriage. Don't worry, I'll make this good for you too. If you're giving it up to a man you hate, you can give it up to me too, you little slut.'

I thrashed against him, trying to make a space between us as he thrust against my ass. Rough fingers kneaded at my tits as tears pricked my eyes. With a yank, he tore the halter neck of my dress, exposing my chest. I sobbed as he kept one hand against my face while the other grabbed at my flesh. When his fingers made their way to the hem of my dress, I vomited.

He swore and removed his hand, shaking it off while I made a dash for the door.

'No fucking way. You've got my dick hard and you are going to take care of it.'

I cried out as he pushed me roughly down onto the floor and climbed on top of me, his belt open as he pulled my dress up over my hips. He smelled like old beer and cigarettes and mingled with my vomit, the smell made me want to hurl all over again. I fought against him, kicking and screaming and scratching. When I caught him across the face with my nails, he saw red. He levelled a punch across my jaw and I tasted blood.

'Stop,' I cried as he yanked my panties to the side and pumped his dick. 'Please stop.'

'I'm going to make you cum around my dick you little whore, and then whenever that fucking loser of a husband is inside you, you can think of me.'

I kicked him hard, sending him back onto his ass. I made for the door on my knees. I just needed to make it to the other side. Someone would be able to help.

Rough hands gripped my hips and pulled me back, his hard dick pressing against me as I sobbed.

'No. Stop.'

'Get the fuck off of her.' I hadn't heard to door, but the tears fell as I saw Cam in the doorway. Never had I seen such cold fury on his face. The guy dropped my hips and started stammering as I righted my clothing as best as I could, tears streaming at the state Cam had found me in. Would he think I was cheating on him?

Cam crossed the room and took the guy by the throat, his fingers digging deep into his neck as my assailant's face turned red, then purple. I gathered my broken dress against my chest and stood on shaky legs as I watched them.

'Why am I finding you touching my wife?' He punched the guy once, hard, sending a geyser of blood shooting from his nose. Cam threw him to the

floor and laid a kick into his side. I slid back into the corner near the fire extinguisher, my body wracked with shakes as I watched Cam round on the guy. He sat up from his blood-soaked spot on the floor and grinned. He pulled a gun from his pocket and levelled it at Cam. My heart stuttered in my chest.

Cam stilled and looked at me, tilting his head slightly toward the door. I could probably make it through before he shot. But it was my fault Cam was in this mess.

‘You know who I am, don’t you?’ Cam said. ‘Killing me would be a death sentence.’

‘The McGowans would pay good money to see you dead.’

I lifted the extinguisher from the wall silently as the guy stood up, keeping his gun trained on Cam as he tried to fasten his trousers with the other hand. Cam’s eyes flicked to me for no more than a breath before he slowly raised his hands as if surrendering.

‘Listen, kid. You’ll be dead if you pull that trigger. You know that, right?’

‘I’ll be gone before your body’s cold.’

I stepped closer, my clammy hands slippery against the metal of the extinguisher as I cursed my heels, wishing they were something quieter. Fear gripped my stomach with each step closer. What if he turned the gun on me?

The door to the bathroom opened with a lurch as two young women stumbled in together, giggling. They paled as they took in the scene, from the bloody-nosed gun toting man to Cam to me with my torn dress and extinguisher.

One let out a scream while the other backed back out as fast as her heels could carry her. The gun clicked as it was trained back on Cam. I seized my moment and hefted the extinguisher as best I could, sending it careening into the man’s skull just before he pulled the trigger.

The bullet hit a mirror, sending glass flying outward as the loud bang reverberated through the tiled room. I dropped the extinguisher as the man toppled over to the right, his head hitting the edge of the sink with a deafening crack. The door thumped closed behind the women as they ran to safety.

Then he was still.

A sob tore from my throat as Cam kicked the gun away from the man before pulling me into his arms and holding me close. ‘Fuck Maeve, are you

okay?’

I muffled my sniffles against his chest as the adrenaline left me, feeling all the pain and fear of the past twenty minutes. The terror had sobered me up a little, but my head still swam and my knees felt weak. Cam pulled off his jacket and wrapped it around me, his body heat feeling like a safety blanket.

‘Did I kill him?’

‘No, he’s still breathing.’ I watched as he picked up the discarded gun and pointed it at the man’s head. I closed my eyes as he ended my attacker, the bang sounding different as it thumped into flesh instead of glass. My eyes remained screwed shut as the gun dropped to the floor. Then Cam wrapped me in his arms.

‘I’m so sorry,’ I mumbled into his neck. ‘I shouldn’t have been drinking so much.’

Cam pulled back and tilted my face up toward him. ‘Look at me, Maeve. None of this is your fault. You are allowed to get drunk, and you are allowed to be out in a dress, and not a single thing you could have done would have excused his behaviour. There isn’t an excuse for what he was doing.’

Blood pooled around the man, and it made my stomach heave all over again. ‘If I hadn’t been here, he wouldn’t be dead.’

‘If you hadn’t been here, some girl might have been dead. Who’s to say he’d stop at forcing himself on someone?’

The door thrust open as Mac and Ewen bust into the room, guns in hand.

‘What the fuck? Maeve?’ Ewen said.

They took in the scene before lowering their guns when they saw neither of us was armed.

‘Is that Russell?’ Mac said, walking over and glancing down at the corpse. ‘Ah shit. You come in here and kill one of my men? Are you trying to get me to kill you?’

Cam didn’t look the slightest flustered. He should have. He was on enemy territory with one of their men dead at their feet. They could shoot him and claim it was an attack. My mouth dried as I looked from my brothers to Cam.

‘He tried to rape me.’

‘Russell? He’s a bit of a dick, but he’s no rapist.’

With a sigh, I loosened my coat, showing them the ripped edges at the top of my dress, making sure not to let the front flap downward. ‘Are you telling me I imagined him on top of me, trying to get his fucking dick inside of me?’

If Cam hadn't come in, it would have been me you found in here on the floor, beaten and raped. By one of your own men. He knew who I was, and he did it, anyway.'

Mac paled as he noticed Russell's still undone fly.

'I don't know what kind of place you are running, but if a woman getting followed into the bathroom by an abuser is standard practice, I think you need to take a long look at yourselves.'

I grimaced as Cam said it, knowing I was going to end up revealing that his father was doing worse, selling people into trafficking rings.

'She was supposed to be safe here,' Cam said, taking me by the hand, my cheeks flaming at the look my brothers gave me as he entwined his fingers in mine. 'Clean up this mess, we're leaving.'

'You can't just walk out of here,' Ewen said as we nearer the door.

'We can.' My words were soft but firm. They wouldn't hurt me, and if they intended on taking their opportunity for revenge on Cam, they would have done it already.

I held my head high and squeezed Cam's fingers tightly as I walked out without another look back.

The tears only came once I was safe in Cam's car.

It was a flood.

CHAPTER TWENTY EIGHT

CAMERON

Katie was sound asleep when I got home, and I dismissed Benny off home to his bed. I needed to take care of my girl.

Maeve had sat mostly stock still on the drive back, seemingly totally zoned out. The tears kept tracking down her cheeks throughout the journey, and I couldn't even pull her into my lap to comfort her as I was driving.

I found her in my bedroom, gazing out over the cityscape that stretched out before us, glittering like a thousand stars.

Her skin was warm as I wrapped my arms around her from behind, breathing her in, finally relaxing with her safely in my home. Our home.

'Let's get you cleaned up, Princess. I think we could both be done with a shower.'

Without a word, she let me lead her to my bathroom, where I switched on the shower, giving it a few minutes to heat as I stripped off. I paused as I moved to remove the tattered dress.

'Would you prefer if I let you shower alone?'

'No,' Maeve said, her fingers gripping onto my hands. 'Don't leave me.'

People dealt with trauma in a million different ways. I'd always distanced myself when I'd been hurt, but my shoulders relaxed at her saying she wanted me to stay. The last thing I wanted was any more distance between us.

The dress pooled on the floor before her underwear joined it. I'd burn them both, so she never had to see them and be reminded of him. Together we stood, naked as the day we were born, with nothing between us. Chills pricked my skin as she traced a finger down my arm.

'He's dead, and I don't know how to process it. I'm not sorry that he's

dead, but he would have mattered to someone. They don't deserve the hurt.'

'It's never easy. But don't shoulder the blame, let me take it. I pulled the trigger.' I'd killed enough assholes in my life that one more wouldn't rock the boat for me. I'd killed some people who didn't deserve it too, and those weighed heavily on me every day.

'I let Mac get to me.'

'You're only human, Maeve,' I said, placing a whisper of a kiss at her temple.

The water was hot, the air, steam filled, and I directed Maeve back into the stream so it hit her back. She moaned softly as the water swept over her and watched me as I filled a loofah with sweet spiced soap and washed the night away. Her legs first, taking my time to lather them up with the loofah, making sure not an inch went unwashed. She smiled as I skimmed her hips and stomach and arched toward me as I washed her chest, her nipples peaking beneath the strokes. I moved onto her arms before spinning her to work the soap over her back. Maeve groaned as the rough texture grazed at her skin; the skin reddening slightly as I worked it. She tilted her hips so her ass perked as I washed it, my dick already hardening at the proximity to her slick, soapy skin. She'd had far too much to drink for it to getting involved, even if she hadn't been through what she had.

When I reached around her and spread her thighs, dipping the loofah between her legs, she whimpered.

'Would you prefer to clean yourself?' I asked, knowing how close that asshole had been to being inside of her.

'No.'

I kept it brief, cleaning her quickly before moving onto shampooing the vomit and blood out of her hair. Happy sighs mingled with the steam as my fingers worked against her scalp. I could almost feel the strain leaving her body. Good. She needed to try to sleep.

After I'd finished washing us both, I wrapped her in a towel and left her in my room with strict instructions to brush her teeth, get into some pyjamas and climb into bed. Hot buttered toast and a cup of tea always helped. I threw in some painkillers and a bottle of water for good measure.

I perched on the bed beside her and put on some reruns of Friends as she ate and sipped her tea.

Finally, she finished both and snuggled into my side as we relaxed back against the pillows. Her lips found my neck as she pressed herself against me.

God. My body reacted to her touch despite me telling my brain to ignore it. When her hand dipped to the front of my shorts, I held it. She pouted up at me.

‘Why are you stopping me? Are you mad?’

‘No, I don’t want to take advantage of you, Maeve. You had a lot to drink tonight and I’m very sober.’

‘I feel pretty sober too.’ She sat up straighter, removing her warmth from my side.

Wrapping a hand around her waist, I tugged her to me and kissed her tenderly, my lips only just grazing hers. ‘It’s not because I don’t want to. It’s just not something I’m comfortable with. Tell me what happened?’

I pulled her down against me, shimmying down the bed until she lay on her side with me curved around her from behind. Her pulse ticked against my arm as she used it like a pillow.

‘I’m being pulled in two directions and it feels like my heart’s being spit down the middle.’

Her hair was still damp as I twisted a strand around my finger while she spoke.

‘I never meant to care for you, but I do.’

Arrows pierced me at her admission, one of joy, another of victory, another of fear. I wanted her to fall for me like I’d fallen for her, but it was bringing her pain instead of joy.

‘My brothers are idiots, but they are my idiots. I love them. I love Esther too, wherever the fuck she is. I even love my dad despite his misogyny. I don’t want to hurt them.’

