



off
LIMITS

THE SCOTTISH BILLIONAIRE SERIES

M.S. PARKER
USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

OFF LIMITS

THE SCOTTISH BILLIONAIRE BOOK 1

M. S. PARKER

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THE SCOTTISH BILLIONAIRE READING ORDER

Thank you for reading *Off Limits*, the first book in my new series, *The Scottish Billionaire*. I highly recommend reading the books in this order:

Prequel – The Scottish Billionaire

1. Off Limits (This book)
2. Breaking Rules (Coming May 26th)
3. *Untitled (Coming June 9th)

ONE

ALEC

MY DATE WAS SEVEN MINUTES LATE, AND I WAS ALREADY ON MY SECOND drink, wondering how the hell someone had managed to talk me into this.

At least I was in my favorite Italian restaurant. Small and intimate, with classical music and personalized service. Not the kind of place where a person was required to wear a jacket, but one where you'd surely feel inadequate if you didn't. Accordingly, I hadn't changed out of the dark blue three-piece suit I'd worn to the office today. Now, however, I was regretting my decision to meet my date here rather than insisting I was far too busy for anything but a quick meal in my office.

Even though the restaurant was full of attractive women in evening gowns, my attention kept alternating between my phone and the heirloom gold watch I'd inherited when I'd received my business degree from the University of Glasgow. I kept it in perfect condition, so much so that it was as accurate as the satellite from which my phone received its information. Information that told me that my date was now eight minutes behind schedule.

A local business associate, Lee Armisen, had insisted I go to dinner with one of his cousins, who deserved better than the drunken frat boys who usually hit on her. At thirty-three, I was quite a few years removed from anything resembling a 'frat boy.' Lee and I had known each other for more than a decade, both having come into our respective family businesses straight out of college.

"Trust me, friend," he told me a few days ago. "I know what it's like being raised by a single, workaholic dad. You and Evanne could use a strong female presence, and Song could be that for you. Just one date and you'll see."

I promise.”

I didn't bother explaining to him that Evanne's mother was already a strong female presence, or that I wasn't looking for a relationship with anyone, strong or not. But the two of us were in business together, and he was probably the closest thing I had to a friend outside of my brothers. A single date didn't seem like too much trouble to keep the peace between us.

At least, it hadn't at the time.

While I hadn't been looking forward to tonight, I'd had my mind wrapped around it as a necessary business event, no different than taking an associate out for drinks when I'd rather spend my time actually working. Just sitting here waiting, however, was a waste of everyone's time, and if there was one thing I hated above all else, it was wasting time.

It was quarter past eight before an exotic-looking young woman approached my table. Long, dark waves of hair, almond-shaped eyes, olive skin, and a trim body sheathed in a silky white dress that showed a more-than-generous amount of leg. I recognized her from Lee's photos, so I stood as soon as I saw her. Even though she was late, I would be polite. Besides, she might have a good excuse for the tardiness. Assumptions did no one favors.

“Wow, you're tall!” she exclaimed when I moved to pull out her chair. She must have been all of five-foot-two – including her heels – while I towered over her at six-and-a-half-feet tall.

I chuckled politely. “You must be Song Armisen.”

“The one and only,” she giggled, showing a row of impossibly white teeth.

I put out my hand for her to shake at the same time as she opened her arms for a hug. I felt eyes on me when I didn't go in for the hug, but I refused to be embarrassed. Not everyone was comfortable hugging complete strangers. I didn't feel it was appropriate to force anyone into physical contact that made them uncomfortable.

Song awkwardly placed her small, limp hand in mine, facing downwards as though I should kiss it. I could have, I supposed, but some part of me stiffened at the idea of her expectations of casual touch...and it wasn't the sort of stiffening that came with attraction.

She sat, and I pushed in her chair, the smile on my face feeling more plastic than it had a few minutes ago.

“What a gentleman!” she squeaked. She had a shrill voice that almost

seemed too much so to be real.

I absently wondered if she'd been told to play it up and come across as cute or girlish. I have split my years almost evenly between America and Scotland, but I found many of my preferences and opinions formed by my native land. Unfortunately for Miss Armisen, none of those preferences reflected positively on her.

I took my seat and reached for my scotch. A quick sip fortified me enough to ask, "How was the traffic?"

"Fine," she said with another dazzling smile. "I got a Lyft." There was a beat of silence where I waited for her to explain why she was late, but instead, she said, "I love your suit. Gucci?"

"Canali. And thank you."

She giggled for some reason, though I couldn't imagine what she found amusing. When the waiter arrived a moment later, she immediately ordered a bottle of their best red wine.

She winked at me. "Only the best for us."

I didn't like red wine, but I liked her presumption and her use of *us* even less.

The waiter looked at me, his opinion of my date hidden behind a polite mask. I'd worn enough of my own that I could still see the disapproval. I wasn't about to draw attention to it though. Not when my own opinion of Song hadn't been improved by her tacky flirting and whatever she'd intended to accomplish with her order of wine.

"Another Highland Park, sir?" His tone was mild and perfectly professional.

"A double, thank you."

He gave me a sympathetic nod and walked away.

"Ooh, we're gonna have *fun* tonight." Song giggled, and it set my teeth on edge. "I like a man who isn't afraid to let loose."

"I'm Scottish, so I can hold my liquor," I said, and then added, "but I never drink when I have my daughter with me." I wasn't going to assume that Lee had told his cousin about my kid, but she had to know that Evanne came first.

She shifted in her seat uneasily at the mention of my daughter but didn't say anything. Instead, she placed her bag right in the middle of the table, clearly wanting me to notice it. It had an upside-down triangle logo, but I couldn't read what it said. Not that it mattered because I knew what she

wanted me to say.

“Nice bag.”

“Oh, this old thing?” she laughed, and then went off on a story about where she got it, how much she saved getting it, who she was with, who she was making jealous, what shoes she had that matched it...

My phone was sitting on the table, too, her bag blocking it from her line of sight. I looked at her and nodded while surreptitiously pressing my thumb to the phone to unlock it. After shooting Song a polite smile, I glanced down. I'd established a color-coded notification system for the people with whom I corresponded the most. A green rectangle told me someone at the McCrae International Research Institute was passing along some information, most likely about an upcoming conference. Nothing that needed my immediate attention.

Dammit.

“So yeah,” Song finished. “Pretty crazy story.”

“Aye,” I said absently. I must have been more drained than I thought if I was slipping into my native speech patterns.

Thankfully, our drinks arrived just then. I swallowed the last of my current scotch and took the new one, watching as the sommelier poured us each some red wine. Song stuck her glass under her nose and swished the wine around for way too long before sipping. I resisted the impulse to roll my eyes as she informed the sommelier that the wine was perfect. I had no doubt that it was, but I hated when people acted like they knew more about things than they did. If she'd simply admitted she didn't know what to do with the wine, I would've respected her more than watching her pretend.

“And might you two be ready to order?” the waiter asked, appearing from being the sommelier.

Song giggled again, the sound grating on my nerves. “I haven't even looked at the menu! I'll have what he's having. He's obviously a man with good taste.”

I ordered the ravioli di capriolo, one of my favorite dishes at Il Terrazzo Carmine. Song didn't know what that was, so the waiter explained that it was pasta. Specifically, pasta filled with venison, spinach, and mushroom veal sauce.

Song's eyes widened. “Venison? Like Bambi?”

The corner of the waiter's mouth twitched as he nodded. “Yes, miss. Venison is deer meat. Like Bambi.”

Song shook her head. “No, that won’t do. Change it out for something else. Lobster or shrimp.”

Before the waiter had to decide how to tell a customer that this sort of substitution wasn’t possible, I intervened.

“Would you prefer seafood, then?” I asked. When she nodded, I looked up at the waiter. “Raviolini di pesce.” He nodded, a look of relief on his face.

“What’s that?” Song asked as the waiter walked away.

“It has crab, shrimp, and spinach rather than venison and veal.”

“Oh.” After a beat, she continued, “How did you get your scar?”

I tapped my phone again. A purple message this time, which seemed to be something to do with upcoming European finance training courses, but since it was purple-coded, it didn’t require my response. No emergencies yet. No excuses to leave.

Dammit.

“Well?” Song asked, taking a big sip of wine and swishing it around in her cheeks like mouthwash.

I sighed and gestured to the thin, white scar through my right eyebrow. “This? A scuffle with my arse of a brother. Kid stuff. Nothing worth a story.”

“Well, don’t worry,” she said and gave me a long, exaggerated wink. “This chick digs scars.”

It was getting harder to smile politely.

She rested her face on her hand. “I love your accent. Scottish is the sexiest accent by *far*. I was always jealous that Lee got to go on so many trips to Edinburgh.”

She pronounced it *Eedinburg* with a hard G. I managed not to grimace, but I couldn’t quite get a smile either, so I raised the glass of red wine I didn’t want to drink. “*Slàinte*.”

“Cheers!” she squeaked, raising her glass, and leaning across the table.

I ignored the way she pressed her breasts together in an attempt to draw my attention to her cleavage. She clinked our glasses together and licked her lips suggestively before taking a deep sip. I gave it a try. It was kind of fruity, and I resisted the urge to spit it out. Not to my taste. I washed it down with my preferred brand of alcohol. I’d rather my mouth taste like a campfire than a bowl of sweetened grapes.

I blamed it on my staunch Scots background.

“So, is your place empty tonight?” Song asked next, arching a painted eyebrow.

“It is,” I said, checking my phone again. No new messages.

Shit.

“What do you keep looking at over there?”

She moved her purse and spotted my phone.

“I’m just checking to make sure my kid isn’t texting me,” I quickly replied. It wasn’t entirely untrue, but I would’ve taken pretty much anyone calling me away at the moment.

Her eyes narrowed. “You’re sure you’re not on Tinder or something?”

“Is that something people do on dates?” I asked, frowning. “Seems crass.”

She sighed, her expression more genuine in that moment than it had been all night. “Sometimes. Guys suck.”

“I promise that’s not what I’m doing.” I might’ve wanted to leave, but I wasn’t looking for another woman while on a date.

I wasn’t that much of a bastard.

Slowly, her face transformed back into the posh woman she’d been. “You’re too much of a gentleman for that. You don’t know how nice it is to be on a date with someone who has their life together. And handsome, too! You’re like a white whale or something.”

Perhaps I was more of a snob than I liked to admit, but she surprised me with the Melville reference. Despite that, when our food arrived, I hoped eating our meal would take precedence over conversation.

No such luck. Apparently, she had no compunctions about talking with her mouth full.

“How do you find time to stay so fit?” she asked, popping another piece of pasta into her mouth. “I have no kids or a job, and I still barely make it to the gym most days.”

I waited until I finished swallowing before answering, “I have a rigid schedule and follow it precisely.”

“It’s definitely made you nice and *rigid*,” she replied, flashing me another smile. This time, she had something green in her teeth.

It was then that I felt her foot sliding up my ankle. I moved my leg away to allow her more space, pretending to simply shift in my seat. But her foot found me again a moment later. All the while she smiled and chatted, completely oblivious to how unattractive that made her.

I checked my phone again. Another green message – no emergencies. Now, I thought about all the things I could have been doing rather than this.

In my periphery vision, I caught her pursing her lips, clearly annoyed at my lack of enthusiasm. Her foot climbed higher up my leg, reaching to my calf.

“How is your food?” I asked as though I didn’t notice her ministrations.

“Almost as delicious as you look.”

I took another drink and wondered how I could get away without destroying my relationship with Lee, personal and professional.

“Lee said you went to university to study architecture?” I changed the subject. “Do you have a favorite architect or structural design?”

“I dropped out, actually,” she said, shrugging. “So not really. It was more of a whim anyway. Erecting buildings is so...cold and boring. I prefer erect *men*.”

She planted her foot on the edge of the seat between my legs. I sat back as far as I could without tipping my chair. I was trying not to be rude, but this was too much. *She* was too much, and this was a waste of time. I wasn’t attracted to her and pretending otherwise would only make things worse.

“I hope you left room for dessert...” Her toes brushed against the inside of my thigh, leaving no doubt about where her foot would be going next.

Enough. I grabbed her ankle and gently removed it from my chair. “Unfortunately, I’ll be working early tomorrow, and I’ll need a good night’s rest. It’s already getting late...”

“It’s barely after *nine*,” she snapped. “And tomorrow’s *Saturday*. Is that seriously the best excuse you’ve got?”

I didn’t bother to explain things to her. She wasn’t a woman I’d pursued and invited here due to mutual attraction. We weren’t a good match, and if she didn’t see that, it confirmed what my intuition was telling me.

“I’ll get the check,” I said.

“*Obviously*. You think I can afford this fucking place?” She folded her arms and scowled.

I fished a few bills out of my wallet – more than enough to cover the bill and a generous tip – and left it on the table next to the purse she was so proud of. If she wanted dessert, she could pay for it herself. I was finished.

“It was lovely to meet you, Song,” I lied, grabbing my phone and getting out of my seat.

“Where are you *going*?!”

I ignored her and everyone else staring at me. As I passed by our waiter, I slipped him a generous tip for having to deal with the mess I was leaving behind, and then I kept walking for the exit.

TWO

LUMEN

IT WAS A STRANGE FEELING TO HAVE CHILDREN LOOKING AT ME LIKE I WAS some sort of beacon. A representation of hope for the future. For their future. Like, if I could make it, they could too.

Like I was the opposite of a cautionary tale.

Not surprising, really. I should have expected it when I'd requested to come here as a volunteer. It'd been six years since I'd aged out, and this had been the place where I'd done it. The dropping off point for kids who weren't going to be adopted, or at the very least, put into long-term care. Usually teenagers. Often troublemakers.

I smiled at each of the other volunteers as I passed them. A few had been volunteers back when I'd been one of these kids. Houseparents, drivers, cooks, servers...people who'd come in to help when there were too many kids and not enough adults.

"Always wonderful to see you back here, Lumen." Brie Richards had a permanently exhausted look, her long salt-and-pepper hair tied back to avoid having to do anything with it.

Years of caring for foster kids couldn't have been easy, but I'd never heard her complain, not when I'd been under her care, and not when I'd come back to help her.

"It's good to see you too," I said, following her into the activity room.

At the moment, Brie had ten 'permanent' residents, and I counted them off around the room. Like any group of kids, their personalities were as different as their stories.

I noticed a new girl I hadn't seen before. She looked about fourteen and had long raven-black curls that made her tanned skin look even darker. Her

baggy, all-black clothes made her look even skinnier than she already was – a sign that she was probably either new to the system or had been in and out of a neglectful situation. New kids were usually quiet, but her paper plate didn't even have a dab of grease, which meant she hadn't eaten anything. That was cause for concern. New kids as thin as she was usually had issues with hoarding food, not ignoring it. I hoped it didn't mean she had an eating disorder. Those were a bitch to conquer.

“Hi, Lumen!” Diana Whitmore waved her willowy arm so fast it was a blur. She was thirteen, with frizzy brown hair and a perpetual smile.

“Hello, Sylvia.” I winked at her. When I'd found her reading *The Bell Jar*, I'd started calling her Sylvia, and it never failed to make her smile. “You guys saved me some pizza, right?”

A few of them looked at the empty pizza boxes sheepishly, but realized I wasn't mad about it. I didn't broadcast my past, but most of them knew I'd been in the system too. I knew what it was like to be so hungry that the thought of food actually made me nauseous.

“Every time,” I sighed, but continued to smile. The girl with the raven curls didn't even look up.

“I'll leave you guys to it,” Brie said, patting me on the shoulder. “Have fun!”

Only Diana responded with a big affirmative, but Brie didn't press. Silence in response to a general statement was more of a win than most people understood.

“All right, folks,” I said, clapping my hands, “let's make something worthy of Pinterest and YouTube.” I gave them a mock frown. “Those are still the cool social media platforms, right?”

A couple of them giggled at my lame attempts to talk their language, but it'd accomplished exactly what I'd wanted.

Most of them already had project ideas in mind and got to work right away.

Except the raven-haired girl. She just sat and stared at a blank piece of paper, making no moves to find a nearby pen or paintbrush. In a way, she reminded me of myself when I'd first come to Brie's house as a lost and unwanted seventeen-year-old. Ten years in the system had left me a lonely and untrusting teenager.

I sat down beside her without asking permission. I wouldn't crowd her, but she needed to know that people here were going to make an effort. “Hi, I

don't think we've met yet."

"Way to state the obvious," she muttered, folding her arms over her chest. I knew that gesture all too well but didn't acknowledge it. "Got a name?"

Her eyes never came up. "Yep."

I knew that move too, and she was going to be disappointed if she thought it'd phase me. "Me too. Guess we've got something in common. Mine is Lumen."

She pursed her lips. "Weird name."

"Not as weird as yours, *Soleil*," Kaitlyn cut in from where she was tearing up the pizza boxes for her graffiti stencil art projects. "That's her name, if you can believe it," Kaitlyn continued.

"It's a beautiful name," I said firmly, giving Kaitlyn a look that I hoped conveyed my disapproval of her teasing.

Soleil sighed, turning her head away. Her voice was so quiet I almost missed her next words. "My mom was probably drunk when she came up with it."

It was hard not to reach over to squeeze her hand, so I said gently, "I'm sure that's not the case."

"Considering she's a fucking alcoholic," Soleil snapped, "yeah, she probably was."

Great. I'd really stuck my foot in my mouth with that one. Better to change the subject and leave the heavy lifting to the therapists.

Which was why I didn't bother to mention that there was a good chance my alcoholic father had indulged in a few too many before helping my mom choose my name.

I went with a different angle. "Our names actually have more in common than just being unique."

Soleil frowned, but for the first time she looked up at me. She had pretty hazel eyes with little gold streaks in them like shooting stars. I had a feeling that if she smiled, she could light up a room.

"*Soleil* is French for 'sun,'" I explained. "A 'lumen' is a unit of luminous flux. That is, visible light." When she didn't reply, I kept going, "And since the sun gives off a lot of visible light, the names are connected."

She actually seemed interested, even if she was frowning.

"What's your thing, Soleil?" I asked. "Writing, drawing, painting?"

She lifted a sullen shoulder. "I sketch."

"Awesome. There's a pencil right here—"

“With knives,” she finished, smirking up at me. “Don’t suppose you got any of *those* around here?”

I wasn’t a psychologist, but I wasn’t some naïve, sheltered college student who’d be easily shocked by whatever she threw at me. It wasn’t my place to lecture or anything like that. I was a volunteer. If I thought she was a danger to herself or others, I’d talk to Brie, but my gut said that wasn’t the case here. She was testing boundaries.

“I can find you a couple butter knives if you think they’ll cut it.” I kept my voice dry, making sure she understood that I’d understood her, and I’d chosen each word intentionally.

To my surprise, she didn’t groan or roll her eyes. She didn’t even curse at me. Instead, something sparked in her hazel eyes. “What a cutting sense of humor,” she drawled, cocking one eyebrow in what was clearly a challenge.

“I take a stab at it now and then,” I shot back.

“You’re a real cut-up.”

“Don’t pretend I’m not a sheer delight.” I couldn’t stop the grin when I saw the corners of her mouth twitching as she suppressed a smile.

“You guys are fuckin’ losers,” Darius snorted.

I wanted to reprimand him about his language, but he was sixteen and telling a teenager to stop swearing would only make him do it more. The same went for the insults. The best thing to do was ignore him, so he didn’t get the attention he wanted.

“Darius needs to cut it out.” I elbowed Soleil, wanting to get back to our banter, but something had changed. Her smile was gone, replaced by the scowl I’d first seen.

“I’m done,” she muttered. “Just give me a fucking pencil. I’ll draw some zombies and shit.”

Dammit. I was so close to getting her to open up.

“Zombies, huh? That’s pretty cool.” I handed her a pencil. She took it but didn’t reply.

As always, interest dwindled after a while, and the kids moved off in different directions. Finally, Soleil and I were the only two left at the table.

“Hey,” she said as she pushed back her chair.

“Hey.” I was piling up the empty pizza boxes.

“It was slice to meet you,” she said before quickly scampering away.

“You too,” I said softly, watching her go. I’d already decided Soleil was going to be my personal project. I would show her that she could have a good

life. This start didn't need to define who she was.

As I tossed the last of the cardboard into the recycling bin, my phone went off. I'd forgotten to set it to vibrate, and the song that burst out of my purse sent blood rushing to my face. I scrambled to answer it before another racy lyric could make itself heard.

"Mai."

"Oh good, you answered!" my roommate and best friend said. I could hear a crowd in the background and hoped she wasn't drunk dialing me. She didn't usually drink during the day, but every once in a while, she went a little crazy. I loved her, but some of the things she did made me cringe.

"I always answer for you," I said. "Remind me to change the ringtone you downloaded on my phone. It's embarrassing enough when I forget to turn my phone on silent, but to have it blasting out *that* song—"

"There's nothing wrong with some classic Madonna," Mai said.

"There is when *Like a Virgin* starts up on the chorus," I countered.

"Agree to disagree," she said lightly. "Hey, can you pick up a shift? My favorite person in the whole wide world..."

Ugh, working on a Friday...it was bad enough that I had to work tomorrow, but at least then I'd be doing administrative work rather than massage therapy. I was grateful for my job and knew there were a lot of worse places I could be working, but I was looking forward to cutting down my hours.

"I was planning on preparing for my new job," I said, but I already knew I was going to give in. I had a hard time saying 'no' to Mai. Which was how I'd ended up with this job in the first place.

"I know yesterday was supposed to be your last MT shift," Mai went on, "but I *totally* double-booked. Me and Hob are at a movie – like, we're *at* the theater – and Mama needs someone to take care of walk-ins. I would've asked Ru, but Mama said he's not allowed to take any shifts alone since the incident with Mrs. Mah."

I made a mental note to smack Ru the next time I saw him. The closest of Mai's siblings in age, he behaved more like he was the baby of the family.

"You know I haven't seen Hob all week." Mai was begging now. "I wouldn't ask it if I didn't absolutely *need* the time with him."

"No worries, Mai," I said, feigning enthusiasm. "I'm your girl."

As lame as it was to work on a Friday evening, it wasn't like I had a hot date or a club to go to.

“You’re the *best!*” Mai cheered. “The shift started ten minutes ago. Thanks, Lu-Lu!”

She made a kissing noise and hung up before I could change my mind. I sighed and mentally shifted my plans for the night. Looking out for each other was what a family did, and the Jins were the closest thing I’d had to a family in a long time. I’d never do anything to risk losing them.

THREE

ALEC

IF THERE WAS ONE POSITIVE THING ABOUT TONIGHT, IT WAS THAT IT WAS beautiful out. A surprisingly dry evening in mid-August with barely any cloud cover. I always enjoyed walking the Fremont area, particularly Canal Park, so after my dramatic escape from the restaurant, I flagged down a cab to cover the four and a half miles quicker than I could on my feet, gave a generous tip, and set out to enjoy the rest of my night.

Seattle was different from Scotland where I'd been born, though the weather was more similar than it had been in Northern California where I'd spent my adolescence. The frequent rain reminded me of Edinburgh, though it was a lot steadier here. The clouds made it far less hot than California, which I appreciated, particularly when I was in a full suit.

I took a slow, deep breath and closed my eyes for a moment, smelling the salt from the sea. I'd missed the sea in California. There was nothing like the way it smelled after the rain. I opened my eyes and took in the rare sight of stars in a clear sky. How could I stress out in such a beautiful time and place?

Easily, it seemed.

Between work and that horrible date, I felt like a kettle about to boil. While I was never sure of just how good a father I truly was, I wanted to be the best I could for Evanne. Part of that meant providing financially for my ex-girlfriend, who had primary custody of our little girl. I had no argument with that, except I didn't want to be the type of father who signed checks and had nothing to do with his kid. I loved Evanne, and I loved every minute I spent with her, even if I wished it could be more.

I sighed and checked my phone. Still no emergency messages, and nothing from Evanne. I didn't expect anything. She was eight years old, and a

sleepover at eight was a much bigger deal than a sleepover as a ‘baby.’ She’d informed me of that in her most serious eight-year-old voice, and I’d been left to wonder just when she’d grown up.

When I turned around a street corner, a bright neon sign made me blink. I squinted to read the name of it. “Real Life Bodywork.” Why did that sound familiar?

“You’ve got to try this bodywork place, big brother. Relief. Best massage I’ve ever had. She zeroed in on every single knot and smoothed me right out. Best part? There’s an ‘extra services’ menu if you’re man enough to ask. I left a happy customer to be sure.”

I could still picture my younger brother’s smug expression as he told the story. Brody knew I wasn’t one to go for things like that, but he was always after me to loosen up, to become more like him. For the first time in my life, I considered it.

As I walked next to the massage parlor, I glanced inside, curious. Everything appeared warm and soft, from the red floor tiling to the varnished wood furniture, the wooden blinds, and potted plants. Much classier than I would have thought. Brody had said it was pretty exclusive, even though the sign suggested it wasn’t. Perhaps it wasn’t the sleazy place I had assumed after all.

A few drops were my only warning before the now-clouded sky opened and rain poured down in a solid sheet. Without thinking, I slipped into the massage parlor to escape the rain. I cursed myself for not bringing an umbrella, but as soon as I looked around, I was in no hurry to leave.

The place was better lit than I’d realized, and the scent of lavender filled the air, immediately taking away some of the tension I always carried. But that wasn’t the reason I suddenly wanted to linger.

“Good evening.” A slender young blonde woman spoke up from behind a simple but elegant counter. She must have been in her mid-twenties, with honey-blonde waves that tumbled over her shoulders and eyes a vibrant azure that almost didn’t look real.

She asked me if she could take my coat, and I nodded dumbly. She smiled with her soft pink lips and stepped out from behind her desk. I registered now how she was dressed: a black, short-sleeved tunic over black leggings. She didn’t look like she belonged in a place like this, no matter how much the beautiful trappings masked the truth of what this place really was. Maybe it was all an act, but she looked almost...innocent. A girl-next-door

sort of charm.

Desire twisted my insides painfully.

When she came near to get my coat, a pleasant vanilla scent wafted toward me. Her hands lingered on my shoulders as they slid up to help pull the coat off. It was barely more than a second of contact, but it was enough for me to know I was going to stay for a while and damn the consequences.

FOUR

LUMEN

WHEN I HEARD THE CHIME FROM THE LITTLE BELLS ON THE DOOR, I SIGHED. I had less than an hour until close. Why did people always insist on coming in right at the end? It never failed.

I'd been busying myself by going over the day's transactions in preparation for close, but I still put on my best customer service smile before turning around to greet the jerk who'd decided to drop in for a last-minute, late-night massage.

The moment I saw him, every word I'd intended to speak flew out of my head.

He was tall. Very tall. Well over six feet and gorgeous. Probably in his early thirties, he had a good head of golden-blond hair and a chiseled jaw that was surprisingly clean-shaven at this time of night. He was lean and tanned, with a scar through his right eyebrow that just added to his masculine appeal. Not to mention that the suit he wore looked insanely expensive. A far, *far* cry from the portly, hairy-backed businessmen I usually dealt with. They might've been nice enough guys, but this one...*damn*.

Staying open a little longer might not be such a bad thing, assuming he was here for a massage and not an escape from the rain that I'd just noticed. Considering this was Seattle, the Jins had come up with a method of dealing with people like this. First, I was to ask if I could take their coat. If they agreed to a small thing, they were more likely to agree to spend their money on a massage. Plus, for some reason, taking off a coat made people feel more like they were already making themselves comfortable.

"Good evening," I said brightly when I found my tongue again. "May I help you off with your coat?"

His eyes widened, giving me the opportunity to see just how bright those blue irises were. Maybe it was confusion, like he hadn't realized where he was, or I'd taken him by surprise. Whatever the case, I retained my best smile and stepped toward him with my hand out slightly.

By the time I was close enough to walk around beside him and reach out, he said, "Aye, thank you."

Was that an accent? English? Irish? It wasn't very heavy, but it was noticeable. Aye wasn't English, I didn't think. Scottish maybe? It sounded like something I might have heard in a movie or something.

Since he'd given me consent, I moved around behind him to assist. He'd managed to get inside before the fine material was soaked through, but my palm was still damp as I slid my hands along his shoulders before hooking my fingers under the soft fabric.

While I'd always been friendly during my sessions, I wasn't like Mai, who enjoyed innocent flirtations whether she was working the desk or giving massages. She never let them venture into anything inappropriate, but she liked skating the line.

I didn't. I was always professional. Polite, kind, attentive, but never flirtatious. Never touching more than a session called for. Not before or after either.

I'd never wanted to touch...until now.

My cheeks burned at the thought, and as I pulled his coat off, I turned away to hide my flushed face. I took an extra couple seconds hanging his coat up, and after taking a long breath to compose myself, I turned my smile back on and faced him again, better prepared.

"Nice to escape the rain once in a while, isn't it?" I asked, hating myself for falling back on talking about the weather.

"Certainly," the man said, smiling gently. "Though it only just started raining."

Yes, definitely an accent. I was almost sure it wasn't English. Deeper and more guttural than Irish, with fully-dropped Gs and a lot of glottal stops in place of Ts. Scottish. It was silly to be so heavily attracted to an accent, and yet...

"Well, you're free to stay here until it stops," I said, perhaps too quickly. Shit. "Um, that is, until we close."

"And when is that?"

Suddenly, I wished we stayed open later. I couldn't lie. Even if I wasn't

such a horrible liar, he could easily see the closing times on the door, and I'd be busted.

"Until ten on Fridays." Except...what the hell. "But we offer half-hour Swedish massages."

"You don't sound Swedish," he said.

I froze, unsure what I was supposed to say. And then I realized he was joking. He'd been smiling the whole time, but it took me a couple seconds to catch up. Then our eyes locked and a shiver went down my spine. I'd never been lost in someone's eyes before, but his were just so deep and clear, like a mountain lake.

Heat flooded my face when I realized I was staring. "Um, no, despite the blonde hair and blue eyes, I'm not remotely Swedish. Well, as far as I'm aware."

He grinned. "I'm Alec, by the way."

"Lumen," I said. "Lumen Browne."

"It's nice to meet you, Lumen." He held out his hand and I shook it gladly. He had nice hands – not too rough but strong. Damn. I almost wished our positions were reversed and I could ask him for a massage.

Shit. I needed to stop thinking that way. What had gotten into me? I wasn't a loud, out-going person, but no one flustered me. No man, especially.

"Now, lass, pretend I don't know what a Swedish massage entails," he said.

Good, I could switch to a rehearsed script now. "It's actually one of the most common Western massage types, based more on anatomy and physiology than energy work or zen lines in Asian massages. If you haven't had a massage in a while, it's a great place to start."

When he smiled this time, it was a slower curve of his lips, drawing my attention to them in a way that made my stomach tighten. "You know, that sounds perfect. It's been a bit of a tense evening."

"Of course," I said, still in customer service mode. I set out the appropriate sign on the desk to let anyone else know that the place wasn't empty, then motioned to Alec. "Please follow me."

As I led him to one of the therapy rooms, I tried to catch my breath. My boss, Lihua, had left at nine, leaving me to close up alone since we rarely had walk-ins this late. That meant I was the only person here to actually do the massage. I'd been flustered enough just talking to him.

How was I going to handle touching bare skin, knowing the only thing

between my hands and his entirely naked body was a towel? Just the thought made my legs wobbly. At least he'd be facing downward and wouldn't see how red my face was sure to get.

We reached the therapy room, which Lihua had prepared before she'd left. A spa bed, several towel rolls, soft glowing lamps and candles, and a countertop with a sink and all the necessary oils. It was quite lovely, but I barely noticed the serene surroundings.

"Before we begin, I need you to please fill out a bit of paperwork." I handed him a clipboard containing the questionnaire and consent forms each customer was required to complete and sign. "When you're finished, please undress and lay face-down on the table here. You may place a steamed towel over any area you wish to be covered. I'll be back in a moment. And don't worry, I'll knock first."

All rehearsed lines. I tried not to think about what I'd do if he forgot the towel or if I walked in early. Or if he simply decided that it was no big deal for me to see his ass.

Shit.

I closed my eyes for a moment as I adjusted a towel that didn't need adjusting. Was it too much to hope that something under that suit could be so unattractive that it'd make this whole process easier? I wasn't superficial enough for a lot of things, but maybe he was a secret Nazi. Yes, a giant swastika on his butt could keep my hormones in check.

I walked toward the door.

"Does that mean you're the masseuse?"

I stopped at the doorway and looked over my shoulder at him. He didn't have a creepy smirk or anything. He was genuinely curious.

"I'm a fully licensed massage therapist," I said blandly, giving him the proper title.

"Sorry, lass. Massage therapist," he corrected himself. Not that I'd been offended by the term masseuse.

"Is that all right with you?" I asked.

"Oh, aye. Yes, yes, of course. I was just wondering." He frowned, but I got the feeling that it was directed more at himself than at me. He'd blurted out an answer that he'd probably wanted to sound much smoother.

Before my burning face could betray me, I shot him a final smile that probably looked more like a grimace and left. Once safe, I shut the door behind me and let out a breath. It was just a half-hour massage, I told myself.

No different than any other one I'd done a hundred times before. And it'd be my last one too. That was what I needed to focus on.

Half an hour. Then I could go home.

I returned to the greeting area and locked the front door to prevent any other walk-in clients from coming in. I switched the open sign to closed, satisfied that I'd followed all of Lihua's checklist, then headed back to the therapist area to wash my hands and tie back my hair.

I could do this. It was my job. I'd knock on the door, go inside, and see just another client laying on the table. I'd seen muscles before, and a pretty face didn't mean shit.

Right.

Time to get started.

I took another breath and knocked on the door.

"Come in."

Damn. Just his voice was enough to get my stomach twisting up in knots. Hopefully, he was the kind of client who liked silence.

I opened the door and entered the room, relieved to find Alec lying as instructed, face down on a u-shaped face cradle and with a towel over his butt. Broad shoulders, good skin. Okay, I could handle this.

It was the little divots at his lower back that caught my eye. I didn't know why. Plenty of people had them. They were informally called "dimples of Venus" in the medical community. Mai had told me that, laughing the entire time. I'd rolled my eyes because they were as impersonal as someone's knees. Except there was just something alluring about Alec's dimples. I had the strangest urge to dip my thumbs in them.

Dammit.

Now that I'd started thinking that way, it was impossible to stop.

His upper back was toned, while his waist was trim. Both his arms and legs were perfect, with just the right amount of muscle definition. He looked great in his suit, but the clothes had hidden all that beautiful, sculpted musculature. Even his glutes looked appealing despite the towel covering them.

Double damn.

Then there was the tattoo on his upper back. A large, elaborately designed cross stretching to each of his shoulder blades and down his spine. Inside the cross were the letters S.A.M. in gothic script. I wondered who Sam was, but I knew better than to ask. The cross suggested it wasn't a topic to be brought

up lightly, and if anyone knew about not wanting to talk about the past, it was me.

I needed to get to work.

I turned on the sound system, letting the pleasant nature sounds calm me. Well, as calm as I was going to get. I then lit some candles and washed my hands again before bringing a tray of massage oil to the table.

“Comfortable?” I asked and double checked his paperwork, making sure everything was in order. Even his damn signature was sexy.

“Aye,” he mumbled, already sounding more relaxed than he had been.

“Wonderful.” Even though he’d answered ‘no’ on the questionnaire, I double checked and asked him if he had any injuries or other conditions I should know about, and he said he didn’t. Excellent. I could do this. “I’ll start by lubricating your skin with some warm massage oil, then I’ll perform some standard massage strokes to warm up your muscle tissue and relieve some knots and tension.”

“All right, lass.”

With that, I got to work, starting by sliding my thumbs over his dimples of Venus. I could have swirled my thumbs over them for hours, but I resisted and continued on, moving across muscles that felt like they’d been carved out of stone. Part of it was tension, but another part was simply how well he cared for his body. He was truly a magnificent example of the male form.

Dammit. I sounded like one of those empty-headed women who hung out at bars and batted their eyes at every hot guy who came along.

He let out a long, rolling moan when I applied pressure on his back. I had the irrational thought that even his moan had an accent. It almost made me laugh, except that laughing didn’t feel like the right reaction to that beautiful noise. Other parts of me clenched.

“You’ve got some serious tension in your shoulders,” I said to fill the silence.

It was a standard sort of comment among massage therapists, something to get our clients talking if they weren’t very open about what their specific issues were. Some of them worked high-stress jobs where they’d be returning to that same situation over and over again. Sometimes, they had a specific incident that had stressed them out. A lot of them had things in their relationships that caused them tension. Knowing that helped me to know how best to help them.

“It’s been a tense night,” Alec sighed.

“I’m sorry to hear that.” I was surprised at how sincere those words were.

He said something that was muffled enough that I didn’t catch anything more than he’d had a bad date. His accent had thickened, and I found myself leaning down, needing to concentrate more to understand him. *Wanting* to understand him.

“How long have you been in Seattle?” I asked, kneading his back as I spoke.

“Nearly ten years now,” he said. “Was it the accent that gave me away?”

“Just a bit,” I said, smiling.

He chuckled. “I was born in Edinburgh. But I moved to northern California when I was near ten. San Jose for a few months, and then to San Ramon.”

“That must have been quite a change.”

He didn’t say anything for a moment, and I wondered if I’d overstepped. Before I could apologize for being too forward, he sighed again. “Aye, it was.”

Shit. I hoped I hadn’t touched a sore spot. Almost as an apology, I gave him a long, deep roll with the flats of my hands all across his back – a Swedish massage technique known as effleurage.

“*Damn*, that feels good, lass,” he groaned. “You’re very good with your hands.”

Clients told me that all the time, but this time, it made me blush. “That’s what they pay me for.”

I sounded like such an idiot.

“I haven’t had a massage in years. Never feel like I have time. Maybe I ought to put them in my schedule more often.”

“As your massage therapist for the evening, I agree,” I joked, liking how easy it was to talk to him.

He rumbled another laugh, this one nearly making my knees weak. “Aye, right! It’s nice to hear an unbiased professional opinion.”

“You joke,” I countered, “but it’s less biased than you think since this is my last shift as an MT. No self-serving initiatives to keep you coming back.”

I moved down to his powerful legs and began working on his right calf. The hair there was rough against my palms, but not unpleasantly so. If anything, each pass wound my insides tighter.

“Am I your final client?”

“Got it in one.”

“Well, aren’t I the lucky one?”

He wasn’t anything like I’d expected. Usually, clients wanted complete silence or unloaded all their personal drama onto me once I’d primed the pump. Both were entirely up to what the client needed, but I couldn’t deny how nice it was to carry on a simple conversation for once.

“Will you be switching to a different establishment? If so, you’ll have to tell me the name of it.”

Was he flirting with me? More than in a friendly way? Was that possible?

He wouldn’t be the first client to do so, but he didn’t appear to be the sort of man who’d need to resort to flirting with someone like me when he could walk into anywhere and get a woman at the snap of his fingers. I found myself wondering what else a snap of his fingers could get him. I was pretty sure the answer was whatever he wanted, and unless I was prepared to out-and-out lie to myself, I was one of those people who’d give him anything.

Dammit.

“Um, if you could just turn over, I’m going to start on the front of your legs.” My voice sounded oddly high-pitched and strained. Not at all like my usual polite and professional tone. I fought to get things back to normal. “I’ll hold the towel up and turn my head away as you roll over.”

“Oh, aye, can do,” Alec replied. “Ready when you are.”

I did as I’d said, closing my eyes for an extra measure of decorum. I’d never wanted so desperately to take a peek before. Then again, I’d never before had a client who looked like a Greek god either.

I heard Alec moving and concentrated on taking slow, even breaths.

“All right, lass.”

I settled the towel back into place and mentally prepared myself to deal with any necessary adjustments. A peek at a hip. A little too much of those deep v-grooves I just knew he had hiding...

Fuck me.

Heat flooded my face...and other places. It wasn’t as though erections were uncommon for men when they received massages, but again, I was usually much better at ignoring such a thing. Except the tent his towel made was impossible to ignore. Not because I was uncomfortable with it – of course not, it was a natural biological reaction – but rather because my own body was reacting in a way that wasn’t like me at all.

I forced a professional smile and avoided looking at either his eyes or his...towel. It was less awkward looking at his muscular legs, but that didn’t

do a thing to cool off my libido.

What the hell was wrong with me today?

“I’m going to massage the fronts of your legs and then move on to your arms, neck, and shoulders,” I said, somehow keeping my tone light and even.

“Sure thing,” Alec said, his voice not betraying a single iota of what he was thinking.

I continued with the massage, focusing on his thighs and trying not to think about what lay under the towel at my elbow. The sudden lull in our conversation, however, made it a lot more noticeable that something had shifted between us, and it was my job to get things back on track.

I picked up the first non-sexual topic that came to mind. “In answer to your question, no, I won’t be going anywhere else. Massage therapy was kind of a ‘get me through college’ thing. My roommate’s parents own the place, and they gave me a job cleaning and greeting clients shortly after I started school. Since it wasn’t quite enough to cover my expenses, even with financial aid, I trained to be an MT, massage therapist, and started picking up those shifts here and there as soon as I finished my training.”

I felt his eyes on me but didn’t risk a look. He was far too dangerous for his own good. Or mine.

“Have you enjoyed being an MT?” he asked. “Jobs during university are usually an incentive to get through school faster.”

I switched to his other leg.

“That’s true. I probably would’ve ended up flipping burgers if not for this. But no, I’ve actually liked my job. It’s a surprisingly good workout, and the music and the candles and the oils make me almost as relaxed as my clients.”

“Then I won’t be feeling bad for making you work all the way to close on your last day.”

“You shouldn’t.” I managed a smile as I started work on his arms. Damn, his biceps were firm. His forearms too. He wasn’t even flexing...

“Technically,” I forced myself to continue, “it’s my last day tomorrow, but I won’t be doing any massages. Just greetings and administrative stuff. Yesterday was supposed to be my last MT shift, but my roommate called me in tonight as an emergency favor. She forgot all about her shift and went to a movie with her boyfriend instead.”

“You’re quite the saint, now, aren’t you?”

I shrugged as I worked my way to his shoulders. “I think of it more as a

mercy mission since her mother probably would've killed her if she hadn't called me to cover."

He laughed, but the sound was suddenly a lot more serious than it had been before. "You're a good friend, lass. You can't even say you're just doing your job because this technically isn't supposed to be your job anymore."

Being called 'lass' shouldn't have given me goosebumps, but there it was.

"You're sweet," I said, knowing full well that my cheeks were still red. "But like I said, I enjoy being an MT. I'm more than happy to work until the end of my shift instead of sitting around watching the time pass. I enjoy knowing I'm giving people relief."

A movement to my left caught my eye, and I glanced over before I could stop myself. I sucked in a sharp breath when I realized I'd seen the towel move, the bulge under it growing as his erection swelled.

I snapped my gaze back to my hands and focused on his shoulders. Except his shoulders were broad and strong like the rest of him. Not too thick but rather beautifully proportioned...

Dammit.

"Um, I feel ridiculous asking, but my date was really quite bad, and I could use a pick-me-up."

I kept working at his shoulders even as I tried to figure out what he meant. Did he want some coffee this late at night?

"A pick-me-up?" I asked, risking a quick look at his face.

He grinned sheepishly. "Perhaps something from the...secret menu."

I had no idea what he was talking about and tried to come up with the best way to politely explain that without making him feel foolish. "Everything we have is in one of our service guides." I pointed to the tri-fold brochure on the counter across the room. "Do you want to see it?"

He shifted a little, and I didn't have to see his face to know that his smile was fading. "I suppose I'm being too subtle. I was told your establishment offers...happy endings."

I froze, those two words ringing over and over in my head. Every place that offered massages knew what a happy ending was, either because they offered it or because they wanted clients to know in no uncertain terms that they didn't run *that* kind of establishment.

We were the latter.

"You have to go."

“I...what?” he asked, startled.

“This session is over.” I made my voice as hard as possible. “Leave. Now.”

He rose from the table, holding his towel in front of him. His expression was puzzled. “It’s all right, lass. If you don’t want—”

I picked up his pants and tossed them at him. “Get dressed.”

He growled but did as I asked while I turned around to give him privacy. I wasn’t about to leave him alone in any of our rooms. I didn’t even want to think about what he might do now that I’d rejected his proposition.

“If you’ll just let me—”

“We’re closing now.” I turned around and tried to ignore the fact that his shirt was still unbuttoned. I pointed to the door, refusing to move until he started back toward the exit.

“Lumen...”

I unlocked the front door and opened it. “Get out.” After a beat, I added, “Please.”

He gave me a long, hard stare, like he was trying to figure out what went wrong, and that just pissed me off. I might not have the sort of money he clearly did, but that didn’t give him the right to come in here and ask me to jerk him off like I was some sort of prostitute.

“Out.” I blinked back hot tears. “Or I’ll call the cops.”

He stepped outside, and I didn’t bother to check if it was still raining before I slammed the door shut. I pulled down the blinds and turned the lock, closing myself off from him for good.

It wasn’t until I’d finished doing the books for the night that I realized I’d forgotten to make him pay his bill.

FIVE

LUMEN

“PLEASE EXPLAIN TO ME HOW YOU, AN INTELLIGENT COLLEGE GRADUATE, *forgot* to ask a client to pay his bill before he left?”

Lihua was no bigger than five feet tall, but when she planted her hands on her slender hips and gave me that look of complete disappointment and disapproval, she might as well have been a giant.

We were both at the front counter, waiting for the next scheduled client. Saturdays could get busy, so two other MTs were already in the back room, changing into their uniforms. Lihua had changed a few minutes ago, wanting the chance to look over the books from last night before we opened.

“My final client last night asked for an...ending,” I said. She knew what that meant, of course, but her expression held no sympathy.

“You know the procedure,” Lihua said. “Tell him we are not that kind of establishment. Then you end the session and take the payment as normal.”

“I know, Lihua, I just...it was different this time. I just felt...really uncomfortable.”

Uncomfortable wasn't the best word to describe why I'd needed him to leave, but I hoped it would get the point across. My face burned with the joint embarrassment of stumbling over my words and desperately hoping Lihua wouldn't push it. I hated lying to her but telling her about my reaction to a client would diminish me in her eyes, and that would kill me. I love Mai and the whole Jin family too much to let that happen.

Lihua pursed her lips. She didn't look old enough to have six children, with Mai being the youngest, but I knew she was old enough that it wouldn't have been polite of me to ask her age. Regardless, she could work any of the rest of us into the ground and still have the energy to ask us why we were

slacking.

“Well,” she said, “if not for Mai, you would not have been working yesterday. And today is your last shift.” She patted my arm. “Do not trouble yourself, dear.”

“You can take the cost of the massage from my final check—”

Lihua waved me off. “Nonsense. A half-hour massage was not such a loss. Besides, you missed out on your tip. That is enough.”

She patted my arm again before walking away like the matter was done. I still felt guilty though. It wasn't just me who was affected by my mistake. The Jins did well enough, but they weren't flush enough to blow off an entire massage. Then there was always the possibility of Alec leaving a negative review online just to be petty. I hoped he wasn't like that, but I wouldn't have thought he was the sort of guy to ask for sexual favors either, so maybe I wasn't the best judge.

This wasn't the way I'd wanted to leave a job that had been so good to me, and I tried to make up for it by being professional and friendly with everyone I spoke to. I made a point of putting myself out there too, telling clients about promotions and making sure the MTs knew what clients they had scheduled and when. I even bought everyone their favorite coffee during my break.

And the entire time, I couldn't stop thinking about Alec.

His eyes, his smile, his accent, his body...I'd thought there had been something unique about the way we'd interacted, about the connection we'd had. I'd thought he was a gentleman, but I supposed my mistake had been assuming that someone that well-dressed had to be a gentleman. I didn't usually think of myself as a naïve person, but I had definitely let my own personal biases color how I'd seen him.

In any case, I'd never see him again. There was no sense worrying myself. I had only a short while left of my last shift and then it was all about preparing for the job I'd gone to school for. The career that had been the entire point of me working here in the first place.

Only a few short seconds after I'd convinced myself that I wouldn't think about Alec ever again, the bell above the door chimed and in he walked.

My hands curled into fists, but I didn't know if it was to keep my fingers from shaking or because I wanted to punch him. Maybe a little of both.

As soon as he saw me, he showed me his palms. “I owe you some money,” he said, “and an apology.”

When I didn't threaten to call the cops or shout for one of the others to come up front, Alec carefully walked toward me, a disarming smile on his face.

"I had the name of this place wrong," he said. "The place I was told about was called Relief Bodywork. I didn't realize you guys were *Real Life* Bodywork until after you rightfully kicked me out."

That wasn't the apology I'd been promised, but it wasn't nothing either. Still...

"*That's your excuse?*" I asked, crossing my arms and giving him my best *no-more-shit-from-you* expression

"It's a reason, not an excuse," he said. He reached into his back pocket and pulled out a wallet. "I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable, lass. Nor to leave without paying."

It was good of him not to blame me for kicking him out before getting his money, even though that part was my fault. But that didn't mean he wasn't still a sleaze for coming into a massage parlor for sex in the first place. Okay, not *sex per se*, but something sexual in content.

"I don't want you getting in trouble with your boss." He opened his wallet and pulled out some bills. "What do I owe for the Swedish massage? Full price, of course."

A part of me wanted to snap back that, of course, he owed full price. We'd only been a few minutes from the end in the first place, and it'd been his inappropriate question that had caused things to end early.

Another part wanted to tell him to get lost – and a few other choice phrases – but I wouldn't make the Jins suffer for my mistake. I could humble myself enough to smile and give him the correct amount.

He pulled out enough money to cover the cost of the massage, and then threw a hundred-dollar bill on top.

"I don't think you heard me," I said, gritting my teeth.

"Aye, I did. The rest is yours."

"You don't need to apologize with money," I said stiffly. "Bit too much like a pay-off, in my opinion."

He shook his head. "The money isn't the apology. It's your tip. Earned fair-and-square before I made an arse of myself."

I picked up the hundred and prepared to throw it back in his face. "I–"

"But I hope you *will* let me apologize by buying you dinner some time."

What was that? I froze, holding his hundred-dollar bill in the air. He

couldn't be this brazen, could he? He must have been joking.

Except the look on his face told me he wasn't.

Fuck it. The money was mine. I earned it; he'd even said so. But his "apology" wouldn't fly.

"I'm not for sale," I said firmly.

He regarded me evenly, his previously bright eyes guarded. "Then a verbal apology will have to do." He cleared his throat. "I'm sorry, lass...I mean, Lumen."

Then, without changing his expression, he turned around and walked out of the store, moving slow enough that I wondered if he was waiting for me to change my mind, but he didn't stop. The bells on the door jingled and then, when the door closed, it was like he'd never come back. Except for the hundred in my hand and the now balanced book from last night.

I put the bill in my pocket, unsure how I should feel. Fortunately, Lihua just then made her way into the greeting area, her oil-covered hands held aloft.

"I heard the doorbell," she said. Her eyes narrowed as she looked around for the new customer.

"He just left," I said. "It was the guy from yesterday. He paid his bill."

Lihua looked at the money that was still on the counter and smiled. "Good, good! Then there is nothing more to think about." Her smile flipped into a frown. "Did he make you uncomfortable again?"

I shrugged, putting the money in the cash register and punching in the correct transaction. "Sort of. He gave me a huge tip and then asked me out. But I turned him down, and he left right away."

Lihua laughed in her rusty sort of way. "Good for you, Lumen. I hope the men who ask you out at your next job will treat you as you deserve."

"Pretty much any man who asks me out at my next job is going to be a dad," I pointed out with a gentle smile.

"That is true," she mused. "Do not date a married man. Or a man with a failed marriage. Or a man with children and no wife..."

"Thank you for the advice, Lihua," I said, still smiling. Sometimes, I wondered if this was how things would have been with my own mother...if she'd chosen me over a life without responsibility.

Lihua patted my arm, and I felt the slickness of the oil still on her palms. "Just remember that you are out of college now and have a new job."

I didn't need her to tell me what she meant by that. My old excuse for not

dating had been that I hadn't wanted to be distracted from my studies. Then, when I graduated, it had changed to me waiting until I found a job in my desired field. Now, I was out of excuses.

"As soon as I get a boyfriend, you'll be the first person I call," I promised, even though we both knew that I'd tell Mai first. Lihua laughed again and returned to whatever client she was supposed to be massaging.

I didn't think I'd be calling her anytime soon.

My shift ended right on time an hour later, and then everyone surprised me with a cake. I couldn't hold back my tears, but at least these were good ones. The Jins had been so good to me since I'd met Mai. I was looking forward to my new job, but I would miss being around this pseudo-family.

I got home later than expected despite turning down Lihua's insistence that I go out with everyone for drinks after we'd finished the cake. I wasn't much of a drinker, even when celebrating, and besides that, I was behind on my job preparations thanks to taking Mai's shift last night. And the fact that when I'd gotten home, I hadn't been in any sort of shape to concentrate.

My apartment was in Ballard, only about ten minutes or so from work, and I'd been thinking about Alec the whole bus ride home. I couldn't believe he'd had the nerve to ask me out after what happened. Did he think he could just get happy endings whenever he wanted?

I blushed at the thought, though it was more from the fact that I wondered what it would have felt like to wrap my hand around that particular part of his body than because I was embarrassed. Not that I ever had to worry about that again since he wouldn't know where to find me, even if he had been inclined to look.

Seattle was too big a city to search for a single person.

I made my way up the stairs to my apartment and unlocked the door. Soon, I'd be able to dig into my real work, and I'd have something better to focus on than dates and happy endings that would never happen.

Before I'd taken two steps into the apartment, I heard strange noises coming from the living room ahead. I immediately picked up the baseball bat Mai and I kept next to the front door. I'd never had to use it, but Mai and I both had active imaginations. Ballard was a safe neighborhood, but that didn't mean one-hundred-percent crime-free.

I made my way down the short entrance hall and then peered around the corner to the living room, ready for anything.

Anything except my roommate and her boyfriend having sex.

They were on the sofa across from the TV, in full view of anyone who happened to stroll in, both stark naked with Mai bouncing on Hob's lap with enough enthusiasm to explain why neither of them had noticed the time or the front door opening.

I snapped my jaw shut and tried to remember how to make my feet work. I needed to get into my bedroom and pretend that I'd seen nothing. I knew nothing. I certainly didn't know that Hob had his nipple pierced and clearly liked Mai twisting it when they had sex.

I would've made a clear getaway if it hadn't been for the curse-it-all bat.

Hob's cat-green eyes shot open when the hard wood hit the corner of the wall, and he let out a short little yelp of surprise when he saw me. I let out a stream of expletives that were surprisingly filthy and creative.

"Why're you *stopping*?" Mai moaned.

"Lumen." Hob's voice was choked.

Mai stopped moving. "Did you just say my roommate's name when we were...oh, fuck! Lumen!"

"I'm sorry!" I said, hugging the baseball bat and squeezing my eyes closed. God, my skin was going to turn permanently red at this rate.

"It's our fault," Mai said. I could hear her shuffling into some clothes. "Mama said she was going to take you drinking, and since you didn't come back after your shift, we started watching a movie and...shit, I'm sorry. We got carried away."

"Sorry, Lumen," Hob added.

"It's fine," I said, trying not to think about how often they'd done that on our couch and how often I'd sat or slept on it. They had a perfectly good bed. And why hadn't they at least left *some* clothes on! I didn't want to sit on the couch after Hob's bare ass had been on it.

"Oh, honey." I could hear her trying to hold back a laugh.

"I'm just going to go to my room, I think," I said.

"No no, it's fine, we're fine! Why don't you tell me about your last day? I should have been there for the going away, but I was waiting for Mama to text me when you were at the bar. We were planning on joining you guys there."

I felt her touch my arm, but I kept my eyes closed. I couldn't unsee it. Ever.

"We're both dressed. Come on, tell us about your day."

Reluctantly, I opened my eyes and turned back around, wary that my

friend would think it funny to still be naked, but Mai was covered up in a familiar gray tank top and her favorite blue sweatpants. Hob was in jeans and a t-shirt and looked almost as mortified as I was. The poor guy grimaced and avoided my eyes, his raven-black hair still sporting that ‘just fucked’ look.

“It was,” I said, “it was nice. They gave me some cake.”

“I know, Jie Instagrammed it. So cute!”

Jie was Mai’s second-to-last brother and another MT at the parlor.

“Hope you brought some home for us,” Hob said, chuckling awkwardly.

I laughed a little and shook my head, let the awkwardness diffuse. “I decided not to go out since I didn’t get a chance to get much prep work done last night.”

“That’s totally my fault,” Mai said, a sheepish smile on her face. “Sorry again. I owe you big time.”

“It’s okay,” I said. “But I really need to get started. We can get drinks next weekend, okay?”

“It’s a date,” Mai said.

A date.

I thought about Alec again and wondered just how screwed I was.

SIX

ALEC

“WHAT’S WRONG, DADDY?” THE QUESTION CAME OUT OF THE BLUE AS I tucked Evanne into bed. She always came up with the best questions at bedtime.

At eight years old, she was wise beyond her years, and I hoped that it wasn’t due to anything her mother and I had done, or hadn’t done, for that matter. Keli had primary custody, and I had enough visitation that I’d always had a relationship with my daughter, but I’d always felt like I was responsible for her missing out on something.

I blinked at her. “What do you mean, *mo chride?*”

Her blue eyes lit up at the familiar term of endearment, but then they faded again as she answered my question. “You seem weird.”

“Maybe I’m the normal one, and it’s you who’s the wee odd one,” I suggested, letting my accent regress to my childhood simply because it made her burst into the sweetest giggles I’d ever heard. I’d been a serious child, and it took a lot for me to shake that off and give Evanne a father she would be comfortable talking to. For her, though, I’d do anything.

“I am not weird,” she said indignantly, after regaining her composure. If she’d been standing, she’d have had her hands on her hips, giving me the best glare she could muster.

I gave her a hard look, tapping my finger on my chin. “I think I may need to test that theory.”

I made my hands into claws and leaned over her, earning a squeak and then a shriek. I tickled her until she squealed and laughed, tucking her elbows in to trap my hands. Before she could get overheated, I stopped and let her catch her breath.

“Well, you *seem* normal enough,” I said, kissing her on the forehead. “Only weird people aren’t ticklish.”

“You never laugh when I tickle your feet,” she pointed out.

The bottoms of my feet weren’t that sensitive, it was true. “I suppose that means I am the weird one after all. Think you can keep my secret, *mo chride?*”

She nodded emphatically, her long braid of dark brown curls bouncing against her back. My own fair hair had lightened Keli’s ebony hair into something that wasn’t quite black but was far from my own golden blond. Her features were the sort of combination that made people see either parent in her face, and I couldn’t help but be glad that she wouldn’t grow up the mirror image of either Keli or me.

“But, Daddy, you’re not sad, are you?”

Shit. I was always surprised at how she could see right through me. “Not sad, *mo chride,*” I explained. “Only embarrassed.”

“Because you had a crappy date last night?”

I barely suppressed my smile. “What did I tell you about using that word?”

“That it’s funny when I say it, but it makes Mommy mad at you,” she recited dutifully.

“Good job not saying it when your Mum’s around,” I said, giving her a high five. “And no, it’s not about my date. I asked someone something silly, and when I went to apologize, I asked her another silly thing. So your Dad’s just eating a big humble pie for supper, that’s all.”

“But we had pizza for supper,” Evanne said, tilting her head.

I couldn’t hold back a laugh this time. Damn, I loved her. I just wished that I was a better father. I tried my best, but from the moment I found out that Keli was pregnant, I’d known that I wasn’t made to raise a child. I would die for her and kill anyone who tried to hurt her, but there was a reason I hadn’t contested custody when Keli had given me an agreement already portioned out to ensure that Evanne was being raised by her mother.

I’d offered more in the way of child support than Keli had asked for, especially since she hadn’t tried to sue for alimony, even though we’d never married. Money was something I could give. I had plenty, and I was always making more.

“I know,” I said, kissing her forehead again, breathing in her sweet scent. “Your dad’s just sleepy.”

“Does that mean you can’t read me a story?” Evanne asked, her eyes widening as her bottom lip trembled.

Shit. Break my heart, why don’t you? She was my heart. That was why I called her *mo chride*. My heart.

“I can always read you a story,” I said, struggling to keep my voice from cracking. The moment I’d first held Evanne in my arms, I’d vowed that no matter how hard I worked, my daughter would *never* feel like she wasn’t the most important thing in my life.

“We can do a short one,” she said, reaching up to pat my cheek. “Okay?”

I kissed her forehead again. I didn’t deserve her. “Karate kittens or singing dinosaurs?”

“Karate kittens,” she said with a sleepy smile.

I retrieved the book from her bookcase and settled into my usual space next to her on her bed. No matter what was going on around me, the times I spent with Evanne were the best of my life. Reading to her at bedtime was definitely one of my favorite things to do, even if I always felt like I never did it as well as Keli must. As confident as I’d always been in most other areas of my life, when it came to being a hands-on father, I often felt like I was barely keeping my head above water.

As expected, Evanne fell asleep before the end of the book – I wasn’t the only one who was tired – but I finished it anyway. After I returned the book to the shelf, I lingered in the doorway to watch her sleep. Even after all this time, I still could barely believe that I’d actually helped make this beautiful, intelligent, amazing creature.

My chest tightened as a surge of love went through me. I wasn’t a demonstrative person, but I loved my family deeply. Or at least what I’d thought was deeply. The moment I’d seen the sonogram, I’d fallen in love, and what I felt for her had only grown exponentially since then. I’d never loved anyone the way I loved my daughter.

I double-checked the monitor system I’d had installed in this room back when it had been a nursery and wondered how long it would be before she asked me to keep it off or remove it. Even though my bedroom was just across the hall, the house was over sixty-five hundred square feet, and I’d wanted a system in place that would let me keep an eye – so to speak – on her no matter where I was.

I’d rented an apartment when I’d first arrived in Seattle when I was twenty-four, but as soon as Keli told me about the baby, I’d immediately

started looking for a house. Even though I'd been doubtful about what would happen with Keli and me, I never once doubted that I'd be a part of my daughter's life, and I'd been determined to give her the best.

Some people probably thought I'd gone overboard, buying something that was far larger than the two of us would need, but I justified it by turning the extra rooms into guestrooms where my huge family could stay when they came to visit. The delight on Evanne's face every time she stepped inside, the way she talked about her home with me, all of it made me sure I'd made the right choice.

I pushed away thoughts of the past as I made my way to the kitchen and pulled a beer out of the fridge. The problem with not wanting to think about the past was that my mind had to go somewhere, and it didn't take long for it to go straight to Lumen.

I couldn't believe I'd asked her out, but I was still more shocked that she'd turned me down. To be sure, I'd made a right arse of myself when I'd asked for a 'happy ending,' but I'd gone back to make things right, despite the fact that I'd been mortified at my mistake. Now, I wondered if I should have gone back as soon as I'd figured out the misunderstanding instead of waiting until today.

I'd called Brody as soon as Lumen had kicked me out, demanding to know the name of the massage parlor he'd recommended. When he'd told me it was Relief Bodywork, my gut still told me to check it out before I assumed I'd been correct. On my way home, I'd looked it up online...and found that it was on the other side of the city. A bit more online research told me that the one I'd gone to was Real Life Bodywork.

I'd never felt more like an idiot than I had last night when I'd realized the mistake I'd made. It had still been on my mind when I'd gotten up this morning, and when I'd taken Evanne out for ice cream this afternoon, I'd known that I needed to try to make things right.

Usually, I would've driven Evanne around myself, but because I'd decided on a whim to have one of my drivers take us around Seattle, I'd left Evanne in the car for the few minutes I'd needed to go inside and make an even bigger arse of myself.

I sighed and set down my beer, wishing I could indulge in the bottle of Highland Park I had in my locked liquor cabinet. Some people might not have seen a problem with having a small drink now that Evanne was asleep, but the only thing I ever drank when she was here was a beer at night.

Unfortunately, it didn't take as much off the edge off as I wished it did.

Which meant I was left with that gnawing longing I'd had from the first moment I'd met Lumen's clear, azure eyes. A longing for something I wanted to classify as lust, pure physical attraction, but something that my mind told me was different.

I needed to clear my head, and since neither alcohol nor sex was an option, I could either exercise...or take a long, hot shower. I'd gone running this morning to try to banish thoughts of Lumen and those amazing hands of hers. It hadn't worked.

Shower it was, then.

Even though I had the monitoring system on, I poked my head into Evanne's room to make sure she was asleep and didn't need anything. She was still nuzzled into her pillow and hadn't moved an inch in the thirty or so minutes since I'd left the room. Her breathing pattern was enough for me to know she was sleeping soundly.

Satisfied, I made my way to my master bathroom and undressed. I wasn't really one of those men who cared much about all the trappings, particularly in my house, but I'd loved this bathroom even when I'd seen it online. I had a walk-in shower with marble walls and multiple showerheads. Almost as good as a massage.

Almost.

Nothing could truly come close to the way Lumen's hands had made me feel, but at least it could help a bit.

I closed my eyes and let the heat wash over me, moving over my scalp and down my face and chest. I'd taken my fair share of cold showers over the years, including last night, but tonight, I didn't want to chase away the heavy feeling in the pit of my stomach.

I didn't date for a long list of reasons – the most important of which was sleeping across the hall – but I wasn't exactly without female companionship. When I needed release, it was easy enough to find. The way Song had thrown herself at me was proof of that, even if Lumen's rejection had been a cold bit of reality.

Most of the time, though, finding a woman wasn't worth the trouble. Not when my imagination and my hand could make due. And considering the gorgeous woman I'd met yesterday, coming up with a fantasy shouldn't be an issue.

Hair the thick, rich color of honey...dammit. No. Wrong gorgeous

woman. I needed to think about the one who'd been eager to come to bed with me.

Dark waves, olive skin. Her hands running over me as I lathered up the cedarwood-scented soap my little sister Maggie had given me for my birthday.

Stronger hands. That perfect pressure. I couldn't believe how good that massage had felt. How good it would have felt to have those strong fingers wrap around my cock...

No. I had to forget her. No use fantasizing about someone who wasn't interested in me that way.

Song had been interested.

Song. Naked. In the shower with me. Offering to fulfill every promise her sultry looks and roaming foot had promised. I closed my eyes and pictured her in front of me. Kneeling, looking up at me. Running her hands up my thighs, inching toward my heavy testicles. What would she say? On second thought, I didn't want her to say anything...I just needed her to touch me. Long thin fingers with garish fake nails...

No.

Strong fingers. Clean, simple nails...Lumen's hands.

Lumen in the shower with me. Water darkening her hair even as it plastered it to her body. Slick, wet skin. Deep azure eyes locking with mine as she cupped my sack. Fuck. I was getting harder by the second. Hand moving up over my shaft as it swelled.

But it wasn't only her touch that had turned me on.

Her voice. Sweet and cheerful. No forced cutesiness. Honey, like her hair. What was it she'd said?

She'd smiled and asked, "Comfortable?"

Fingers slid up my shaft, the hand twisting at the head to swipe a thumb across the tip, slicking away a drop of pre-cum.

Yes...

Drops of water beaded on her skin, on her lips. I licked them off, teased the seam of her mouth with my tongue, waited for her to open. Explore her mouth as she fisted my cock faster, tightened her grip.

I groaned, the sound echoing off the stone walls. What sorts of sounds would she make when I rolled her nipple between my fingers? Would she want me to be gentle, flick my tongue over the wrinkled little bud? Or rough, tugging and twisting? Would she beg me to use my teeth on her?

My balls drew up tight at the thought of having her writhing beneath me, fair skin marked by my mouth and teeth.

I covered her hand with mine, stroking faster and faster until I exploded, my cum painting her skin even as she leaned forward to lick...

I shook my head, ridding myself of where my mind wanted to take me next. If this had been real, I knew exactly what my next step would have been. Taking her to my bed, spreading her legs and going down on her until she screamed. Sinking inside her, driving us both over the edge until we lost ourselves in each other...

And I'd never see her again.

SEVEN

LUMEN

“GUESS WHAT DAY IT IS!” MAI CALLED OUT AS SHE ENTERED THE APARTMENT.

I was sitting on the living room sofa – on the end opposite from where I’d caught Mai and Hob having sex – working on my upcoming lesson plans when her sing-song voice carried into the living room. School didn’t start until the Tuesday after Labor Day, but in two days, I would officially walk into a school building as a teacher. Not a student teacher. Not a classroom assistant. An actual teacher.

I was trying to ignore how nervous I was about it.

“Uh, Friday?” I said.

Mai beamed as she bounced into the room, still dressed in her black tunic and yoga pants from Real Life Bodywork.

“Exactly!” she said. “You promised we would hang out and get drinks this weekend.”

Had I? I thought back to last weekend. Right. I’d come home from work, already reeling from Alec asking me out, and I’d caught her and Hob on the sofa. I’d wanted to hide away in my room rather than go out to celebrate my resignation from RLB, but Mai had extracted a promise from me that I’d go out with her this week.

She was a hard person to refuse.

“I don’t think I *promised*, exactly,” I wheedled.

“You said it was a date.”

I raised an eyebrow. “*You* said it was a date!”

“All right. Why won’t you date me, Lumen?”

Oh boy.

I looked down at the open notebook on my lap. I’d actually gotten ahead

of myself, working out the details for lesson plans farther into the year than was necessary. I liked being prepared, but this was even a lot for me. I didn't need to be a shrink to know that I was overcompensating.

I glanced up at my friend.

Shit.

She was giving me those puppy dog eyes. The same ones she used whenever she needed me to take a shift for her. I'd mostly grown immune over the years, but my resistance was down. I blamed it on the crazy amount of prep work I'd been doing.

"I don't want to go far," I said with a sigh.

"MacLean's is like three blocks away!" Mai replied, her eyes lighting up in triumph.

"Have I been there?"

"No, but me and Hob have. Super classy Irish place. Or Scottish? Scotch is Scottish, right? I mean, it must be, because otherwise, it'd just be stupid. Then again, we both know not to get Mama started on the comparison of Chinese food here and Chinese food 'back home.'"