A yawn stole over her as she whispered into the night. I turned out the lights before gathering her up against my chest, burying my face into the cleft between her shoulder and her neck.

‘We’ll figure it out, Princess. You deserve to be happy.’

‘I can’t live under your father’s rule, but I can’t leave you.’ I stiffened against her back at the mention of her leaving. The fact that thought was even on her mind sent a dreaded weight to my stomach. ‘I don’t want to leave. I’m stuck between the families, belonging to neither but also both.’

Her head tilted toward me as she looked over her shoulder. ‘I don’t doubt that you care for me too, but it’s not enough to rock the loyalty you feel toward your father. There is no good ending to our story, Cam.’

My heart ached. She was right. How could there be a happy ending? I

should tear myself from my father, gather her up and take us far from Scotland. I had plenty of funds squirrelled away in multiple accounts that my father didn't have access to. But I couldn't abandon Katie, and it wouldn't be fair to take Maeve away from ever seeing her family again. Living on the run, however well funded, wouldn't be a good start to a relationship. The tension would likely tear us apart.

'I see you Maeve. I see the way you fight against the life you were given, the way you strive for the life you deserve and fight against the bad. I want to be a part of your story. I want to be the man you come to and spill your thoughts, the man who protects you when you need it and lets you soar when you go out to conquer the world. You are so far from insignificant, you are strong and kind and beautiful and I want to be by your side as you explore that part of you.'

Maeve took a shaky breath, her back quivering against my chest as she did. 'How can we when we are being crushed from all sides?'

'I don't know yet.'

Flipping over to face me, she reached up and caressed my face, her warm fingers skimming over my forehead and down my face to rest on my jaw. Long lashes dusted her cheeks as she blinked up at me through half-lidded eyes. My heart skipped a beat at the tender touch.

'You are so beautiful, Cam, and I see you too. I see the big heart hidden under your sheets of ice. I see how you care for Katie, how you've grown tough to protect you both and how you've suffered terribly at your father's hands to protect her. I don't want to be another person you suffer for. I want joy. Happiness. Freedom. For both of us.'

'We can have that together, no matter what the world throws at us.'

'Will you kiss me until none of it matters?' I swallowed the lump in my throat before leaning toward her and taking her mouth with mine. The tenderness in her lips hazed my senses as I lost myself in her taste, her tongue exploring gently as she pressed herself against me.

Digging my fingers into her damp hair, I tipped her head back for better access to her hot little mouth, deepening the kiss as she whimpered into me. Every nerve ending in me flared as she writhed against me, so delightfully needy. If only I could slip inside her and fuck her until with both forgot who we were.

'Please,' she moaned against my lips. 'Make me forget him.'

'No, Princess. I'm not going to fuck you tonight.'

‘Then touch me, give me your fingers. I need you.’

She needed me. Warmth shot through my veins and straight into my chest at her desperation to have me despite everything she’d gone through.

‘I need you to be the last person to touch me there.’

I growled as I flipped her back over so her back rested against my chest and her ass against my cock. She ground back against my straining erection, and I bit my lip to suppress a moan.

Her whole body quaked as I slipped a hand beneath her pyjama bottoms, my fingers going right to the spot she so desperately needed me. Her breath caught in her throat as I circled that most intimate part of her, bringing it to full arousal.

‘Cam.’ My name on her lips had me losing myself in her heady scent, licking and kissing and nipping at her neck as I reached lower until I found her wet centre. She cried out as I thrust my fingers into her, her cunt gripping at me as I slowly pistoned my fingers in and out of her. When she widened her legs by kicking one over my hip, I smiled into her hair.

‘There’s my good girl. Open up for me Princess.’

I loved the way she whimpered at my touch, the way her skin flushed when I praised her. I loved how wet she always was beneath my fingers.

I loved her.

The realisation hit me at once while she moaned, arching her hips to take more of my fingers, desperately grinding her clit against the palm of my hand.

I. Loved. Maeve.

My whole body tingled as I admitted it to myself. Admitted that I loved this feisty, needy, strong yet vulnerable woman. She’d taken my hate for her and crumpled it up, tossing it aside and leaving nothing but love in its wake.

Increasing the friction between her clit and the heel of my hand, I curled my fingers inside of her as her breath quickened.

‘Fuck me?’ she said, grinding her ass hard against my cock, sending waves of need through me.

‘Not tonight, Princess. But in the morning I’m going to fuck you until you beg me to stop, filling you up with cum until you can’t take any more.’

‘I love your cum,’ she moaned as I circled her clit, my other hand slipping under her neck and curving round her to hold her against me by her throat.

‘Good, because I’m going to spend my life filling you with it. In every

hole. You're going to take it like such a good girl for me, aren't you?'

Her skin was on fire, so hot beneath my touch as I tightened my grip on the sides of her neck, careful to avoid pressing against the front. Hips bucking, her little whimpers went straight to my dick. Fuck, I was going to come in my pants if she kept it up.

'Yes,' she whispered, 'Your fingers feel so good. I'm so close.'

'That's it sweetie, take my fingers, I'll even give you another for being so good.' I slipped a third finger into her as she clamped down on me. Then I felt her tip over into the last strains before orgasm took over. Her breath hitched and her legs tensed, her pussy milking at my fingers.

'Cum for me, Maeve. My dirty, needy girl. That's it. There we go.'

She came screaming into my pillow, her cunt squashing my fingers as the orgasm tore through her. Her whole body shook against me as I smiled into her neck, licking and kissing until the orgasm subsided, holding her as the quakes ramped down to twitches, my hand sodden between her thighs.

As I went to move my hand, she placed her fingers over it, holding me inside her. 'Don't let me go, not yet. I want you there.'

'You want to keep me holding what's mine?' My cock twitched against her arse at her request.

'Yes. All yours.' Her voice was dulled with exhaustion as her breathing calmed against my chest. 'Thank you, Cam.'

'Anytime baby.' I relaxed against her, my fingers still sunk into her heat until she drifted off.

I was screwed. I loved her. She'd wriggled under my skin and taken my heart captive and there wasn't a hope in hell I'd be letting her go. But how could I keep her safe without blowing up my family and my syndicate?

My father deserved death. Deserved to have his world blow to smithereens. But the death of a boss often left the syndicate in tatters. People turned on one another, the ecosystem always delicate between factions. It could tear everything apart. No, I had to force Father's hand and make him vow to leave Maeve alone. But how? My father kept proof on all of us, photographs and videos and corroborations of illegal things we'd done. Drug running, theft, murder. He had it all and he wouldn't hesitate to use mine to have me thrown in jail if I became a problem. He knew enough people in the judicial system to have a sentence swayed to whatever he desired, whether that was for or against me.

He wouldn't hesitate to put a bullet in me either, son or not, if he

perceived me to be a threat.

My life was a fucking mess. The only thing I was certain about was wanting Maeve by my side, no matter what.

When she'd fallen into a deep sleep, I removed my hand from her pyjamas and pulled her close, letting sleep capture me too.

CHAPTER TWENTY NINE

MAEVE

Days had passed since Katie and I's night out, and when the headache finally left, I was no closer to a solution. Guilt wracked me as I avoided telling Cam about my brother's threat, or his father's debased side business. If he told his father the situation would escalate to a point where someone would likely die, and unfortunately it probably wouldn't be Harold. Losing anyone else I loved wasn't an option. I needed evidence that would prove that Harold was involved with trafficking, evidence that not he, nor anyone else, could refute.

We'd been summoned back to the mansion for another family dinner, and I was going to find my proof. Somehow.

Cam pulled my chair a little closer to his as we waited for Harold's arrival. Katie was quieter than usual, and the tension in the room was so thick it almost felt clammy against my skin. I smiled as Cam slipped his hand under my hair and caressed the back of my neck. I'd never tire of the way he looked at me with those intense, dark eyes of his. As if I were the most precious thing in the entire universe. It gave me goosebumps every time.

'You've fallen for the bitch, haven't you?' We both jumped as Harold's voice slammed into us from behind. Cam's fingers twitched against me, but he didn't remove his hand.

'You are talking about my wife. I'd watch your mouth.'

Harold paused, his hand on the back of his seat as he clenched his teeth. 'Are you threatening me, boy?'

'I'm standing up for my wife. You're going to call off your whole tirade and the threats toward her are going to stop.' Cam stood up to his full height, his shoulders puffing as he stood up to his father.

Katie's eyes rounded, frozen in her chair, with fear riddling her features.

‘I can bury you as fast as I can bury her. I should have known you were too weak to do your duty. I should have taken her bewitching little cunt for myself.’

I grabbed Cam’s arm as he moved toward his father. His men were in the house, and he was likely armed. Punching him would only make things worse.

‘You are all fucking pathetic. A bunch of wimps, just like your mother. All I wanted were some children who wouldn’t turn into utter disappointments.’

‘Stop it!’ Katie’s chair hit the ground with a clatter as she glared at her father. ‘You are the reason we are the way we are.’

Harold rounded on her, landing a hard slap across her jaw. Katie’s lip burst into a torrent of blood. ‘I should have married you off a long time ago. You’ve made your brother soft. I’ll have you packed off to someone in Europe within the week.’

I tightened my grip on Cam’s arm as every muscle in his body strained toward his father. Perhaps I should let him maim him, but I didn’t believe he’d kill his father, and injuring him would only prove worse for us all.

‘Katie won’t be going anywhere,’ said Cam between gritted teeth as multiple men with their hands resting on holstered weapons blocked both doorways.

Harold laughed and shook out his hand where he’d used it against his daughter. ‘We’ll see. It’s about time your sister proved useful.’

His eyes drifted toward me, before he fixed me with a sadistic grin. ‘You’ve let your dick rule your head, son. There will be plenty more pussies to sink yourself into once Maeve’s been returned to her brothers. In tiny cardboard boxes.’

Cam lunged at his father, but stopped when Harold’s men raised multiple guns toward me and Katie. Time slowed to a standstill as my pulse thundered in my head. I didn’t doubt for a minute that they’d pull the triggers if instructed to.

The silence was pierced with ringing, and Harold non-chalantly answered the call before turning and walking out of the room as if nothing had transpired. His minions followed him, leaving the three of us in the room.

‘Katie,’ I said, moving over to her and pulling her into my arms. ‘Your lip...’

‘It’s not the first time he’s done it. Can I stay with you guys?’

‘Yes,’ Cam said. ‘I’ll have a room made up for you. Come on, I’ll get your lip patched up and help you pack your things. Maeve, get Benny to pull the car around front and stay there with him. We’ll be as quick as we can be.’

I didn’t go to find Benny.

Silence rang through the mansion as I made my way to the office, my tennis shoes making it far easier to sneak through the halls.

Harold’s office door was closed, and I prayed that he wasn’t inside as I tried the door with a trembling hand. Inching the door open, I breathed a sigh of relief. The office was both open and empty.

Moving quickly, I searched the desk, hunting for anything that might amount to proof of the trafficking. But there was nothing incriminating at all.

I let out a little groan of discontent as I searched the bookshelf. Nothing.

‘Maeve?’ I turned at the sound of my voice, my stomach all but falling out of my ass.

Benny stared at me from the doorway, his hand on the door handle. We stood staring at one another for what felt like minutes before he cleared his throat and looked down the hallway. ‘Whatever you’re doing, make it quick.’

‘It’s my only chance to get him.’ I hoped he wouldn’t call for Harold or his men, prayed that he’d understand after all he’d seen over his years working for them.

‘I’ll try to keep him distracted.’

‘Thanks,’ I breathed. ‘Don’t suppose you know the code to the safe?’

Benny shook his head and closed the door behind him, relief washing through me. He was on our side. If he could be trusted. I hoped he could.

Minutes went by agonisingly slowly as I tried to guess the code to the safe, but nothing worked. I groaned and thumped my fist against it in anger. There had to be something! It was my last chance. Between my brothers and Harold, time was running out.

It was then I heard voices coming from the corridor outside the office. Benny’s voice. He was speaking unnaturally loudly in what I could only assume was a warning.

Fuck.

I shimmied under the desk, tucking myself as far back as possible against the solid backboard, and prayed it was anyone but Harold.

No such luck.

The door slammed behind him as his voice carried toward me. 'In an hour? Yes, I'll be there.'

I heard him searching the drawer and grabbing some paper or a notepad, the scratch of the pen right above me. Not daring to breathe, I waited, every fibre of my being itching to run, to escape.

'Yup, I've got the address. And you say they're young?' Harold chuckled darkly at the reply from the other end of the call. 'If the girl's fifteen, she should do well. The buyers are clamouring for teens, not nearly as used up as the meth heads.'

My nails dug into the flesh of my hands as I listened to the call. Harold was a piece of fucking shit and I was going to take him down if I had to kill the fucker myself. I froze as his legs came into view, sure that he could hear the hammering of my pulse over the short distance between us.

He reached down and scratched his balls in front of me, his hand only inches from my face before I screwed my eyes shut, so sure that he would find me and kill or capture me. I'd never see Cam again.

My muscles ached when he left, slamming the door shut behind him. I waited a few moments before peering out from my hiding spot. How could I follow him?

I stood up and looked at the yellow pad, laying where he'd left it. An idea struck and hope surged through me. Please, please let it work.

The desk drawers were neatly packed, and I found a pencil quickly, turning it onto its side and lightly dragging it across the empty notepad.

'Yes!' I said as letters appeared. An address! An industrial estate on the other side of town. Perfect.

The door swung open with force, and I screamed, thrusting the paper into my back pocket.

'Maeve, what the fuck are you doing in here?' Cam said, his eyes narrowing at me.

CHAPTER THIRTY

CAMERON

I'd gone to help Katie grab her things, but instead of going to Benny to get the car, Maeve was in my father's office. It was the last place I'd expected her to be, but I'd looked just about everywhere else. I only dared to check the office because my father had left the mansion in a hurry.

'What the hell are you doing in here?' Anger rippled through me at her guilty expression. I thought we were trying to figure out a way to be together, but she was still sneaking about, trying to find dirt on us. 'Do you have a fucking death wish? If he'd have caught you...'

Maeve visibly bristled, pulling herself up straighter under my glare.

'I heard him on the phone. He's trafficking.'

The room spun around me at her words. My dad was shit, but he would never...

'Trafficking kids too,' she swallowed hard as I steadied myself with a quaking breath.

'He isn't. Even he wouldn't.' I refused to believe it. My father was a moral degenerate, but there was no quarter given to people dealing in the skin trade, no matter who you were. We had enough money and power that the risk wouldn't be worth it for him.

'You don't believe me?' her voice accusatory as she crossed the room toward me. 'Your father is a piece of shit. How does it even surprise you that he would be involved?'

'What proof do you have?' My mind whirred, judging every conversation, every business action I'd ever had with my father. There wasn't even a whisper of evidence of it. It couldn't be true.

'I heard him on the phone. I have an address he wrote down.'

‘An address? What the hell does that prove?’ My voice pitched louder that I meant it to and I cringed when Maeve shrank away from me, her eyes widening.

‘I’m going to go find proof.’ Her face steeled as she moved toward the door. ‘Maybe then you’ll get the stick out of your ass and believe me.’

‘You must have heard wrong.’

‘I didn’t.’

Through a clenched jaw, I repeated myself. ‘You must have heard wrong.’

If it was true, was I complicit? My brain refused to allow it.

‘I heard right. And this is my way to end this war for good. Help me?’

‘You need to stop this.’ I needed time to think.

‘I thought you saw me, believed in me?’ Her eyes pricked with tears that only made my head spin more.

‘I did. I do.’

‘Then don’t get in my way.’

Shouldering me, she moved to leave until I grabbed her wrist, holding her in a tight grip. ‘I am not letting you pursue this. He won’t hesitate to blow your brains out if he catches you.’

Narrowing her eyes, she looked at me in disgust, her voice lowering to a whisper. ‘Are you going to keep me prisoner? Pin me down like he wants you to? Are you going to put me in my place?’

The sheer disgust on her face made me drop her wrist as I stared at her.

‘Maeve,’ I said, reaching out to touch her face, wanting to right things. Everything was wrong.

‘Don’t,’ she said, moving past me. ‘If you aren’t going to help me, just don’t get in my way.’

Rooted to the spot, I went over it all in my head multiple times. Our business couldn’t be involved in trafficking, there would have had to be some kind of evidence. I couldn’t have missed it. The very thought sent me to the wastepaper bin, my stomach heaving up my lunch. The money I spent, the island, the mansion and apartments... was it possible that it was more than just the money from drugs and coercion?

No. No! My fist hit the wall as I tried to relieve the pressure building inside of me. It couldn’t be true. Blood gathered at my knuckles where they’d collided with the wall, but the pain didn’t help this time.

Why would Maeve lie? She must have believed that it was true. Whether

or not it was. She believed enough to do something about it.

Fuck.

Involvement in trafficking would explain the stranglehold he maintained over not just the criminal underworld, but those in high-ranking positions too. People he should have no hold over at all.

The world lurched as I steadied myself against the desk and tried to breathe. My breath came in short bursts, my lungs burning as I almost choked on them. What had I done? I'd accused Maeve of lying. I hadn't believed my girl. I'd treated her like all the other men in her life and discarded her opinion.

Grabbing my phone, I pulled up her name and dialed. Straight to voicemail. I left a message, begging for her to call me, telling her I was sorry and that we needed to talk.

Storming from the room, I hit the hall running. I needed to find her. Needed to show her I believed her.

Katie stood in the entrance hall, eyebrows lifting as I ran into the room, my breath catching in my throat.

'Where's Maeve?'

Katie paled at the sight of me, bloody knuckles and all. 'What did you do, Cam?'

'Where is she?'

She shifted uncomfortably, her fingers tightening around the handle of her suitcase. 'She left.'

'With Benny?' I could call him to talk to her.

Katie opened her mouth, then closed it, shaking her head. 'I let her take my car.'

'Some of the guys are tailing her, right?'

'No. I snuck her out. She needed my help.'

'Fuck, Katie. What have you done?' I scraped a hand through my hair as I tried to grasp an answer in my head. What if she'd gone to confront him?

Shit. What if he caught her? I needed to find her. Immediately.

'Who took Father out? Who drove him?'

'No-one. He took his own car.'

'She's in danger Katie, what the fuck do I do?'

Katie walked over to me and pulled me into her arms. 'We'll find her. She'll be okay.'

'I'm not sure I'll be able to live with myself if she isn't. I should have

believed her.'

'Believed what?'

'Our world is built on money from trafficking. She'd gone to find proof.'

Katie stilled against me as those words sank in.

What the hell could I do to find her?

CHAPTER THIRTY ONE

MAEVE

The warehouse looked like any other warehouse. From the outside, you'd never expect there to be such despicable things going on inside. What if I was wrong? I'd been so sure I'd heard correctly, but Cam had left me doubting myself. Desperation to find something against Harold could cloud my head, making me imagine it. Couldn't it?

Should I have called my brothers? Left them to deal with it while I stayed safe somewhere? I turned my phone on, silencing it. Missed calls from Cam littered the screen, but I ignored them. The camera was all I hoped to need.

It's okay, I reminded myself. I was only going to get proof. That's all I needed.

I found an unlocked door at the opposite end I'd seen Harold enter, my heart thundering in my chest as I found myself amongst stacks of crates. Voices carried from the far end of the warehouse and I crept my way along, ensuring slow, silent steps.

The voices got louder the closer I got to them, and my pulse beat loudly in my ears, nerves wracking my stomach.

Breathe Maeve, just breathe.

Peeking out from my hiding space, I viewed the scene before me. Harold stood with two men as they counted money. I pulled my phone up and photographed the strangers. All it showed was Harold doing a deal. Where were the people he was selling? It took me a few seconds to locate them. They were at the far edge of the room, shackled to a pipe. Fuck, they really were just kids. My heart ached for them as I pulled my phone up and photographed them, too. A girl and a boy, both in their early teens, from what I could tell. They both sported facial bruises and looked utterly terrified as

they watched the men count out their price.

Rage simmered beneath my skin, heating my blood to boiling.

Proof wouldn't be enough. I needed to get someone here. Proof might bring down Harold, but it would be too late for the kids. They'd be gone by then. I couldn't leave them.

I pulled up my brothers into a group chat and sent the photos along with the address, swallowing hard as I sent them. Cam and Katie received the same brief message before I thrust my phone back into my pocket. I ignored the storm of vibrations in my pocket and watched as the two men left, taking their case full of cash with them.

Would my brothers or Cam get here in time?

Harold walked across the room and grasped the girl by her chin, turning her head from side to side before skimming a hand down over her chest. The girl paled while the boy tried to kick out toward him. Harold's laughter echoed about the room as he slapped the boy.

'No point fighting. After today, you'll never see your sister again. And she'll be getting touched by whoever pays the most for her.'

The boy's words were muffled by the fabric gag that truncated his face, pulled tightly between his teeth.

'Don't worry, they'll pay to fuck your arse too.'

The boy's eyes widened as his sister's shoulders shook with quiet sobs.

I'd fucking kill him myself. There wasn't a shred of Harold that was worth saving. His existence was a pestilence that I intended to rid Scotland of. Somehow.

The trilling of Harold's phone pierced the air. What if it was Cam or Katie? Would they give me away? Perspiration beaded at my neck as I waited.

'Yes, they're gone,' Harold said into the receiver. 'You'll be thrilled with these two. Someone has already logged them as runaways from the foster parents. No-one's looking for them.'

My eyes darted back to the kids. If they left here, they'd all but disappear. It would take Cam at least thirty minutes to get to me if he came. Would they be gone by then? I didn't have any weapons to take care of Harold myself, and he would be armed.

'You can make your way here and be quick. I don't enjoy babysitting. Same as always. I'm alone. You can pull right in with the van.'

I moved to another stack, closer to the kids, wanting to get a clearer

picture of their faces. If Cam couldn't get there in time, maybe it would be useful to the police. Maybe they could find them somehow.

My foot caught against the pallet as I crossed, sending me to my knees hard, landing with a crack that reverberated throughout the space. My phone flew from my fingers, skittering across the cement floor and coming to a halt in the open.

Harold's eyes went to the phone, before lifting to me. Hatred, mixed with glee, crossed his face as he stalked toward me. I tried to run, but waves of pain shot through my knee as I stood. A terrible crunch rang out as Harold brought his foot down on my phone, crushing it beneath his heel.

'Well, well, well,' he said, gaining ground fast as I hobbled away. Pain shot through my scalp as I was yanked back forcefully by my hair, the ground grazing at my skin as he dragged me over the floor and into the open. 'Look what we have here. I should have known you'd be the one to figure me out.'