Scottish. Dammit.

Understandably, my thoughts immediately went to Alec and his accent. I'd managed to mostly put him out of my mind while working on my lesson plans, but his voice still seemed to float in the back of my brain, popping up at the most inconvenient times. Sometimes, I'd feel like I heard him call my name, and then I'd picture him walking into the parlor, hair wet from the rain, magnificent body wrapped in that expensive suit, bright blue eyes settling on me...

This wasn't going to lead anywhere good.

"It's Scottish," I said, my voice quieter than usual.

"Right, well, you don't need to drink scotch, but it's got a dance floor and yummy cocktails. What more do you need?"

She knew how much I loved to dance, even if I didn't drink a lot. She was a master manipulator, and I made a mental note to discuss with her how she should never use her powers for evil.

"All right," I said. "Let's do it."

Mai made an exaggerated fist-pumping display of excitement that made me laugh. Maybe this was a good idea after all.

I wasn't the sort of person who usually went all-out on my appearance, but dressing up for tonight sounded like fun, and I could use some of that. I

shook my hair out from my normal ponytail and used some product to keep the frizz down, then squeezed into my black faux leather leggings – the most daring pair of pants I owned. When I pulled a white sleeveless blouse from my closet, Mai wasted no time snatching it from my hands.

“No way are you wearing this. I approve of the leggings, but this shirt isn’t going to work.” She tossed it onto my bed and disappeared into my closet where I heard her muttering as she flipped through my wardrobe. “Nope. No. Definitely not. Hell no. What the...I don’t want to know.”

I’d never had much in the way of money to spend on clothes, which meant I stuck with simple styles and neutral colors, the sorts of things that I could get at least a couple years out of before I had to go shopping again. While that made for smart budgeting and always-ready work outfits, it didn’t tend to lend toward night-on-the-town fun.

“I’ll get you something from my closet,” Mai announced as she emerged from mine.

“Mai, I know I’m not exactly big, but I still have three inches on you,” I pointed out. I didn’t add that my average-sized bust was a couple cup sizes bigger than hers. That’d become obvious as soon as I tried to put on one of her shirts.

“Here,” she said a moment later as she shoved something into my hands. “This has one of those lace-up corset fronts, so it should fit.”

I had my doubts, but I knew better than to argue with Mai. I pulled it over my head, appreciating the slide of silk across my skin. To my surprise, the lacey corset-like shirt settled into place without a problem. The laces didn’t have much more give in them, but I was able to make a presentable bow without any difficulty.

By the time I was finished, Mai was dressed in her favorite ripped blue jeans, a scarlet tank top, and matching heels. With her equally daring lipstick and a silver choker, she was prepared to attract attention, though I knew she’d never even consider cheating on her boyfriend. That was just Mai.

“You look perfect,” she declared as she turned me toward the mirror.

The deep, cerulean blue made my eyes practically glow, and the combination of the shirt and leggings showed off my figure better than I could’ve imagined.

“I guess I clean up well,” I joked. I pressed my hands to my stomach, pretending to smooth down the material when in fact I was trying to calm the butterflies that had taken off. I rarely had a problem handling professional

interactions, but social ones generally left me at a loss for what to do. Not for the first time, I wondered how much of that was my personality and how much was the way I'd been raised.

"You do," she assured me. "Now, let's find you some shoes."

MACLEAN'S WAS SMALLER than I'd expected, and thankfully, wasn't too loud or crazy. I didn't like going to clubs, even to dance, which meant the slim brick building was a welcome surprise. The interior had classic furniture lining the walls, with one section reserved for a dozen four-person tables. The dance floor was equally small, with room for only a handful of couples dancing to the American-style music. As I scanned the beautiful prints of various Scottish landscapes, I wondered if they played popular or traditional Celtic music when it wasn't a weekend, or if they just mixed it up all the time.

We turned, and to my surprise, I saw Hob waiting for us at the bar. Mai hadn't mentioned that he was coming. It wasn't as though I didn't enjoy his company. He was a great guy. It was just that I'd expected a casual evening with my roommate. A girls' night out. With Hob here, Mai had someone to dance with, and I didn't. Instead of the two of us drinking and dancing together, I'd just become the third wheel.

Hob smiled when we approached. "Wow, Lumen, you finally made it out to a bar!"

Judging by his appearance, he'd come straight from the hospital where he was a third-year pediatric resident. Jeans and sneakers with a slightly wrinkled button-down shirt weren't exactly in Mai's league at the moment, but the two of them pulled it off like they always did.

"Here I am," I said, feigning enthusiasm.

At least I was close enough to home to walk when Mai and Hob got wound up enough in each other that they forgot I was here. It wasn't anything intentional on their part. I was just that sort of person who faded into the background. I didn't mind. At least I wouldn't have to be out until the early hours of the morning.

"First round's on me," Hob insisted.

He waved over a wiry, grizzled man with a thinning hairline masked by a

close buzz cut. One bicep had a picture of what appeared to be a blue lion-dragon hybrid with a white cross over it. Underneath were the words 'I bleed blue and white.' The other arm had a full sleeve of what appeared to be a blue and green tartan with thistles every so often. The detail and quality of the work made me wonder if this man had gone to the artist who'd done the tattoo on Alec's back.

"'Nother bloodhound, mate?" he asked, his accent thick, his voice rough with what I guessed to be a lifetime of cigarettes and whiskey. It wasn't until he took a step back to grab something that I realized he was wearing a kilt to match the plaid on his arm.

"Please!" Hob swished his nearly-empty glass of orangey liquid, making me wonder if that was his first or second glass of the night. He wasn't a lightweight, but he couldn't handle alcohol as much as he thought he could. "A raspberry Cosmo for my lass while you're at it, and a blackberry G&T for my lass's lass."

"Stop saying *lass*, you ass," Mai hissed at him, smacking his arm.

"I'll have a Tom Collins instead of the G&T," I clarified for the bartender. I liked G&Ts just fine, but I didn't like when people ordered for me, not even someone as well-meaning as Hob.

The bartender nodded and began mixing the drinks with the sort of practiced movements that spoke of just how long he'd been at this job. It wasn't long before we were half-way through our drinks and loosening up, waiting for the right song to come on before heading over to the dance floor. My drink was fizzy and sweet and delicious, and before I knew it, I was swaying to the beat of the new song that had just come on.

"Ugh, this is the one with the harmonica," she groaned. "No no no."

"You're so picky," I complained, my tongue loosened by my delicious alcohol.

Coming out had been a wonderful idea. I didn't know why I didn't do it more often.

"Tell me about it," Hob laughed. He was on his third bloodhound and had reached the point in intoxication when he started slapping his hand down to emphasize a point. He hadn't believed that he did it until one day he'd ended up with a bruised palm. Whenever he got past tipsy though, it happened all over again.

"I'm dating *you*, aren't I?" Mai shot back. "Take it as a compliment."

I laughed, aware that I was sitting comfortably in the tipsy realm. Even

with getting something to eat, I knew I could only drink one more safely. After that, I'd be flat-out drunk, and that wasn't an option. Loosening my inhibitions was one thing. Losing control was something else entirely. I didn't do it. Ever.

"One more?" Hob asked. Mai and I both nodded, and he headed back to the bar for a fresh round.

While he was gone, another song came on, and Mai bounced in her chair. "This is it!" she exclaimed. "Let's go!"

She grabbed my arm and pulled me toward the dance floor, already bouncing in rhythm to the beat. We squeezed between a few couples before finding a nice place to claim, and then we got down to it. I rolled my hips and raised my arms, moving my feet in time with the beat. Mai laughed and followed my lead, dancing close enough to me that there was no doubt we were there together, but not so close as to give the impression that we were there *together*. Neither of us really cared if people thought we were lesbians, but those sorts of misunderstandings could end up being far more serious than people realized.

I pushed all of that from my mind. We weren't here to be introspective or anything like that. This was time to relax and de-stress before officially starting on my chosen career path. No thinking about serious stuff or the future or the past or anything that wasn't my friends, a good drink, and dance music.

As I glanced toward the bar to see where Hob had gotten to, another man caught my eye.

A white shirt with thin blue stripes, rolled up at the wrists, tucked into dark slacks. A light brown leather belt and matching shoes. He also wore a gold watch, which was what had grabbed my attention in the first place. I recognized that watch as much as I recognized the carefully styled hair and strong, athletic body.

Except it couldn't be him. That would be an impossible coincidence. The sort of crazy thing that no one ever believed would happen in real life.

Then he raised his head, and even with the dim lighting, I could see those bright blue eyes.

Well, damn.

I turned around so fast that I nearly knocked Mai over. I grabbed her arm, squeezing it in my panic to get out of his line of sight.

"Whoa, hey!" she said. "What's wrong?"

I loosened my grip a bit. “Nothing.”

“You’re not dancing.”

Nothing like seeing the hot guy who got hard in the middle of a massage and then asked for a...I shook my head. Nope. Not going there. I came here to dance. That was what I wanted to do.

“And you’re blushing,” Mai pointed out, studying me closely. “You can’t be that drunk yet.”

Mai could read me like a book, and it took her all of ten seconds to figure out that something I’d seen had freaked me out. If she’d been stone-cold sober, it would’ve taken her less than five.

She looked past me to where I’d been staring and let out a low whistle. “Oh, wow.”

I feigned ignorance. “What?”

“He’s tall.”

“Who?”

“The guy at the bar you were ogling.”

Not a shock she saw right through me. I was a horrible liar when I didn’t have alcohol in my system.

Still, I tried to deny it. “I wasn’t ogling.”

“Bullshit,” she said with a smile. “And *he’s* ogling *you*.”

My curiosity got the better of me, and I glanced over my shoulder. Alec was alternating between talking to the bartender and looking directly at me. Except he couldn’t be because that would be crazy. I looked nothing like I had when we’d met before and I wasn’t the sort of woman who guys checked out, especially in a bar or club where there were women like Mai around.

But it really did look like he was staring at me. My cheeks burned at the thought, and I hated myself for how badly I wanted it.

Suddenly, Hob blocked my view, grinning and holding out a Tom Collins to me while handing off Mai’s Cosmo to her. He’d probably already downed his bloodhound, and I hoped it’d be his last one. He was a funny drunk, but I had no desire to be helping him stumble out to a taxi at the end of the night.

“Out of the way!” Mai hissed.

“What?” he asked as Mai shoved him.

“Lumen’s having a love connection.”

“Oh please,” I said. I took a sip of my drink and glanced at the bar again. Alec was still there, still shooting looks my way with the sort of calm assurance that meant he really didn’t care if anyone saw him or not.

Hob followed Mai's gaze. "Damn, he looks like Ryan Gosling and Chris Hemsworth had a secret love child. Do you know him?"

"I'd watch that movie," Mai muttered.

"Me too," Hob said. He winked at me. "But that guy's not a child. He's all man."

I sighed, resigning myself to sharing the story. "He came into the parlor when I was working last Friday. Near the end of the massage, he asked for a happy ending."

"Did he get one?" Hob asked, cat-green eyes glinting.

"No!"

"I told you we don't do that," Mai said. She got a mischievous look on her face as she smacked his ass. "Not for clients, anyway."

I really didn't want to go down *that* filthy rabbit hole, so I finished out the story. "I kicked him out, of course, but then he came back the next day to ask me out." Hob opened his mouth, but before he could ask, I said, "I turned him down."

"Think he's stalking you?" Hob took an entirely different track. "I can go threaten to beat him up."

While it sounded like a joke, I didn't doubt for a moment that Hob meant it. Mai had always been protective of me, and as soon as the two of them had started dating, he'd immediately taken it up as well.

"He's not stalking me," I said. "He's Scottish. This is a Scottish bar. Not too crazy of a coincidence."

Or so I kept telling myself

"He's Scottish?" Mai asked, eyes going wide. "Like, with an *accent*? Damn. No wonder you're blushing all over."

I sipped my drink and returned to dancing. I didn't want to talk about it. Because blushing didn't mean anything more than embarrassment at the memory of him getting an erection while I worked. Except I didn't share that part of the story. That was something only for me. A secret memory that I might bring out once in a while.

"You *like* him!" Mai exclaimed, her entire face lighting up as she grabbed my arm. "You actually like a guy, like in an 'I want to tear your clothes off and ride you into the sunset' kind of way."

That was weirdly specific. "Um..."

She threw up her hands. "You're not asexual after all, are you?"

I blinked at her question. "You thought I was asexual?"

“Well, it just seemed like you didn’t care about getting laid,” Hob cut in. “And we’ve never really heard you talk about sex or dating or friends-with-benefits or whatever.”

Apparently, Mai wasn’t the only one who’d thought it.

“Not that it mattered to us,” she said quickly. “You could be asexual, celibate, polyamorous, pansexual...we love you no matter what.”

“I’m not asexual,” I said before she could go into more sexual preferences and orientations. I didn’t want to have this conversation here. Or ever. “Dating and sex just aren’t the first things on my mind.”

“Go over there and talk to him.” Mai gave me that stubborn look that said she wasn’t going to let this go.

“He’s a creep,” I said. “He wanted a handjob, remember?”

“But he came back to apologize,” Mai pointed out. “Just have a conversation. Maybe he’s not as creepy as you think.”

“If he is, I’ll rescue you,” Hob said.

They both laughed as Hob hooked his arm around Mai’s waist and pulled her tight against his body. They began to sway to the music, their eyes meeting as the rest of the world fell away.

It looked like I was on my own for the rest of the night. I could continue dancing alone, pretending like that’d been my goal the whole time, or I could excuse myself, call for a ride, and have a nice, long soak in the tub back home.

I’d almost made up my mind to go when movement by the bar caught my attention. It was Alec, and he was coming this way.

Dammit.

EIGHT

ALEC

THIS WASN'T HOW I'D SEEN MY WEEKEND GOING WHEN I WOKE UP YESTERDAY morning. Then Keli called last night to ask if she could have Evanne for the weekend so the two of them could do some back-to-school shopping and girls' day things.

I assumed that meant a spa, manicure, pedicure, that sort of thing. When I heard Evanne chattering excitedly in the background, I agreed. Keli had always been good at working with my schedule when I needed her to. I'd take Evanne for the three-day weekend over Labor Day, and we'd do our own special stuff then. She'd been begging me to take her rock climbing, so maybe we'd do that.

The downside to Keli taking Evanne at the last minute was that I hadn't planned on having nothing to do for the weekend, and I needed to stay busy to keep from thinking about Lumen. I'd been on my way home when I'd gotten a text from Duncan MacLean, an old friend of mine from Edinburgh, inviting me to stop in for a tasting of his new scotch.

Duncan and I weren't the sort of friends who felt the need to socialize. We could go months, even a year, without talking, but it was never awkward when we saw each other again. And it never stopped us from dropping everything when the other one needed something. When I'd needed to talk to someone after Keli told me she was pregnant, he'd been a listening ear. When he'd needed a sponsor here in America to get a work VISA, he'd called me.

I'd invested in his bar and distillery, and he'd named his first Scotch after me. The time I'd been a hundred miles out of the city and hit a deer, he'd come, no questions asked. It had been a little over a year since we'd last spoken, and I'd already been thinking that a talk with Duncan might clear my

head of Lumen, so I took his call as a bit of divine providence and headed over.

As soon as I came in, Duncan saw me and flashed a grin. He had a gap between his front teeth and a short growth of reddish hair on his face that stood out compared to the thinning brown hair on his head. He'd spent much of his teens and twenties as a merchant fisherman in Scotland and Newfoundland, finally coming here to open a pub and distillery. If our lives hadn't taken us in such different directions, we might've been inseparable, but as it was, our friendship went beyond socioeconomic class, geography, and everything else that said the two of us never should have hit it off in the first place.

"Haw, Alec, ya right numpty," he called.

"Duncan, ya wee bastard," I shot back as I reached the bar. As it always did when I was around someone from back home, my accent and speech came back like I'd never left.

Sometimes, I wished I never had.

He laughed, showing a lot of crow's feet at the corner of his eyes. He was only a couple years older than me, but his time at sea had aged him harshly. Even so, he had a friendly face, and he'd never complained about how hard his life had been, especially compared to mine. "Here for a hauf o' whiskey?"

"I'll have a nip," I said, sliding onto a free barstool. The place was packed tonight, and I loved seeing it.

"Ah got just the thing. Just let me help this laddie first." He nodded to the man beside me, a twenty-something guy with light brown skin and a definite hipster aesthetic. The guy seemed to be well on his way to being drunk but wasn't quite at a cut-off point yet. Duncan was good at knowing when that was. He took that responsibility seriously. His nan had been injured by a drunk driver a decade ago, and the first thing he'd done when he'd gotten his liquor license here was post a giant sign saying that he had the right to refuse drinks and confiscate keys. He didn't mess around.

As Duncan mixed the hipster's drinks, I let my gaze roam around the bar. I'd always thought the dance floor a silly idea since he hated the kind of music people danced to, but it seemed to be drawing a good crowd. A woman with honey blonde hair like Lumen's was having a good time out there. The flash of false recognition bothered me, but as soon as the woman turned, my heart leaped.

It was Lumen.

She was dancing with a petite Asian girl, both of them laughing as they moved in sync. It was funny how much of our recognition came from context. I'd almost completely passed her over because I'd dismissed what I'd seen as a resemblance. And then I'd almost missed how different she looked because, in my head, she had her hair pulled back and wore simple scrubs.

She sure as hell didn't look like that now.

She wore a blue top that accentuated her trim waist and high breasts, skin-tight pants that looked like leather, and heeled ankle boots that accentuated her legs. She was moving her hips hypnotically, her hair swinging freely around her shoulders. And as her smile widened, I realized she had dimples.

Damn.

No wonder I hadn't been able to get her out of my mind.

"Cheers!" The hipster guy beside me flashed us both a smile as Duncan handed him his drinks.

"Aye, cheers," said Duncan with little enthusiasm. He never liked mixing cocktails. The hipster wandered off.

"You should've made it a scotch-only bar," I joked.

Duncan gave me a grin. "And get a bunch o' wankers like you? Look at these burds and tell me ye wouldn't put up with making mingin drinks and listenin to jobby music if it meant ye owned a bar full o' bonnie lasses, many o' them willin' ta fill my bed."

I instinctively glanced over at Lumen, only to find her looking at me. Her eyes widened and then she turned, grabbing her friend's arm. Desire clenched my stomach.

"See something ye like?" Duncan went on, grabbing a bottle from underneath the bar and an empty glass. "Guess my point is made."

"Someone," I clarified. "Not something."

Duncan followed my line of sight and shook his head. "Chinese burd? She and the pofter I just served come in all the time. Think she's spoken for, mate."

"Not her."

He splashed the amber liquid into the glass and looked at the dance floor again, this time nodding his head in appreciation. "Blonde? Ye ken who she is?" I didn't answer, but the look on my face must've given him something. "Gonna have a go?"

“Already tried,” I admitted ruefully.

“Aye, ‘tried,’ is it? Finally met a lass who dinnae just fall in yer lap, I see.”

He was half-joking, but he wasn’t wrong. I’d never had a difficult time finding women to be on my arm or in my bed. I supposed that was probably why I’d gotten tired of the game. I didn’t want someone who played hard-to-get, but I didn’t want someone who threw themselves at me either. I’d barely said anything to Song, and she’d been ready to peel her dress off in the middle of the restaurant.

I wanted a woman who, as Duncan would have said, ken her own mind and ken what she wanted, and didn’t compromise any of that for a few more zeroes to her bank account.

My gut told me Lumen was that kind of woman.

I wanted to get to know her better. Simply asking her out and expecting her to be impressed wouldn’t cut it with her. I needed a different approach. If she still wasn’t interested, I’d have to get over it, but at least I’d have put in the effort.

“Taste that before ye do anything daft. It’s the whole reason I brought ya here.”

I took a mouthful and savored it. It was as smoky as a campfire, burning in the best way. Smooth and no cloying aftertaste. Perfect.

“Aye, that’s fine.”

He nodded, the expression on his face carefully pleased. I knew him well enough to know he was thrilled. It wouldn’t do to show it though.

I knocked back the rest of my drink and set the glass back on the counter. “Wish me luck.”

“Aw, ye don’t need it,” Duncan scoffed. “You’re a right jammy bastard, and ye know it. Go get her.”

I appreciated his compliment, but I had a feeling that luck would have to come into play for this to work. I headed for the dance floor, my eyes still on Lumen. She was chatting with the Asian girl and the hipster guy, both of whom seemed to be laughing at her as they wrapped their arms around each other and swayed to the music, leaving Lumen without a dance partner. The Asian girl gestured in my direction, and when Lumen looked over, I gave her a friendly smile. She didn’t look angry or afraid, which I took to be a positive sign.

As I got closer, however, her expression turned into a combination of

amusement and irritation. She didn't walk away though. In fact, she didn't even turn her back to me. Instead, she continued dancing on her own, waiting for me to be in hearing range before she spoke.

"Shouldn't you be out, begging for happy endings?" she asked, an impish twinkle in her eyes.

"Very funny," I replied. I wasn't quite dancing, but I was shuffling my feet to the beat enough that I didn't look completely out of place. "Nice choice of bar for the evening. I see you have a fondness for all things Scotland."

She rolled her eyes. "I don't think Ed Sheeran is Scottish."

"Who?"

She jerked her chin up, making me realized that she meant the singer of the current song playing. She smirked as she danced, swinging her hips and taking small sips of what appeared to be a Tom Collins. To my right, the hipster and the Asian girl were plastered together almost pornographically, which I took to mean they were a couple. And since Lumen was dancing alone, all signs pointed to her being single.

"His loss. We're a braw lot, as I'm sure you remember," I said, earning a laugh. Maybe it was the light coming off the red brick walls, but I was pretty sure she was turning red. "Dance with me, and I'll make it more Scottish for you."

"And how are you going to do that?" she asked, arching a golden eyebrow.

That wasn't a no.

"Scottish magic," I said, beginning to move more with the music. I wasn't a fan of this sort of dancing, but Duncan's scotch packed a wallop, and I hadn't eaten since lunch. One drink was enough to smooth the rough edges.

Lumen sighed as if disappointed, but the light in her eyes told me she was teasing...or flirting.

I liked the idea of flirtatious Lumen.

"I expected Riverdance," she said.

I feigned offense. "That's Irish!"

"Irish, Scottish, what's the difference, laddie?" she asked in what I could only assume was supposed to be either an Irish or a Scottish accent.

I burst out laughing, the sound surprising me as much as it clearly did her. How long had it been since I'd laughed with a woman? I honestly couldn't remember. Polite chuckles, maybe. The closest would have to be laughing

with Keli over something Evanne had said or done, but that humor came out of our daughter, not anything sparking between us. And sparks were certainly flying between Lumen and myself right now.

“Keep that up, and I’ll revoke my dance offer,” I warned.

“That would be a shame.” She almost purred the words, and my dick twitched, more than a bit interested in what other sorts of sounds she could make.

I put my hand out and let the mood settle a bit. “It would. I’d really love to dance with you, Lumen.”

Her eyes met mine and held them, the moment between us drawing out as she searched for something I couldn’t name. I wasn’t sure what she wanted to find, but I let her see what I did have to offer. A sincere desire to dance with her and an attraction that I was confident was mutual.

Then she blinked, and the spell was broken. She winked and downed the rest of her drink with what looked like resolve. The glass went on a passing waiter’s tray and then she was moving. Rather than take my hand, she walked past me, her shoulder brushing against mine and sending a ribbon of electricity down my arm. I watched her walk away, captivated by this woman who appeared to be nothing like the blushing massage therapist I’d accidentally propositioned. She didn’t go far, though, stopping less than two feet away before turning to dance back toward me.

Easy, sensual movements that were all the more erotic for how subtle they were. Unlike most of the other women here, she wasn’t screaming out her sex appeal. She looked sexy, no doubt about that, but she was less the yowling she-cat in heat and more the seductive—

She stopped in front of me, a puzzled expression on her face, and I realized that my admiration had turned me into a statue in the middle of a moving sea.

“Lost in my thoughts for a moment there, lass,” I said, bending my head closer to hers to ensure she could hear me.

When she smiled, I knew all was forgiven. I put a hand on the small of her back and let my body fall into sync with hers, barely holding back my grin. The scent of her vanilla perfume filled every breath I took, and the feel of her wavy hair swishing across my skin gave me goosebumps despite the nearly overwhelming heat.

I’d never had a woman’s touch affect me so much, and the fact that she wasn’t even trying made it all the more attractive.

Her arms came up, wrists resting lightly on my shoulders, and I took the opportunity to settle both of my hands on her waist, keeping them right above her hips. As much as I liked this less-inhibited Lumen, I wasn't going to assume too much. Something in my gut told me that if I wanted to get to know her better, I needed to make her feel safe. Groping on a dance floor was definitely *not* the move to make.

Talking, however, was something I could do. I put my mouth next to her ear. "You're just as skilled on your feet as you are with your hands, aren't you now?"

The flush in her cheeks deepened, and she ducked her face to let her hair swing down in a curtain across her face. She didn't say anything in response to my compliment, but she did sway a little closer, the front of her body brushing against mine and sending a jolt of arousal straight down to my already-interested cock. When I responded to the friction by pulling her closer and grinding subtly into her, her head shot up, eyes wide and irises darkened to a color much like the sea as seen from Calton Hill.

A wave of longing for home swept over me, but before it could take hold, Lumen's hands slid down to my chest, bringing with them a trail of fire. For a moment, I feared she would push me away, but her hands remained in place. Her fingers flexed, applying light pressure as they shifted slightly, but as a serious expression settled on her face, I understood that she was simply doing a bit of her own exploring.

She was strong enough that I had no doubt she could make her displeasure known if she decided I had taken too many liberties. I had to trust that she would let me know if I read her wrong.

I rested my cheek on the top of her head, thankful for the heeled shoes that cut the difference in our heights enough for the gesture to not be awkward. Without access to bare skin, I was left to wonder just how soft it was, but as I let my hands fall a little lower, I admitted to myself that this wasn't bad either. I wasn't quite palming her ass, but my fingers had curled enough around her hips to be outside of the completely platonic zone. Our bodies still held an inch or so between us, but I didn't think anyone would mistake us for a pair of friends.

"Is this Scottish dancing?" she breathed the question against my neck.

"It beats Riverdance, doesn't it though?" I had my mouth against her ear, my lips brushing against the cool metal of her bee earring. "But I can think of another sort of dance I'd like to be doing with you."

She fisted her hands in my shirt as a shudder ran through her.

“Steady, now.” I tightened my grip on her hips and let my lips brush the shell of her ear.

This time, she *did* push me away, her lips parted in a gasp as her cheeks took on a fetching red hue. But she didn’t let go of my shirt, and she didn’t tell me to fuck off. It was surprise I saw written on her face, not disgust or annoyance, so I took a chance and tugged her back to me. She came, her eyes never leaving mine. At any point, if she wanted me to let go, all she needed to do was say the word, but for now, I planned to push forward until she asked me to stop.

Right now, the thing I wanted the most was her mouth. I wanted to taste her, learn how she liked to be kissed, hear all the sounds I was sure she’d make.

I took one hand off her hip and placed it on the side of her neck, letting my thumb brush back and forth across her jaw. Her skin was as soft as I’d imagined it to be. I took my time, letting her grow accustomed to my touch. In the back of my mind, I was aware that we were in public and that she had friends nearby, but nothing else seemed important.

Her eyelids fluttered, and that was when I took her chin between my thumb and forefinger, my grip tight enough to leave no doubt about my intentions. I went slow, savoring the anticipation while at the same time giving her the chance to stop me if she didn’t want it. Instead, her breath caught in a shuddering little gasp and her tongue darted out to wet her bottom lip.

Fuck.

I ignored the way my dick throbbed in its cotton confines and focused instead on the moment our mouths touched. A simple, near-chaste touch of lips to lips that sent desire coursing through my veins. It was all I could do to rein in my sudden and almost overwhelming need to thoroughly possess her. To explore every inch of her mouth and her body. The sheer *wanting* made me dizzy, and my fingers dug into her hips as I struggled to ground myself. If this was what a single kiss was like, I couldn’t imagine how the world would explode when we had sex.

I parted my lips, ready to deepen the kiss, but hers remained closed. That was fine too. I wouldn’t push her. Still, I couldn’t resist tracing her bottom lip with the tip of my tongue, just to get a hint of what she tasted like. My hand returned to her throat, then slid around to the back of her neck, tipping her

head back so I could kiss her chin. Nothing too scandalous.

Except she pulled back, cheeks bright red. “We...we shouldn’t.”

I didn’t get the impression she wasn’t enjoying herself, so I asked, “Don’t you want to?”

“Too many people,” she mumbled.

That made sense. She might’ve been enjoying the way *I* looked at her, but she wasn’t the sort of person who enjoyed general attention. I could take care of that though. “My car is out back.”

She gave me a disapproving look. “You’ve been drinking.”

I brushed some hair back from her face. “Who said we need to drive anywhere?”

The meaning of my words clicked a second later. “Oh.”

“We can stay if you’d prefer.” I dropped my hand down to take hers. “We can dance some more. Whatever you want.”

She shook her head. “I want to...I mean...” She glanced at the Asian girl she’d been dancing with before, and the girl danced her way a few steps closer so Lumen didn’t have to shout. “I...I’m stepping out for a bit. With Alec. Um...”

The girl winked and then wiggled her fingers at Lumen, then looked at me, her eyes narrowing. She pointed a finger at me, then drew it across her neck, her threat perfectly clear without a single word being spoken.

I gave her a nod to let her know that I understood she’d cause severe pain if I hurt her friend. I squeezed Lumen’s hand as I turned my attention back to her. “Shall we?”

She nodded, her cheeks flaming bright enough to be seen even in the bar’s dim lighting. I put my hand at the small of her back and led her out of the pub. My heart was pounding, and not from the dancing.

Since I’d invested in the bar back when Duncan first opened it, my car was parked in one of the four employee parking spots behind the building. Thanks to a narrow alleyway leading from the bar to the driveway and a high brick wall around the parking lot, we’d have plenty of privacy.

“What kind of car is that?” Lumen asked as we approached my car.

“It’s a Maybach 62 Landulet,” I said as I opened the closest back door. A unique design, the Landulet had a power divider window that separated the front and back seats, similar to a limo. The divider was down right now because I’d driven the car today, and she was able to see that the front area was finished in black leather and the rear was white with gold-flecked black

granite inserts.

I smiled at the astonished look on Lumen's face. I hadn't bought the car because I wanted to show off, but I had to admit that I was enjoying watching her react to it. "Have a seat."

She slid inside, running her hands over everything. "I've never seen a car like this before."

I climbed into the seat next to her. "Well, only eight were made, so that makes sense."

That got a laugh out of her, which made me think she didn't know I was serious. But that was fine with me. I liked looking at her dimples. And her eyes. And her mouth. And...fuck it. I just liked looking at her, period.

I leaned toward her and waited to see what she could do. When she reached for me, my pulse picked up again, and then her mouth touched mine, and I didn't care about anything other than her. I resisted the urge to take over, letting her take the lead instead. Her lips parted slightly, and I followed her example, matching my movements to hers, nice and slow.

I loved the thrill of learning a new partner's kissing style, but I'd never experienced anything like this before. Every other woman I'd been with had acted like they had something to prove. Writhing on me, shoving their hands down my pants, that sort of thing. Usually, I didn't mind that. The faster we got down to it, the faster I could get off and disappear.

I didn't want that here. I wanted to take my time with her. And I didn't want to overanalyze why.

As she wrapped her arms around my neck, I threaded my fingers through her hair. It was as soft and silky as I'd imagined, and I wondered what it would look like spread out on my pillow. What it would feel like brushing across my thighs as her soft lips explored...

At last, I felt her tongue against mine. Just a hint of it at first, then a little more. She tasted like lemons. I cupped her cheek as I stroked her tongue with mine, slow and gentle so as not to scare her. I didn't know anything about her background, but I could feel how cautious she was, and as much as I wanted her, I wanted her to feel safe with me. I caressed her cheek with my thumb, feeling for the dimple. As we kissed, she smiled, and I felt the shallow divot under my thumb. Perfect.

I couldn't help pulling her body a little closer to mine though. I wanted more. I wanted all of her, and with an intensity that I'd never felt before. One of her hands gripped my forearm, and her breath quickened, the reaction

enough to tempt my tenuous control. She was intoxicating, each kiss better than scotch.

I dropped a hand to her knee and felt her tense, but she didn't pull away. Emboldened, I ran my hand up to mid-thigh. Her legs were irresistible, and I wished she would've been wearing a skirt. Her bottom lip trembled, and I captured it between my teeth, tugging for a moment before soothing it with a kiss. She moaned, and I shuddered. Damn, I could do this to her all night if she kept making that sound.

I moved my mouth to her neck as I slid my hand higher up her leg. Her pants may have looked like leather, but they felt more like leggings, a thinner material that let me feel the heat of her.

"Alec..." she whispered. She scrunched my shirt in her hands, pulling at it like she wanted it off.

I hummed in response, and my hand moved a little higher. When my thumb grazed near the crease of her thigh, she flinched hard enough to make me instinctively pull away, my head spinning.

She looked mortified, her face flushed. "I...I...I'm sorry."

"What is it?" I asked, completely confused, but she was groping for the door handle. "Lumen, talk to me."

She opened the door and swung her legs out. "I'm sorry!" she said again before slamming the door behind her.

I got out the other side and stood up, looking over my car, but she was already disappearing down the alley.

"Lumen!" I called her name even though I knew it wouldn't do any good.

She was gone, and the only thought that kept circling in my head was 'how could I find her again?'

NINE

LUMEN

I'D THOUGHT THAT MY NEW JOB WOULD MONOPOLIZE ENOUGH OF MY TIME that I wouldn't be able to spend it thinking about Alec. I was wrong.

It had been almost a full week since my...encounter with him, but the way my brain kept obsessing over it, it was like it'd happened last night. Then again, in a way, it did because every night, the moment I closed my eyes, I saw it again. Felt it. Experienced every bit of sensory overload as if it was happening for the first time. No matter how exhausted I made myself, I always dreamed of it and woke gasping, my body right on the brink of something explosive.

I wasn't an idiot. I knew what a climax was. I'd just never experienced one. Privacy had never been easy to come by in foster care. Shared bedrooms. Shared bathrooms, usually with a limited supply of hot water. I'd never considered it important enough to actively seek out the time and space to try to work myself up to one. I'd never thought I was missing something until I'd run away from Alec.

I hadn't told Mai. She'd asked what had happened, of course, and I'd given her a partial truth. I'd told her that Alec and I had made out for a bit, but I hadn't wanted things to go too fast so I'd asked him to take me home. She'd been impressed that he hadn't tried to pressure me into something more, especially since it'd seemed like things had been heating up between us. When she asked about why he hadn't called, I'd told her that I hadn't given him my number. At least that was the truth.

Once my awkward conversation with her was over, I'd tried to focus on my work. School didn't start until next Tuesday, but most people didn't realize how much prep work went into getting a classroom and curriculum

ready for a new school year. I'd spent this past week meeting the other teachers and faculty, getting used to the school layout, and putting the finishing touches on my lesson plans. Thanks to some plumbing issues, I hadn't been able to get into my classroom until today, but as soon as I'd come in this morning, I'd been told it was ready for me.

In college, I'd taken several foreign language classes in anticipation of working at a low-income school. I'd had my mind set on teaching kids who'd grown up like me. Instead, I'd found myself offered a position at a fairly prestigious elementary school. I'd gone to the interview prepared to make a list of all the reasons this school wasn't what I wanted. Then the school board had complimented a paper I'd done my last year of college on the subject of the responsibilities of the privileged to those less fortunate and how that way of thinking needed to start in elementary school. They'd offered me the chance to put my theories into practice with my own class, and I hadn't been able to resist.

As soon as I stepped into my room, I was grateful that the secretary had given me directions rather than walking with me, because my expression when I saw my classroom for the first time was nothing short of gob-smacked. Hardwood floors and paneled walls. South-facing windows that would let in plenty of natural light. Bookshelves filled with beautifully bound books, classics as well as popular newer titles. Sturdy chairs and tables that were made of actual wood rather than the usual particle board, as well as the latest in fidget and sensory furniture. My desk looked like something out of a study rather than a handed down, battered piece of metal. The chair was ergonomically and aesthetically pleasing.

It was more than I'd ever could have imagined, and it took me a few minutes to process enough to start unpacking my things. Posters went on the walls with the command strips the school provided. Then came the bulletin board, a welcome message to the students that was both fun and informative. I'd carefully chosen everything the kids would see, knowing that what they saw when they came into the classroom for the first time would set up their entire year, for good or for bad.

Once I'd finished with my desk, I moved to the Smart Board. We'd used them in some of my education classes and the school where I'd done my student teaching had had one, but this one was mine, and I wanted to be well-acquainted with it by the time I used it in class.

As I practiced writing, the music on my phone changed, and a new song

started playing. Instantly, I was back at MacLean's, swaying to the beat, Alec's hands on my hips. And then his hands were somewhere else. And his mouth...

I hadn't been drunk, and by all accounts, I should have turned him down again after what he'd done at work, but I hadn't turned him away. I hadn't stopped him from kissing me. I'd gone with him to his car, knowing that things would be going further than some dancing and fairly chaste kissing. And I'd let things go further than that once we were in the back seat.

Dammit! I shook my head. This was the last place in the world it was appropriate to be thinking about these things. At least right now, my classroom was empty. But on Tuesday, as soon as school officially started, I'd have a class of impressionable third graders watching every move I made.

I needed to stop thinking about him, about what we'd done. It'd been a rash decision brought about by stress and enough alcohol to make my head fuzzy.

Except...there'd been a connection between us. I'd had guys touch my hand, my shoulder. I'd danced with a few. I wasn't a nun or anything like that. But not a single one of those men had ever made me want more. And I definitely wanted more of him.

More in a way I'd never had anyone before.

Part of it was physical, and while that made my entire body heat up with combined arousal and embarrassment, sex wasn't the reason I was scared. Sure, I was nervous about it, about letting myself be physically vulnerable, but it was what went *beyond* the physical that had my insides twisting.

I'd spent my life in crowds and never being seen. Foster homes where kids slept on floors and couches so the 'parents' could collect as many checks as possible. Schools where the student to teacher ratios were impossible, and good kids got lost in the shuffle. A group home with other kids who were too old, and no one wanted.

No one had wanted me for anything good until I'd met Mai. Even my parents had had enough of me by the time I was seven when, after years of ignoring and neglecting me, they'd signed me over to the state. I'd always been a burden. A paycheck. Something to mess with.

And then Mai had embraced me and took me home to her family. The Jins liked me and included me in all of their holidays and family events, but I was always aware of being an outsider. Of not belonging. Not really. Not because of anything they did, but because of something that was missing.

If someone had ever asked me to name what that something was, I couldn't have done it. I didn't know what it was, only that it existed...and it always reminded me that I was alone. That no one would want me.

Except I'd seen it in Alec's eyes. He wanted me. Yes, physically, but more than that. If he'd only wanted sex, he wouldn't have danced with me in the first place. He'd never pushed me, not once. He'd stopped as soon as he'd realized that I wasn't into it anymore. I hadn't exactly stuck around to see how he took me freaking out, but when he'd yelled after me, he hadn't sounded angry.

It would've made me have hope if I'd actually heard from him since.

Then I reminded myself that he didn't have my number and that I needed to focus on my job. On reality and not the fantasy I'd always promised myself I wouldn't indulge in.

I sighed. This was not how I'd wanted today to go.

Suddenly, the back of my neck prickled, and my spine stiffened. I didn't hear anything or see anyone, but I felt like I was being watched and I'd learned to always take those sorts of gut feelings seriously. I looked over at the door to the classroom and saw the vice principal of Kurt Wright School leaning against the doorway, smiling impishly.

He was only a few inches taller than me, and skinny, with a buzz-cut of wheat-colored hair and an ill-fitting slate-gray suit. I hadn't officially met him, but he'd been pointed out to me by another teacher earlier today. The way Siobhan had quickly turned us down a different hallway before he could see us told me that Vice Principal Cornelius Harvey was as unpleasant as his name made him sound. She hadn't told me anything specific, but I had my theories.

"You should use the brush vertically," he said when I looked at him.

"I'm sorry?"

"Whenever you have to use the chalkboard, make sure to brush vertically, like this," he said. He made up-and-down sweeping gestures with his arm, pantomiming a space much larger than the small chalkboard that hung on the far wall. "Not horizontally, like this," he went on, making long, side-to-side sweeping gestures, weirdly waving his butt back and forth as he did so. "The young boys will find it distracting."

Third-grade boys checking out my ass? I didn't really know how to respond to that, so I cleared my throat and said, "Thanks for the tip."

"My pleasure," he said in a way that sounded like it really was.

But not in a good way. At least not for me.

Still grinning, he walked into the classroom. If he hoped I was going to practice erasing the chalkboard, he'd be waiting a long time. If he commented on it, I'd remind him that I'd only use the chalkboard in the rare instance my smart board wasn't working. Maybe I'd tell him that I planned on having my students do all the erasing.

"I've seen you around," Harvey kept going. "Haven't had time to say hi yet though. Being the veep keeps me busier than you'd think. But I guess that's what it takes for that sweet paycheck, huh?"

He laughed, and I was reminded of the hyenas from *The Lion King* – not in a positive way. I grimaced a smile as I crossed my arms, not thinking until it was too late that I probably shouldn't have done it. When his gaze dropped to my breasts, I stifled a curse. I considered calling him on it but ultimately decided that antagonizing someone of authority before I even got the chance to do any actual teaching was probably unwise. Especially since he'd most likely deny it, and the whole encounter would end up being a 'he said, she said' situation. Better to be cautious.

"Cornelius Harvey," he said, sticking out his hand. "Most people call me 'veep.' But you can call me Harv."

I managed not to grimace as I shook his sweaty hand. "Lumen Browne. You can call me Ms. Browne."

He laughed, as if I'd been joking. I didn't correct him, concentrating more on trying to free my hand.

"Good to meet you, Lumen. Always nice to see fresh graduates join the team. Makes me look forward to every new September."

"I'm glad to be a part of Kurt Wright School," I said awkwardly as I surreptitiously rubbed my palm on my hip. "One of my professors specifically recommended KWS for any of us who were interested in a diverse educational experience."

"Who's your professor? I know all the professors connected to the school."

Somehow, I doubted that. "Jewel Abbey."

He frowned. "Oh."

I wondered how much of that reaction was because I'd named someone he didn't know, or because the professor in question was a woman.

"Where did you go to college?"

While it could've been a perfectly innocent question, I didn't think it was

out of line to assume that very little with him was innocent. “Seattle Pacific.”

He smirked. “That explains it.”

What the hell was that supposed to mean? “It’s a good university.” My voice was tight, but at least not accusatory.

He showed me his palms, giving me the sort of ‘aw, shucks’ look I’d seen on the faces of too many sleazy politicians. “No, no, of course it is. It’s just not one we tend to hear a lot about in the public sector.”

I didn’t point out that KWS wasn’t a public school. I knew what he meant. Seattle Pacific was a Christian university. I hadn’t chosen it for its religious values, however. One of the women who’d volunteered at one of the after-school programs I’d gone to in high school had been an alumna, and she’d given me a glowing recommendation...and some help applying for a couple scholarships.

“It’s just that we always tend to look out for our own, right? And around here, that means Washington U has priority. Of course, there are exceptions for the exceptional.”

I didn’t crack a smile as the last little bit of my patience stretched to the breaking point.

He laughed to break the tension. “Look, Lumen, I’m just trying to be—”

“It’s Ms. Browne.”

He looked surprised that I’d interrupted him. “What?”

I spoke slower, making each word clearly deliberate. “I prefer to be called Ms. Browne at work.”

Harvey stared at me for a minute as though expecting me to laugh. I didn’t. So he did. Again.

“So formal! Already drunk on that newly-minted teacher power, huh? Hey, whatever you say, Ms. Browne.” His gaze swept down my body until it landed on my left hand. “Or is it Mrs.?”

“Miss,” I said sharply. If he wanted to be an ass about it, fine. I was through playing nice. “Although I prefer Ms.”

It might’ve been safer for me to lie about being married, but I shouldn’t have to pretend to belong to a man for my disinterest to be valid. Just because I was a generally quiet and polite person didn’t mean I let people walk all over me.

“I like Ms. better too,” he said with a slight sneer. “Very professional. And what do I call you if we wind up going out for lunch?”

I wanted to ask him if he was deliberately being obtuse or if his lack of

ability to read people only applied to women, but something told me that wouldn't go over well. I could only hope that my tolerance would outlast his idiocy.

"The same. School meetings outside the building are no different," I said, crossing my fingers that he'd take the hint.

No such luck.

"Christ on a cracker, girl! We never go *out* for lunch. It'd be seen as 'wasting time.'"

I could almost hear the air quotes. While I knew that teachers were often taken advantage of by people who thought of education as an easy field filled by people who worked from eight until three and had all sorts of breaks throughout the year, this school wasn't exactly hurting for money. As a new teacher who hadn't gotten her Master's degree yet, I was at the bottom of the pay ladder, and I'd been shocked at the salary on my contract. The school hadn't done any name-dropping when it came to who its sponsors or its parents were, but I was starting to get curious.

"No, I was thinking just you and me, some nice sushi, maybe some wine. I know the best sushi place in town. My treat, don't worry."

I wasn't a shallow person, but he had to be nearly twenty years older than me and had yet to show me anything he had to offer that would make me even *consider* going on a date with him. "Drinking before class would be completely irresponsible and inappropriate."

The words were out of my mouth not more than two seconds before I realized my mistake. I opened my mouth to ensure he knew that lunch with him was *entirely* out of the question, no matter when or where or whatever else he tried to—

"This Saturday, then."

Fuck.

I shook my head. "I'm busy Saturday."

"Sunday, then. Or Monday. Long weekend, baby!" He laughed, then quickly cleared his throat. "I mean...Misssss Browne." He drew the sound out like a snake, somehow thinking that was charming.

It wasn't.

"No," I said flatly. If he couldn't take a direct no for an answer, this could end up turning into a huge problem.

"Hey, just think about it!" he insisted, showing me his palms again and backing up toward the door. "Why don't you sleep on it? I know I will."

I didn't even want to think about what that could possibly mean. "Mr. Harvey," I said, "I'm not—"

"I'll see ya tomorrow, Lumen!" he shouted over me, waving as he backed up through the doorway. "Keep up the good work! We'll talk about lunch! Peace out!"

And he was gone.

"—Comfortable with this," I finished as the door slammed shut. At least that meant I was alone in my classroom when I let loose a string of expletives so foul that they rarely ever left my mouth.

This was *not* how I'd wanted my first teaching job to end up.

TEN

ALEC

NORMALLY, I HAD EVANNE ONE TO TWO WEEKENDS PER MONTH, DEPENDING on how work was going, but three-day weekends like Memorial Day or Labor Day, those were mine, and as inadequate as I sometimes felt when it came to parenting an eight-year-old girl, I loved having that extra day.

A couple weeks ago, Keli had asked me to take an extra day this weekend, dropping Evanne off on Thursday evening instead of Friday night. At first, I'd thought about making an excuse, but I'd felt a flood of guilt after a few seconds. Keli had always been so good about our arrangement that I felt like a complete bastard telling her I couldn't take a single extra day off from the company my family owned.

I'd checked with my assistant, Tuesday Boswell, and she'd assured me that MIRI – McCrae International Research Institute – could survive without me for four days. I'd almost snapped at her for being so smug, but she was an excellent assistant, and I could be a difficult bastard to work for sometimes. Fortunately, she'd known all that when my father had first hired her to be my assistant.

It wasn't the extra time with Evanne that had me on edge right now though. That was all thanks to Keli.

She'd spent the past two weeks texting me regular reminders not to fill my schedule this weekend. As if I didn't live and die by my calendar reminders on all of my electronics. I might've been a workaholic, but one of the things that made me a *good* workaholic was the effort I put into being organized. I didn't miss meetings. I didn't double-book. I transcribed every appointment, had my assistant double-check my calendar against the calendar she kept, and then had my transcription program read my daily schedule back

to me. Every appointment had an alarm set ten minutes before and then again five minutes before.

Keli and I hadn't exactly been in the most serious of relationships, but she'd spent enough time with me to know how strictly I kept to a schedule. In fact, we'd had more than one argument about my inflexibility, especially after Evanne was born and I'd been annoyed that Keli was laxer about sticking to a schedule than I was.

At least now, Evanne was old enough that she could understand the differences between the rules when she was with her mother and when she was with me.

The doorbell rang, and I closed my laptop with a groan. Normally, I'd have continued working well into the night, but I didn't mind the break. Not really. Evanne went to bed fairly early, which meant I'd be able to pick back up for a couple more hours tonight.

I glanced at the security camera in the corner of my office to confirm that it was indeed Keli and Evanne at the front door, then hit the button to unlock it. The security system I'd had installed was similar to the sort we used at MIRI, allowing me to unlock the door from various points in the house. It relocked automatically after a couple minutes, but I could make changes to it if I wanted to. I supposed as Evanne got older and wanted more freedom, I'd look into it, but for now, I'd keep my daughter safe any way I could.

I headed out toward the entrance, and by the time I got there, Keli was already there, carrying two large bags and a roll of papers in one hand. Before I could remind her that Evanne had her own things here, Evanne came out from behind her mother and threw out her arms. "Daddy!"

"Hey there!" I leaned down to catch her. I'd never been much of a hugger, but I'd done enough research to know that positive physical contact was important to children, and some studies even claimed that a child's relationship with the parent of the opposite gender – if there was one involved in the child's life – was even more important.

I'd never let my own idiosyncrasies damage my little girl. It was the least I could do for her.

Keli and I had split up shortly after Evanne was born. It hadn't been a planned pregnancy or the most ideal relationship, but I'd wanted to at least try to make things work. For the baby's sake. Keli had thought that was what she wanted too, but it hadn't taken long for us to realize that we wanted different things. I could've been satisfied with how things had been between

us – or I’d at least convinced myself of it – but Keli had wanted more, and I hadn’t been able to give it to her. I’d been honest with her about it, and we’d chosen to break things off before Evanne became accustomed to seeing us together.

Arranging things once the decision had been made was easier than I’d expected. I paid a generous amount for child support, and Keli had returned to pursuing a career as an artist. I made sure she had enough money to work as little or as much as she wanted, whether that was painting or doing something else.

“Take your narwhal, baby,” Keli said gently.

Evanne squirmed in my arms, and I let her down. She immediately ran back to her mom, hands out for her stuffed narwhal, Norbert. She clutched it tight, dancing around, humming to herself.

“You look good,” I said, awkwardly shoving my hands into my pockets. “Did you change your hair?”

Keli flipped her long ebony curls over her shoulder and raised one perfectly-sculpted eyebrow. “You saw me two weeks ago, and I look exactly the same.”

“Right.”

A moment of uncomfortable silence hung in the air before Keli broke it. “Here’s everything she needs.” She gestured to the bags she’d put on the floor. And two things I hadn’t noticed the first time.

A lunch box, and a backpack.

I frowned but didn’t address it directly. Even though our daughter didn’t seem to be paying attention, I never liked to sound confrontational with Keli. “She’s got clothes here.”

“You’ll need this,” Keli continued as if I hadn’t said anything. She handed me a sheet of green paper, and I glanced at it. I was pretty sure it said School Schedule, but that didn’t make sense. There was a big block graph below it with some more words I couldn’t quite focus on right now because I had no clue what was going on.

“School doesn’t start until Tuesday,” I said evenly. “You’re picking her up Monday, right?”

Keli bit her lip and held out another small sheaf of papers, these filled with tiny print. Across the top of the front page, however, was one word in big enough print for me to understand it.

Custody.

“You know that I met someone,” she said, shifting from one foot to another.

“That Italian guy?” I asked, not sure where this was going. She’d mentioned him offhandedly before, but I hadn’t realized it was serious. “The one with my name?”

“*Alessandro* is not the same as *Alec*,” she countered with a smile. It was a lame joke I’d made before, but she understood where it was coming from. “And yes. Him. We’re in love, Alec.”

My stomach flipped. I’d known this day would come sooner or later, but it wasn’t *Keli* causing the sick feeling. I’d cared about her, lusted after her, enjoyed being with her, but I’d never loved her.

“He’s going to be Evanne’s new dad.” My jaw clenched. I hadn’t even met the guy. This was moving too quickly. If this document said that I wouldn’t be able to see my daughter anymore...

Keli’s teal eyes widened. “Oh. No. No no. I mean, not...”

Okay, I was really lost now.

“*Alessandro* isn’t going to be Evanne’s stepfather,” she said, reaching out to put her fingertips on the sheet I was holding. “This is for you.”

I made myself concentrate and studied the document in my hands, taking my time until I understood what I was reading. It was a transfer of custody document. Not from me to Keli and *Alessandro*. From *her* to *me*.

I looked down at the backpack and lunch box with a sudden realization. My eyes shot over to Evanne, who smiled up at me with that wide, beautiful smile of hers.

“I’m going to Italy,” Keli said.

I blinked. “Come again?”

“To be with *Alessandro*.”

“Keli—”

“I’m giving you full custody.”

I choked on my words. “How long—?”

“I don’t know, which is why I had my lawyer draw this up instead of just changing primary custody. I didn’t want there to be any legal issues.”

I had to be hearing things. Maybe I was dreaming. Maybe I’d hit my head. Evanne was prodding me in the leg with Norbert’s plush horn and giggling. Okay, maybe I was dead. That would explain everything.

“It wouldn’t be fair to take her somewhere she doesn’t know the language,” Keli continued. “And...*Alessandro* doesn’t want...” She pursed

her lips, as if she had to carefully consider what she said next. “I can’t build a relationship in a new country with a child.”

“Don’t you think that means—”

“Don’t,” she said sharply, holding up a hand. “You have no idea how hard it is dating when you’re a single mom. I was so lucky to find Alessandro.”

I gritted my teeth. “It wasn’t like you didn’t have a say in the custody agreement to begin with. You can’t just—”

“Once Alessandro and I get settled, I’ll call, and we’ll discuss what happens next,” Keli interrupted, kneeling to hug Evanne as if she hadn’t just dropped a bomb in the middle of my life. “Bye-bye, baby girl. You’re gonna be good for Daddy like we talked about, right?”

“Uh huh,” Evanne agreed. That little line between her eyebrows said that she sensed something was off.

That tended to happen when people were blindsided.

Keli didn’t look at me as she kept talking to our daughter. “And you’re gonna get good grades and have fun at school, right?”

“Are you and Daddy fighting?” Evanne asked, her bright blue eyes shining with the threat of tears.

“No, baby,” Keli said immediately.

“No, pumpkin, no,” I said just as quickly, patting the top of her head.

“I’ll call soon, okay?” Keli said with a bright, cheerful smile. “No tears, now. Remember our deal.”

Evanne nodded, sniffing.

“That’s my girl.” Keli kissed Evanne on the forehead and stood up again. “I have to go, Alec,” she said in a quiet, hurried tone. “Remember, school starts Tuesday at eight o’clock. All the information is on the schedule. You’ll do great.”

“Keli.” I took a step toward her, but she was already opening the door.

She waved to Evanne, mouthing, “Bye-bye!”

“Keli,” I said again, more insistently.

“Call you soon!” she said, turning around and walking away.

I opened my mouth, but it was too late. Keli was gone.

“Can we have pizza for supper every day?” Evanne asked me, smiling shyly. She seemed to still be on the edge of crying, unsure whether everything was okay or not. Pizza was always a good distraction.

“Um,” I said, mind scrambling for something to say even as I tried to

wrap my mind around what had just happened. “Listen, pumpkin. You’re, ah...you’re going to be staying here for longer than the weekend...so...”

Evanne didn’t seem surprised by that fact. At least I wouldn’t have to deal with a shock.

“...I don’t think I can swing pizza every single day,” I continued. “You’re going to have to get used to Daddy’s cooking.”

She wrinkled her nose. “All you ever want to cook is steaks. Steaks are made from cows, you know.”

“That’s not the *only* thing I...” I sighed. “Okay, how about a deal? Pizza tonight, and we’ll work out some meals we both like for the future. Ham and pineapple with extra cheese, right?”

“Right!” she said triumphantly. I guess Keli never explained to her where ham came from. Or maybe pigs just weren’t as cute as cows.

Who knew how the mind of an eight-year-old worked.

And who knew how long I’d have to figure it out now.

ELEVEN

LUMEN

IT WAS TIME.

As the assortment of parents and students came into the classroom, I tried not to show how completely petrified I was. It wasn't just the normal nerves that I would've felt at my first open house at any other school. These were not the same sorts of people I'd grown up around. Kurt Wright was one of Seattle's best, most exclusive – and most expensive – private schools, which meant the people were the best, most exclusive – and richest – in the city.

The generally older fathers wore suits, with the occasional younger sweater-wearing startup mogul among them. The elegant mothers wore pantsuits and blazers or fashionable but conservative dresses. All had more jewels on their fingers, around their necks, or in their ears than I'd ever seen. There seemed to be more mothers than fathers, and a few people who didn't really seem to be either. My guess was nannies or tutors, though a few silver-haired men and women might've been grandparents.

Then there were the kids. All neat and clean and crisp and wholly unlike the children I'd spent my life around. Even the wealthiest kids at the schools I'd gone to growing up were nothing compared to the ones walking around here like they owned the world.

It must've been nice to have been born with that sort of confidence.

Hell, I wished I had that sort of confidence as an adult.

I had too many thoughts in my head.

The loudest of them was that the parents would know I didn't belong, that I wasn't qualified to teach their beloved babies. That they'd see me as too young or too poor or from the wrong school, the wrong side of the tracks.

Just wrong in every way that possibly mattered.

Even as all these thoughts paraded through my mind, I kept smiling and greeting everyone that approached, all the while trying to remember to breathe. The kids were polite, though I got the feeling some of them were only like that because their parents were here.

I supposed I'd find out who the problem children would be once things got started. Some of the parents were polite, but most were brusque, treating me the same way I assumed they treated all of their employees. Because that's what I was in their minds. An employee.

One young mother walked in and took a look around my classroom with an instant look of disapproval. She was clutching her kiddo by the shoulders – a blond boy with hair shaved at the sides and neatly parted on top. He looked uncomfortable rather than rebellious, which was a good thing since I was pretty sure they weren't just curious or looking ahead to where their child would be in a year or two. I only had two students I hadn't yet met, and I had a feeling this boy was one of them.

"How *many* children are in this class?" she asked me, her voice sharp.

"Eighteen in total," I said and offered my hand. "I'm Lumen Browne. It's so good to meet–"

"*Eighteen?*" the woman scoffed, ignoring the greeting. "How is Skylar supposed to get proper attention with so many other *children* here?"

The way she said the word made me want to ask her what she thought her precious Skylar was if not a child. I knew how to behave myself though. I had a lot of practice keeping my thoughts to myself and pretending that things were fine when they weren't. These people might've known how to put on a nice face for polite society, but that was nothing compared to the lessons I'd learned growing up.

Which meant putting on a smile and pretending that I didn't want to say something completely inappropriate for children.

"Hi, Skylar, I'm Ms. Browne," I said, leaning down a bit to match Skylar's height. "It's good to meet you."

"You too," Skylar said bashfully.

"*It's nice to meet you too,*" his mother enunciated each word carefully. To him, not to me.

Skylar repeated her word for word. He had the pinched, frustrated look of someone who was used to repeating things when his mother corrected him. Which it seemed like she did a lot.

"Feel free to find a seat anywhere," I said, not addressing her behavior.

No need to piss off a parent before the year even started. “We’ll start in a minute.”

“I’ll stand,” the woman told me, pushing her son along by his shoulders like a stroller.

I checked my attendance sheet again even though I already knew the name of the student who wasn’t here yet. Evanne McCrae, registered by mother, Keli Miller. Either they were running late, or they weren’t bothering with the open house. Either way, it was time to get started.

I shut the classroom door, took a second to steady myself, then turned to face the parents and students I’d be working with this year. After giving them a polite greeting and reminding them of my name, I moved right to the curricula, the school’s policies and procedures, the classroom expectations, and general standards. Then, I opened it up to questions.

Probably a bad idea.

I was barraged with questions, but I somehow reminded myself to keep breathing and stayed composed the entire time. Once I was done, I let everyone know that there were refreshments being served, but they were also welcome to remain here to talk to both me and each other.

It seemed like forever by the time I reached a break in the flow of parents with all sorts of curious questions, but a look at the clock told me that I still had ninety minutes before I could even begin to think about leaving.

I’d just taken a drink from my bottle of water when an older woman, maybe in her early fifties, hurried into the classroom, holding the hand of a skipping little girl with long, dark brown curls and sparkling blue eyes.

“Hello!” said the woman, breathing heavily. She was short and slender with silver-streaked reddish-brown hair. Her hair and clothing were simple, but in that tastefully expensive way that told me she probably had more money than most everyone else here. “I’m so sorry we’re late. Evanne’s father had a business meeting, and I plumb forgot about tonight until half an hour ago.”

“That’s quite all right,” I said with a smile. “Hello, Evanne! I’m Ms. Browne. It’s so nice to meet you.”

“Really?” she asked, seeming to be genuinely surprised.

I laughed softly, not wanting her to think I was laughing at her. “Of course! I’m looking forward to being your teacher.”

She smiled and held her hand up. I gave her a high five. I liked her already, and if I wasn’t careful, I was going to start playing favorites.

“And you must be Evanne’s...?” I let the question trail off rather than making a potentially insulting assumption.

“Grandmother,” she said. Her dark brown eyes were warm. “I’m Theresa McCrae.”

“Lumen Browne,” I said, shaking her hand.

“Wonderful to meet you, Lumen.”

I believed her. She seemed like the sort of woman who wouldn’t pretend, no matter how unpopular her opinion or feelings might have been.

“I’m sorry again for keeping you waiting.”

“I tried to run as fast as I could!” Evanne interjected.

“I had a hard time keeping up,” Theresa admitted.

I chuckled too. The two of them were quite the pair. “You must be a very fast runner, Evanne.”

“I’m training to be a marathon sprinter,” she said seriously. “Or a firefighter. I haven’t decided yet.”

Impressive goals. “You can be both.”

She considered my statement with a gravity beyond her age. “Maybe. But I’ll only run at recess. I know not to run in class unless it’s an emergency.”

“Wise girl.”

Theresa patted Evanne’s head, pride and love shining in her eyes.

“I’m afraid I’m a little unprepared for this,” Theresa admitted. She held a rolled-up piece of green paper I recognized as one of the school schedules sent home to the parents.

“Don’t worry about it. This is just for you and your granddaughter to get a feel for me and get an idea of what the upcoming school year will be like.”

“Do you mind if I ask a few questions about the schedule?”

I smiled. “Of course not.”

Someone off to my right cleared their throat. I glanced over at the husband and wife who were standing a couple feet away. Judging by the expressions on their faces, they were starting to get impatient.

Theresa followed my gaze. “I’m sorry again for not being here earlier to get all of this information already.”

“Sorry!” Evanne added.

I smiled and told them not to worry. I wasn’t going to shove them aside just because someone else thought they deserved my attention more. Theresa and I chatted briefly about the learning outcomes for the year, and she made a few notes on her smartphone, surprising me at how easily she navigated the

tech.

“Can I do sprints at the gym?” Evanne asked suddenly, interjecting herself back into the conversation.

“Of course,” I said. “The gym isn’t a classroom, after all.”

“I want to be the fastest girl in the world. Like a cheetah.” She curled her fingers into claws.

“That’s pretty fast,” I agreed, chuckling at her imitation.

“Daddy says if I work hard, I can do anything.”

“He’s big on working hard,” Theresa said.

Something about the way she said it made me wonder if this wasn’t the first time she’d had to bring her granddaughter to things because her son was working.

Unless it became an issue with Evanne, however, it wasn’t my business.

“It takes a lot of work to be the fastest runner,” I said, keeping my attention on Evanne. “And to be the best student you can be.”

I believed in pushing students to reach their potential, but I also knew that didn’t always mean the same things. Some students would never be at the top of their academic classes. It had no bearing on actual intelligence, and one of the things I wanted to convey to all of my students was that I would do all I could to help them succeed.

“I’m going to work hard,” Evanne said with a definitive nod.

“That’s what Grandma likes to hear.” Theresa winked at me.

“Me too,” I said. “I think we’re going to get along famously, Evanne.”

“Me too, Ms. Browne,” Evanne said, beaming.

What a sweetheart.

“As much as I’m enjoying talking to you, I do have a couple other people who are waiting to talk to me,” I said. “Did you have any other questions for me?”

Evanne raised her hand.

“Yes, Evanne?”

“Are there going to be any pizza days?”

“Evanne!” Theresa laughed. “Not everything revolves around pizza, you know.”

With the strict dietary restrictions many of the parents most likely had for their kids, I wondered how many of the kids would look to the school to give them a break.

“I haven’t seen a menu yet, but I’ll be sure to check.” I winked at her. “I

like pizza too.”

Evanne giggled, and that was a good, positive note to end this interaction on.

“It was great meeting you two,” I said, shaking Theresa’s hand again and giving Evanne another high five. “Feel free to mingle and meet the other parents and students. Enjoy the rest of your long weekend, and we’ll get started first thing Tuesday morning.”

As they headed off, I watched them go, feeling better about this job than I had in days. Maybe if I focused on the kids and stayed away from Cornelius Harvey, this would be as great an opportunity as I’d originally hoped.

“I hope this won’t be a habit, Ms. Browne. Do you know how much I make an hour?”

Then again, maybe not.

TWELVE

ALEC

CONTRARY TO WHAT CLASSIC FAIRY TALES HAD TO SAY, STEPMOTHERS WERE A godsend.

My mother hadn't been gone for a year when my father had come home from a business trip to America to say that he'd met someone. Five months later, Theresa Gracen Carideo became my stepmother and brought with her four children: Austin, Rome, Paris, and Aspen. I'd gone from being one of five to being one of nine, and I'd resented it.

Theresa had been a widow, so she'd not only understood loss, but she'd helped her own kids after their father died. Things hadn't magically gotten better between us, but she'd been as patient with me and my siblings as she'd been with her own biological kids, and we'd eventually developed a wonderful relationship.

Wonderful enough that after I'd put Evanne to bed Thursday night, I'd called Theresa. She'd been at my house the next morning. With Evanne being the only grandchild on my side of the family, any chance of having extra time with her was met with enthusiasm, but I knew Theresa would've come no matter how many grandkids she had.

The moment she'd walked inside, a rush of relief had gone through me. I'd spent my life trying to do everything myself, and Theresa had always been there to tell me that I didn't have to. She'd never pushed things, but the moment Keli had driven away, I'd known exactly who I'd needed to call. And Theresa hadn't let me down.

Da would've come too, but he'd gone back to Edinburgh for a few days. Even though he'd technically handed over MIRI when I'd turned twenty-one, he still liked to visit various sites, especially back home. Theresa had offered

to call him, but I'd asked her not to. He'd only come back right away and try to fix things, but this wasn't something that could be fixed. Or something I really wanted *fixed* in the way that most people would think.

Da was the sort of man to have around if I'd needed to fight for Evanne. He wasn't mean or anything of the sort, but I knew it'd drive him crazy to feel like there was nothing he could do. What I'd needed was what Theresa had provided. Help with Evanne while I figured out at least enough to function in the new role I'd been given.

I was in over my head, sure, but I loved my daughter. I'd just gotten blindsided. Having Theresa around over the long weekend while I adjusted and made the necessary calls to ensure that the custody papers were all in order was a blessing. The last thing I needed was for Evanne to get hurt and not be able to take care of her properly because Keli overlooked something in the paperwork.

I'd called my assistant this morning at five o'clock to tell her that I'd be in late because I had to drop my daughter off at school. She'd been silent for a moment – adjusting to the surprise, I guessed – but then she'd reminded me about my six thirty Skype meeting with the head of Dherma Security Services, a security firm I'd been working to acquire for the last seven months.

If I canceled it or tried to reschedule it after hounding Hiram Claudel for months, I'd never get a second shot, and MIRI would be out a shit-ton of money. Even though it was a huge, multi-billion-dollar company, we employed hundreds of thousands of people all over the world, which meant that if I didn't do my job, then people would suffer.

So I'd swallowed my pride and had gone to find Theresa. An early riser, she'd already been in the kitchen, and the moment she'd seen me, something had flickered across her face. I'd explained the problem and reassured her that I'd already double-checked to make sure I had the afternoon free specifically so I could pick Evanne up after her first day of school.

Theresa hadn't been happy, but she'd agreed to help out. Again.

This, however, would be the last time, because Theresa was going home this afternoon. My stepsister, Paris, was arriving back in the States after being gone for months on her latest dig. I couldn't ask Theresa to miss time with her daughter simply because I was struggling to cope with my strange change in circumstances.

Which was why I was surprised when Theresa came strolling back into

the house, less than two hours after leaving to take Evanne to school.

“Isn’t Paris’s plane coming in tonight?” I asked as Theresa came into my office.

She took a seat across from me and ignored my question by asking one of her own. “How’d your meeting go?”

I sighed and scrubbed my hand along my jaw. “Not as well as I would’ve liked. Hiram wants me to come down to San Diego for a week to see how he runs things before he even considers my offer.”

“When are you going?”

I gave her a surprised look. “I’m not. I have Evanne now. I can’t just leave for a week.”

She smiled, her eyes warming with pride. It had been a while since I’d seen that expression. “I have faith you’ll figure something out. You’ve always been good at that.”

I rubbed my temples. “Thank you for taking her to school this morning.”

“It’s all right to need help, you know.” Her voice was mild, the way it always was when she talked to me.

After so many months resenting her for taking my mother’s place, it was the way Theresa had spoken to me that had finally gotten through. She’d talked to me like an adult, an equal. She hadn’t tried to coddle or comfort me even though I knew she would have if I’d asked her to. I hadn’t though. I’d been self-sufficient. It was the others who’d needed that part of having a mother.