Harold threw me to the floor before landing a solid kick into my ribs, my breath fleeing with the force of it. A cough wracked me as I curled up around my stomach.

'You just couldn't accept your place, could you, Maeve? Couldn't just stay on your knees sucking my boy's dick like the whore you were born to be?'

Another kick bruised into me as tears sprung, wetting my cheeks.

'But what do I do with you? Blow your brains out or sell you on. I'm sure they'd take you.' Harold reached down and flipped me onto my back, straddling my chest as I flailed beneath him. He pinned my arms with his knees as he pinched my chin hard enough to make me yelp.

'You look so much like your mother. She was a slut too, always teasing me but giving her cunt to your dad instead. She knew what she was doing. But I took care of her, just like I'll take care of you.'

I closed my eyes as his hands went to my chest, kneading at my flesh and making my stomach lurch.

'I knew I'd get my hands on you, eventually. You'll scream around my cock one way or another, shame you chose fear.'

'Not in front of the kids,' I whispered. If I got him to move me, maybe I could run. Desperation gripped me as he adjusted himself in his trousers. A mouthful of sick ascended my throat, making me splutter.

Harold's laugh made every muscle in me tense. 'They may as well get used to it. It's the only life they'll know.'

The girl's sobs increased as she watched us. Fuck, I needed time. Time for Cam to reach us. With a yank, he freed my top from under his thighs and grinned as he pulled it over my chest. I fought as hard as I could, working to unseat him from my chest, but I was stuck.

The air in the warehouse was cold, and the floor beneath me was even colder. When he pulled my bra down, the tears came anew. He twisted a nipple mercilessly as I cried out from the pain.

'Stop,' I begged, my eyes going to the door.

He followed my gaze before a sadistic grin crossed his face.

'Do you think he's going to come to your rescue? That he'll storm in here and save you? Don't be so fucking pathetic. He might well have enjoyed sinking his dick into your tight cunt, but he doesn't love you. I worked hard to beat that shit out of him.'

Harold leaned down and pressed his tongue flat against my neck, licking his way up to my mouth as I turned away, sickened by him.

'Do you think he doesn't know about all of this? He doesn't assist me?' he whispered in my ear. My mind raced. Could he have known? Could it all have been a lie? Was I really the gullible idiot my brothers had told me I was?

No. I knew Cam. He wouldn't have allowed this if he'd have known. I tipped my head toward Harold and caught his jaw with my teeth, baring down until the coppery taste of blood filled my mouth.

'You fucking bitch,' he wailed, pulling himself upright. Punches rained down on my face and body as I choked beneath him, his full weight on my chest. Pain blossomed from his strikes, bone crunching and flesh bleeding. The far off lights of the ceiling swam as my vision dulled.

I stilled as he pulled his gun and held it to my temple. The warm barrel dug into my head as I screwed my eyes shut. It would all be for nothing.

'You think you know Cam, but you don't. He's just been keeping you sweet with his lies until I was ready to put you to use. Filling your head with lies for access to your cunt. Seems you want to expedite the end of your existence, though. Fine with me.'

I prayed for the bullet when he undid his zip.

'Enjoy it Maeve, my dick is going to me the last thing you ever feel.'

CHAPTER THIRTY TWO

CAMERON

Swerving to a halt in front of the warehouse, I ditched the car, not even stopping to turn it off. Maeve still hadn't answered her phone, and I hoped beyond all reason that she'd left the building after snapping and sending those images.

Panic lurched in my chest when I ripped open the door and entered the cavernous space, seeing my father in the centre of the room, fumbling at his trousers while holding a gun to my girl's head.

'Get the fuck off of her,' I yelled, pulling my gun from my waistband and cocking it while aiming it at my father.

His fingers paused on his waistband, before slowly reversing his actions and pulling his zip back up. A vice grip squeezed at my chest when I saw Maeve's face purpling, her lip cut and nose bleeding. Rage encapsulated me, it taking everything not to pull the trigger.

Dad lifted his hands in a gesture of surrender, lifting his body off of Maeve, who coughed viciously as the air filled her no longer compressed lungs. He'd exposed her chest. He'd been touching her, hurting her. I needed to get her away from him, and then I'd finally deal with him once and for all.

As he stood, he pulled Maeve up in front of him, holding his gun to her head as he grasped her about the waist, her top falling back down and laying crumpled and bloodied against my father's arm. A whimper escaped her lips as she met my eyes, a whimper that set my tense muscles on fire.

The muzzle of my father's gun pressed against her temple as she screwed her eyes shut. It was then I noticed the teenagers off in the background, wide-eyed with terror. Shit. I'd have to do this in a way where Maeve and the kids wouldn't get hurt. But how?

‘Always trying to be the knight in shining armour, eh Cameron? Trying to save your sister, helping your mother get away. Now here to try, and what? Save her cunt from me? I own her. I own you. I own everything. Untouchable. If you know what’s good for you, you’ll straighten your head and stop being fucked over by your dick.’

Ragged breaths tore at my nostrils while I watched him, not trusting my mouth with a response.

‘I have given you the world. Laid it at your feet and given you every opportunity to succeed. You should have been by my side, think how much we could have if you helped me with this,’ Harold said, indicating to the kids off behind him. ‘Brought to your knees by a fucking McGowan. She’s your enemy. She says she loves you, but all the while, she’s here spying for them.’

‘She’s my wife.’

‘She’s nothing but a whore. You’ve always been so needy, so desperate to be loved. I thought I’d finally cured you of that particular deficiency. But no, all she has to do is spread her legs and you’re there betraying me. Where’s your fucking loyalty?’

Despite knowing he was wrong, his words still grated at me, still swept me with guilt as I pointed a gun at my father.

Maeve opened her eyes and met mine. Her mouth opened as she silently conveyed words to me. It was hard to make out over her swollen lower lip, but a shot of joy ricochet through me.

I love you. It’s what the words said. I was almost sure of it. Tingles gripped my spine as I looked from my father to Maeve and to the kids beyond. Taking a deep breath, I let my veneer of ice settle over me once more.

Lowering my gun, I shrugged. ‘How can I be loyal when you are pulling this shit behind my back? You expect me to take over the syndicate when you are running this shit without me?’

My father’s eyebrows raised, his shoulders relaxing as I narrowed my eyes and said, ‘This is low, even for you.’

‘Money, power, control, you’ve enjoyed it all. I’ve given you everything, and like it or not, this is where the big bucks are. You will join me in it. I have enough on you that you’ll fall in line. You always do.’

Maeve’s face dropped as I pushed my gun back into the waistband of my trousers. ‘You’re right. She can’t compete with it all. There are plenty more where she came from.’

It cut me to the core to say it. It was so far from the truth, but I needed to get her away from his gun before I could deal with him.

Dad's victorious laughter filled the air as he leaned in close to Maeve and bit her neck, his eyes never leaving my face as she cried out. The urge to run over and tear him limb from limb had me quaking with anger, but I swallowed it back. He had to believe I didn't care.

'The business is all I have. I'm not going to lose it over her.'

'The right choice for once. You won't have to worry about her after this. I think I'll keep her for myself.'

Maeve's knee's trembled visibly as tears dripped down over her cheeks. I tried to catch her eye, but she couldn't even look at me.

'Slide your gun over there,' Father said, pointing to the far side of the room where stacks upon stacks of palletted goods lay.

I had no choice but to comply. Sliding the safety back into place, I thrust my weapon hard, sending it skittering over to the side and under one of the pallets. I marked where it was. I'd need to get it back. Somehow.

Maeve crumpled as he pushed her forward, her knees landing hard as they grazed the cement floor. My heart went with her.

When she looked up at me, the hate was back, amplified.

Fuck, I didn't want her believing the charade.

Sweat slicked my back as I attempted to formulate a plan.

Every single one seemed to end in disaster.

CHAPTER THIRTY THREE

MAEVE

My brothers were my last hope.

Dirt engrained into my bloody knees as Harold levelled another sharp kick into my side, my sob catching in my throat as I looked up at Cam.

Not a flicker of worry crossed his face. The ice king was back. Maybe it had only been an infatuation for him, a desire to fuck while I was available. How could I have been so dumb?

‘We’ll make the trade for the kids when they guys get here, and then we’ll figure out what to do with her,’ Harold said, pushing me with a heel so that I tipped over to my side, every muscle in my body aching from the cold and pain. ‘Tie her up next to the kids. There’s rope on the side.’

Harold tossed Cam a flick knife. ‘For the rope, and in case she get’s any ideas. He still clenched his gun, now lowered by his side. Even if I could get the knife, he’d shoot me before I could use it.

I flinched as Cameron lifted me roughly to my feet; the betrayal cutting deep. My arm ached where his fingers dug hard into my flesh. Every step brought another wince as I bore weight on my battered knee. We neared the terrified teenagers, their eyes huge as they took in my cuts and bruises up close.

The noise of the knife cutting through rope made me stiffen next to Cam as he readied a piece for me. He pushed me roughly to my ass, seating me immediately between the children, crouching in front of me and gripping my arms. Instead of the pressure of the rope I expected to feel, his thumbs grazed down my palm.

With brusque actions looking every bit like he was securing me, he bent over me, his lips grazing my ear. Something hard slipped into my hand

behind my back, the knife. He'd been bluffing his dad the entire time.

Relief flooded me as I choked down a sob.

'Cut the kids free,' his words were but a whisper in my hair as he still mock-tied me to the pipe. 'Don't run until I attack him.'

'But your gun--'

'Don't worry about me. Just get yourself and the kids out. Go through the pallets, there will be a door near the back. Get in Katie's car and disappear. I'll find you when I can.'

'You can't do it alone. He'll kill you.'

'Just go when you can. Promise me?'

I nodded, knowing I had no intention of leaving without him.

With a last stroke of his thumb against my cheek, he stood and walked back toward his father, leaving my heart breaking behind him. Where the fuck were my brothers? I needed them more than ever.

Cam looked toward the stack of pallets his gun had slid under. If I could get away, maybe I could reach it in time.

Minutes ticked by as Cam and Harold spoke in hushed tones across the room. Eventually Harold relaxed enough to slip his gun back in its holster, patting Cam on the back and letting out a raucous laugh.

Sweat beaded on my forehead as I worked the knife against the kids' tied wrists.

'What are your names?' I whispered beneath my breath as the rope securing the boy finally loosened.

'Elias, and she's Grace.'

I stilled as Harold glanced back at us for a moment before going back to his conversation. My wrists ached as I started work on Grace's binding, my fingers frozen from the chilled air and the cold floor. It was hard to make steady strokes while holding the knife behind me to make it seem like I was secured. Eventually Grace's shoulders tensed as the rope dropped.

'Not yet,' I said. 'Not until they're distracted.'

The urge to flee rolled off of the girl in waves of terror. Please, not yet. It would ruin everything.

A scuffle broke out as Cam tightened his arm around his father's neck, the gun pinned out of reach between them.

'Now,' I said in a hushed whisper. 'Go, run, hide. If he over powers us, get away. Find the police and hand yourselves in. Don't trust anyone outside. They might be with him.'

They didn't need to be told twice. They were up and running within seconds, lost in the sea of pallet towers.

'Go,' Cam roared at me as I froze.

'You stupid fuck,' Harold shouted at him as he threw his fists back at Cam over his shoulder. Harold was similarly built than Cam, albeit thicker from years of parties and having his henchmen do the more vigorous work. Could Cam subdue him before he got to the gun?