Before things could get too maudlin, I returned to a safe topic. “I’ve already taken care of clearing my schedule and bringing a couple others up to speed. You can go back home before Paris gets in.”

“She’s a week behind,” Theresa said with an indulgent smile. “Which means I can stay a little longer, if you’d like.”

I should have told her that it was okay, that she could go back to her life. She might not need to work, but she wasn’t idle. She served on numerous charity boards, but she was also hands-on in ways that few other women like her were. She was something else, my stepmother.

All of those were reasons why I should’ve reassured her that I would be fine.

But I couldn’t.

If I was the only one who’d get hurt if I fucked up, I would’ve done it, but I couldn’t risk Evanne getting hurt, whether physically or emotionally.

“Please do,” I said quietly. “I’m going to try to do this myself, but I’ll appreciate having the back-up for a few more days.”

Theresa stood. “You can do this, Alec.” She reached across my desk and gave my hand a squeeze.

“Thank you, Mom.” I didn’t use the title often since my memory of my own mother was still strong, even after all these years, but she understood why I didn’t. Her older kids were the same with my father. But there were times when our parents needed to know that no matter what we called them, we knew how important they were in our lives.

“No thanks needed.” She walked around my desk and kissed the top of my head as if I was a child. “I enjoy every minute I get to spend with my granddaughter. She is something else.”

That she was. I’d known it before, but I had a feeling that the more time I spent with her, the more I’d appreciate it. That hadn’t kept me from being pissed when I’d talked to Keli over the phone Saturday night, though. The fact that she’d ignored my call on Friday hadn’t helped matters much.

I had, at least, gotten a few more details about what had prompted the sudden change. Alessandro had told Keli from moment one that he didn’t want kids, but when she’d still thought of things as casual between them, it hadn’t been an issue. When he’d told her his time in the United States was done, and he would be returning to Italy, she’d panicked. That panic had prompted Alessandro to invite her to move with him. But just her.

Apparently, all of this had reminded Keli that, before Evanne, Keli hadn’t wanted kids either. She loved our daughter, and she’d never treated Evanne with resentment, but for the first time, Keli told me that she felt like her life had been on hold these past eight years. The chance Alessandro offered her wasn’t only to be in a more serious relationship with him, but to experience some measure of that childless existence she’d always wanted.

The guilt she felt was evident as she’d promised she’d be back for regular visits and insisted that she was by no means abandoning her daughter. But when I’d asked her why she hadn’t just come to me so we could come to a new amicable agreement, she hadn’t been able to give me a straight answer. I suspected she’d thought I’d flat-out refuse a change in custody, or at the very least, tie her up in court until Alessandro didn’t want her anymore.

My gut told me that had more to do with it than even I wanted to admit. She was afraid of losing a man more than she was about her daughter’s happiness. I understood that Keli’s plans had been derailed when she found

out she was pregnant, but the route she'd taken to try to get them back wasn't the right one.

I was going to do better. Not comparing myself to Keli, but comparing myself to, well, myself. I wasn't perfect, and I knew that wasn't going to change, but I would do my damndest to be a better man for my daughter.

Starting with picking her up from school.

I could've had a driver take us, but I wanted this to be as normal as possible for her, so I drove one of my less ostentatious cars. One that we usually took around the city when she was with me.

As I approached the designated pick-up and drop-off area, I saw Evanne come out of the double-doors. Her face lit up when she saw the car, and she skipped toward it. When she got close enough to see that I was the one driving, she broke into a sprint and made it to the door in record time.

My little runner.

I unlocked the doors, and she yanked open the passenger side door and climbed in. "Daddy! It's you!"

"How was—"

She didn't let me get the question out. "I had so much fun! Ms. Browne is sooo nice, and she asked us all to tell stories about ourselves, and I made a friend named Skylar, and I ran *seven laps* around the playground at recess, and Skylar timed me, and I broke my record three times! Oh and..."

As she prattled on, I laughed and followed as best I could while pulling out of the pick-up area and down toward the school gates.

"...and then Skylar said Miss Brown was 'foxy' and I thought that was so funny because she doesn't look like a fox! She's pretty, and she wants us... Oh, Ms. Browne is my teacher, and—"

"You told me that before, remember?" I said. Ms. Browne must have made a real impression on her because her teacher had been all Evanne talked about when she and Theresa had come back from the open house.

"I know," said Evanne, "I was just reminding you. Anyway—"

"Oh, thank you. You know Daddy's so forgetful."

Had this been what I was missing, not picking her up from school every day?

"Don't worry, Daddy. I have a good memory. Anyway, Ms. Browne wants us to write a story about what we did over the summer. Can you help me write it?"

"Oh." That familiar tension was back in my shoulders. I worked to keep

my voice even. "Of course, honey. I'm all yours."

She was over the moon, and now I was wondering how I was going to make sure Evanne kept up with all her schoolwork. A lot of planning and scheduling went into homework, even in third grade. I was good at planning, fortunately, but just the thought of it gave me a headache.

When we got home, supper was already cooking. I hadn't asked Theresa to make us anything, but it seemed I hadn't needed to.

"Grandma!" Evanne shouted as she went flying into the kitchen

"Well, hello there, button!" Theresa knelt down to give Evanne a hug. "I'm just putting together a nice casserole for the three of us. How was your first day of grade three?"

Evanne launched into the same mile-a-minute spiel about her day as she had with me. When she got to the part about her homework, a part of me had hoped Theresa would offer to help, but instead, she said, "That sounds fun! Why don't you go take care of that while I finish fixing supper, hmm? Then it's out of the way."

"Okay!" Evanne said. "Daddy promised to help!"

Theresa looked at me with an arched eyebrow and waited for a response.

"Sure, sweetie," I said, trying not to sigh as I followed her into the living room.

Despite everything, I had to smile as she settled in with a grave expression on her face. It was good to know that she took her schoolwork seriously.

"Listen," I said as she pulled her notebook and pencil case out. I lowered my voice so Theresa wouldn't hear, ignoring the flash of shame that washed over me. "I can...I can help you come up with a story, but you'll have to write it out yourself. Ms. Browne will know if it's a grown-up's handwriting."

Evanne hummed, nodding. "But sometimes I, um...need help with spelling. Some words are hard. Can you read it while I write?"

I scratched my chin. "I don't know, sweetie..."

She looked up at me with those big, sad eyes that she hardly ever used to get away with murder.

"I'll watch," I agreed. "Maybe Grandma will want to, um, to hear your story after supper."

"Okay." She beamed up at me. "Ready?"

For a single word, that was an insanely loaded question.

THIRTEEN

LUMEN

BY THE TIME SCHOOL LET OUT THURSDAY AFTERNOON, I WAS BOTH exhausted and exhilarated, a combination that I was sure I'd experience over and over again while doing this job.

After years of balancing college courses and working at a job I tolerated for Mai's sake and my own financial sanity, I had a career. A pension. Benefits. Medical insurance. As much job security as anyone could in this economy.

There were only a few people left on the school grounds as I left the building, but that wasn't surprising. I'd stayed late adjusting my lesson plans now that I had a better understanding of my students, and I was looking forward to seeing my ideas implemented.

As exciting as it was, it was also more than a little terrifying, knowing that all of this rested on my shoulders. I'd enjoyed student teaching but had chafed under a teacher who was so old school that she'd shot down any fresh ideas I'd suggested. Once I'd finished, I'd already been planning all the ways I'd do things differently.

I loved being able to try some of the new techniques I'd learned under my favorite professors, as well as coming up with unique ones of my own, but I hadn't truly understood how daunting it would be to not have that safety net of another teacher. Not that my colleagues weren't supportive, but it wasn't the same as knowing that at least partial responsibility for the students' well-being belonged to someone older and wiser. Someone who'd take more of the blame if something went wrong, to be honest.

As I made my way toward the bus stop, I was already going over my budget in my head, double-checking when I'd be able to afford a car. I didn't

have a problem with public transit, but this was Seattle, which meant either juggling an umbrella with all of my stuff or getting wet. I needed to be able to transport not only myself but my supplies as well, which meant car shopping was in my near future.

Only half-aware of the world around me, out of the corner of my eye, I saw a figure running along the other side of the road, heading in my direction. On reflex, I looked, taking in the impressive height and athletic build before I got to the golden hair and a familiar face.

Shit.

How the hell did this keep happening to me?

Alec did a double-take only a few seconds after I recognized him, not giving me the chance to pretend that I was still oblivious to his presence. Not knowing the proper protocol for greetings post-almost-hook-up, I raised my hand to wave. He did the same thing, then jogged across the road.

Wow, he was...sweaty. And it wasn't the turn-off I would've thought it'd be. While the misty air could've accounted for some of how damp he was, there was no doubting how hard he'd been pushing himself. He wore typical running gear, and he was breathing heavily, which for some reason I didn't want to think too much about, made *me* breathe heavily. Had he looked that good the night I'd run out on him?

The memory of what I'd done sent heat rushing to my face, and I second-guessed the wisdom of not having made an immediate excuse about why I needed to be somewhere else.

"So, did you head for the bus stop last Friday too?" The teasing note in his voice made me a little less self-conscious.

"Yeah." I laughed awkwardly, only a *little* less self-conscious. "Um... sorry about that."

He shrugged, pulling his foot up behind him to stretch his leg. "No worries. You don't owe me an explanation. But it's nice to see you. Thanks for...waving."

How did he manage to make something as innocent as waving sound dirty?

Or maybe it was just me.

I couldn't stop staring at him, and then looking away before he could realize what I was doing. It wasn't my fault. No one should be that gorgeous. Except on my second or third look, I noticed that he wasn't quite as put-together as he'd looked at the bar last week. It was hard to tell if it was

simply because he'd been running a lot, but I somehow got the impression he was a bit more haggard than usual, like he wasn't getting much sleep.

A twinge of something that wasn't lust went through me.

"Nice evening for a run," I said, feeling like an idiot even as I said it. Considering how...familiar we'd been with each other less than a week ago, it seemed silly that I couldn't figure out a way to talk to him.

Or, maybe, that was *exactly* why it was so difficult. We hadn't exactly done much in the way of talking before.

"It is," Alec agreed. "I was just taking some air, judging the distance between my place and..." He glanced behind me, then scratched the back of his head, a strange half-smile on his face. "Well, seeing if I've slowed down over the years, I suppose."

I almost laughed. He didn't look like he'd slowed down since puberty, and I doubted he'd be slowing down any time soon.

Not that I could tell him that.

"I'd be running if I wasn't in heels and a skirt," I said.

Why did I keep blurting out inane comments? I was an intelligent woman. I had a college degree.

And one look at those bright blue eyes and I was reduced to idiocy.

"I suppose heels would make running a wee bit of a challenge," Alec agreed with a smile. "You make them look good, though."

"Don't you mean they make me look good?"

The humor in his eyes turned heated. "I said exactly what I meant. Take the compliment, lass."

Damn, that accent... "Thanks. You too. Um. I mean, you look good too."

"Despite all the sweat?"

I laughed as I nodded. What was it about this man that made my insides turn to jelly?

He laughed with me, the sound taking me back to that night at MacLean's when we'd been flirting and dancing, but when his eyes met mine, they were serious.

"We must keep running into each other for a reason."

I didn't tell him I'd just been thinking the exact same thing.

"Would you like to go out Saturday night?" he asked.

My heart leaped into my throat, and I opened my mouth, but nothing came out.

He waited, his expression unreadable. Maybe it was just because he

looked tired, but I felt like he genuinely hoped I'd say yes. I wanted to say yes. So much. But...

"A date," I stammered. "Uh, it's just--"

"Not..." Alec began, then shook his head. "I mean, a date, sure, but nothing serious. You know? Dinner and drinks. Fun."

That three-letter word implied another three-letter word. One that'd been on my mind from the moment I'd taken his jacket that first night, even if I hadn't wanted to admit it then. When he'd asked me for a happy ending, I'd reacted so strongly because a part of me had been tempted. Then when we'd been in his car, I'd been tempted again, but fear had won out. Now, I'd had time to regret what I hadn't done, and I wasn't scared anymore.

No more pretending that I didn't want him. I'd been given another chance, and I wasn't going to waste it.

"Okay," I said.

He blinked, as if he hadn't really thought I'd agree. "Aye?"

"Aye," I parroted back, vaguely aware my response had prompted a chuckle. I could barely hear anything through the blood pounding in my ears. "Where and when? I mean, you said Saturday, but..."

"Seven? At the Goldfinch Tavern? I'll pick you up."

"Sounds good," I said. I dug into my purse for a pen and a sticky note. I had more pads of sticky notes than I knew what to do with now. They were a teacher staple. I jotted my number down and handed him the note.

"I'll see you Saturday then," he said as he slipped the paper into his pocket.

"I can't wait," I said. The words didn't seem adequate enough to describe the sensations tightening in my stomach, but I wasn't going to try for anything else because I was pretty sure I'd just embarrass myself.

He smiled as he said goodbye, then turned to continue his run. I allowed myself the indulgence of watching for a minute before heading for the bus stop again. My bus had already left and watching his ass for a minute would at least give me something to fantasize about while I waited for an Uber.

IF MAI DIDN'T QUIT BOUNCING on my bed, I was going to use my teacher voice and put her in a time-out.

“I’m just so excited for you,” she squealed, clapping her hands. “Alec is smoking hot and totally into you. He’s going to make you see stars.”

I laughed. “You can tell that based on the little bit of time you saw him at the bar?”

She wriggled her eyebrows at me. “I saw the way he was eye-fucking you and then watched the two of you dancing. Trust me, when two people move that good together on the dance floor, they’re dynamite in the bedroom.”

Mai knew I wasn’t sexually experienced, but not exactly what that meant because I didn’t talk about it. Even as close as the two of us were, I didn’t want to discuss something that personal. Now, as I looked at my reflection in the mirror, I wondered if maybe I should talk to her before Alec arrived. Between the little black dress and the black silk lingerie underneath it, I looked like I knew what I was doing.

But I didn’t.

Still, I wasn’t ready to talk to her about it. I might’ve been ready to have sex, but it was different with Alec. He wasn’t my best friend. I didn’t have to be embarrassed because he wasn’t someone I planned on seeing much of after tonight.

And I wasn’t going to think about whether or not that was a good thing. Tonight was about fun. Not anything serious.

“You do know I’m expecting a full report, right?” She jumped off the bed and came up to stand next to me. “I mean *full*. I want all the dirty details. Measurements. Skill level. Specialties.”

“Please stop,” I begged her, laughing. “He’ll be here any minute.”

“Just as long as he doesn’t come in a minute.” She grinned at me, dancing back as I swatted at her.

The apartment buzzer went off before I could decide how best to retaliate. Instead of chasing her, I went to the intercom.

“Hello?”

“Hello, lass.” Alec’s brogue came through loud and clear.

“It sure is!” I said. “I’ll be right down.”

“What are you doing?” Mai hissed. “Tell him to come up! I want to meet him.”

I batted her hand away from the intercom button and grabbed my purse. “How do I look?”

“Stunning,” Mai said immediately. “I’d fuck you.”

I rolled my eyes. “Oh, thanks.”

“Any time!” She grinned. “Does this mean I get to meet the hot Scot?”

“No.” I slipped on my shoes and took a big breath.

“You got this, lady,” said Mai. “Mr. Highlander won’t know what hit him.”

“You are such a nerd,” I said, laughing.

I was still smiling when I reached the lobby. Alec stood just outside the building, and I relished the few seconds I had to admire him as I walked toward the glass door. He wore a perfectly-tailored dark pinstripe suit, a dotted tie, polished black dress shoes, and a pocket square. I didn’t think I’d ever actually seen a pocket square before.

“Right on time,” I said as I opened the door.

“You look incredible. Wow.” His blue eyes were more fire than ice, and they made me melt as they scanned me top to toe.

“You look great too,” I said weakly. That was an understatement.

“Thank you.” He smiled like he knew exactly how he was affecting me and held out his arm, a challenge written in his eyes.

I lifted my chin and took his arm. I hadn’t made it through the foster care system by not being able to ride to a challenge. Just because I chose my battles wisely didn’t mean I wasn’t capable of fighting.

My resolve to show Alec I could be as cool and sophisticated as him lasted less than half a dozen steps. The moment I saw the car, memories flooded over me and my skin immediately flushed, my heart skipping a beat.

“Still a very nice car,” I joked, proud of myself for not squeaking.

“I think so.” His gaze slid down my body and every cell hummed with new electricity. “Do you drive?”

“I can, but I don’t have a car. I budgeted with the goal of getting one after graduation, and I only need a couple more weeks to give myself some bargaining room. Using public transportation was a good way to keep down debt when I was in school.” I realized I was babbling and cringed. If I kept this up, he’d probably put me in a cab as soon as I was done eating and pick up a beautiful woman who knew exactly how to handle a date like this.

“Most people would see a car as a necessity,” Alec said as he opened the passenger’s side door.

Apparently, we were going to be in the front seat tonight. That was good. I wasn’t sure I could’ve handled being back there with him already.

“I’m not most people,” I said.

“I’m getting that.” He closed the door and walked around the car. Once

he'd gotten settled and pulled the car onto the street, he picked the conversation back up. "Do you have a type of car in mind?"

I shrugged. "Pretty much just looking for a working one. If it gets me to where I need to go safely, I don't care what sorts of bells and whistles it does or doesn't have."

"Not a lot of young people care about practicality more than appearance." He cut a sideways glance at me. "But as you already said, you're not most people."

He wasn't the first person to tell me I wasn't like everyone else, but he was one of the few who I thought meant it as a compliment. I didn't want to ask and be proven wrong, though, so I focused on another part of what he'd said.

"You say 'young people' like you're not one. You can't be much over thirty."

He flashed one of those smiles that made my knees weak. "Thirty-three this past summer. If this is where you tell me you're not old enough to drink, I can take us to one of those restaurants with the playgrounds."

I laughed, feeling the tension in the car ease to a tolerable level. "You don't need to worry about underage drinking. I'm twenty-four."

"I still feel a wee bit like I'm robbing the cradle, but if you don't mind, neither do I."

I assured him that I was fine with the age difference, and the conversation shifted again, this time to the ridiculous number of advanced features this car had. We didn't offer any additional personal information, and I was fine with that. This was a date with only one purpose – fun – and while neither of us specifically mentioned sex, the assumption of where the night would end had been there from moment one.

Case in point: the Goldfinch Tavern we were going to was located in the Four Seasons Hotel. The matter-of-fact way Alec was approaching this only solidified my decision. I was attracted to him – more than I'd ever been to anyone – and he wasn't playing games with me.

We were both going into tonight with our intentions laid on the table. The fact that we'd have good conversation over a nice meal was a bonus. The only thing more important than any of this was that I felt safe with him. He'd already shown me that he'd stop if I asked, and with that worry out of my mind, I could focus on the rest.

He'd made a reservation for a two-person table in a quiet corner of the

restaurant, a place where we could talk, but still public enough that I wasn't overwhelmed. I didn't know if he'd done it for my comfort or his, but either way, it allowed us to remain in our own little world without any of the dangers of being isolated.

Once we'd been seated, the waitress took our drink orders, then left with a promise to return after we'd had some time to look over the menu. As we perused the selections, Alec and I chatted about small things. Our favorite drinks (scotch for Alec, gin and tonic for me), the movies we liked (dramas), our ideal superpowers (teleportation for Alec, being able to talk to animals for me), and dozens of other things that allowed for sharing without awkward silences.

By the time our drinks arrived, I felt much more relaxed than I'd expected to be. Since my appetite hadn't disappeared after all, I ordered the wild mushroom risotto and Alec ordered something called a tomahawk ribeye.

"Sláinte," Alec said, holding up his glass.

I didn't bother to try the Scots word as I tapped my glass against his. "Cheers."

"Have you been here before?" Alec asked after we'd both taken sips of our drinks.

I shook my head. "I don't have much in the way of free time and waiting for a meal in a restaurant isn't at the top of my list for ways to spend my time."

"Do you order in, then?" he asked. "Or do you harbor a secret knack for the culinary arts?"

He had a way with words.

"I don't know about a knack for cooking, but I do make most of my own meals. This might sound nerdy, but when I was writing up my college budget, I did a lot of research, and one of the biggest ways to save money was with food. Mai – that's the friend I was with at MacLean's – and I had a bet that first semester about who'd spend more on food. I won. And before you ask, the bet wasn't for money. I didn't have to watch a single show with a Kardashian the entire next semester."

"You continue to impress with your fiscal responsibility." He couldn't quite suppress his smile. "As well as your viewing choices."

"What can I say?" I took another sip of my drink. "I prefer my entertainment to be Kardashian-free."

Our appetizer arrived, and we paused the conversation to eat a bit. I'd

been too high-strung to eat much for lunch, and if I didn't get something in my stomach, my drink would go straight to my head. Once I was satisfied that I wasn't going to get anything more than a buzz, I went back to a previous topic.

"When it comes to budgeting, I found that it's easier for me if I have a specific goal. Like a car. I won't be able to buy something brand-new unless I want to pick up some fantastic new debt, but I'll be more than happy with a decent used car."

"New cars depreciate in value drastically as soon as they're bought and become used," he said, wiping the corner of his mouth with his linen napkin. "Buying used is smart, investment-wise. So long as the car is in proper working order, of course."

"Sounds like you know what you're talking about."

He shrugged. "Business degree from the University of Glasgow."

That was a nice bit of personal information, and I was tempted to ask for more. Like how he'd ended up in Seattle, especially since he'd gone to college in Scotland. Had he come for a woman? And what sort of woman would let a man like him go? Unless he'd been the one to walk away. If that was the case, though, why hadn't he gone home after the relationship had ended? Or was it his business that had brought him here? What sort of business attracted a man like Alec? What about his family? Were they here too?

I gave myself a mental shake. We weren't here to get to know the sort of thing that would matter in the future. Small talk. Having fun. Nothing more.

I was struck with the sudden desire to make him laugh. "Was your Maple Laundry car used?"

He nearly choked on his scotch, and I couldn't resist a laugh at his expense. Once he managed to get the liquid down and his throat cleared, he joined me.

"Aye, lass. I bought my *Maybach Landaulet* from a rapper named Jumpin' Jimmy or some such nonsense."

I didn't know if he was kidding or not, but I went with it anyway. "Well, be sure to thank Mr. Jumpin' Jimmy. It's a lovely car."

"Aye, it is." His voice was rough, and it did strange things to my insides.

And it apparently made me bolder. "I've had fun getting familiar with it."

The dancing blue flames in Alec's eyes burned brighter. "I've had fun getting to know you, Lumen."

I loved the way he said my name, and I wondered if it was just the accent, or something more. "I'm glad you think so."

Our meals arrived just then, and we turned our attention to them, eating in relative silence as we occasionally smiled at each other as if we were both in on the same inside joke. The risotto and G&T were delicious, but my stomach was full of butterflies as I thought of what would come next. I had no idea how to approach it, and a phone call to Mai for advice would definitely ruin the mood.

"Do you have any other plans this evening?" he asked me with a casual smoothness.

I answered honestly, if vaguely. "It all depends on how late I'm out."

The corner of his mouth curled up, and I found myself remembering what it had felt like against mine. And wondering what it would feel like to have it on more intimate parts of my body.

"How late are you expecting to stay out?"

I liked that he was presenting me with an opening to end the date here and now, but I didn't want to be the one to spell it out.

"That depends," I said, circling my fingertip over my glass, "if there's a reason you chose this restaurant other than for its steak."

"I hope I wasn't presumptuous," he said.

My heart skipped. "Not at all. But if you were...you've presumed correctly."

He set down his now-empty glass. "Then I'll see to getting us a room."

FOURTEEN

ALEC

WHEN I'D SEEN LUMEN WALKING DOWN THE ROAD THE OTHER DAY, IT HAD felt like fate. I'd never been much of a believer in that sort of thing, but how else could I explain seeing her two completely random times after our awkward first and second meetings?

Logic said that in a city the size of Seattle, with neither her nor I having just moved, the chances of us having that many chance meetings would be phenomenal. I'd almost been tempted to have someone run the numbers.

That or buy a lottery ticket.

What made me even more convinced that some higher power was bringing us together was that before I'd left the house to go on a run that day – an activity I did only rarely in the first place – Theresa had suggested that since she'd be returning to San Ramon on Sunday, I should take advantage of her presence to go out at least once. I'd told her that it wasn't necessary, but then I'd seen Lumen and decided to make one last attempt at asking her out. I'd hardly been able to believe it when she'd accepted.

Then when I'd picked her up, I'd thought for certain that I'd died and gone to heaven. That silky black dress clung to every curve, and my hands itched to follow my gaze. Knowing what she'd feel like only made matters worse.

Her heels were of a sensible height, but they still managed to draw my attention to her legs. The neckline was modest, but Lumen wasn't the sort of woman who needed to flaunt what she had.

I'd appreciated her not asking too many questions, though I did see the interest in her eyes a few times. I'd been clear from the first that I wasn't looking for a relationship. I hadn't been before Keli had left Evanne with me,

and now that I was a single parent to an eight-year-old, I would have even less time and energy to focus on another person who wasn't Evanne. Still, I hadn't wanted to assume that my asking her to dinner with the clarification that I was only interested in having fun meant that we were going to have sex.

I wanted to. Hell, I'd wanted her from the first moment I'd seen her. If anything, the more time I spent with her, the more I wanted her. But I would never presume. I didn't mind needing to ask, however. It may have been old-fashioned of me, but I preferred to be the one taking the lead.

When I returned from speaking to someone about renting the best room they had available, the waitress had come back to inquire about dessert.

"Interested?" I asked Lumen as I sat down.

Her cheeks flushed. "I'd rather not wait."

"Just the bill," I spoke to the waitress but kept my eyes on Lumen.

The waitress set the billfold next to me, but before I could reach for my wallet, Lumen lifted her purse. I reached out and put my hand on hers.

"Please allow me to pay," I said. She looked like she was going to argue, so I appealed to the practical side of her rather than the romantic. "We've talked a little about budgets tonight. Trust that I'm in a better position to pay for the meal than you are, lass."

"Well, you are older..."

I raised an eyebrow, enjoying the sparkle in her eyes.

"Thank you, Alec. I'll name my car after you."

I laughed. Alec the car. This lass was as canty as she was bonnie.

As I waited for the waitress to return with my card, I was struck by the sudden and surprising wish that I'd met Lumen at a different time and a different place. Under different circumstances. A world where I could offer her more of my time and attention. Where the two of us could have more than one night.

But that was wishful thinking, and if there was one thing I knew better than anything else, it was that wishful thinking was pointless.

We didn't have any of that, but we did have time. Time to find out what we could do with what we did have.

As we headed for the elevators, I reached for her hand, lacing my fingers between hers. The gesture had felt natural, the sort of thing that had simply been the right thing to do, and now we were holding hands. I couldn't even remember the last time I'd held a woman's hand.

We were alone in the elevator, but I didn't let go. Instead, I used my free hand to touch her chin and turned her head, tipping it up until I could see her whole beautiful face. Her eyes met mine, big and blue as a clear sky. Her lips parted slightly, as if in anticipation, and my heart thudded against my ribcage. I hadn't wanted anyone like this before.

I didn't want to think about what it meant, so I did the only thing I could think of and covered her mouth with mine. Damn, she tasted good. I'd almost forgotten. For a moment, I felt her surprise and thought she'd push me away, but it took her only a few seconds to turn toward me and lean into the kiss.

Our hands slipped apart, but that was okay because we were touching other places. She grabbed the lapels of my suit jacket, tugging me closer, as if she couldn't get enough of me. I knew how that felt because I couldn't get enough of her. The feel of her lips and the slide of her tongue across mine. Her slender body in my arms. The bare skin of her back as I slid my fingers along her spine.

A moan escaped her, and I pressed her against the elevator wall, letting her feel how much being here with her like this turned me on. My hands slid down her ribs to her hips, and I sank my fingers into her ass. She made a sound I interpreted as something good, and I thought about what it would be like to take my hands lower, feel her soft skin against my palms as I pushed up her dress and...the elevator dinged, and Lumen jerked away.

As much as I didn't want to, I let her go. We barely had time to smooth down our clothes – and me to turn enough to hide my current condition – before the doors slid open. An elderly couple stood on the other side, and I smiled at them. Lumen cleared her throat, and the moment the old man brushed his finger against his mouth, I knew they'd both seen the same thing. As Lumen and I stepped off the elevator, I wiped the back of my hand across my mouth, then looked at it. A streak of lipstick showed up against my skin.

“Sorry,” Lumen said, cheeks blazing.

I wrapped my arm around her waist and pulled her against my side, lowering my mouth to her ear. “I'm not.”

She shivered, but I saw her pupils dilate and her teeth scrape over her bottom lip. She was as turned on as I was. It was going to be difficult to take my time. Not because I didn't want to taste every inch of her gorgeous body, but because I wanted to be buried deep inside her as soon as possible.

But we were only having fun tonight, not dating. Maybe we'd run into each other again, but I couldn't count on having another night with her.

Which meant I wasn't going to rush things.

Still, I was grateful when we reached our room because the things I wanted to do to her weren't appropriate for public places. She went in first, but I caught her around the waist again and pulled her back against me even as I kicked the door closed behind me.

She turned in my arms, and her mouth crashed into mine. My shoes and jacket dropped to the floor as Lumen and I stumbled toward the bed. I vaguely understood that her shoes were gone too when our height difference increased, but I simply tightened my hold and ruined my posture to gain access to her jaw. She moaned, tipping her head back, and I trailed kisses down her elegant neck.

She was as sweet and smooth as honey, just like I remembered. Her lips, her neck, the supple flesh of her back as my fingertips explored it – every inch of her was delectable. I sent a silent prayer of gratitude to whoever had given me another chance to have her.

The back of her legs hit the edge of the bed, and her eyes flew open in surprise. The mood between us shifted, and I could see a hint of anxiety in her eyes. I didn't push her, straightening as I started to undo the buttons on my shirt. I only made it through three before she covered my hands with hers.

Something inside me twisted as I tried to brace myself for rejection. Maybe this time she wouldn't run out without any real explanation, but I couldn't do this again, not when all this was supposed to be fun.

"I want this. I want *you*."

I didn't fully register her words until her fingers moved mine aside and resumed the work of unbuttoning my shirt. She'd sounded sure of herself, but her hands shook, and I was struck with the desire to soothe her.

I wasn't an unfeeling person. I had family members I had taken care of, comforted, in various moments of distress. I'd just never had a woman with whom I didn't share blood stir such a response.

The heat and hunger on her face as she pushed my shirt off my shoulders moved everything that wasn't *want/need/have* to the back of my mind. Even though she'd seen me nearly naked before, she looked at me with wonder, her fingers tracing over my chest and then down my abdomen. I sucked in a breath when she reached the thin trail of hair that began just under my belly button.

"I'm thinkin' yer a wee bit overdressed." The Scot in my words was thick and rough.

She looked up at me from under long, thick lashes. “Do you want to help me with that?”

How could someone be so sensual and still seem so innocent?

“Aye,” I said, my voice low.

I kept my eyes on her face as I slid my hands up her back and just under the straps of her dress, casually inching them to the ends of her shoulders, keeping them on the edge of falling. I waited there, intuitively understanding that if I rushed, she might bolt again.

When she nodded, I slipped the straps of her dress over her shoulders, letting it fall forward to reveal her black silk bra. Fuck it all. Her breasts were perfect, and I was struck with the urge to mark that creamy skin.

Tearing my eyes away from her chest, I focused on her face again. I needed to read what she wrote there, not only to gain permission but to see what she liked. I reached behind her for the strap of her bra, and her nails dug softly into my back.

“Alec,” she breathed.

Without taking my eyes from her face, I pressed my mouth against the top of one swell, then the other. My fingers lingered on the hooks of her bra, waiting to hear the word.

“Yes,” she whispered, head falling back so that her hair brushed against the hand I had splayed in the middle of her back to keep her in place.

It took all of my restraint not to bury my hand in her hair and yank her head back, pulling until it hurt in the best way. Something told me that she’d like the rush that came with a little edge of pain, but not now. I could feel the tension humming under her skin and knew that she wasn’t really in the mood to play.

I eased off her bra, and she breathed out a moan. My free hand ran up her ribcage and cupped her breast.

“Oh...”

“Yer a bonnie lass to be sure,” I murmured the words against her collarbone.

I brushed my thumb across her nipple, and it tightened into a hard, little nub. Lumen’s nails dug into my arm, giving me that hint of pain that I’d been looking to give her. She trembled as I kissed my way lower down, bending uncomfortably until I could run the tip of my tongue across her breast.

“Yes, oh shit yes.”

“More, *mo nighean bhan?*”

“What does that mean?”

“My fair-haired girl,” I said, chuckling. “You bring out the Scot in me.”

She laughed a sweet laugh and pulled me with her onto the mattress. I caught myself on one hand, then dropped to my elbow to put me closer to her. I lowered my head, flicking my tongue back and forth across her nipple until she started writhing. When I wrapped my lips around the peach-colored flesh, she cursed again, arching her back as if attempting to get closer.

She buried her fingers in my hair, and I slid my hand down her body to the only thing she still wore, a pair of the sexiest silk panties I’d ever seen. She gasped as I teased a finger across the waistband.

“Shall I go further?” I asked, smiling against her skin.

“Aye.”

I chuckled as I slipped my hand under soft material, and there was a heat to the sound that had been absent in the past. I let my fingers explore her private flesh, pass over the soft curls and down to the softer, sweeter skin.

“Alec,” she whimpered.

“Let me care for you, lass.”

She nodded, and I let my fingers slide between her lips, down to where she was the wettest. I dipped a finger inside, teased her entrance, then brought the moisture up to the most sensitive place.

“You’re fucking stunning, *mhurninn*,” I found myself saying as I circled her clit gently.

Her voice was breathless. “Don’t be stunned for too long. I’d prefer not to finish this myself.”

I shook my head, keeping up the light pressure on that swelling bundle of nerves. “I don’t know what sort of man you’ve been with before, but that won’t be happening on my watch.”

She shivered as I moved my whole body down, removing my hand even as I hooked my fingers into the elastic at her hips. My eyes met hers as I pulled down her underwear and tossed them over my shoulder. I rested on my heels for a few moments, admiring the view of her slender body, the flush across her cheeks and chest, pointed nipples...Fuck.

I spread her legs, giving her time to protest if this wasn’t what she wanted, but if the eagerness on her face was any indication, she was more than willing for me to make the next move. As if she knew I needed permission, she gave it.

“Yes, please, yes.”

I finally looked down, taking in that beautiful little pussy, already glistening and waiting for me. My mouth watered as I settled between her legs, and then her hands were on my head, scrunching into my hair, and she was not-so-subtly pulling my face toward her pussy.

“Please,” she repeated.

When I opened my mouth and slid my tongue from the bottom of her slit all the way to the top, we both moaned. I wanted to eat her like a creamy dessert. I’d never tasted anything like her. I’d never minded going down on a woman, but this was, somehow, different. I swooped my tongue up along her cleft again in a leftward curve, then again in a rightward curve, spreading her lips before circling her clit with my tongue.

“Your mouth feels *fuhh*-fucking amazing!”

I didn’t raise my head to respond, but she didn’t seem to mind, her fingers tightening in my hair, hips raising up to press her pussy more firmly against my mouth. I gripped her thighs, not to keep her open but to hold her in place as I used my tongue and lips to push her toward orgasm.

My pants were uncomfortably tight as my dick swelled, the scent and taste of her driving me wild. The sounds she made had blood rushing straight to my cock, and I had to push against the bed, desperate for any sort of friction to relieve at least some of the pressure building.

Suddenly, her face contorted into an expression of surprise and something akin to panic, and for a brief, intense moment no sound came from her – no breath, nothing – and I knew the inevitable had arrived.

I sucked on her clit hard, one long pull until, with a great shudder, she fell back against the bedspread and let out a long, throaty moan. I pulled back, giving her respite from the oral assault. I didn’t completely cut off all physical contact though. I stroked her thighs, placed soft kisses until her shivering subsided.

Her fingers released my hair, her hands still trembling, and I pushed myself to my feet, never taking my eyes off her. I could have taken a picture of her right now. She was splayed out on the bed, pussy shining, nipples hard, hair tousled, lips parted, eyes wide, just breathing and basking in the afterglow.

My cock gave an impatient throb, reminding me that, if she was still willing, we weren’t over yet.

I reached into my pocket for my wallet and pulled out a condom. Her eyes immediately snapped to it, and she blinked for the first time in what

seemed like minutes.

“Need a break, or...?” I asked with a smirk, reaching for my belt.

“Yes,” she said right away. Then she rose to her elbows and amended, “I mean, no. I mean...”

I took off my belt and waited for her to finish, hoping she could get to it before my hard-on ripped a hole in my favorite pair of dress pants.

“I...” Her pupils were blown wide, her lips swollen, and she looked undeniably fuckable. “I mean...you...if you could...take it easy...”

“It’ll be a mite tough to ‘take it easy’ when I’m this hard,” I chuckled, pulling down my zipper.

“Please,” she said. “I’m...I’m...”

I hooked my pants and briefs with my thumbs, pausing when the slight edge of anxiety in her voice caught my attention.

I was glad I’d waited when she blurted out, “I’m a virgin.”

FIFTEEN

LUMEN

ALEC STOPPED COLD. “YOU’RE A WHAT?”

Shit. I should have handled that better. Then again, considering that it’d just come flying out of my mouth without a thought, pretty much any way of handling it would’ve been better.

I could see him thinking, trying to decide if he should start putting his clothes back on, and if he’d be able to do it without insulting me in some way. He was also clearly trying to hide the panic in his eyes because he didn’t want to be one of ‘those guys.’

“It’s okay,” I said calmly, wanting to put him at ease. How strange was it that our roles had reversed with just a single question? *Me* reassuring *him*.

“Are you...? I mean...I...Fuck.”

I sat up, resisting the urge to cover myself. If I gave him the slightest hint that I wasn’t all right with what we’d done so far, he’d completely freak out, I had no doubt. And that meant I’d lose the opportunity to do this my way, with the man of my choice.

“Hear me out, please.” I kept my tone even. “I’m not...I mean, it’s not a religious thing or anything weird, or even a big deal, I just haven’t had sex with anyone. But I want to have sex with you. Tonight. Now.”

I didn’t know how I could make it any clearer.

“Fuck, Lumen, I...” He still didn’t seem to know what to say, but he’d at least gotten some color back in his face, which I was fairly certain meant he wasn’t going to have a heart attack.

“I’m not being coerced into anything,” I said with a smile, hoping to ease the negative tension that had overtaken the positive. “I’m an educated, intelligent woman, Alec. I knew where this night would lead. I want to be

here. With you.” A thought occurred to me. Something else he might have been worried about. “I’m not asking anything more of you than I’d agreed to when you asked me out. Fun. This is fun.”

There was something else I could try. Something to convince him that I wasn’t going to run away like I had before.

I placed my hands on my breasts, letting my fingers slide over my nipples, feel how hard they’d gotten from Alec’s hands and mouth.

“What are you doing, lass?”

Damn, I loved that accent. He could read a cookbook, and it’d turn me on.

“Please, Alec,” I breathed as I slid one hand down my stomach to the space between my legs. I was soaking wet, the skin sensitive to the lightest touch. “Don’t make me have to take care of this myself.”

His eyes fell to where my fingers were lightly stroking, and a moment later, I heard the condom wrapper crinkle. I opened my eyes, hardly aware I’d closed them. He tossed the condom onto the bed next to me, his gaze never leaving me, though it roamed across my body as if he couldn’t quite decide where he wanted to look more.

When he began to lower his pants and underwear together, I understood how he felt. I wanted to keep watching his face, seeing all the nuances shift as he watched me touch myself, but I also wanted – *needed* – to see what had been hiding under the towel that day we’d first met.

My eyes dropped, following the trail of fine curls, the deep v-grooves at his hips. He didn’t rush, giving me the time to change my mind, I supposed. I used it to enjoy each inch of skin revealed. Technically, I knew what I’d eventually see. I hadn’t studied anything medical, but I’d taken enough biology to know what a man’s penis looked like, even aroused.

Still, the sight of that thick shaft emerging from beneath his black cotton briefs was enough to make me catch my breath. Thick and long...oh, so long. Much longer than I’d expected, even after remembering how impressive it had appeared under the towel.

Wow.

I hoped it wouldn’t hurt too much.

“Are ye certain this is what you want?” he asked as he stepped out of the last of his clothes.

I didn’t even hesitate. “Yes.”

He smiled, but there was still something...tentative in his expression. “I’ll

go slow. Don't be afraid to tell me if you want me to stop."

It was very sweet that he was so concerned, and it just confirmed for me that I hadn't made a mistake telling him the truth.

"I will. Now, please, don't make me wait any longer." I winked at him. "I'm getting a bit chilly."

He smiled, his expression softening. He leaned over me and reached for the condom. I watched with fascination as he rolled the smooth latex over his erection with a few strokes. It didn't look anything like when my sex ed teacher in high school had put a condom on a banana.

That was definitely *not* a banana.

He crawled over me but didn't touch me, his eyes searching as they met mine. Seeking to erase all doubt of what I wanted, I licked my lips and lifted my head up to kiss him when he got close enough.

It was a soft, slow kiss, full of promise. As he reached for a pillow, his cock brushed my hip, soft and hard at the same time. I let him lead as he lifted me a little by the hip and slid the pillow beneath me. I knew what I wanted, and theoretically, I knew what should happen next, but he was the more experienced one, and I was happy to let him take control.

He brushed his lips across mine, less than a taste, but it sent electricity through me, nonetheless. "One last time, lass, I need to know. Is this what you want?"

I put my hand on his cheek, running my thumb across his cheekbone. A part of me knew that this beautiful, sexy man was actually asking if *he* was what I wanted, but neither of us went there. Instead, I answered only what he'd actually asked.

"I'm sure."

The backs of his fingers ran along my torso as he reached between us, and a moment later, I felt the cool, smooth tip of him nudge my clit. I gasped, my hands automatically going to his leanly muscled arms.

"Relax, Lumen." His voice was low, calming. "I'll make this good for you, *mo nighean bhan*. Trust me."

It should have been silly, a man I barely knew asking me to trust him, but I did.

With my body, at least. He wouldn't hurt me, wouldn't do anything I didn't want him to do. And that's all I was asking for. All we'd agreed to.

And it was all I wanted.

"I do."

He nodded, and a moment later, his cock was lower, easing into me. I let out a shuddering breath as my inner walls expanded to accommodate him. I barely registered the slight, pinching pain I'd expected, instead closing my eyes as new, overwhelming sensations filled me even as he did. The stretch caused a slow, dull ache, painful, but somehow, pleasure zinged through it, overcame it.

I groaned and dug my fingers into his back. He was splitting me in half, and I opened my eyes to see him watching me for signs of pain. As if making sure I was okay was more important than anything he was feeling.

“Keep going,” I begged him. “More. Deeper. Please.”

He complied, sliding farther in, pushing the very breath out of me. My eyes rolled back as my lower abdomen sizzled with complicated feelings I knew I enjoyed, even with the distant throb of pain still underneath. I'd heard people claim that a certain kind of pain could make things more intense rather than destroy the mood, and I'd never understood it until now.

I moaned as Alec stopped moving, completely sheathed inside me, filling me more fully than I'd imagined possible. He held there for several long seconds as the world around us froze. The moment hung there, shimmering as I held my breath, and then he pulled back, giving me a release of tension that allowed me to breathe again. The feeling of that thick shaft moving back was almost as pleasurable as moving forward, the friction making me tingle down to each individual cell.

I pulled his head down for a kiss, needing another connection. He brushed back my hair, then placed his palm on my cheek before covering my mouth with his. I tasted something distinct yet somehow familiar on his lips, and I realized I was tasting myself. It didn't shock me or disgust me, but rather tugged at something deep inside. Something that made me wonder if this intimacy could have been more than the two of us were making it.

Before I could follow that dangerous trail, he broke away from our kiss and pushed himself up again, his weight shifting to his knees. He reached for my face with both hands this time, sliding them down my jaw to my neck, and over my breasts, sending a shiver of pleasure through me. Finally, he stopped at my hips, fingers curling around to hold me tight. His eyes locked with mine as he rocked himself forward again, filling me up faster, harder than he had before.

I moaned the whole way, my toes curling as the tingle at my lower abdomen pulsed outward. He went impossibly deeper before retreating again.

At the third, more insistent stroke, I gasped and wrapped my legs around his waist. The burn of stretching in new ways had dissipated to practically nothing and left me with the desire to have him wholly, in every way I could.

I rolled my hips to meet his thrusts, my body moving in ways I hadn't known it could. Each time he sank into me, the ecstasy pulsed more intensely, as if building to the sort of climax that would leave me sated and boneless.

And it wasn't only pure pleasure. This position, with his size, sent the tip of him a little too deep, giving me a jolt of something that could have been pain if he'd pushed harder or held himself there longer. As it was, he knew exactly how much I could take, how much would make me gasp but not cry.

It should have been impossible for someone who had only known me a short while to be able to make me feel these things, but he did. The realization would most likely leave me self-conscious when we were done, but in this moment, all I felt was gratitude that he knew how to bring my body to wonderful, blissful heights.

As my mind became overwhelmed with conflicting and myriad sensations, I didn't know where to put my hands. I grabbed at the bedspread, but couldn't find a good grip, and this position kept Alec's arms too far out of reach. When I finally made a frustrated sound, slapping my palms against the bed, he grabbed my wrists and pinned them to the mattress above me.

His bodyweight shifted forward, and I cried out. This new position allowed his cock to brush against my clitoris with each stroke, sending a shock of pleasure racing along my nerves, twisting its way through my body until I felt it in my fingers and toes.

And then there was the feeling of his hands on my wrists. Something about relinquishing control heightened things even more, and I squirmed under him, daring him to hold me tighter. Without needing me to say it, he did what I wanted, his grip restricting even more of my movement as he drove into me, all pretense of gentleness gone. His body dancing with mine, chest hair chafing my sensitive nipples, teeth scraping my throat before lips bruised mine.

Everything now was euphoric pleasure, beyond pain, beyond awkwardness, beyond any sort of self-consciousness that could have made me overthink this experience.

"You're going to make me come, lass," he growled into my ear. "So tight and hot and wet, *mhurrinn*."

His words rolled over me, pulled me under into a wave of pleasure that I wasn't quite sure could be called orgasmic, and it only grew when he groaned my name and thrust deep, holding himself over me and in me, body stiffening.

His hips jerked, driving him that last little bit to send a spark of pain threading through my pleasure. I gasped, clinging to him even as my body shook.

It wasn't until he pulled out of me that I realized he'd let go of my wrists. Every inch of me felt like I'd been taken apart and put back together, as if the lightest touch would be too much to handle. And in the background was a new ache, a promise that tomorrow, I would remember this encounter every time I moved.

I didn't regret it though.

I didn't know if I'd actually come again at the end, but it had felt amazing. It wasn't like I had anything else to compare it to, though I suspected I'd compare everything that came after to this moment, second climax or not.

Alec reached over to the bedside table and retrieved a box of tissues. As he handed it to me, he looked like he wanted to ask me something but couldn't figure out how.

I knew what he wanted.

"I'm okay," I reassured him with a smile. "It was amazing."

He smiled back. "It really was." He held my gaze for a moment before looking away. "Um, I'll just..." He got off the bed, and picking up his clothes as he went, walked into the bathroom.

I cleaned myself up with the tissues enough that I didn't feel completely gross, though I would probably want to shower before I went home. Even though Mai would know what I'd done either way – I wasn't looking forward to her interrogation – I would feel less awkward about walking out of here after a shower than I would with Alec's scent all over me.

I hadn't heard the shower running, but when Alec came out of the bathroom, his hair was wet, and he was dressed again. He looked in my direction, but his eyes didn't meet mine.

"I need to go," he said quietly. "I could give you a ride back if you—"

"No, it's okay," I said, reaching for the edge of the bedspread to pull across me. "I can get a cab. I want to get a shower before..."

"Aye, of course," he replied quickly. "Are you...?"

“Yes, I’m fine. Good. Great, really. Is there anything I need to do at checkout?”

“No.” He shook his head. “I’ll see to it you’re not disturbed. The key is on the dresser. Leave it there when you go.” A few seconds of strained silence fell between us before he added, “I had a wonderful time, Lumen.”

“Me too, Alec.”

I almost added that I’d see him around, the sort of generic statement that people made to each other all the time, but as he walked out of the room, I knew it would’ve been a pointless thing to say. This had been fun, but it was done now, and we wouldn’t be seeing each other again.

SIXTEEN

LUMEN

WHEN I'D AGREED TO GO OUT WITH ALEC, KNOWING THAT I'D BE SLEEPING with him, I'd completely forgotten that I'd signed up to take Soleil school shopping the next afternoon, but I was grateful for it.

I'd stayed at the hotel all night, mostly because I would've felt even more awkward leaving in the middle of the night. Well, that and the fact that I really wasn't looking forward to getting the third-degree from Mai. When my phone alarm had woken me up with a reminder of where I had to be at noon, I'd been relieved that I wouldn't need to come up with ways to fill my hours to avoid thinking about the fact that I wasn't a virgin anymore.

Not that I was thinking of it that way, not really. Sex just hadn't occupied much of my thoughts, but on the rare times it had come up, the virginity thing had always hovered around the edges. Now, I was full of new aches that reminded me constantly of what had happened last night, which meant an awareness of what I *wasn't* anymore.

Once I'd picked up Soleil from the group home, however, I'd been able to push thoughts of *him* out of my head and focus on Soleil.

At the moment, the two of us were at an Office Depot, making our way through the busy aisles and taking advantage of the big sales now that school was officially back in session. Soleil was being quiet, as usual, though I hadn't decided yet if she was being contrary or just didn't like to talk.

"Do you want an assortment of colors or just black?" I asked as we wandered into the pen aisle. I carried a basket that was currently empty except for a piece of paper with her shopping list.

Soleil shrugged, seemingly uninterested in any of this, though I sensed it was mostly posturing. A wall put up to prevent anyone from seeing that she

actually cared about getting school supplies. To keep from admitting how embarrassed she was that she was living in a group home and didn't have anyone to take her shopping except a random volunteer.

I'd been there, more times than I cared to think about. At least that meant I knew what to *not* do, namely, nothing. If I addressed the issue directly, she'd just throw up more defenses. No foster kid wanted to be reminded of where they ranked in the scheme of things.

I added some pencils to the basket as well and tried to make some small talk. "This is your last year of middle school, right? Are you excited to move on to high school?"

She shrugged again. "Just want to be done with school, period."

"I hated middle school too," I admitted.

Soleil looked up at me with a curious glint in her eye. Adults weren't supposed to say bad things about school. Especially not adults in my particular career field.

"Aren't you a teacher?" she asked.

I checked the shopping list to see what kind of notebooks her teachers wanted. "I'm an elementary teacher."

"That must suck."

I laughed. "Sometimes, but it's better than teaching middle school."

It was Soleil's turn to laugh. "My teachers all look like they wish they were retired." She picked out a notebook for herself and dropped it in my basket.

A step in the right direction.

I'd always intended to go into elementary education simply because I'd detested my own junior and senior high experiences so much, and I'd never felt like I could relate as well to older kids as well as younger ones. Not in a classroom setting anyway. One-on-one or in small groups like at the group home, I was okay.

"At least you'll be in high school soon," I said.

Soleil's smile vanished. "Is it any better?"

I expected that question was rhetorical, but I wanted to give her an honest answer.

I thought back to my time in high school. I'd had good teachers and had been a good student, so I'd had a better experience than some others. I'd always liked school because it was a chance to pretend I was a normal kid with normal parents. The teachers had, for the most part, treated me that way,

and that had helped when the other students hadn't.

"It can be better," I said. "You can't slack off, and you can't be the moody, sullen teenager, but you can have teachers who'll guide you, believe in you. If you let them, they'll help you find your strengths, find your way."

Maybe I was speaking too candidly with her, but I remembered the way I'd wanted to be treated at her age. The way my best teachers had treated me.

"Everyone at the home says you used to live there," Soleil said nonchalantly, as if this wasn't something she was particularly interested in. "That true?"

I grabbed a binder and put it in the basket without looking at her. "It's true. I was in and out of homes most of my life. I was there for the last year I was in the system."

With the usual tact of a fourteen-year-old, Soleil asked "Why the hell'd you come back? You're not even getting paid."

I turned to look at her, waiting until she raised her eyes to meet mine. She needed to see that I was sincere.

"I've been where you are. I've had people look down their nose at me because of who my parents were, where I lived, the fact that I didn't have a family. I felt like I had to do more, be better, and even then, I always felt like everyone expected me to fail."

I could see the recognition in her eyes and kept going.

"I go back to the home to show you guys that whatever anyone else says is bullshit. You can do whatever you put your mind to." Her eyes widened when I cursed, not because she hadn't heard it before, but because I usually watched my language around the kids. "And I'm there to let you guys know that there are adults you can count on, ones who aren't going to choose drugs or sex or alcohol or whatever over you. If you need me, I will be there."

I held her gaze a moment longer, and then turned away, giving her the chance to process everything. I wasn't going to win her trust with one passionate speech in the middle of an office supply store. I'd put it out there, and now all I could do was be the person I'd promised her I was...and wait.

Soleil dropped a calculator into the basket and shot a glance at me before turning away again. "I heard you teach at a private school for rich kids."

"Yes, something like that," I said.

"Rich kids have everything they could ever want, and they're all going to end up being assholes." The venom in her voice saddened me but didn't surprise me. "You're probably getting paid a lot to teach there too. Sounds to

me like you come back to the home because you feel guilty.”

I wanted to go on the defensive, tell her that she didn't know what she was talking about. She hadn't lived my life and didn't know my mind. But I didn't blurt out the automatic responses that came up in my mind.

I was an adult. Soleil was a child. A scared, angry child who was looking for anything she could possibly find to push people away.

But I'd been where she was. Pushing away anyone who showed compassion for me because I thought they'd just leave me like my parents did. Soleil was afraid, lashing out. I'd said that I was someone she could count on, and she was testing me now, seeing if an accusation would be enough to test my resolve.

I blew out a breath as I reached for a ruler, examining it for a moment before putting it back. I kept my voice calm as I responded to her claims.

“You're right, a lot of rich kids turn out to be horrible adults. Generally speaking, there are two types of people who influence the way people turn out. The parents...and the teachers. I don't have kids, and when I do, they sure won't be rich, which means if I want to change how the next generation of rich adults behave, I have only one other option.”

Sure, I was simplifying things a lot, but Soleil didn't want some complex, psychological reasoning. Matter-of-fact was the best approach.

“If I can show these kids how to empathize with the people less fortunate, the people who have had crap breaks in life, then maybe, when they're adults, they'll remember those lessons.” I pulled the list from the basket and glanced down to see what else she needed. “And I probably don't make as much as you think I do. Trust me, the whole thing about teachers being overpaid is a lie.”

That made her lips twitch. Not quite a smile, but close. Even if she didn't believe anything I said, she wasn't shutting me out completely.

Progress.

SEVENTEEN

ALEC

THERESA HAD GONE BACK HOME ON SUNDAY AFTERNOON AS PLANNED, AND I hadn't complained. I loved my daughter and wanted what was best for her. I just didn't know if I could be that. So, I did what I did whenever I got worried...I scheduled the hell out of everything.

I set aside blocks of time for taking Evanne to school and picking her up, then made sure that I had Tuesday on the pick-up list in case I got caught in a meeting and couldn't make it myself. But I didn't plan on that happening often because I was changing how and where I worked too. During school hours, I'd work in the office, and after school hours, I'd work from home.

I put together a meal plan, budgeted for Tuesday to go on weekly grocery runs, and made calendar alerts for Evanne-related events, such as birthday parties or holidays or school trips. If any surprises happened, my assistant knew she had to be on call to help. I'd been a little worried that adding all of these personal errands would bother her, but Tuesday had taken it all in stride.

By the time I put Evanne down for that night, I thought I had every contingency planned for. I'd even had a great night out to think back on if things got rough. I could do this.

Monday was the trial run. I made omelets for breakfast since they were what Evanne and I usually had. My driver, Barnaby, drove us to the school, where I kissed Evanne and watched her walk to the door – I wouldn't want to embarrass her at her new school – and then Barnaby took me to my office.

The workday seemed ridiculously short when I realized I had to pick Evanne up at three, so I had no choice but to have Tuesday pick Evanne up and bring her to the office in order to give me an extra precious half hour to

get work done. By the time Evanne came into my office, I was ready to take things home.

Being thirty minutes off wasn't bad at all. That was the point of a trial run, after all, to see how things worked and to make necessary changes. Maybe the answer was shorter lunches, to start. Maybe no lunches. I could eat at my desk and work at the same time. It'd probably make me seem even more like an antisocial workaholic, but if it gave me the time I needed to make things perfect with Evanne, I'd take it.

On the positive side of things, I successfully cooked a healthy chicken, rice, and broccoli dinner, and Evanne didn't complain once about eating it despite it not being pizza in any way. After dinner, I caught up on work while she did her assignments and played Nintendo Switch, and we watched a Disney movie together before her bedtime. Then I worked some more, determined to see just how difficult it would be to put in the same number of hours now as I did before I became a full-time dad.

Tuesday morning, I discovered that the answer was 'annoyingly difficult.' In college, I'd often function on two to three hours sleep a night for weeks at a time. In my twenties, I'd had no problem pulling an overnighter. Now, I was sluggish enough that I had to get Barnaby to bring us breakfast. We ate in the car, Evanne savoring her doughnuts while I concentrated more on the massive cup of coffee than on the pastries in the box between us.

With Barnaby driving while we ate, we made up all the lost time, getting her to school in plenty of time. As I usually did when I wasn't the one driving, I worked while Barnaby maneuvered through the traffic, and that put me right on track by the time we arrived at MIRI. Thanks to working during lunch and not having any surprises on my schedule, I finished in just enough time to drive myself to pick up Evanne. The way Tuesday had beamed at me when I'd asked her to forward my calls made me feel like I'd done something extraordinary even though I knew millions of parents juggled work and kids all the time.

Still, I was in a good mood when Evanne got into the car. So good, in fact, that I almost missed the question that came in the middle of her non-stop dialogue about everything she'd done at school that day.

"What was that, *mo chride*?"

"Daddy, are you listening to me?" For an eight-year-old, she certainly knew how to sound stern.

"I'm trying, but you talk really fast," I answered honestly.

She giggled and shook her head like I was being silly. Perhaps to her, I was. Maybe all fathers were silly to little girls.

“I said I need your help on my homework tonight.”

My stomach lurched. “What subject?”

“Social studies. I have to make, um, a line.” She frowned. “That’s not it. Oh! A timeline!”

“A timeline? Of what?” I consciously relaxed my grip on the steering wheel and felt the blood flow back into my fingers.

“Of the Lewis and Clark expedition.”

The Lewis and...? Shit. I’d been around Evanne’s age when we’d left Scotland, and I’d obviously taken all of the required history classes to graduate, but for the life of me, I couldn’t remember anything about Lewis and whoever.

“What part did you need help with?” I asked, hoping I sounded casually interested, the way a good parent would when it came to assisting their child with homework.

“My spelling. And, um, if the dates are right.”

I let out a mental stream of curses and forced the smile to stay on my face.

“I have to write it myself because Ms. Browne says it’s important, but we’re allowed to have our parents check it to make sure it’s right.”

Personally, I had my doubts about how many of the other parents at Kurt Wright were hands-on with their children, but I didn’t intend to craft my parenting to meet the standards of the families at Evanne’s school, no matter how prestigious it was. Occasional help, particularly as I worked things out with my schedule, would be acceptable. Brushing off a homework assignment on someone else because I didn’t want to do it was *not* acceptable.

“After your snack, how about we sit down together and work?” I suggested. “That way, if you have any questions, I’ll be right there to answer them.”

And I’d have my laptop right there too.

It sounded like a good plan in my head, but when we actually settled down to do it, I realized there was something I hadn’t taken into consideration. While it was okay to say that I didn’t remember exactly how long it took a group of early nineteenth century explorers to make it across the Western United States, then use my computer or my phone to look up the

information, that didn't work all the time. My daughter was growing up in a world where it was easy to ask machines to do the legwork, but that didn't mean she could rely on always having that information at her fingertips.

Then there were other things that parents shouldn't have to look up at all.

Things like spelling. Words that were in her book, but I didn't want to even attempt to find.

And how many times could I justify telling her that she needed to look things up herself? When did it cross from building character and work ethic to shutting her out because I didn't want to do it? And how hypocritical was it of me to tell her she needed to learn how to do things herself when the intention behind me making her do it wasn't so that she'd learn that everything wasn't handed to her, but rather to avoid it myself?

All these questions swirled around in my head as I struggled to determine the best course of action. When I wasn't helping her, I couldn't concentrate on my own work because I kept wondering if she was okay, if she'd stop asking me for help when she saw how much I hated it, if she'd think I hated her...

By the time I tucked her into bed, I was more exhausted than she was, but her homework was done.

I couldn't keep doing it this way though. I'd thought I could handle everything the way Keli had, but now I knew that wasn't the case. I could have called Theresa and asked her to come back down and help while I found a tutor, but I couldn't stomach the idea of making my parents disappointed in me.

That just meant I needed to do what I'd always done and figure it out. The first step with that would be to schedule a meeting with Evanne's teacher to get details about what was expected of the students and perhaps even ask for upcoming work so I would have time to do the research myself.

It would cut into my work, but I couldn't see a better option.

I was Evanne's father, and I'd do things right, no matter what it meant for me.

EIGHTEEN

LUMEN

SINCE MY STUDENTS' GYM CLASS TOOK PLACE ON WEDNESDAY AFTERNOONS, I knew I'd have time to enjoy having the room to myself as I did my lesson plans, but just as I'd gotten everything set up the way I liked, my least-favorite person at the school swept inside with his usual arrogant, leering grin. I'd managed to avoid being alone with him since our first meeting, but now I was cornered.

He wore the same slate-gray suit he always seemed to wear, but with a slightly different-colored shirt that was never completely wrinkle-free. His ties were always a little crooked, his face never completely shaven-smooth. I hated the idea of being shallow enough that those things could make me think poorly of him.

Then he opened his mouth, and I remembered that I wasn't superficial after all...and that his inappropriate behavior wasn't an isolated thing.

"Happy hump day, *Mizz Browne*," he said.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Harvey. How may I help you?" I asked.

"Straight to business as always," he laughed, knocking his knuckles against my desk as he got closer.

I reminded myself that it was a bad idea to push my chair away from him. Like out into the hallway away.

"I came to tell you about an email we got from one of your kids' parents."

My stomach sank. I couldn't be getting complaints already, could I? Sure, some of the mothers and fathers I'd met at the open house had seemed a little demanding, but I'd gotten the impression that they weren't patient enough to go through channels. The fact that they'd reached out to the vice principal didn't bode well.

Harvey laughed, holding up his hands, palms out. “Hey, don’t kill the messenger. Criminy, you should see your face! Don’t worry; you’re not in any trouble. I mean, I don’t *think* you are.”

I gritted my teeth and hoped he’d just get on with it.

Fortunately, he did. “Evanne’s father wants to set up a meeting with you Friday after school to go over some things.”

It took a second, but then what he said sank in completely. “Evanne’s *father?*”

Harvey raised an eyebrow. “That a problem?”

I shook my head, confused. “No. It’s just...I thought Evanne’s records showed her mom as having primary custody.”

“Oh, that’s right,” Harvey said, snapping his fingers. “I had Alice check for me before I came here. Primary custody was transferred from Evanne’s mom to her dad. Apparently, it was some last-minute thing, and because it’s the beginning of the year, things got backed-up. Anyway. Four o’clock Friday here work for you?”

I frowned. I’d had no idea any of this was going on with Evanne, and I should have. That sort of thing could seriously fuck with a kid’s head. She certainly seemed as cheerful as ever, but maybe she was just good at hiding how she was really feeling. I’d known a lot of kids who could pretend to be fine and then...not be.

Harvey cleared his throat.

Right. Answering his question.

“Yes, that’s fine,” I said, opening up my planner and scribbling it in. “I’ll meet Mr. McCrae here Friday afternoon at four.”

I was actually feeling better now that I knew it was Evanne’s father who wanted a meeting. Since he now had primary custody and hadn’t been able to make it to the open house, he probably just wanted to meet me. I assumed that’s what an involved parent would do.

“That’s great, Lumen, just terrific,” Harvey went on. “And be sure to make him *happy*, all right?”

Something about his tone made me look up. “What does that mean?”

He chuckled. “Come on. You’re a smart girl. Mr. *McCrae?*” I stared blankly. “Guy’s one of the elites, Lumen.”

“Ms. Browne,” I corrected.

He ignored me. “The McCrae clan is one of the top-dog families in Seattle. You had to know this.”

“I didn’t,” I said tightly.

He grinned and winked at me. “Well, now you do. You don’t have to give him a BJ or anything, but—”

My eyebrows shot up. “*Excuse me?*”

“—just make sure he knows you’re treating his baby girl with utmost care, yeah?”

“Mr. Harvey—”

He kept going as if I hadn’t said a word. “I’m sure I don’t need to tell you how important McCrae is for the prosperity of Kurt Wright. He’s our second-biggest investor.”

He cleared his throat. “Donor, I mean. Right behind the dad who practically runs the NRA. These are guys we want to treat right.”

“Treat right.” I echoed, unable to believe what I was hearing. I had to be misunderstanding. “What does that—”

“You’ll do great, kid. McCrae’ll take one look at you, and he’ll be putty in your hands.” He grinned.

This was pointless. Harvey was a misogynistic lecher who’d never understand why this conversation shouldn’t have even happened. “I’ll take care of it.”

“I know you will. I’m sure you’re great at taking care of people.”

I ground my teeth but said nothing else. I turned back to my planner and hoped he’d take the hint. He chuckled and waved with his fingers before strutting out of the room, clearly pleased with himself.

When I was alone again, I let out a breath and closed my eyes. My head was throbbing, and I pinched the bridge of my nose. This was not a headache I’d wanted to have, especially not this early in the school year.

Friday at four. That gave me two days to put together whatever I thought Mr. McCrae might want.

I could do this.

I went straight home after work, ready to do some decompressing, but when I walked into my apartment, I immediately noticed the kitchen was a mess. And not like a breakfast bowl left in the sink kinda mess either.

“Lu-Lu, that you?” came a voice from the living room.

“It’s me,” I said, frowning at the disaster on the kitchen counters. Now that I was really looking, I could see some pattern to the mess. It looked like various projects – for lack of a better word – had been started and stopped.

Shit.

I put my bags down and walked into the living room. Mai was dressed in her pink housecoat and Pusheen cat slippers, a slimy green moisturizing mask on her face. Her hair was tied back, and she was lounging on the recliner watching TV, a large bowl of mostly-eaten popcorn on her lap.

Definitely *shit*.

“What happened?” I asked immediately.

“I’m watching this *Archie* show,” she said. She glanced up at me, and I saw her eyes were red.

I walked up to the recliner and crouched beside her. “You okay, sweetie?”

“Had a stupid fight with Hob,” she muttered, blinking rapidly.

“Oh, honey,” I said, putting my hands on one of hers. “I’ll order the Chinese.”

She laughed, the sob that had been in her throat escaping with it. “That would be good.”

After I ordered the requisite comfort food and dug out a bottle of wine, I mirrored Mai’s housecoat-slippers-facemask combo, and we were ready for our Netflix marathon. This wasn’t the first time we’d gone through this routine. Whenever Mai had a fight with Hob, it was typically over something inconsequential, which both of them would get over in a day or two. She just needed to get her mind off things for a bit. Pretty soon, we were laughing at the silliness of the show while also becoming completely enamored with the mystery, our stressful days put aside, if not forgotten.

Except there was a family on the show we were watching, a powerful family, that made me think about what Harvey had said about Evanne’s father. I’d never paid much attention to the so-called society pages, but Mai had an obsession for gossip blogs and celebrity lifestyles. Maybe she knew about the McCraes.

“Have you ever heard of the McCrae family?” I asked her as the credits of the current episode ran.

“Of course. They head up the McCrae International Research Institute,” Mai said. “Duh.”

Nice to know she was feeling better. “That sounds familiar...”

“MIRI,” Mai clarified. “They organize huge business and tech conferences all over the world. The company’s worth millions. So’s the McCrae family.”

Right, I *had* heard of them. Among other things, they sponsored the

largest teachers' conferences in Seattle and across the globe.

"There are locations all over the world, but I guess the head guy lives around here. Not that anyone would know it. He pretty much keeps to himself." Mai shrugged. "Why the sudden interest?"

"You know Evanne? The cute kiddo in my class who's going to be a marathon sprinter?"

Mai nodded, draining the last of her wine.

"Her last name's McCrae."

Mai's eyes widened. "Wow. That school really *is* top tier."

"I'm supposed to meet her dad on Friday," I said, sipping my wine. "That dirtbag VP told me to 'make him happy.'"

She wrinkled her nose. "Ew."

"Yeah."

"Well, when you marry Mr. McCrae, maybe the veep will finally leave you alone." Mai winked. "Or better yet, you can buy the school and fire the sleaze's ass."

I snorted. "Let's start the next episode."

"Thought you'd never ask."

Mai unpaused the Netflix auto-play, and we went back to our girls' night. No more thinking about men for the time being.

NINETEEN

ALEC

I'D WAFFLED ON WHETHER OR NOT TO HIRE A REGULAR BABYSITTER FOR Evanne but hadn't yet made up my mind when it was time for my meeting with the infamous Ms. Browne, so I decided to keep her with me for the meeting. It wasn't like we'd be discussing anything Evanne couldn't hear.

After I picked her up from school, we went for a quick bite to eat at a sandwich shop around the corner, and Evanne told me about her day. She was ecstatic for me to meet Ms. Browne, convinced that this was going to be, in her words, "The best day *ever*."

I had to admit, I was a little nervous. While I was generally good with face-to-face meetings, schools had always made me a little...off-kilter.

Not that Evanne had the same problem. The way she kept havoring on about her day was evidence of that. She didn't take after me when it came to talking either, that much was for certain. I'd always been the quiet one, taking my time to say anything.