The gun!

I looked longingly toward the exit before setting my shoulders square and making my decision. Running wasn't an option. I'd fight by my man to end Harold.

I took the ground between myself and the pallets as quickly as I could. Sliding onto my side and peering underneath. Fuck, it was right in the middle and I couldn't reach. I stretched my arm, twisting it at the shoulder under the pallet to try to grasp the gun. My fingers grazed the edge of the metal. So close.

A face appeared in the gap at the other end of the pallet. It was Elias. Why the hell was he still there? A broom appeared, sliding under the pallet and shunting the gun toward me. Pure relief washed over me as I pulled it out and turned the safety off.

Cam and Harold were still entangled in a grunting, fist flailing pile. But Harold had his gun in hand, and was trying to point it at Cam.

No.

I wouldn't lose him.

I loved him, and I wouldn't let Harold rip someone else I loved from me.

Ignoring the pain ripping through my leg, I crept up behind them, aiming to get Harold isolated to get a clear shot.

Both of them were grunting and swearing, landing elbows, knees, and fists wherever they could. Blood dripped from Cam's brow and Harold's nose.

A shot cracked, the noise reverberating through the room as Cam yelped. He went down and my heart went with him.

Blood wetted his trousers, blooming from a hole in his thigh.

Harold trained the gun on Cam's head, standing over him as he tried to drag himself backwards. My hands trembled as I lifted the gun and aimed it at the back of Harold's head, praying I didn't miss.

'You've always been a piece of shit.' Harold said, spitting a mouthful of

blood on the floor as he followed Cam's retreat, maintaining his aim. 'I should have made sure they left you to rot when I took the skin off of your back. You were weak then and your weak now. This is your last chance. You choose her or you choose me.'

The trigger dug into my finger as I half squeezed it, taking my aim. I had one shot to really get it right. Nausea swept through me. Could I really shoot him point blank? Movement flickered to my far left, Elias and Grace half hidden in the shadows.

'I choose her. I love her.'

His words filled me with hope, hope for our future. I pulled the trigger, only to be surprised by another shot ringing out a second before mine.

Harold's head caved in, blood and bone splintering, brain matter slopping out as he hit the ground. My stomach heaved at the sight before my eyes fell on Cam, recoiling from the second shot from his father's gun.

He lay sprawled on the ground, a hand cradling his chest as blood darkened his shirt. The room spun as I fled toward him, dropping the gun and throwing myself at his side.

'Knew you could do it Princess,' he said, his chest rattling as he inhaled.

'Shh.' I pressed my hand against the hole in his chest as he winced. Blood spurted between my fingers, staining my hands red as I applied pressure. Fuck. Fuck! Panic swept through me. My phone had been crushed. I needed an ambulance.

The door opened, and for a moment, I thought it would be Harold's buyers. Tears came as my brothers burst into the room.

'Shit,' Mac said, taking in Harold's dead body and me crying over my bleeding husband. He whistled low. 'Well kid, you took out the Thompson's after all.'

'Call an ambulance,' I yelled, fury taking over at their lack of empathy. Cam's eyes closed as his face drained of colour. He was going to die.

'It would be less messy to let him join his father,' Ewen said, standing over Harold's corpse.

'I fucking love him. If you let him die, I will come after all of you. Get an ambulance or so help me god you'll be joining him.'

Logan pulled out his phone and dialled a number. 'I'll get someone to help.'

'Thank you,' I whispered, leaning down to brush my lips over Cam's brow. 'Please, please don't leave me. Help is coming. Just hold on.'

‘We’ll call in the clean-up crew to make this disappear.’ Logan creased his brow as he hung up the phone.

‘You can’t kill the boss and expect it to disappear,’ Mac said.

‘We have proof he was trafficking. We’ll blame it on a deal gone sour.’ Logan had gone straight into business mode, ever the straight laced one.

‘The kids are hiding over there. Elias and Grace. Help them. I don’t think they’re hurt, but they are likely traumatised. They saw it all.’ I breathed in Cam’s scent as I continued to press firmly against his wound, wishing he would groan or flinch, but nothing.

‘Take them home until I can join you. And find out who sold them and how, and make them pay.’ My teeth ground with rage. I was going to bring them all down. Anyone who was involved. They’d all suffer.

‘On who’s authority?’ Mac asked.

‘Mine.’ I held my brother’s gaze, feeling the rush of power as I did. ‘I’m the wife of the boss now. And with Cam incapacitated, I’m taking control.’

If he died. Heads would fucking roll.

His breath was barely a whisper as the private ambulance tore into the place. The paramedics didn’t even look twice at Harold as they relieved my aching arms and took over. ‘Just don’t die, my love,’ I whispered into Cam’s hair through my blood caked hands.

CHAPTER THIRTY FOUR

CAMERON

Far-off voices intercepted my dreams. Trying to focus on them was like wading through thick soup, they were close but unclear. Everything hurt, from a dull ache in my chest to a hot pain in my thigh. Where was I? Last thing I remembered was being on the icy warehouse floor, the lights swimming far above me as Maeve sobbed against my chest.

Maeve.

Warmth filled me as the thought of her drifted into mind. My beautiful, hardheaded, wonderful wife.

Another tug toward consciousness had me doubling down on trying to focus, trying to pull myself from the fog. My head thumped as I tried to get my ears to cooperate with my addled mind.

‘You didn’t have to take matters into your own hands Maeve.’ Who was that? Maeve... she was here?

‘I did. For you guys, for me, for him, for those kids. It needed to end. I’d do it again if I had to.’ Maeve’s sweet voice brought a wave of pleasure to my aching body. I needed to pull myself out of the fog. Needed to hold her, to kiss her, to know we were both safe.

‘You’re not the baby anymore, are you?’ The other voice must have been coming from one of her brothers. My jaw ticked at them being so close to me while I was unconscious. They could have slit my throat without me even knowing. Something must have changed while I was out.

‘I’m not.’ She sounded exhausted, her voice soft but strained.

‘I wish you hadn’t had to get involved in the whole mess. All I ever wanted was to keep you out of the business. To keep you safe.’

‘And all I ever wanted was to be a part of it. Keeping women out of it is

so stupid. So old-fashioned.’ A slice of anger in my girl’s throat. So proud of her.

‘Yeah. Maybe you’re right. Do you really love him? After everything that’s happened? You could leave, you know? The threats are gone. You don’t have to stay.’

Warm fingers slipped over my hand, caressing over my bruised knuckles with a feather-light touch.

‘I do.’ My heart bloomed in my chest, joy filling it to brimming. She loved me. Loved me! I needed to drag myself back to the real world. My body refused to cooperate, barely a twitch of a finger all I was rewarded with. ‘Who’d have thought it possible? A McGowan loving a Thompson. He’s a good man and I feel different when I’m with him. It took me a while to see it, but he knows me, and wants to see the real me at every turn.’

My tongue moved thickly in my mouth as I battled it for cooperation. Eventually it submitted to me. My voice came out at barely a croak as I forced my eyes open, the bright light burning against them.

‘I love you too, Princess.’

I focused on her face, willing the blurriness to subside, bringing her beautiful, tear pricked face into view, right before she threw her body at me.

Wincing as her body slammed into me, I groaned.

‘Shit, sorry,’ she said, pulling back. I reached up, using what little energy I had to pin her to my chest. Who cared about pain when I had my girl in my arms?

‘Thank god,’ she murmured into my neck, her tears wetting my cheek. Maybe it was my own tears. I couldn’t tell. ‘I thought I’d never hear your voice again.’

‘Not getting rid of me that easily.’ Her scent filled my nostrils, sweet and sultry, salty beneath the shampoo. I wanted to taste her, to indulge in the women who I adored.

Ignoring the lines that were still inserted into the back of my hand, the painful prick of them as I fisted Maeve’s hair, pulling her lips to mine. Hesitation held her back as I kissed her softly, before she melted into me, her mouth giving way to my tongue in a tender, yet passionate kiss. I poured all of my pent up fear and love into her, groaning as she whimpered softly into me. My pulse quickened as I lost myself in my girl, my blood heating as she swept her tongue over my lower lip.

A cough from the other side of the bed brought us back to the world with

a bump. Maeve pulled back, a blush reddening her cheeks. I only noticed the bruises when I pulled back and studied her. Fuck, she was a mess. Hate crept into me as my father's marks still marred her.

Another cough brought my eyes from her face to the man at the side of the bed, filling one of the plastic chairs. Mac.

'Is he dead?' I asked, needing to hear it. I'd gone down before her gun had gone off, and the images of the moment were foggy. If he was alive, I'd kill him myself.

'Yes. I'm sorry Cam.'

'Hey, no, don't be sorry. I'm sorry you had to do it. You never should have had to. I should have listened to you. I should have dealt with him years ago. Are you okay?'

'Yeah. Still a bit shaken up, but I'll be fine. We both will.' Her fingers tightened around mine and a smile lit up her face. I do anything to keep her smiling.

'Fuck, I really thought I was going to lose you before we'd even had a chance to do this for real,' Maeve said, reaching up and stroking a finger along my hairline.

'Oh my god,' my sister's voice pierced the air, loud and shrill against my sore head. I cracked my lips into a grin as she came into view. She practically threw her coffee cup and jacket into Mac's hand as she moved past him, throwing herself into my arms.

Sobs wracked her as she pulled back and looked at me, tilting my face this way and that as though checking I was really awake. 'Trust you to wait until I leave to wake up.'

'Did it just to vex you,' I said, grinning at my little sister.

'We're finally free Cam. Finally!' Glee brightened her eyes as she pulled Maeve into our hug. 'God, I'm so glad you're okay. If you'd have died on me, I'd have marched down to hell and dragged you back here myself.'

A chuckle escaped my throat as I looked at the two most important people in my life, my heart sore at the amount of love that leaked from it.

And then there was Mac, not looking entirely thrilled in the corner. That was a battle for another day. I'd have to deal with the fallout of my father's death before I dealt with what that meant for the war between our families.

Katie stood, gathering her things back from Mac, smiling down at him. Was that a hint of red tinging her cheeks? Her fingers reached up and toyed with a strand of hair as she thanked him. What the hell? Was she flirting with

him? Hell no.

‘I’m going to leave you guys too it now that you're awake. Call Logan when you’re back on your feet.’ Mac gave me a nod as he stood, looking flustered as Katie blushed at him.

I couldn’t help but scowl as I watched something pass between them. But what?

‘So now that’s dad’s gone, you’re going to stick around, right Maeve?’ Katie asked, filling Mac’s now empty seat and perching with her elbows on the bed.

‘Yeah, I guess I am.’ Her face creased into a grin as she toyed with my hair.

Katie let out another girlish squeal before standing to pull Maeve into a crushing hug.

‘A sister, for real.’

Pain tugged at my chest as I watched them together. I’d never have thought that I could be so happy, so filled with utter joy.

My girls were safe.

And I was in fucking love.

CHAPTER THIRTY FIVE

MAEVE

Cameron winced as I wrapped the clean bandage around his chest, his fingers digging at my hips while I looped the long cream strip over his shoulder.

‘Don’t be a baby,’ I jested, trying to lighten the mood. Every time I saw the raised red scar that was forming on his chest it tore me asunder all over again. I’d nearly lost him. At least I finally had him back home in our apartment, all mine to fuss over as he healed.

Cam laughed and pulled me toward him, nuzzling at my chest from where he sat in front of me at the edge of the bed. ‘I’d take pain all day every day if it means you’re by my side.’