"Don't talk with your mouth full, and take your time chewing. Don't want you choking."

She smiled, giving me those dimples that melted my heart.

Maybe I *could* do this without hiring help. Granted, getting a part-time nanny would take a lot of pressure off me, but I only wanted the best for her. I mean, I wasn't so uptight as to think I could do a better job than a trained caregiver. I just wanted a strong relationship with my daughter. I wanted to be a good father.

After we finished our sandwiches, I checked my watch. Almost time for the meeting. I could do this. Hell, I'd gotten through college. Visiting a third-grade teacher should be a piece of cake.

“I’m sorry to drag you back to school right after taking you away, *mo chride*,” I said to Evanne.

“It’s okay. I like school,” she assured me. “And I like Ms. Browne.”

“Is that so? You never told me that.” I pressed my lips together to keep from laughing at the indignant expression on my daughter’s face.

“Yes, I did!” She put her hands on her hips, looking the spitting image of her Aunt Maggie.

Well, like Maggie as a kid. My smile faltered, but I forced my big-brother-worry back. I had father-worry to deal with right now.

And I wanted to smile a little while longer. “Doesn’t ring a bell.”

She growled adorably, and I chuckled, the two of us cleaning up our table as Evanne went back over every positive thing she’d ever said about Ms. Browne. When we were back to the school, Evanne showed me the way to her classroom. When we reached it, I knocked on the door, even though it was open.

“Come on in.”

Evanne skipped inside first, clearly without any of the trepidation I was feeling. I took a breath. This wasn’t about me. It was for Evanne. It was about what was best for her. That was all that mattered.

“Hello, Evanne! It’s wonderful to see you again.” The teacher’s voice was low enough that I automatically knew she wasn’t saying the words for me to hear. She truly liked my daughter.

I cleared my throat and stepped into the classroom. The light coming in through the windows blinded me for a moment, but I kept walking forward, not wanting to seem like I was anxious about this meeting.

I was still blinking in an attempt to clear my vision when I held out my hand. “Good afternoon. I’m Alec McCrae.”

“Oh...”

That single, breathy sound twisted something in me, as if preparing me. The moment my vision cleared, I understood.

The clothes were simple and exactly what one would expect of a third-grade teacher, even one this young and attractive. Honey hair pulled back in a sensible ponytail. Flats instead of heels. No makeup I could see.

But it was her.

She was here.

Lumen.

Ms. Browne.

Lumen Browne.

“Glad to meet you,” I fumbled, dropping my hand.

“You too, Mr. McCrae,” she said, wincing as she said my name.

And then we both realized we weren’t alone and looked down at Evanne. She was flicking her eyes between the two of us, her smile fading just a little. She was too smart for her own good.

“Well,” Lumen said, clapping her hands and squeezing them together. “Why don’t you two have a seat, and we can talk?”

“Yes, thank you. Um...” I didn’t know what to call her. *Lumen* made me think of what she’d felt like underneath me. *Ms. Browne* made me think about all the wonderful things my eight-year-old daughter had said.

Trying to meld those two people into the one woman in front of me made me feel vaguely dirty.

Then I realized there was only one chair. It seemed like Lumen had only expected me, not the two of us, and that, for some reason, helped me refocus.

“Go ahead, *mo chride*,” I told Evanne.

“Oh,” said Lumen, “there’s a spare chair over—”

“I’ll get it,” I said, walking over to the nearest desk and pulling the chair out. When I returned to sit beside Evanne, I noticed Lumen’s cheeks were flushed. Mine probably were too. I just hoped my eagle-eyed daughter wouldn’t notice.

“Before we begin,” Lumen said, “I’d just like to say that Evanne has been an excellent student so far.” She gave Evanne a stern look. “Even if she likes to run in the hallways.”

Evanne giggled, and I exhaled. Lumen wasn’t going to let what happened between us affect how she felt about my daughter. The last thing I wanted was to have someone treat Evanne poorly because of their opinion of me.

“She’s not a big fan of walking,” I said, shifting in my seat.

“I’m trying really hard to slow down,” Evanne told us sincerely.

Lumen smiled. “Even if you do need to walk a little slower, you are one of my best students.”

The sincerity in Lumen’s voice left no room for doubt. She meant every word she said, and Evanne was thrilled. I felt a surge of pride even though I doubted I had much to do with my daughter’s academic success. Her temperament wasn’t much like mine, but from what I remembered of my mother and the stories Da told, that part of Evanne’s personality had come from Ma.

“So, Mr. McCrae,” Lumen began.

“You can call me...” I started but then realized she already knew she could call me Alec, which meant she had a reason for her choice. Shit. It was too late not to finish my thought without Evanne asking questions. “...Alec.”

Lumen smiled thinly. “Alec, then. What is it you would like to discuss this afternoon?”

I’d almost forgotten the reason I scheduled the meeting. “I just wanted to chat with you to get a sense of the lesson plans for the school year since I, unfortunately, couldn’t be present for the open house. My mother gave me the basics, but since this is Evanne’s first year here, I want to keep on top of things.”

It was only after the words were out of my mouth that I realized the common American phrase could be taken in a sexual manner. I curled and uncurled my fingers, hoping Lumen didn’t think I was coming on to her. I never would have had sex with her if I’d known she was Evanne’s teacher.

“Of course.” Lumen was keeping her composure rather well, all things considered. “I think I still have some documentation from the open house that Mrs. McCrae didn’t get a chance to pick up.”

I mentally cursed the circumstances that had kept me away that night. I must have seemed like an absentee father, completely disorganized and clueless. Lumen, on the other hand, had everything on her desk cleaned and arranged for maximum efficiency. She barely had to dig around to find the open house documents. I knew how difficult it was to maintain that sort of order and a new admiration of her abilities took root.

“Here we are,” she said, sliding the small bundle over to me. “Feel free to have a look and let me know what else you might be interested in knowing.”

My chest tightened in an all too familiar way as I looked down at the papers in front of me. “I’ll look these over a little later tonight and get back to you then.”

She nodded. “My contact information is on there too, so you don’t have to go through the office if you don’t want to.”

The irony wasn’t lost on me that I now had the information I’d wanted but hadn’t asked her for before because it was supposed to be just a fun date. Nothing more.

“By the way, Evanne,” Lumen continued as if this was just another parent-teacher conference, making me wonder if this was as surreal to her as it was to me. “You did very well on your Lewis and Clark timeline. I just

marked it.”

“Really?”

“Oh, yes. I’m very impressed. You must have worked hard.”

Evanne gave me a little sideways look. “Well, my dad helped a little.”

“That’s okay,” Lumen said, azure eyes sparkling as she stole a glance at me. “It’s good to ask for help when you need it. I know you didn’t cheat because it’s in your handwriting, and there were some rather creative spellings of the word ‘expedition.’”

I cleared my throat and joined the conversation before discussion of prior homework could go any further. “Things are going well? Grades, behavior, everything? Aside from the tendency to run when she should walk, of course.” I winked at Evanne to let her know that while I was serious about her behaving in school, I wasn’t going to yell at her about something as small as rushing.

“Very well.” Lumen kept her eyes on Evanne. “I hope you keep up the good work!”

Evanne looked like she was going to explode from happiness, and some of the pressure in my chest eased. It was a relief to know that the sudden shift in custody hadn’t messed Evanne up. My biggest fear when Keli had told me she was pregnant was that I’d do something to hurt my child.

“Aye, that’s good to hear. Still, there must be places we can improve,” I said.

Lumen nodded, her gaze lightly touching my face before flitting away. “As I noted, spelling sometimes needs another check. I usually encourage parents to spell the word out loud, then have their child repeat it, then write it. Everyone has different learning styles.”

I wondered how much better I would have been in school if I’d had a teacher like Lumen. Then again, if I’d had a teacher like her after I’d discovered how much I liked girls, I probably wouldn’t have gotten any work done at all. She definitely would’ve been a distraction.

“We’ve discussed the running in the halls, but there are other areas where we’ve also been discussing patience. These are always lessons that can be reinforced at home.” Here Lumen sent a gentle but pointed look toward Evanne, who looked down at her hands. “For example, Evanne always wants to be at the front of every line and the first out the door for recess. Do you remember what we said about that?”

“It’s okay to be competitive, but you have to let other people be ahead of

you sometimes,” Evanne recited primly. ““And save the sprinting for the race track.””

Lumen laughed, and Evanne beamed. These two really were getting on well. It was great to see.

“We’ll work on those things,” I said as I reached over to put my hand on Evanne’s head. “Won’t we, *mo chride?*”

“I’ll try my best,” Evanne promised.

This was one issue I had to own. Nearly all of my siblings were competitive, and I was the worst of us all. I knew it was why I was such a workaholic now. I had to be the best, accomplish the most. Not necessarily to show others how much I’d achieved, but to prove to myself what I could do.

“Do you have electronic copies of these files?” I asked. “I find it beneficial to have both electronic and hard copies, so I have backups.”

“Of course,” Lumen said. “I can get your email address from the school files and send that to you right away.”

I reached into my coat pocket and pulled out one of my business cards. “Here’s my card. It has my email on it. If that’s easier.”

My sentence cut off abruptly as I realized I was on the brink of calling her *lass*. I didn’t want to give anyone the wrong idea, including me. We would be seeing plenty of each other over the school year, and I wanted us to be able to talk without either of us feeling weird about it.

Talk about Evanne, of course. That and polite small talk. We didn’t need to have a conversation about anything else. We’d already said everything we needed to say.

And as I smiled at Lumen, and she smiled back, I told myself that was all for the best. For everyone.

TWENTY

LUMEN

THE FIRST MAN I'D EVER SLEPT WITH WAS MY FAVORITE STUDENT'S FATHER.

That sounded like the beginning of a really bad porn flick. Or maybe a really good country song.

It definitely *wasn't* what I'd wanted for a strings-free, fun first time.

Fuck my life.

I was so thrown off by what'd happened that I forgot several of my books at the classroom in my rush to talk to Mai and get some clarity. It wasn't until after we'd talked – and had some serious ice cream – that I'd gone to put away my things and realized that the books I needed were sitting in my desk. Eventually, I was sure I'd know the curriculum enough that the plans would practically write themselves. I was too new to this right now though.

During the bus ride to the school the next day, I had plenty of time to think about everything that'd happened between Alec and me, as well as time to consider the things Mai had said. Her opinion had pretty much boiled down to 'hot, consenting adult, bang him,' but that really hadn't been a surprise. Even after I'd explained to her the complications that came with Alec being the parent of one of my students, she'd been on the Alec bandwagon.

Knowing that my best friend had no issues with this situation didn't do anything to ease the nerves that had been tying into knots since yesterday.

I'd expected to have things I'd need to get used to, a learning curve that I'd adjust to. Everyone did in a new job, and it wasn't any different in teaching. My childhood had given me a bit of an advantage when it came to adapting to new situations, but this situation wasn't anything I would've known to prepare for.

I'd anticipated parents who'd think I was too young, who'd worry about the fact that this was my first year. There'd be some assholes like Cornelius Harvey who'd flirt with me, even with their wives standing right by their sides. Wives who would despise me for being young and pretty. Families who'd treat me like the help if they didn't ask about where I came from, and who'd look at me as something even less if they knew about my past.

I assumed I'd have to wear a polite mask, not take the bait when people were nasty. That was the sort of professionalism I thought I'd be dealing with. Not with an attraction to a parent, and certainly not an attraction to a parent I'd already slept with. Since we'd parted ways under good circumstances, it shouldn't be hard to do. He wasn't pursuing me, and I wasn't pursuing him. As long as we both stayed of the same mind, we'd be fine.

And that wouldn't be a problem because I had my focus in the right place. My job. Not sex. And certainly not on sex with Alec.

Shit.

I got off one stop early because walking seemed like a better idea than sitting and thinking. It was drizzling but not cold, and a surprising number of people were out taking advantage of the mostly pleasant weather. With autumn officially beginning in a couple weeks, Seattle natives always knew to take what they could get.

I'd seen Alec here before, I realized. When I'd been walking from the school to the bus stop, he'd been out running. Even as the thought came to me, I found myself scanning the area for him. It was stupid. Beyond stupid. But I couldn't seem to help myself, not even if the odds were astronomical that we'd happen to see each other again.

Then again, the ways the two of us kept running into each other seemed to defy the odds already.

"Ms. Browne!"

I thought I had to be hearing things, but I looked anyway. Down the sidewalk, I saw a little girl with dark curly hair dressed in blue jeans and sparkling tennis shoes, waving excitedly at me. Beside her was the unmistakable silhouette of her father. As they jogged closer, I could see the awkward expression on Alec's face, and I was struck by the overwhelming desire to put him at ease.

Which meant addressing the daughter rather than the elephant in the...on the sidewalk.

“Good afternoon, Evanne,” I said when she reached me. I gave Alec a professional smile and inclined my head. “And you, Mr. McCrae. I hope you’re having a good Saturday.”

“Daddy, pause the timer!” Evanne ordered. Alec chuckled and clicked something on his watch. “We’re seeing how fast we can run to school from home,” she explained. “So I can run instead of sitting in the car.”

“Are you going to start showing up to class all sweaty then?” I teased her.

From the way she scrunched her face, it seemed she hadn’t considered that. “Well,” she said, still deep in thought, “I can walk to school and run home.”

“Are you passing off the wee sweaty munchkin to me?” Alec joked, his tone light.

“I suppose I am,” I said, surprised by the comment as much as I was by the smile.

“You look good,” Alec said. His cheeks flushed a moment later, and he must have realized how it sounded because he quickly added, “Are you working this weekend?”

“Just picking some things up,” I said, turning to Evanne to avoid the brilliance of her father’s blue eyes. “Good to see you’re running outside instead of inside for a change.”

“I run everywhere!”

“I’m sure that comes as a shock.” Despite the humor in his voice, he held himself stiffly now, his smile practiced rather than genuine.

I mirrored his expression, reminding myself this was the way it had to be. “It does indeed.”

We hummed laughter together, and I wanted nothing more than the ground to devour me.

Shit. I couldn’t deny how much I liked this, standing here, talking to him and to Evanne. How hot he was.

It was completely inappropriate. I was no less drawn to him now that I knew he was my student’s father. Not even with him slightly sweaty and in casual clothes. Not even after I was determined to forget about him. We’d had our night. We’d had our fun. There was no need for anything else.

“I like gym class a lot,” Evanne said suddenly. “Dodgeball is my favorite because I’m so fast no one can hit me, but I always miss when I try to catch the ball, so instead I just run until there’s only one other player left on the other team and then when they throw the ball they miss me so I can pick it up

without having to catch it and then I throw it and sometimes I hit them and win!”

“That sounds exciting,” I said when she finally took a breath.

I loved how enthusiastic she was and hoped she would continue to be that way as the year went on.

“I still miss track and field from second grade at my old school, but Mr. Buchanan says if I keep training to make sure I’m fastest, I’ll be ready in spring. Sometimes we have these slow sports like badminton, and there’s like no running, and I just wish track and field was back already—”

“All right there, *mo chride*,” Alec said, putting his hand on Evanne’s shoulder. “Let’s not take up any more of Ms. Browne’s time, all right?”

“It’s no trouble,” I said honestly. “I always enjoy Evanne’s stories, but I won’t keep you two from setting a new record.”

“Shall we keep moving?” Alec asked his daughter.

She chewed on her lip, hesitating for some reason. Then she said, “Ms. Browne?”

“Yes, Evanne?”

“Can you come for supper at my house today?”

Shit.

Alec’s eyes widened, and his smile flattened. “*Mo chride*, I don’t think—”

“Please? It would be so fun.”

Shit!

“Oh, Evanne,” I stammered. “That sounds...wonderful, but I don’t want to be any trouble.”

“It’s not trouble, right, Daddy?”

She looked up at him, those big blue eyes of hers staring up at him. He rubbed his hand across his cheek. “No, I mean—”

“See, Ms. Browne?” Evanne turned those eyes on me.

“Evanne,” Alec fumbled. “It’s a bit short notice.”

“Please, Daddy? Please, Ms. Browne? I’ll be on my best behavior. I promise.”

Damn. How was I supposed to argue with that? I was good at saying *no* to a group of pleading kids, but this one kid...

I was at a loss for words as I looked at Alec. When I saw a similar expression on his face, I laughed.

“She’s a tough negotiator,” I said.

“Aye, lass. Tell me about it.”

The pet name sent a shiver up my spine even though I knew it wasn't something personal to me. A part of me wanted to ask him if he was putting her up to this, but I knew that it was a bad idea. If he said he had, I'd know that I needed to spend the rest of the year avoiding him. If he said no, I didn't even want to think about how much that would hurt.

"It would be okay, right, Dad? You can make apricot chicken!"

"Maybe Ms. Browne doesn't like chicken," Alec offered.

She frowned. "Why wouldn't she like chicken?"

"Maybe she's a vegetarian." He glanced at me, humor dancing in his eyes.

"What does that mean?"

I had a feeling this was the sort of conversation the two of them often had.

"It means she doesn't eat animals."

"Chicken is an animal?" Her frown turned into wide-eyed surprise as she connected the dots. "Chicken is made from *chickens*?"

"Oh boy," I laughed. "You've done it now."

"But it doesn't have feathers!"

Alec grimaced. "This summer, she found out steak was made from cows and refused to eat it. My recipe list will get smaller and smaller if I have to take chicken off the list."

I was impressed he'd managed to hide the truth of meat for so long. "Guess you're going to have a vegetarian in the family."

Evanne thought about it and said, "No, I like chicken too much. Do you like chicken, Ms. Browne?"

"I do," I admitted before realizing the can of worms I'd just opened.

"Does that mean you can come for dinner?"

I looked to Alec, who shrugged helplessly. "If you're not doing anything," he said. "I mean...we'd be, uh, happy to have you..."

His response surprised me. After the way he'd hurried out of the hotel that night, I'd assumed that his request for a 'fun' date was the way he normally did things. Then I'd found out who he really was and understood why he didn't want to date anyone. Being wealthy and a single father...it had to be difficult. I respected that he'd been honest with me about what he wanted, and now that we knew how we'd be spending the next year, it made complete sense for me to decline and walk away.

And yet, I couldn't bring myself to do it.

“Well,” I said, “if it’s okay with your dad...”

Evanne pumped her fists in the air. “Yes!”

Alec couldn’t hide his grin, and I wondered if he even wanted to. Looking at Evanne, I doubted it. Something told me that he’d do whatever it took to make Evanne smile the way she was now.

“Aye, if you would like to come, it would be fine with me,” he said. “I live about six blocks from here. Would seven o’clock be fine?”

“Seven works,” I said. “Can you send the address to my email? Do you still have it?”

“Aye,” he said, reaching out to take Evanne’s hand again. “I’ll send it to you as soon as the wee’un and I get home.”

“Perfect.” I nodded. “And then I’ll see you at seven.”

Alec nodded, keeping his farewell to a brisk wave as Evanne pulled him down the sidewalk again.

As I watched them go, I wondered if I was making a stupid decision by agreeing to see him...to see *them*. It seemed too personal for what should have been a professional relationship. There should have been distance. Especially after what happened a week ago. And now, it wasn’t just sex and fun and me and him. It was her too, and I didn’t know if that made things better or worse.

Things just seemed to be getting more and more confusing, and I wasn’t sure if they’d clear up any time soon. Or what my world would look like when it was done.

TWENTY-ONE

ALEC

SEVEN WAS LATE FOR US TO BE EATING DINNER, BUT I'D WANTED A LITTLE extra time to wrap my head around what had happened this afternoon. Namely, the fact that the woman I hadn't been able to get out of my mind would soon be sitting in my dining room.

And that it was my daughter who'd invited her here.

The enthusiasm with which Evanne was looking forward to 'Ms. Browne' coming for dinner should have worried me, but I was simply thankful for how well Evanne was adjusting. Keli had always told me that Evanne was doing well in school, since the extent of my involvement in that particular part of her education had been going to her extra-curricular activities and paying the tuition.

I hadn't even blinked when Keli had told me she wanted to move Evanne from the school she'd been attending before. Maybe if I'd paid attention, I would've wondered why Keli had chosen a new school so close to my place.

When the doorbell buzzed right at seven, I allowed Evanne to answer the intercom.

"It's Ms. Browne."

If Lumen was as nervous as I was, she was hiding it well.

Or maybe she wasn't nervous at all.

I didn't like the idea that my presence didn't affect her the way hers did me, but I told myself that it'd be better if this attraction was one-sided. Keeping my distance then would be about respecting her. My don't-take-no-for-an-answer mentality didn't translate into harassing women who weren't interested in me.

"Daddy, can I let her in? Please!!"

I couldn't help but smile. "Aye. And thank you for asking."

Evanne was smart when it came to strangers out in the world, but when she was here, she rarely thought twice about being cautious. In a way, I was glad because I didn't want her to see the world that way, but I also knew that she needed to learn that home was safe because we kept it that way.

I put aside those thoughts for another time. The pile of things I was putting off doing or saying was growing, and I had a bad feeling they'd come back to bite me in the ass.

As Evanne raced to the door, I double-checked to make sure everything was on track to be ready in just a few minutes. At dinner, awkward silences could easily be filled by a meal, and I'd pulled out all the stops on this one.

It was my father's favorite, and out of all of my brothers and sisters, I believed I was the only one who remembered when our mother used to make it. After Da remarried, he made a point of preparing this dinner for us at least every couple months. Bone-in chicken thighs cooked in a pot of apricot jam, onion soup mix, and Russian dressing, served along with some rice, steamed peas and carrots, and a Greek salad with lemon vinaigrette. I added some French bread and pulled out a chardonnay in case she was interested in having a friendly drink with dinner.

"Wow, when you guys have chicken for dinner, you *really* have chicken for dinner."

I glanced over as Evanne led Lumen into the kitchen, hanging from her teacher's hand and hero-worship in her eyes. Lumen smiled, and in the few seconds our eyes met, I wondered if maybe there was something a little more than professional about tonight. Or maybe I was imagining things.

"Nice apron, Mr. McCrae," she said. Her tone was polite, but the twinkle in her eyes said she was joking.

Even though I was wearing a simple light gray button-down and dressy jeans, I hadn't wanted to risk staining my clothes, so I'd put on the only apron I had. A pastel pink one with a unicorn on the front and fancy script stating: *My mom's cooking is better than a unicorn*. Evanne had given it to me for Christmas two years ago. Keli had gotten a matching one because, according to our daughter, we were both better than unicorns.

"Thank you, Ms. Browne," I replied, mimicking her professionalism. "It was a gift from a certain little girl."

Evanne laughed and tugged on Lumen's hand until her teacher bent down. In a child's loud whisper, she said, "Daddy says he only wears

unicorns for me.”

“I see,” Lumen said, her eyes growing wide. “Then you must be a very special girl indeed.”

There wasn’t a hint of insincerity in Lumen’s words, and I realized that I needed to be extra careful tonight or I’d break more of my ‘just fun’ rules. “I’m just about done in the kitchen.”

“Please, take your time. Is there anything I can help with?”

“No, no. Relax. Can I get you something to drink?”

“Water would be fantastic.”

“Sparkling or still?”

She gave me a look like she’d never been asked that question before in her life. “Sparkling?” she said.

I nodded and went to the fridge, hanging my apron up on its usual hook. After I poured her a glass, she thanked me and gave it a quick, surreptitious examination before taking a sip.

I used the time to take in what she was wearing. When we’d met earlier today, she’d been dressed in the casual sort of attire that one wore out in public when doing mundane things. Now, she wore clothes more similar to mine, a dressy casual that could mean anything. Dark blue jeans that showed off her long legs. A simple deep pink blouse that looked great with her coloring and drew attention to her curves, but not in a flashy way.

Something in my stomach turned over at the thought of another man looking at Lumen’s curves, with or without clothes.

Without clothes.

Fuck.

She was going to have sex with another man. Other men. She’d remember me because I’d been her first, but there would be others. Who knew how many? I could probably figure out the number of sexual partners I’d had since I wasn’t the type to wake up next to a stranger and wonder what I’d done the night before.

Shit. She could do that. Go to a bar and find some Neanderthal who’d fuck and forget and wouldn’t understand how lucky—

“I’ll give you the tour!” Evanne shouted, breaking into my thoughts.

Lumen sent me a nervous glance. “Thank you, but I’d rather not intrude.”

“Go ahead,” I said, grateful for the chance to collect myself after the unexpected path my thoughts had taken me. “It’ll give me a minute to get everything set.” I barely registered the possibility that Evanne would show

Lumen my bedroom.

As I brought the food out to the table, I heard Evanne chattering about the house. She proudly talked about her video game scores and how hard I worked in my office and how many books and toys she had and how big the bathtub was, and on and on. Lumen barely got a chance to reply, but I heard her laugh a lot and that did nothing for my resolve to stop thinking about Lumen in ways that could never be.

Focusing on the food helped me get under control so that when I finished, I was able to appear nonchalant when I found them in front of my room, Evanne talking animatedly about how much she used to jump on my bed until her mom told me I couldn't let her do that anymore.

“Daddy says that sometimes Mommy’s rules have to be followed when I’m here, but other ones don’t. Like how he lets me eat breakfast for dinner sometimes even though Mommy says chocolate chip pancakes aren’t a real dinner.” Evanne lowered her voice to a whisper as she took a couple steps into my room. “But sometimes, he still lets me jump on the bed, as long as I don’t tell Mommy.”

Lumen appeared to be torn between embarrassment on my behalf and amusement. When she heard me coming, she blushed, her eyes darting from my face to my feet.

“It’s all right,” I said with a smile. “I know how Evanne likes to overshare things.”

“Daddy, the next time Ms. Browne comes over, can we have breakfast for dinner?” Evanne came running out of my room as soon as she heard my voice.

I glanced at Lumen, wondering what she thought about Evanne’s assumption that there’d be a second dinner, but she wasn’t looking at me.

“Let’s enjoy tonight, all right?” I smoothed my hand over Evanne’s hair.

“The food smells wonderful,” Lumen said as we made our way to the dining room.

“I hope it tastes wonderful,” I responded.

“I’m sure it does,” Lumen said. “Everything is lovely.”

I rubbed the back of my neck, faintly embarrassed. I didn’t have my mother’s china that had been passed down for generations – it was at the family home in San Ramon with my father – but I’d used the nice, matching dinnerware my parents bought for me as a housewarming present rather than whatever random stuff was clean.

Evanne pulled out Lumen's chair for her, something I'd occasionally done for her. She'd always giggled about it, but I hadn't realized how much she'd been paying attention.

"Thank you, Evanne," Lumen said, stifling a laugh.

"You're welcome, Ms. Browne," Evanne replied, the picture of politeness. Her eyes, however, still held that familiar spark of mischief.

"Nice work making me look like a model dad," I teased in a stage whisper. "Remind me to give you a raise."

"Okay," Evanne agreed readily as she took her usual seat. A seat that just happened to be strategically placed between mine and Lumen's.

Once the ladies – *my* ladies, my mind insisted – were settled, I offered Lumen some chardonnay. She accepted and then Evanne started to talk, taking the pressure off Lumen and me to keep up a conversation. I thought about asking Lumen how long she'd been a teacher so that she'd actually have room to speak, but as soon as I thought of the question, I realized I *knew* how long she'd been teaching. She'd only left her massage therapy job a few weeks ago. It'd be insulting to both of us to pretend we didn't have a history.

"Take your time chewing, *mo chride*," I said when there was a break in Evanne's chatter. She'd rushed through the last couple bites so she could keep talking and do it without her mouth full.

She nodded, and I watched her until she was eating at a better pace.

"You have a lovely home," Lumen said during the silence. "Very spacious."

I thanked her and took a sip of my wine.

"What do you, um...do for work?"

The hesitation in her voice suggested she still wasn't sure if she could discuss personal details with me, but if we were going to have a casual parent-teacher relationship, it would be weird not to know anything about each other. Asking about work would be a normal question for a teacher to ask the parent of a student. It was only what had happened between us that made it strange. Besides, knowing more about me might help her teaching style for Evanne.

"I run a business that organizes conferences around the world," I said. "My da came from old money, but he wasn't content to sit back and spend it like his parents. They weren't bad people, but he wanted to do more, even when he was young. He wasn't even twenty when he acquired a small publisher and grew it into the McCrae International Research Institute, one of

the top companies in our field.”

“So you bring people together,” she said.

“Aye, I’m a real matchmaker.”

She smiled. “I knew the company name, but not what you did. It’s good stuff.”

“But not as important as being an educator,” I said, tipping my glass in her direction.

“I’m sure some of the conferences you organize are very educational.”

I chuckled. “I think teaching children the fundamentals of human knowledge is more important than teaching intelligent adults how to excel in their careers. But thank you.”

“You’re too modest, Alec.”

“Thank you, Lumen,” I replied, my voice rougher than I liked. Something about her using my given name made goosebumps roll along the back of my neck.

“Lumen is a pretty name, Ms. Browne,” Evanne interjected.

Before I caught myself, I murmured my agreement. Lumen blushed, and I took a sip of my wine to hide my embarrassment. Dammit, what was I doing?

“Thanks, Evanne. Yours is very pretty too.”

My daughter wrinkled her nose. “I like it, but teachers sometimes think my name is Evan when they first take attendance.”

“Teachers used to call me Lummin,” Lumen said.

“My American teachers often called me Alex.” I joined in the conversation.

“Names are tough,” Lumen laughed. “Give us teachers a break. We try our best.”

“I think you try best,” said Evanne. “And trying hard is important.”

“Aye, it is,” I agreed.

Everyone was smiling, and it was hard to remember that this wasn’t going to be how things always were. It was hard, pushing down the attraction that kept creeping up on me. It was harder when I flashed back to our night together, the taste of her, the sensation of her touch. I wondered if she replayed that night in her mind much as well.

This wasn’t a date, I reminded myself more than once. Evanne was the one who had invited Lumen for dinner, not me. I could innocently enjoy the company of my daughter’s teacher – as long as I didn’t enjoy it *too* much.

We continued with small talk until we finished dinner. Lumen thanked

me graciously for the meal and offered to help clean, but I refused, taking the plates away. “Go ahead and finish your wine. I’ll wash everything later tonight. By which I mean my dishwasher will take care of everything. Spared no expense on *that* little helper.”

She agreed, though she seemed a little uncomfortable with staying at the table while I brought out dessert. Nothing fancy, but rather simple ice cream sundaes. Sundae night had been a tradition for Evanne and me since Evanne was six, and it felt right to share it with Lumen. Despite the name, we always had them on Saturdays since Keli had always picked Evanne up Sunday afternoons before dinner. I hadn’t seen any reason to stop the special treat night just because Evanne was here all the time now.

“I’ve been awfully spoiled tonight,” Lumen declared when she finished.

“You should come over again! All the time,” Evanne said as she worked on her ice cream. She spent the first few minutes swirling it around until it was an even light brown mixture of chocolate sauce and vanilla ice cream, with hazelnuts and Oreo crumbs spread around.

Lumen put two healthy spoonfuls of hot fudge on the vanilla ice cream in her bowl. “Thank you, Evanne, but I really don’t think your dad needs to cook for three all the time, my dear. But as for tonight, it’s getting rather late...”

“Just about bedtime, in fact,” I said to Evanne. She looked forlorn, but I stuck with it. “Finish your dessert and then bed.”

We’d established a bedtime routine when she’d been visiting me and had just transitioned it to a regular thing, so she knew what that meant. Since she’d taken a bath when we’d gotten back from our run, we could skip that tonight.

“Ms. Browne, could you read me a story before bed?” Evanne asked.

“A story?” Lumen laughed. “What kind of story?”

“Something from one of my books. Please? Just for a minute?”

Lumen looked to me helplessly. Evanne’s “please” was a powerful spell. “Well, if your dad says it’s okay...”

“You really don’t have to, lass,” I said, the word slipping out before I could stop it. If I hadn’t been attuned to her so well, I wouldn’t have noticed the sharp intake of air that preceded Lumen speaking.

“I don’t mind, but if it’s...”

“No, no, I mean, you’re more than welcome to...”

“Well...okay, then.”

Our desperate attempts at being polite brought us to an awkward resolution that somehow landed in Evanne's favor. She pumped her fists in the air.

"Bowl in the sink." I pointed at her. "Brush your teeth, put on your pajamas."

With a triumphant yelp, Evanne rushed off to her room at full speed.

"I suppose I can no longer pretend her hallway running wasn't my fault," I said with a sheepish smile. "Are you certain you don't mind reading to her?"

Lumen shook her head, giving me a shy smile. "It's fine, really. She's a sweetheart, and I always enjoy reading time in class."

We must have realized at the same time that we were alone because silence stretched between us as we finished our glasses of wine. Evanne had been our buffer. Without her, we avoided eye contact as long as we could, smiling and exhaling silent laughs through our noses whenever our eyes did meet, only to look away again.

I could see the struggle in her eyes and knew her thoughts were along the same lines as mine. What would a regular parent say to a regular teacher over a casual dinner? What would I talk with her about if we were both men? Or if I had a wife? If she had a husband? A boyfriend? If our first meeting had been at the school and we hadn't had this strange, sensual history between us?

Nothing seemed appropriate. It was all too personal or not personal enough. The tension was palpable.

Too much later, Evanne padded back into the dining room, dressed in her favorite elephant pajamas. "I'm ready, Ms. Browne!" she announced.

"Brushed your teeth?" I asked.

"Yep!"

"She's all yours then." I stood. "I'll clean up down here. Yell if you need me."

Lumen followed Evanne while I gathered up the wine glasses and empty ice cream bowls. As they climbed the stairs, I heard Evanne say, "I want you to read me a *new* book. Daddy always reads me the same three."

I winced with guilt. I'd always made a point of finding her favorite books so she'd have copies here, then memorized them so that we could enjoy them over and over again. When she was younger, she'd loved the repetition. I hadn't realized that had changed.

Trying to shrug off the negativity, I rinsed off all the dishes and put them in the dishwasher, then wiped down the kitchen counters with brisk precision. I hated leaving a mess if it could be helped. When I finished, I found that I didn't quite know what to do next. If I went to the living room, I didn't want Lumen to feel obligated to follow. But if I sat back at the dining room table, she might feel like I'd ambushed her with some sort of parent-teacher meeting.

That was how I ended up leaning against the counter, phone in hand as I checked my email and phone messages, taking the time to respond to a couple. Before I knew it, Lumen was back, her hands clasped in front of her as she walked into the kitchen.

"Out like a light," she said. "I wish I could get to sleep that quickly. Maybe *Fantastic Mr. Fox* isn't as exciting as I thought it was."

I chuckled. "Thanks for getting her situated."

She smiled, that shy curving of her lips that held a wee bit of impishness that I had yet to see fully.

"It's the least I could do after that wonderful meal. And wine. And ice cream."

I grinned back. "I like to treat my guests well."

"It seems so."

Every second seemed to spread out as far as it could go, like a bowstring ready to snap. The air thickened, made it harder to breathe. My pulse thudded unsteadily, and I wondered if she was as affected as I was. My gaze dropped to her mouth, and I remembered what it had been like to kiss her.

She was the stronger one, the one able to finally speak, "I'd better get going."