‘Me too.’ We’d released the details of it being a trafficking deal gone wrong regarding Harold’s death, making it clear it had been a clandestine meeting between him and the dealers, and that no-one else had known. When the buyers had shown up, my brothers had meted out justice and staged the scene to make it look like a shoot out that had ended in tragedy for both Harold and the other guys. Their support meant the world, and slowly I was mending the bridges that had damaged over the past months.

‘I had something I wanted to ask you.’ I trailed a finger down his neck as he looked up at me, hooking me into those soulful eyes.

‘Anything.’

I fiddled with the edge of the bandage, having secured it once more. Nerves riddled my tummy as I tried to find the right words.

‘It’s about the kids.’

Cam’s eyebrow lifted, yet he remained quiet.

‘They don’t want to go back to the foster system. It’s brought them nothing but pain. The foster mother was the one who sold them to the men

who brought them to your dad.'

'Fuck,' Cam inhaled as he said it, his eyes staying closed longer than on a normal blink.

'She's been dealt with.' Steel gilded my words as I stiffened, the anger still coursing through me whenever I thought of what those kids had had to endure. They escaped being sold into much worse hardship, but the adults in their lives had failed them repeatedly. Trusting anyone would take a long, long time.

'Princess, you don't have to deal out punishments. I can take care of that.'

'I wanted to. Plus, I'm sure you promised me equality in our running of the family business. Promised me power of my own. We're going to pull up every root of their rotten fucking tree until I've eradicated the trafficking going on. If I have to torture them myself to weed them out, I will.'

Cam's eyes widened at my words before he grinned at me. 'Fuck, you're even hotter when you're mad.'

I swatted him playfully before planting a kiss on his forehead, his skin warm beneath my lips.

'So where will they go?'

'I... I know we haven't really discussed kids, and if I'm honest, I don't know if I want any of my own, but could we foster them? Help them find their way to a good life?'

'They'll have a lot of baggage, Maeve.'

'So do we... who knows more about dysfunctional families than we do? We have the means to get them a top class education and to support them into a great life. We can use some of Harold's blood money for a worthy cause.'

'We are still a criminal organisation. I'm not sure that's a great start for them.'

'No. I don't want them to follow us unless they choose to as adults. I want them to thrive. I want us to use the money your dad made from this to help kids in Scotland not to fall into these cracks. I know we aren't above crime, and I know our families are involved in bad shit, but what if we could do good, too?'

'You want to be a sexy little robin hood?'

'Yeah.'

Cam smiled at me and pulled me down into his lap, shifting me with a grunt so my legs straddled his hips.

'My power hungry little philanthropist. I could never say no to you. But

give them a choice. If they want to stay, they can. If they don't, then we help them find somewhere else.'

I brushed my hand over his heartbeat, my fingers stilling over the bandage where the scar lay hidden. 'Thank you, my love.'

'More scars to add to my father's legacy,' he said, his arms circling my waist as I leant my forehead against his, our breath mingling between us.

'I love your scars. I'm going to spend eternity kissing every one of them.'

The press of his erection between my thighs didn't go amiss. Longing gripped me as I tested a wriggle of my hips, his groan making me smile.

Cam whispered against my lips, 'Are you sure you're ready?'

'I've never been ready for anything so much in my life. I need to feel you inside me. If you think you'll be okay?'

Cam grasped me by the back of the neck as his lips pressed against my own, his tongue hungrily searching my mouth. 'Show me how bad you need it Princess.'

My cheeks heated as I gave into the lust that overwhelmed me. I ground against his thickening cock, my sundress rucking up by my hips. A rush of wetness had me soaked as he continued to plunder my mouth, our moans mingling on our tongues.

My whole body was on fire with need, from the tips of my fingers right to the core of me. I gave way to passion, leaving my dignity aside as I moved against my man with wild abandon.

'Look at you, such a desperate little thing. My trousers are soaked already.' Flutters of desire blossomed into great waves as he gripped my hips roughly, arching his dick harder against me.

'Please, Cam.'

'Please, what my sweet?'

'Please fill me up.'

'With my fingers? My tongue? Or my cock?' he said against my mouth as my breath came in desperate bursts.

'Your cock. I need it so badly.'

'Yes you do.'

His rough fingers made light work of my dress, yanking it over my head before relieving me of my undergarments.

'So fucking delicious,' he moaned, pulling me back to his mouth, the heat settling over a nipple as he sucked it. His hands held me to his face as he pulled me back onto the bed, still astride him.

‘Take my dick out baby, show me how badly you want it.’

I practically ripped it out of his trousers, so desperate was I to take it. He pumped his hips as my fingers circled the flared tip. What did I want more? To ride him or taste him?

His groan of satisfaction filled me with pleasure as I lowered my mouth onto him, taking as much of his thickness as I could manage. He watched me with lust half-lidded his eyes as I worked him, using my hands and fingers to tease his flesh.

‘Yes, that’s it. Just like that. I’ve missed that hot little mouth.’

My moan vibrated against his cock as I closed my eyes, losing myself in his pleasure. I loved his cock. It’s heft in my hand, the way it twitched when I ran my tongue under the head. Wetness made my thighs slide against one another as I bent to take him deeper into my mouth.

‘Take it all, Princess,’ he said, looping my hair up into his hands, holding it out of my face in a tight grip so he could watch me devour him. ‘More.’

His cock grazed the entrance to my throat as I gagged around him, my throat constricting against the invasion.

‘Breathe through your nose,’ he said as my body fought against the head of his dick. I did as he said, my eyes watering as his tip pressed further. I couldn’t hold back from gagging, but that only seemed to make his dick all the harder, which made me even wetter.

‘That’s it baby, almost there.’ With a final thrust, I took him fully into my mouth, pride blooming as he let out a throaty groan. ‘Yes, fuck.’

My throat worked against him as drool trickled from my mouth, pooling around the base of his cock. Stomach heaving, he pulled me back by the hair, allowing only a second of air before plunging back into my throat.

‘My dirty little Princess, so happy to take my cock inside of you. My needy girl. You’re doing so well.’

I was driven to the edge as he fucked my throat, the roughness of the act mingling with his praise to drive me to a lust addled high.

When he pulled my face off of him, I cried out, desperate for him to fill me again. Then I was straddling him, his hands pulling me down on top of him. A throaty cry left my lips as he speared into me, my pussy stretching around him, feeling full at last.

I slowed as I looked down at him, seeing him wince.

‘Don’t even think about holding back,’ he growled, grasping my hips harshly as he pistoned his dick into me hard. I shuddered around him, my

thighs quaking as he stretched me to bursting.

‘I’ve missed this,’ I said through a moan, grinding myself along his length, squeezing him inside me.

‘Me too. Now show me how needy you are.’

Cam laid back and watched me as I knelt above him and let go, gave into every thrust and let my moans slip freely. Again and again I took his cock deep into me until at last he pressed a thumb against my swollen clit and sent me soaring. Tremors shook my whole body as my pussy clenched around his hardness, my cries lost as he pulled me to him, swallowing them with his kiss. My chest ached with longing and with love as I gave in to the sensations wracking me to my very soul.

My body went rubbery against his as I came down from my high, but he only gave me a moment’s reprieve before tipping me over and pinning me under him.

‘Your wound,’ I whispered as he looked down at me, those dark eyes intense as he looked down at me.

‘Fuck my wound. I’m going to make you come again and again. I want to watch your face as you lose control. Until you beg me to fill your cunt with my cum.’

I trembled beneath him as he rocked into me, his groin crushing hard against my swollen pussy with every thrust.

‘Tell me how much you hate me,’ I whispered as I dug my nails into his back, the sensations in me already ramping up once more.

‘I hate how much I love you. I’d lose everything to spend one minute with you.’

My moans filled the air, and he leaned down over me, continuing his deep strokes as I wrapped my legs about his hips.

‘I hate that your neediness drives me crazy. That one lap at your wet cunt has me craving to taste you on my tongue forever.’

His words were hot against my neck as I arched my back, tilting my hips so his thrusts hit even further inside me.

‘I hate that your tight little cunt has me wanting to be inside you every minute of the day. I dream about losing myself inside you. About your whimper as I stretch you around me. I hate how your cheeks redden when I call you a good girl, and how your body aches for my touch, leaving me wanting to praise you every minute of every day.’

My breath hitched as his strokes quickened along with my pulse, his hips

hammering into me as he drove me to the edge.

‘I hate how I’d burn the fucking world down just for one of your smiles. I hate how much I love you with every fibre of my being. Because you own me, and there’s not a damn thing I can do about it.’

Fireworks went off in my head as he groaned in my ear, his muscles tensing as my pussy crashed around his cock. A scream ripped from my lungs as I came, orgasming so hard it was almost painful around his thick length.

‘Yes, my good girl, come around my cock. That’s it. Just like that. Such a good, good girl.’

He fisted his hands in my hair, tugging roughly as his hips juttled, groaning loudly against me as he spilled his desire deep inside of me.

We lay tangled, sweat slickened and spent, in one another’s arms, until the skies darkened over the city.

‘I love you so fucking much.’ I whispered as I drifted off, knowing that at last, I had found my place in the world. Beside him, beneath him, surrounded by him.

CHAPTER THIRTY SIX

CAMERON

Voices murmured around the room as I stood facing the men who made up the upper echelons of my organisation. The numbers had been thinned out considerably as I cleaned up the ranks, instilling my most trusted men in place of those whose loyalty to my father had usurped their loyalty to me.

Maeve stood at my side, looking every bit commanding as my men eyed her, unsure of her role. I intended to clear it up real fast.

‘You will all treat my wife with the respect that you give to me. Her orders stand without needing my back up, anyone running back to me for permission will be seen as trying to undermine her. Maeve is my equal, and will be taking charge of multiple aspects of our work, particularly in tracking down, and eradicating those who were working secretly with my father on his--‘ I paused, the words still foul against my teeth, ‘--trafficking operation.’

‘As you will have heard, Maeve and I have both chosen to adopt her maternal surname, and from now on we are the MacKenzie clan.’

A voice sounded from the back of the room. ‘You cannae take a lassie’s name.’

Before I opened my mouth, Maeve stepped forward, narrowing her eyes at the man, Bill, who had spoken.

‘Is my mother’s name not good enough for him? Do you think him less of a man for deigning to stray from his asshole of a father’s name?’ Her heels clicked on the floor as she rounded the table, all eyes following her as she made her way behind the man. Sweat beaded visibly on his forehead as she stood behind him. Before he could speak, she had her knife to his throat, the one she had taken to keeping on her person.

A drop of blood graced the tip of the blade as she pressed it tightly to his

gulping throat. 'Because I can guarantee you he is all man.'

He paled beneath her fingers, his knuckles whitening against the table.

My dick was half way to hard watching her take her power and flourish in it.

'Aren't you going to do something about her?' Bill stuttered, his adam's apple bobbing against the blade.

'I think she's got things in hand.' Silence gripped the room as she looked down at Bill, before lifting her blade off of him and snapping it shut before putting it back in her pocket.

'Next time,' she said, leaning down close to him, 'I won't be so kind.'

She knew that there was a fine line between weakness and restraint, and she rode it ever so well.

'Things are changing around here, and if you are not willing to change with us, you are welcome to leave. Know that staying with us will see you rewarded well, but absolute loyalty will be expected from you.'

Bill's chair scraped as he fled the room. The others remained seated.

Maeve joined me, slipping her arm in my own. Over the weeks since my release from the hospital, we'd fallen into a comfortable rhythm with one another. Working together to figure out our future, and surmounting the issues that fostering the kids brought. Neither of us were experienced with children, let alone teenagers who'd gone through hell in their short lives. Together, with Katie's help, they'd settled into a new school, with additional tutoring to catch them up. Both wanted to go to university in a few years, and didn't hesitate to take advantage of the opportunity to learn. They'd be okay. We all would.

Pride surged in me as the meeting drew to a close and I watched Maeve speaking with my men. It was effortless for her. She'd taken hold of her new role and was conquering it, earning the men's trust piece by piece. For the most part. There had been others like Bill, who couldn't accept change. It was a wall we'd have to break down together. Seeing her thrive filled me with a new pleasure, one I'd never even known could exist. Her successes, big or small, made me want to worship her all the more.

All those years I'd closed myself off to the world, keeping everyone at arm's length. I hadn't known what I was missing. I was learning to let my barriers down with the people close to me. Learning to be kinder to myself when I let old habits slip back in. Maeve kept me right, always knowing how to reach into my icy shell and drag me back to the surface when I struggled.

Once the others had left, we walked through my father's house, memories searing at me. None good. It was a place that reeked of pain and despair, a place I'd had my innocence ripped from me at the hands of my father. Beneath his fists. His weapons. His cruelty. We were turning it over to a charity. It would become a refuge for women and children, a place where women like my mother could seek shelter from abuse. After today, I'd never need to set my eyes on it again.

Maeve paused near the door to my father's office, catching a breath as she opened it wide. No monsters lurked there any more. It was just an office, already cleared of most of my father's things. I'd had everything of his burned.

The desk remained, its ornate dark wood gleaming in the soft evening light. I'd spent so much of my life staring at that desk while being cussed at, slapped, beaten. I'd stared at it while hearing the cries of my mother, and stood beside it while washing my sister's tears away. It was the last place I'd ever doubted my wife, almost costing me her life.

Maeve saw the look on my face and pressed herself up against my chest, pulling my eyes from the desk to her own, capturing me in their depths. She wrapped her arms around me and claimed my mouth, whipping me into a frenzy with her lips. Every kiss tore through me, building me anew beneath her tongue. I could never get enough of her.

I pushed her back until her ass hit the edge of the desk, hoisting her up onto it as her glorious thighs engulfed my waist. Her dress yielded to my fingers, slipping up to her stomach as her red lace panties darkened at the gusset.

'I am going to worship you until the day I die,' I said into her ear as I pulled her panties aside and sunk my fingers in to the knuckle. Her gasp gave me chills. 'But first, you are going to cum all over my father's desk, replacing all my fucked up memories with ones of you.'

I tore her dress straps downward with my teeth until I exposed a nipple, taking it in my teeth and roughly nipping at it. Her whimpers increased as I sunk my fingers back into her heat, her body arching at the invasion.

'It'll be a final fuck you to the bastard.'

Her pulse hammered against my cheek as I fingered her roughly, her wetness seeping down my hand and making the desk gleam all the brighter. I stood, pulling her panties down roughly and discarding them on the floor before pushing her back onto the desk. Her thighs spread wide at my touch,

her wet cunt begging for my attention. Always so ready for me.

With my tongue flat I licked her from base to clit, grinning as she shuddered, her thighs closing around my face.

‘Keep them wide Princess,’ I said, ‘I’m nowhere near finished with you yet.’

Hours later, we tumbled back into the apartment, wrapped up in one another and sickeningly in love.

Elias and Grace sat studying with Katie, pizzas littering the counter. It would take a while for me to get used to them being there, but already I wanted to see them happy. Grace had cried fat tears when she saw she had her own room, and Elias had hugged me when they realised we were serious about letting them stay. We’d even hired a swim instructor when we discovered they’d never been taken to a pool.

Life was pretty good.

There was just one thing that would make it perfect. I slipped off while Maeve chatted with Katie, probably getting the latest gossip on her rock star boyfriend. Guy seemed like a prick to me, but she needed to get her new found freedom out of her system. I let her be.

When Maeve came to find me, I was kneeling by the towering glass windows in our bedroom, candles glittering in the reflection adding to the sea of lights outside.

Her eyes went wide as she walked into the room, flicking from dozens of shimmering candles and down to my face.

‘Maeve, you never got the wedding you deserved and I want to make it right. I’ve loved you for longer than I ever dare admit to myself.’ Her eyes welled up as she walked toward me, stopping just in front of me and cupping my jaw as I spoke. ‘I love you to your very bones, and I’m hoping you’ll do me the honour of marrying me.’

Her laughter warmed my soul as she knelt down beside me and pulled me into a pizza-flavoured kiss. ‘We’re already married.’

‘I want to do it properly, the way you would have chosen. And this time, I’m hoping you’ll kiss me for real.’

‘Yes,’ she said with a grin, ‘Of course I’ll marry you again. I’d marry you every single day only to hear you tell me how much you adore me.’

‘Oh, you’re a wicked thing,’ I said between peppered kisses.

‘I thought I was your good girl?’ she said, giving me a look that went straight to my dick.

I slipped the ring over her finger, the blue stone glittering prettily against her wedding band.

‘Don’t worry, I have plenty of ideas for my bad girl, too.’

EPILOGUE

MAEVE

The summer breeze tickled at my bare arms as I walked through the ancient trees on Mac's arm. Fairy lights twinkled as we approached the clearing where the people I loved waited for me.

'Are you nervous?' Mac asked as the mournful lilt of a violin filled the evening with its voice.

My stomach flitted, bubbles effervescing deep within. It wasn't nerves; it was excitement. Cam came into view as we followed the trail, his smile like a magnet pulling me toward him.

'No, not nervous. Not this time. I'm so happy Mac.'

He gave my arms a tender squeeze as he escorted me to my husband. Every little detail overrode our first wedding, replacing the memories of fear and sadness with new ones of joy.

Our favourite people sat on logs and tree stumps around the circumference of the clearing. Sweet Katie with her rockstar boyfriend wrapping an arm about her shoulders, Logan and Ewen sat beside Elias and Grace, looking every bit the fun uncles they had sort of become to the teens. Benny sat with his wife, looking more relaxed than I'd seen him, his eyes crinkling at the corners as he grinned at me. Even Esther has finally returned to visit. It had taken months to convince her that Harold was really dead, and that I truly loved his son. Our first meeting after her disappearance had been stilted, but soon enough, old habits won out, uniting my siblings as we strove to find our new normal. She looked thrilled as she clung to her husband, Alec's hand, her stomach swollen with her pregnancy. I think it had been worse for him. He'd betrayed our families when he fell for her. But forgiveness came easily enough. After all, what had I done when I fell in

love? I could no more curse them than be cursed myself. Love reigns. My father had yet to waken, still being kept alive by the machines. Hope faded fast for him ever recovering, but we'd been loath to switch them off. The longer he remained in his twilight sleep, the harder it was to hate the things he'd done. I spent many afternoons by his side, reading softly from the old western books he favoured and updating him on our lives. On the things I was achieving with Cam by my side, supporting me.

Leaves crunched beneath my feet as the sun set off to my left, its dying light filtering through the trees and lighting up my love. As we stepped up to the autumnal flower filled wooden arch, Mac pulled me tight to his chest and kissed my temple.

'I'm so happy for you, kid.'

Tears pricked at the corners of my eyes as I left a red set of lips on his cheek. 'Thank you Mac, it means the world.'

And then it was Cam and I, together once more.

I passed my wild bouquet off to the humanist and smiled as Cam gathered my hands in his own, his thumbs caressing my knuckles as he stared at me with an intensity which warmed me to the core.

Would I ever tire of seeing his beautiful face? His laughter came so much quicker these days as we relaxed into our life together, the comfort of familiarity only making our relationship that much sweeter as we learned more and more about one another.

'Ready?' he said.

'Yes, I can't wait one minute longer to marry you. Again.'

'I'd marry you time and time again, my love.' A tingle shot through me as he licked the edge of his lip before biting down on it. My head filled with the need to bite it, too.

The humanist cleared her throat before beginning to speak, smiling softly at us.

'We gather here today in this woodland to celebrate the union of Maeve and Cameron MacKenzie. Brought together under unusual circumstances, but choosing to renew their vows surrounded by love. Sometimes life's adversities bring the sweetest rewards, and I think you can all agree that they have been rewarded wonderfully with their deep connection.'

I smiled at Cam.

'Someone once said that love is a fabric which never fades, no matter how much it is washed in the water of adversity and grief, and your love

blossoms in the face of the struggles you've both faced.'

We grinned as she spoke, looking at our mishmash family and luxuriating in the happy moment we all shared. They had been so few. I was determined to make them happen far more often. I might even have to insist on some big family dinners.

Finally, we came to the vows. I inched closer to Cam, my fingers warm in his hands.

'Maeve,' he said, finally letting me know the vows he's been poring over for the past few weeks, 'You came into my life like a storm that I thought would wipe me out, a force to be reckoned with. I think, from the very day you told me you would ruin me, that you stole my heart. Little by little, you took it piece by piece until I was gathering up what remained and trying to thrust it into your hands. I've been consumed with you ever since. Every day that you resisted the fall burned me up inside, but when you finally gave into the depth of the feelings between us, my universe brightened. It continues to brighten with each moment I spend with you.'

A tear escaped and rolled down my cheek as I listened to Cam, his voice steady as he poured his love out in front of everyone. His pulse quickened in his throat with each word, and mine matched it.

'I promise to love you until the day I die, and in whatever worlds lay beyond. I promise to support you in anything you wish to do, to stand beside you and offer you my arm as you go out and conquer the world. I promise to never make you feel insignificant or less than. You are the most significant person in my world. I promise to kiss away your tears.' He leaned in close and did just that to the loving laughter of those around us, his lips hot against my wet cheek. He leaned in close to my ear and whispered the last sentence of his vow. 'And I promise to fill your cunt every night until you bless me with your whimpers, letting you know that you're such a good girl for taking my cock so needily.'

I blushed crimson as the humanist coughed and squirmed beside us, near dropping her notebook at his words. Thankfully, no-one else could hear those final whispered words. It took me a moment to compose myself, the words good girl making me instantly wet beneath my boho wedding dress. His eyes creased as he grinned at me, knowing well what those words did to me.

'Your turn, Maeve,' the humanist said, barely able to look up at Cam.

'Cam, you showed me I could stand tall beside you and take on the world. You made me work hard to chip away the ice that you hid your soft side

behind, but it was worth every moment. I'd fight for you again and again if it meant even one more moment at your side. I love you so fucking much that it hurts sometimes. I promise to spend my life loving you and supporting you every day. While I may not obey, I promise to make my disobedience worth it.' His fingers twitched against my palms at the word disobedience. I knew the dirty, dirty thoughts that would bring up and grinned as his cheeks pinked. 'I promise to be there for you when times are hard and celebrate with you when they are easy. I promise to support our family, all of them, and love them as though we aren't a mismatch of personalities who didn't long threaten to wipe each other out. I promise to live a full life with you and never to shy away from our love.'

The humanist fixed us with a small smile as she said, 'Cameron, you may kiss your bride.'

In sharp contrast to our first wedding, where I'd avoided his kiss and levelled him with a threat, I pounced into his arms and wrapped myself all up in him. Our mouths met without a single crumb of reluctance as I moaned softly. Heat washed through me as I was about overflowing with happiness. Love. Lust. Fuck, I'd never have enough of my man. A sweep of his tongue and I was a goner, hope for our future blooming from where his fingers held me tight.

Finally, he broke the kiss and pulled me against him in a tight hug, before whispering into my ear, 'This time, I'm going to ruin you.'

I was disgracefully wet at his words, his promise sending shivers to my core. I loved it when he was tender, but when he was rough, well fuck, I'd do anything for him when he was rough. Ruin me indeed. I couldn't fucking wait.

'Yes please,' I said against his ear, 'I'll beg ever so prettily for it.'

I was rewarded with a growl against my throat before we remembered where we were and broke apart, holding a hand as our loves ones stood and cheered, their smiling faces soon concealed by the brightly coloured paper confetti that they decorated us with.

Cam laughed openly, no speck of ice left as unfiltered joy filled his face between fluttering coloured dots.

I'd have done it all again just to see that face once more.

We spent the evening glazing over the cracks in our families with new,

happier memories, trying to work our way past old wounds. It would take time, but with Harold gone, time was something we had on our side. I hoped. Crime was a dangerous game. Grace sidled up beside me with her usual hesitance, before looping an arm about my waist and giving me a quick squeeze. I held her gently about the shoulders, returning her affection, my chest filling. They'd been through a lot, and while Cam and I weren't parental figures, we were still their guardians, their trusted adults. Their second chance. I wanted to bring them happiness and opportunity.

'Thanks for everything, Maeve,' she said, pulling back shyly and smiling up at me. She wasn't that much shorter than me really, how soon would she catch me up?

'My pleasure.'

'It's so pretty.' Grace sighed happily as she looked wistfully around us. It was beautiful. The sun had long since sunk leaving us lit by strings upon strings of fairy lights, weaving their way through the leaves and bark. A far cry from our no expenses spared first wedding. It didn't matter how much money you threw at a wedding when the love wasn't there. The air filled with the scent of hot pizzas from the massive delivery we'd received, and the sweet yet smoky scent of burning incense as an attempt to fend off the midges. It wouldn't be a wild Scottish wedding without the bite of the wee bastards.

'I'm so glad you and Elias are here with us. I can't wait to help you both achieve your goals, to see what lives you form around yourselves.'

Grace bit down on her lip before peeping at me. 'What if I don't have any goals?'

'They'll come when you least expect them, but first we work on healing. All of us. Just focus on being the best you and the dreams will spark. Promise.'

I looked around the clearing, at Ewen stuffing marshmallows onto sticks while Elias toasted them and handed them around. At Cam laughing with Benny and his wife. At Logan being chatted at by Esther and her husband, looking every bit ready to disappear into the ground, he could be almost as solemn as the old Cam.

Then there was Mac. My favourite sibling, even if we weren't supposed to have those. He leant back against a tree, staring off into space with a scowl turning his lips. No. Not into space. He was staring at Katie and her boyfriend. I sent Grace to join the guys around the fire and picked my way

over the crunching leaves to Mac's side.

'Hey,' he said, his voice sounding bored, but his eyes still watching Katie intently.

'Why are you watching her so hard?' I asked. 'You're got a face like a slapped arse.'

'I'm not.'

'Sure you're not.' I rolled my eyes as he tore his gaze from her. 'Why don't you just ask her out? Tell her you like her.'

His shoulders stiffened, and he blinked his stare back at her. 'I don't like her like that. I just think he's an idiot. She could do better.'

I followed his stare to the log where they sat, her boyfriend's arm pulling her close while she giggled against him. Katie was positively smitten.

'She looks pretty happy to me.'

Mac shrugged before clearing his throat. 'We've got a wedding present for you.'

'Oh? You didn't have to...'

'We're ready to officially declare the war over. To wipe the slate clean and work alongside you and Cam. Let bygones be bygones.'

He yelped when I pounced on him and pulled him into a crushing hug. 'Thank you. It's all I've wanted these past few months. I love you.'

'Don't be a sap,' he said, extracting himself from my grip, but not before I saw the ghost of a grin steal over his mouth.

Cam walked over to us and took me by the hand. 'Sorry Mac, but I need to borrow my wife.'

'All yours,' Mac said, looking relieved to get back to his angry staring.

Music drifted out through the clearing. From somebody's phone, I supposed. Cam wrapped an arm about my waist and pulled me flush to his chest, swaying us from foot to foot. I laughed as he spun me around, the stars glittering far above us.

'I love you,' he kissed into my hair as we slowed and weaved together until the very last strains of the song.

'I love you too.' A wave of apprehension stole over me at what I knew was coming next. I only hoped I had judged my gift right.

'Come with me,' I said, taking him by the hand and leading him down the trail between the trees to a series of tiny log cabins where we were staying. He followed silently, his eyebrow cocking as we drew up to our door.

'Desperate to bed me already?' He grinned and kissed my neck. My heart

leapt into my chest as I shook my head.

His brow furrowed as he looked at my expression. 'Is everything okay?'

'I...' My breath shook as I tried to calm the nerves clawing at my stomach. 'I did something that I'm hoping is a good surprise. But I'm not sure whether it will be or not.'

'Princess, if it's something you've planned, I'll love it. You know me better than anyone.'

God, I hoped he was right.

A gasp tore from him as we entered the room, his fingers digging into my palm as he froze.

His mother sat on a chair at the table, looking as nervous as I felt. Fuck, no-one was moving. Had I misjudged it?

'Mum?' he whispered, the longing in his words breaking me. Then he dropped my hand and ripped across the room, gathering her in his arms as tears flowed down her cheeks.

'Oh Cam, I'm so sorry. Sorry I left. Sorry I didn't come back to get you out of there. I was just so scared.' His mum broke as he squeezed her tight against him, no longer the boy she'd been forced to abandon.

'I understand why. You don't need to be sorry. He would have killed you if you hadn't left.' Cam pulled back and studied her face. It had been years since he'd last seen her and they'd both changed infinitesimally since then, physically and emotionally.

'I wish I'd been braver.'

'No apologies Mum, I still love you as much today as I did then. I never blamed you.'

They stood together for a long while, whispering together, making amends, making up for so many lost years together. It had taken Katie and me months to track her down, and longer yet to convince her Harold really was dead. She was a broken woman, and I only hoped that they could find healing in union.

'I've missed you so much. We should go get Katie.' Cam looked out of the window to where the lights glowed a way off through the woods.

'It's okay, I've already seen her. She brought me here today.' His mother reached up and caressed his cheek. 'My, how you've grown into such a good man. I'm so proud of you.'

'I've missed you so much. Welcome home, Mum.'

'I'll leave you two lovebirds for a little while and go and see my Katie-

bear.'

'You could have joined us earlier,' Cam said as she opened the door.

'I didn't know if you'd be okay. I wanted to surprise you a little more privately, to make sure you didn't hate me. I wouldn't have been able to live with myself if my appearance had ruined your big day.'

'You being here could never be a bad thing. Will you stay?'

'Yes sweetie, I'm staying.'

When the door closed behind her, Cam turned and scooped me up into my arms, spinning me about before kissing my face.

'So you're not mad?' I laughed against his cheek.

'Never. You are the best thing that's ever happened to me. I love the ever loving fuck out of you. I can't believe you found her.'

'I'd have searched to the ends of the earth just to see you smile,' I said, slipping my fingers into his hair and pulling his mouth over mine, stealing a lingering kiss.

Cam pressed me back against the wall, the smooth wood cold against my bare back. His kiss deepened, a melding of hot lips and sweeping of needy tongue. I moaned into his mouth as he hitched my dress up, wrapping his fingers under my thighs and lifting me against him.

'We can't be too long.' My voice caught in my throat when his teeth grazed my neck.

'With how good you look in that dress, I'm not sure I could last even if I wanted too.' He was already rock hard against me, making me squirm. He reached under my ass and released his dick, rubbing its head against me before pulling my panties aside and seating himself inside me in one hard, desperate thrust.

My teeth found his collarbone as I bit down on a cry, so fucking full of my man.

Dipping his hips and arching against my swelling folds, he drove himself into me time and again.

'I need more, harder. You promised to ruin me.'

Cam let out a growl before carrying me to the bed and throwing me down over it, grasping me by the hips as my wedding dress fell down about my face. I clung onto the bedcovers, fisting them between my fingers. He swept his fingers along my heat, pinning me on them and making me writhe

beneath them. I pressed my face into the bed to stifle my whimpers.

‘I should take a photo of you here, Princess. Ass in the air and utterly soaked, your cunt just begging to be filled up. Your wedding dress may be white, but you’re still my dirty, dirty girl, aren’t you?’

‘Yes,’ I moaned as he twisted his fingers inside me, sending heat coiling through me.

When he withdrew his fingers I hissed in desperation, the tension subsiding, but then he was there, the head of his cock rubbing over my clit as he toyed with me.

‘What do you want, baby?’

‘You.’

The stretch was glorious as he filled me up, slowly as first, letting me flare around him and enjoying the view. The pain as his fingers dug into my hips and pulled me flush against him was glorious.

‘That’s right, Maeve. And I need you. Need to feel you shuddering around my dick as you call my name. Every part of you is mine, and I’ll make sure you know it every day.’

He grunted as he pulled back to the tip before filling me again and again. ‘Such a good girl, taking every inch. Such. A. Good. Girl.’

Hard thrusts punctuated his words as I quaked beneath him, right at the edge. Then his fingers were in my hair, around my neck, pulling back up against his chest without missing a single punishing stroke.

Hot breath against my ear, he said, ‘What do you do to me, Maeve? I’m addicted to you.’

I fought the waves of pleasure, not ready for it to be over but powerless against the onslaught of his thick cock. One of his hands made their way between my thighs and to my clit. I was a goner.

‘Fuck,’ he groaned into my ear.

Fuck, indeed.

I came undone around him. Lost in the arms of my once enemy, my forever love.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Thank you for reading *Dark Enemies*, the second book in my Scots mafia series. I hope you adored Maeve and Cameron as much as I did. I really appreciate you taking your time to read a new author.

A massive thanks to my wonderful family, especially my husband, for supporting me as I work toward my dream of being an author. Balancing life with kids and jobs and writing is a whole circus act at times and I couldn't do it without him.

I can't wait to bring you Katie's story next. It's a bit more of a delve into darkness and I hope you'll join us for the ride.

Love, Effie

If you missed Esther's story - you can grab it on [Amazon](#)

If you'd like to keep up with my books and me, you can find me on [TikTok](#) (@effiecampbellauthor), [Facebook](#) (effiecampbellauthor) and [Amazon](#).

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DARK OBSESSIONS

Tingles creep up my spine as I feel eyes on me. Things move in my home when I sleep. Something, or someone is watching.

My life is falling to pieces.

My boyfriend is hiding a secret and I'm determined to find out what it is. Why he has gone from cherishing me to hurting me?

But there is someone else determined to catch my attention. My brother-in-law Mac is rude and mean whenever he sees me, but what if its not hate beneath his icy glares? What if it's something else entirely?

Can I figure out my boyfriends secret, or will Mac's hard demeanour give way to feelings that will pull me apart? Will any of it matter when it comes down to love, or death?

Dark Obsessions is a dark mafia romance with an obsessed MMC, stalker vibes, heat and a HEA.

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