Even though I nodded, as if agreeing, I kept looking at her mouth. I wasn't ready for her to leave. I knew that the night had to end, that we had to go back to our respective lives, but I wasn't ready yet. I hadn't thought we'd have a second chance, and now that Evanne had gone to bed, that chance was here.

Suddenly, she sighed. "Dammit."

Her eyes blazed as she took two steps...toward me.

My arms reached for her automatically and bringing my mouth to hers felt like the most natural thing in the world. We'd have a price to pay, of that I was certain, but in this moment, all I knew was her.

TWENTY-TWO

LUMEN

THIS WAS A BAD IDEA. A VERY BAD IDEA.

But it felt so good...

Dammit.

I melted into Alec's kiss, for once giving in to what I truly wanted and to hell with the consequences.

And there would be consequences. Of that, I had no doubt.

Right now, I couldn't care about that though. All I could see and feel and taste and smell was him. But it wasn't just those beautiful eyes, so bright that they almost looked unreal, or that sexy lean build. And it certainly wasn't the fact that I now knew how much money he had. Rather, it was the little smiles he made whenever his daughter spoke, the care he'd put into a meal without expectation. It was his humor, his laughter, and the way his accent thickened whenever he was caught off-guard.

Then there was the heat generating between us with each touch. A chemistry that was beyond physical or emotional. I felt it every time I looked at him, and when he touched me, I felt like I'd jump right out of my skin. Or that I'd burn up from the inside out. Because there was no possible way I could hold everything rushing through my body and mind.

I needed this outlet, or I was going to explode.

When Alec broke our kiss, he rested his forehead on mine, his arms still around me, telling me without words that he didn't regret this moment. Not yet anyway. The tension humming through me wasn't thinking that far ahead either. In fact, the only thing I was thinking about was whether or not Alec was single.

He wore no ring. Evanne's mother was listed as Keli Miller, and the

address was different. My tour of Alec's apartment earlier had shown no sign of a wife or girlfriend. No toiletries or other female-related products. If he was married or seeing someone, he was hiding it well.

Now, it was only a matter of sleeping with the parent of a student.

There were no specific rules against it, and I'd read the handbook rather thoroughly. But there was such a thing as an unspoken rule, the sort everyone followed even though it wasn't written down. If I broke such a rule, and the other teachers or faculty of Kurt Wright School found out, it could have some long-reaching consequences.

Then again, it wasn't any of their business. If I didn't say anything, and Alec didn't say anything, no one had to know. This was just a physical attraction. I didn't want a relationship – not yet. Alec had made it clear that he didn't date. Just because we slept together tonight didn't mean we were going back on our 'no strings attached' agreement.

Maybe I was making excuses. It was hard not to when a man like Alec was looking deeply into your eyes to ask your permission to have him do incredible things to you and you knew he could do every single sinful thing.

Excuses or not, I wanted this.

I nodded, and Alec took a step back, reaching for my hand. This wasn't like before at the hotel where we'd been on more or less equal footing. This was his house, the place where he and his daughter had made a home. I was a guest, and not one who'd be carving out a place for herself here. I would treat him with the same respect that he was showing me.

After I'd followed him into his bedroom, he closed the door behind me and flipped the lock. For a split second, my mind lit up with all the stories of women who'd gone somewhere with a man and found themselves locked away.

"Once, when Evanne was around five, I thought she was asleep...at least up until when she surprised me in the shower. She's usually good about knocking, but whenever I want to make sure she doesn't accidentally walk in on me, I lock the door." He gave me an easy smile. "I have intercoms in every room that she can use to find me, and each one has an emergency button for 911." He pointed to a small box by the door. "Easily accessible."

Good to know.

I plucked at the hem of my blouse, wishing that my nerves hadn't required him to reassure me. I'd been with him before, back before either of us had known how connected we were. If he hadn't hurt me then, he

wouldn't do it now that our lives were intertwined.

I refused to admit the possibility that it wasn't physical harm I was worried about. I'd thought him a good man before. Now, I knew how wonderful he truly was.

"You can change your mind, lass." He was suddenly right in front of me, taking my hands in his. "I won't think less of you for it."

I heard what he wasn't saying too. That he wouldn't think less of me for wanting him either. Whatever happened between the two of us tonight would stay right here.

The anticipation was almost too much to bear. Last time, it had been all nervousness and unfamiliar sensations. This time, I knew some of what I liked, and I definitely knew what I wanted.

Him.

"I want you," I whispered, looking up at him from behind my lashes.

The desire I saw on his face made me bold, and I reached behind me to tug down the short zipper that kept my shirt fitted to me. As soon as it sagged, his hands were on the hem, the question in his eyes.

I nodded, and he pulled it up and over, tossing it onto a massive, stuffed armchair that sat in the corner of the room.

"Your turn," I said, reaching for his shirt.

"So beautiful," Alec murmured as he ran the tip of one finger along the edge of my bra.

Goosebumps broke out across my skin, which I thought was strange because absolutely no part of my body was remotely cold. He ducked his head and brushed a kiss across my collarbone, sending a shiver down my spine. Another contradiction.

All of this was a contradiction, I realized.

The heat and chill with their opposite responses.

How eager I was for him to undress but loving the way he built the tension simply by taking his time. Knowing I'd seen these sculpted muscles, had touched them, but still catching my breath like it was the first time.

Then he was naked, one hand wrapped around his already-hard cock, slowly fisting it as he waited. There was a fine line between smug posing and letting me look my fill, and he knew precisely where that line was.

As he placed his hands on the button of my jeans, a thought suddenly occurred to me. "Will Evanne be able to hear us?"

"No, lass." He kissed the corner of my mouth. "Not unless you scream,

that is.”

His hand slid under my panties, the fit of my jeans not giving him much in the way of give, meaning the single digit he managed to wiggle into the hot cleft between my legs rubbed my clit hard enough to make me come right there.

I gasped, grabbing his arm even as my legs gave out. My orgasmic state didn't do anything to dissuade him from proceeding to finger me to a second climax within minutes of the first.

The next thing I knew, I was on my back, staring up at the ceiling and begging for Alec to hurry up and get my pants off. He tossed my jeans and panties to the floor with the rest of our clothes, and as he climbed onto the bed, he turned to the bedside table and pulled a condom packet from the top drawer.

Opening a foil wrapper and rolling on a condom shouldn't have been so damn fascinating, not even when what was being sheathed in latex was as magnificent as that particular piece of flesh. I was struck with the near-overpowering desire to take him in my mouth. The only thing that kept me from sitting up and taking what I wanted was the incessant throbbing between my legs.

He leaned over me and took a nipple between his lips, teasing it with his tongue and sending ripples of pleasure through me. They wrapped around the heat left over from what had come before and filled me with warmth.

“Yes, yes, Alec,” I breathed out.

“Damn, I love the way you say my name.” His lips moved against my skin in a gentle caress. “I don't think I can be patient much longer.”

I opened my eyes. “Then don't.”

He teased the tip of his cock against my clit, moving it back and forth before sliding down to notch against my entrance. There, he paused.

“Last time, did I...did I hurt you?” He put his hand on my cheek, and if I hadn't been struck by the concern on his face, I would've been impressed by how he was holding himself up with one arm.

“No, not really.” I smiled at him. “Now, please, I—”

The rest of the words flew out of my head as he filled me up with one smooth thrust. He groaned, a beautiful sound, one I could listen to all night. As he moved deeper into me, I gasped, my back arching. I wasn't sure how, but I'd forgotten what it had felt like to be this full. It didn't hurt like it had before, but the discomfort certainly tested the limits.

And then he rolled his hips and rubbed against something inside me that sent a lightning bolt through my every cell. “Oh, fffffuck,” I moaned, white sparks going off behind my eyelids. How was he doing this? With only a few steady thrusts, I could swear I was nearing climax. Again. The intensity of what was building inside me wasn’t anything I could’ve imagined.

“Fuck, lass, look at me. Open your eyes.”

I did as he said and found him watching me. The sunset through the window spilled onto us, and I watched him back. The little ripples of muscle movement as he held himself over me, controlling that big powerful body, turned me on even more. All that strength...he could have hurt me, even unintentionally, but he held himself in check.

I didn’t want him to keep anything in reserve. Not now that we were moving so well together. This felt amazing, but I knew he wanted more, and I wanted him to have it.

“Faster,” I pleaded. “Deeper. Don’t hold back.”

He didn’t need to be told twice. He gripped my hips and plunged himself deep enough to hurt, but it was worth it. I moaned, only for Alec to clap his hand over my mouth, the reminder burning in his eyes. His daughter couldn’t know about this, for so many reasons.

He started to lift his hand, but I couldn’t trust myself not to moan. I grabbed his wrist and shook my head, holding his hand in place to keep in all of the sounds I couldn’t quite muffle. What I didn’t expect was the way my body reacted to the mild restraint, and my orgasm caught me off-guard, ripping through me with a force that was almost painful.

“That’s it, lass. Come for me.” Alec’s voice was a low rumble that rolled over my skin.

I could feel the strain in his body as he rode me through my climax, his thrusts becoming more and more erratic until he let out a stream of curses and slammed into me hard enough to make me cry out. He buried his face against me as he came, his breath hot on my skin, and he slumped down, hand falling off my mouth.

I wrapped my arms around him as his weight settled on me. He’d need to dispose of the condom soon, but we could rest here like this for a few minutes anyway. I closed my eyes and enjoyed the blissful silence in my head.

MY EYES SNAPPED OPEN. For a moment, I didn't know where I was or how long it had been since I'd fallen asleep, but then I saw the shape of someone under the blanket next to me and remembered. Alec was on his stomach, head facing away, so I couldn't see if he was awake.

Which made me wonder if I should leave or wait until he woke up. Or if I should wake him up. Or maybe he was awake and just didn't want to face me...shit.

"Alec?" I whispered.

Nothing.

What now? I thought about our night at the hotel and what a hurry he'd been in to get home. Maybe it had been because he'd had Evanne to get home to, even if the child's grandmother had been there to babysit. Or maybe he just didn't like sleeping in hotels. With a bed this comfortable, I wouldn't blame him. But whatever the reason, he hadn't seemed interested in spending the night with me then. He probably wouldn't be now either.

Before I could come to a decision, I heard a familiar buzz coming from the floor where Alec had left my jeans. My phone.

I disengaged myself from Alec as carefully as I could, somehow managing to keep from waking him. By the time I reached my pants, my phone had stopped buzzing, but I still dug it out to see who'd called.

Soleil. I'd given her my number after our shopping trip in case she needed anything else, and considering how late it was, I assumed it was urgent. I called her back.

"So, you *aren't* ignoring me," she said as a greeting.

"What's up, Soleil?"

"Why are you whispering?"

I stepped out of the bedroom and moved down the hall, away from Evanne's room as well.

"It's late," I said to avoid a real answer. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine, I just..."

I could hear reluctance in her voice and gave her a gentle push. "Yes?"

"I went to a party, and I forgot my purse, and I don't really know anyone here, and, well..."

"You need a ride."

She sighed. "Forget it. This was a stupid idea."

"I'll come get you," I said.

"Yeah?"

“Yeah. Give me the address. I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

I didn’t have a car, but I could pay for a Lyft. Especially since I would’ve been paying for one anyway. At least this way, I had an excuse to leave the McCrae house, and neither Soleil nor I would be spending all of our trip alone.

Win-win.

TWENTY-THREE

ALEC

WHEN I WOKE UP IN THE MORNING, LUMEN WAS GONE, BUT THAT WASN'T THE first thing I registered. No, the first thought that popped into my head was a question. Namely, why was I naked?

I never slept in the nude, not even before Evanne was born, but since then, I'd started wearing shorts or lounge pants instead of just underwear. Last night, however, I'd completely skipped the step of putting on my pajamas.

And then I remembered why.

I'd slept with Evanne's teacher. Again.

Before, I'd had the excuse that I hadn't known who she was. This time, I'd done it with full knowledge *and* my daughter in the house. I hadn't planned on it, which was the only reason I didn't feel like a complete scumbag.

I rolled onto my back and sighed. I didn't have long before Evanne would be up, if she wasn't already, and I needed to take a shower. I smelled like Lumen and sex. Not the sort of way I wanted to greet my daughter.

As I got out of bed, my gaze was drawn toward the spot where Lumen had fallen asleep. In one way, I was annoyed that she hadn't said goodbye, but in another, I was relieved that we wouldn't have to have an awkward 'morning after' discussion. The fact that she'd crept out without waking me suggested she understood that our previous conversation about just having fun still applied.

That was a good thing. The last thing I needed right now was more drama.

I turned on the shower, letting it heat up while I brushed my teeth, then let

the hot water work some of the tightness from my shoulders. I needed to come up with a new exercise routine soon, if for no other reason than the fact that sex would be scarce until things with Evanne stabilized.

Not for the first time, I mentally cursed Keli, while at the same time wondering if I could've done something differently. If she'd wanted a different custody agreement, she could have talked to me instead of dropping Evanne off without any warning. I'd always thought we'd gotten along well, especially when it came to parenting.

I pushed aside those thoughts and finished rinsing off. As much as I might have liked to linger here, I knew I had an eight-year-old who'd be waking up soon.

Sure enough, the moment I opened my bedroom door, Evanne sprinted into the room, then did a Tom Cruise worthy slide in her socks across the floorboards.

"Wake up sleepy head!" she shouted. So much for sleeping in on a Sunday.

I winked at her. "I already beat you to it."

"I'm hungry."

"Me too. What are you cooking?"

She planted her fists on her hips. "Daddy..."

I gave her my most serious face. "I think you need to start pulling your weight. Waffles, some freshly-ground coffee for me, and orange juice for both of us. Hurry on now."

Evanne didn't look impressed. "Daddy..."

"Or you could brush your teeth and get dressed, and I'll do the hard work," I offered.

She grinned and zoomed away. Similar banter had been a part of our weekend routine since she was old enough to join in. I didn't see that changing just because she was here more than those couple weekends a month.

Before heading out into the kitchen, however, I stripped the bed to do laundry later. When I got to the kitchen, I saw the pots and pans I'd left soaking in the sink and groaned. I'd thrown all the utensils and plates and glasses in the dishwasher, but not the big stuff. At least I'd be doing the sort of work today that Evanne could join in with. I'd found she preferred helping me with chores to doing her own thing while I was on my laptop.

Following the recipe I found online and using the ingredients Tuesday

had picked up for us at the beginning of last week, I made blueberry waffles and hoped they'd turn out okay.

Once her teeth were brushed, Evanne did laps around the house while I finished up in the kitchen. I had no idea how she could find so much energy this early in the morning. Neither her mother nor I were morning people. Once I made my coffee and downed a cup, though, I was in better shape to keep up with her.

"What do you want to do after we're done with dishes?" I asked as I set a plate of waffles in front of her.

"I want to ride on a fire truck," she said, spooning whipped cream on her waffles. After every spoonful, she'd look at me, waiting for me to nod. When I shook my head, she set the spoon down and attacked the food as if she hadn't eaten in days.

"A fire truck? A wee bit young to start your firefighter career, aren't you? Besides, I thought you wanted to be a marathon sprinter."

"I can do both," she said matter-of-factly. "Ms. Browne said so. There are synergies there."

Synergies? I laughed. She must have been listening to my business calls lately. "Aye. Sprinting helps you to run into a burning building without getting winded and breathing in smoke. Being a firefighter teaches you how to run really fast to get *out* of a burning building. Synergies."

"It was so much fun having Ms. Browne here yesterday," she announced when she'd finished swallowing her bite. She'd apparently taken my instructions about speaking with her mouth full to heart. "She's my favorite, even if she doesn't let me run when I want."

As she chomped into another forkful of waffle, I thought about how much fun *I'd* had last night too, even before we'd headed to my bedroom. Lumen was a delight to talk to and laugh with, and something about the way she interacted with Evanne made me warm in a different way than lust did.

"Aye, she's a special one, all right," I agreed.

Evanne beamed at me. "You really think so?"

I took a bite of waffle and ate it as I tried to decide if this was a conversation I actually wanted to have. "Do I lie to you?"

"Only when you're trying to be funny. And that's not really a lie, is it?"

She had me there. "Does it ever work?"

Evanne held her hand out flat and wiggled it back-and-forth. Where she learned these things, I had no idea.

“Well, I’m not trying to be funny now. Ms. Browne is...”

I tried to think of a good adjective that didn’t sound too...interested. She’d probably share what I said. What would I want Lumen to hear? That I thought she was kind? Beautiful? Funny? Brilliant?

Having her over last night felt good. It felt right. But how could I say that?

Before I could finish my sentence, my phone rang with the ringtone I’d assigned to Keli. For a moment, I had the strangest feeling that she was calling to tell me it wasn’t working out with Alessandro and she wanted to come back to Seattle and put things back the way they’d been before. I didn’t want that to happen, not when it would mean going back to eating dinners at my desk while I worked or eating them here alone.

“Hello, Keli.”

“Hi, Alec,” she said in a soft, hesitant voice. “How are things?”

For a long moment, I was tempted to make her feel bad about leaving the country and her daughter, but that would’ve been just me being petty. It was time to be a grownup. Besides, I wasn’t mad anymore. Quite the opposite. I was grateful, because if Keli hadn’t left, I never would have known what I was missing.

“Not bad, actually. Evanne and I are just having breakfast.”

“Cold pizza?” Keli asked, half-teasing.

I’d given Evanne cold pizza one time for breakfast, and it had become a running joke.

“Waffles,” I clarified. “Blueberry waffles. Which I made myself.”

“Oh, that sounds nice.” Keli sounded distracted, but I wasn’t offended. She didn’t have to make small talk with me. “I actually just called to talk to Evanne, but if you’re having breakfast, I can call back later...”

“Is that Mommy?” Evanne asked, hope lighting her adorable face.

“She’s just finished,” I said into the phone. “One sec.” I looked over at Evanne. No doubt her fingers were covered in syrup. “Wash your hands.”

Keli and I waited in silence as Evanne washed and dried her hands. She was all smiles when she took the phone from me. “Mommy!”

I listened to Evanne’s chatter as I returned to my breakfast.

“It’s going good,” Evanne said into the phone. “I’m getting good marks, and I really like my teacher.” There was a pause, and I could hear the buzz if not the words of Keli talking. “It’s Ms. Browne.” More talking from Keli. “Mhmm! She’s the best. She came over for dinner yesterday. We had so

much fun. She even read me a bedtime story.”
Fucking hell.

TWENTY-FOUR

LUMEN

I TURNED MY PHONE ON AS SOON AS CLASSES ENDED ON MONDAY, HOPING TO see a missed call or a waiting text, but there wasn't anything. Not from Soleil, and not from Alec. The first wasn't really a surprise, but I'd really wanted the second. I slumped into my desk chair and closed my eyes.

Maybe it had been wrong of me to leave without saying anything. Evanne, thankfully, didn't seem to have any idea I'd stayed the night on Saturday. I was just grateful she hadn't told anyone that I'd gone to her place for dinner. Having rumors spread about me spending time with a student and her very wealthy, very single father could be awkward. And it was never going to happen again.

As for Alec, there was no reason for me to have any expectations beyond what had happened. We'd had a good time. No one else had to know about it. And it was silly of me to have spent all day wondering if he planned to contact me again. What was done was done.

And I definitely didn't need to feel guilty for leaving. Soleil had needed me to pick her up, and I needed to build trust with her. She hadn't said much when she'd gotten in the car, probably because we weren't alone, but she'd thanked me on her way out of the Lyft. That had honestly been more than I'd expected.

"Knock knock," Harvey said as he strolled into my classroom without knocking. "Hope you don't nap when you're supposed to be teaching."

I opened my eyes. "What can I do for you, Mr. Harvey?"

He leaned against my desk, garbed in his usual gray suit and crap-eating grin, his proximity too close for my comfort.

"Plenty," he said, giving me the sort of look-over that made me want to

take a shower. “But you don’t want to hear about that. Or...maybe you do.”

“Does another parent want to talk to me?” I asked.

“No idea.” He put a toothpick in his mouth and started chewing on it. “How’d it go with McCrae? You give him the ol’ blonde bombshell routine?”

“The *what* routine?”

He waved it off. “Maybe you just can’t help it. You dress a little frumpy for your age, but you still rock it. Makes us guys use our imagination.”

I bristled, insulted by his description of the way I dressed and repulsed by his admiration. I didn’t even have words for how much I didn’t want to know what was in his imagination. The worst part was, if I called him on it, I knew he’d twist it around to make it seem like I was being too sensitive. After all, he’d only given me a “compliment.”

“The meeting was fine,” I said, resisting the urge to put my jacket on again. My classroom wasn’t hot, but I wasn’t prepared to overheat myself just because this jerk was a pervert. “Mr. McCrae only wanted some information since he missed the open house.”

Harvey hummed, leering at my body as I spoke. I didn’t think he was listening. “Let’s grab sushi tonight. I’ll drive. No need to change.”

“I’m sorry?” I could think of a couple of other words I’d have liked to say instead.

“Don’t be. It’s my treat.” He licked his lips luridly. “We’re both single. Just makes sense. It would be a shame to waste any more time playing coy.”

He was leaning too close to me. I pushed my chair back with my foot, putting a bit more distance between us. “I don’t like sushi.”

“Of course you do.” He made one of those dismissive gestures. “You just haven’t had *good* sushi. I know the best place in town. It’s just like they make it in China.”

“Japan,” I corrected.

He took a step toward me, eliminating the space I’d made between us. “You prefer Japanese? That works for me. Come on, my car’s out front. Primo parking spot, primo car.”

I stood up, straightening myself until we were nearly equal height. “Mr. Harvey, I’m not comfortable—”

“We can get comfortable at my place.” He took another step forward, and I took two backward. His expression tightened, but his smile remained. “Lumen, we’ve been playing this game for weeks. You can stop playing hard to get, and we can carpool back here in the morning. Save the environment

and all that. Everyone wins.”

Any hope I’d had that he would back off if I kept deflecting disappeared.

I was running out of options of how to handle this tactfully, and I honestly wasn’t sure I wanted to anymore.

I could threaten to hurt him if he didn’t back off, but who would believe me? Maybe the other female teachers. But would they defend me, support me by sharing their own experiences? Or would they just protect their own careers and reputations?

This was a private school with wealthy parents who had their fingers in all sorts of pies. And I knew how people like that thought. If I slapped the vice principal of an elite school, he could easily fire me, or charge me with assault. There was little chance anyone would believe a first-time teacher. Especially not if everyone learned how I’d grown up. Foster kids weren’t exactly known for being believed.

“If you really care about the environment, we can share a shower too. You can’t tell me you haven’t thought about it.” He winked at me. “Not with all the signals you’ve been throwing my way. Is it that you want more than sushi? Okay, how about we get wine with dinner. Is that better? Sushi, wine, then back to my place.”

I moved my chair between the two of us as casually as I could and spoke firmly but politely, “I’m not going anywhere with you, and you need to stop asking.”

He planted his hands on the top of the rolling chair, his grin flattening. “I’m your boss, *Lumen*. I tell you what to do, you don’t tell me.” He smiled again. “Hey, this isn’t a threat. I’m not that kind of guy. I’m not an asshole. I’m a nice guy. You know that. After all, I convinced Principal McKenna to give you a shot, you know. One dinner isn’t too much to ask as a *thank you*. Whatever happens after that is entirely up to us.”

He moved the chair out of the way and panic flooded my system. Shit.

“It’s the least you could do after you’ve been winding me up every day. I sit in my office and think about how I want to—”

I really didn’t want to hear the end of that sentence. “I...I have to go.” I picked up my phone and darted around the desk and out of the room.

I thought about going to the principal’s office, but I knew if I came across as frazzled as I felt, instead of supporting my accusations, they’d only make me appear less credible. Just another woman being hysterical.

I needed to get out of there.

Some students were still milling about the hall, waiting for their parents to pick them up, almost all of them goofing around on their cell phones. Teachers chatted as they kept one eye on the kids, and many of them smiled politely at me as I walked past. Everyone was acting normal. Everything was normal, as far as they knew. Hell, as far as I knew, this was how it was here. It would always be this way, and no one cared.

Tears burned my eyes. I was almost at the front doors. Almost free. Almost away from *him*.

As I reached for one of the double doors, one swung inward, and a figure came through. My hands bumped into a firm chest, and I flinched, my racing mind wondering how Mr. Harvey had gotten in front of me and what he would do to me and if anyone would—

“Lumen?”

“Ms. Browne?”

It was Evanne. She was frowning up at me, standing in the doorway next to her father. The father on whose chest my hands currently rested. I immediately jerked them away.

“I forgot my lunchbox,” Evanne said slowly, confusion on her face.

I looked over my shoulder to see Harvey coming out of my classroom. He gave me a cold smile, then turned and walked in the other direction.

“The classroom’s unlocked,” I said, not meeting Alec’s eyes. I couldn’t go back to my classroom right now, not even for Evanne. I needed time to process, and I needed to do it somewhere I could be safe.

I just wasn’t sure where that was anymore.

TWENTY-FIVE

ALEC

“WHAT’S WRONG, LASS?” I ASKED, FIGHTING THE URGE TO TAKE HER IN MY arms, to protect her from whatever had upset her. I couldn’t, for any number of reasons, and I hated every single one of them. “Did something happen?”

“No,” she said, watching Evanne skip down the hall to the classroom. “I’m fine.”

I wouldn’t have believed her even if she hadn’t been actively avoiding looking at me. Still, I had no right to pressure her to tell me anything. She didn’t owe me an explanation, and I wasn’t her boyfriend, father, brother, husband. Hell, I wasn’t even sure I could consider us friends.

Evanne bounced out of the room, swinging her lunchbox. “Got it!” she announced happily.

Now, I was torn. I didn’t want to leave Lumen in this state, but I didn’t have the right to prod her about what was wrong. What I could do, however, was offer her a ride.

“Since we’re here,” I said, stuffing my hands into my pockets so I wouldn’t touch her, “we could give you a lift back home.”

“Yay!” It came as no surprise that Evanne was all for the detour.

Lumen smiled fondly at Evanne, but still didn’t let me see her face. “That’s kind of you, but there’s no need for you to go out of your way.”

I glanced outside and saw the rain that had been threatening all day had begun falling. Pretty soon it was going to be drizzling at best, pouring at worst, and Lumen didn’t have an umbrella that I could see.

“It’s no trouble at all,” I said. “Keeps you from walking in the rain.”

“Daddy’s got a really comfy car,” Evanne said. “You’d like it.”

Lumen’s cheeks flared red, and I cleared my throat, drawing Evanne’s

attention before she could clue in on her teacher's embarrassment.

"We'd better get moving before we get drenched," I said. "I promise you, Ms. Browne, it's no trouble at all. In fact, you'd be saving me from the wrath of my daughter if I let you go and you got sick. I'd never hear the end of it."

There it was, the hint of a smile.

Evanne started running for the car, as if she could outrun the rain. "Come on, Ms. Browne!"

I put up my umbrella even though it was only a few feet to the car. "Please, lass. Let me do this for you."

The words came out far gentler than I'd intended, and her head jerked up in surprise. Her eyes glistened as if she was holding back tears and another wave of protectiveness washed over me, followed quickly by anger toward whoever had made her this upset.

"Thank you," she said quietly as she fell in step next to me.

"My car's just over here," I said, even though she obviously knew which car belonged to me.

She nodded but looked over her shoulder as if she expected someone to be following us. I glanced back but didn't see anyone paying us any attention. Still, I angled my body so I could pull her in front of me if I needed to. Once I found out what was going on with Lumen, I'd need to have a talk with Evanne's principal and find out what sort of shit security the school had if someone could scare a teacher.

Evanne was already in the backseat, beaming from ear to ear. "You can sit in the front seat, Ms. Browne." Lumen looked at me and then looked at the backseat, her expression uncertain. "Or you can sit next to me."

The hope on my daughter's face made me wonder if I'd made a mistake. Her getting attached to a teacher was one thing. Blurring the lines between school and home was something else, and if I wasn't careful, Evanne might very well lock on to Lumen in response to her mother having left.

"Thank you," Lumen said as she took the seat next to Evanne.

"Can you come for dinner again?"

That hadn't taken long.

Lumen chuckled, the sound sincere enough to make me think sitting with one of her favorite students was the best thing for her right now. "I'm not going to make your dad cook for three again."

"I can cook!"

"Aye, is that right?" I asked, pulling the car out of the school gate. "Toast

for supper? Mac and cheese?”

Evanne made a face. “I can follow a recipe, Daddy. It can’t be that hard. Besides, if I cook, you can work.”

“Why don’t I cook?” Lumen suddenly offered. “It would give you a chance to work and give me the chance to repay your kindness.”

“Can she, Dad?” Evanne begged, her hands linked under her chin as she pleaded with me through the reflection of the rearview mirror. “It would be so fun.”

I liked the idea of Lumen in my home again, but I worried that it’d seem like too much. Still, it *would* give me the opportunity to get some work done without needing to keep an ear out for Evanne. Besides, Lumen still seemed shaken by whatever happened at the school. Maybe she just wanted a distraction and denying her that would be a cruel thing to do.

“Aye, all right, if that’s what she wants.”

Once we arrived at the house, Lumen and Evanne did an inventory of the contents of the fridge and cupboards. Since Tuesday had brought the weekly groceries this morning, we were fully stocked, though I wasn’t entirely certain of what we were stocked with. I didn’t want to feel like a recluse while I had a guest over, so I brought my laptop out from my office to work in the dining room. At least, that was the lie I told myself about why I wasn’t in my office.

It had nothing to do with how I couldn’t keep my eyes off my daughter’s teacher.

They settled on pork loin chops, mashed potatoes, and roasted asparagus, broccoli, and cauliflower. Impressive endeavor. I let them do their thing while I worked and listened. Or mostly listened and tried to work while keeping my eyes to myself.

Evanne did most of the talking, as usual, reading different things from the recipe and then returning to her story without missing a beat. Lumen smiled and prepared the meal, adding in little comments here and there. She looked in better spirits, if still a little distracted.

As they worked, the apartment filled with the smell of roasted veggies and pork, and Evanne rambled about how she was okay with eating pigs and chickens but still didn’t like to eat cows because they were too cute. She used to think pigs were cute, too, until one bumped her into a puddle of mud at a farm once. Her story made Lumen laugh, and that was damn good to hear.

“Soup’s on!” Evanne announced after Lumen told her quietly that supper

was ready.

“It smells delicious,” I said, folding up my laptop and putting it away like I’d actually been accomplishing anything. “Thank you, lass.”

Lumen blushed. “It’s the least I can do for all you’ve done for me.”

The food was heavenly, and the first several minutes were spent in silence as the three of us ate. The fact that Evanne wasn’t even trying to get words in between bites was a testament to the quality of the meal.

“Can you read me some *Charlotte’s Web* tonight?” Evanne asked once half of her plate was empty. “Mommy got it for me as a back-to-school present.”

“I thought you didn’t like pigs,” Lumen replied.

“But I like spiders,” Evanne countered

“I’m not sure you’ll be a big fan of this story, then, sweetie,” Lumen said, stifling a laugh.

“Please?”

“You’ve done it now, lass,” I said. “Her secret weapon.”

Evanne stuck out her bottom lip and gave Lumen puppy-dog eyes. She hadn’t seriously tried to use that expression since she was about four or five. Then, about a year ago, she’d learned that she could make most adults laugh with it. Now, she used it to try to get her way by being charming.

She got that from her Uncle Brody.

“Don’t fall for it,” I said, grinning. “You’re not obligated to read anything.”

“You’re seriously able to say no to that face?”

“Rarely. I’m developing an immunity.”

“I guess I’m not that tough. I can stay a little bit later if that’s okay with you?”

I didn’t know how I was going to drive her home if Evanne was in bed, but I’d worry about that later. “No problem. I have a few more things I can do.”

Evanne cheered.

I insisted Lumen leave the dishes for me after supper, but she insisted she and Evanne take care of them. “You got supper and dishes last time. We’ll be even now.”

Maybe she didn’t want to think she owed me anything. Fair enough. There was a time and place for chivalry, and this wasn’t it. My gut told me that whatever had happened to her today had left her with a need to feel like

she had control, had choices.

I stayed at the table as they cleaned up around me, and then Lumen helped Evanne with her homework. I was able to focus a little better on work, but every so often, I'd find myself just listening to them talk. It relaxed me. Made me smile. I told myself I was trying to pick up tips on the best way to assist Evanne in the future, but the truth was, I just enjoyed listening to the two of them together.

Storytime came a little faster than I'd anticipated, but it wasn't surprising. Evanne was eager to be read to, even more than she usually was when I was doing the reading. I made a mental note to ask Lumen for some suggestions for new books. I was just thankful that more and more books were available in audio form.

When I heard Lumen's footsteps on the stairs, I closed my laptop and headed into the living room. I sat down at the end of the couch and used my remote to turn on the massive stereo system that took up half of one of my walls. I went through a couple different albums until I found my favorite. I had varied taste in music, but classic jazz was what I always went to when I needed something to quiet my head.

"I'm starting to think it's my voice that's putting her to sleep."

I chuckled and sat down on the end of the couch. "I don't believe that's it. Once she's tucked in, it doesn't matter what you read. She's out in minutes."

"That's a relief. I won't worry too much about boring my students, then."

She stood in front of me, and I waited for her to sit or say something. When one track moved to the next, I felt safe assuming that she wasn't going to initiate anything, even something as simple as sitting down.

"Have a seat," I said to fill the air.

She hesitated but eventually sat down on the recliner opposite me.

"You looked pretty shaken up earlier," I ventured.

"It was nothing."

I regarded her evenly. "Is that right?"

"I feel like I should be the one on the sofa if you're going to play therapist." She smirked. "We can switch spots if you want."

She was deflecting. "You know you can tell me anything."

"I'll be the therapist then." She cleared her throat and schooled her face into a serious expression. "What can you tell me about your muzzer?"

Her German accent was horrible. I snorted. "Come on, quit goofing around."

“I zee you are avoiding ze kvestion.” She pantomimed writing something in a notebook.

“I’m not the one avoiding questions,” I said with a smile. “All right, lass. But you should know that your German sounds a little French.”

She feigned offense. “*Mein gott.*”

I laughed. I couldn’t help it. Even though I still wanted to know what had upset her earlier, and I fully intended to make certain it never happened again, I let it go for now. I didn’t want anything to disturb what was happening between us.

She started laughing. “Your laugh is hilarious. You should put it on YouTube.”

Still chuckling, I said, “YouTube?”

She grinned and got off the recliner, coming over to sit next to me. “Go to YouTube.”

“If you insist, *fräulein.*”

“You think my German accent is awful?” She laughed as I pulled up the website on my phone. “Yours sounds like you made up a whole new dialect.”

Soon, we were in the YouTube spiral, watching dumb videos and laughing loud enough that I feared we’d wake Evanne. I hadn’t laughed this hard in years, maybe ever. It felt good.

And she felt good beside me.

TWENTY-SIX

LUMEN

ONE MINUTE I WAS SHOWING ALEC A VIDEO WHERE CATS WERE RINGING A bell to get a treat, the two of us shaking with the strain of keeping our laughter from waking Evanne, and the next minute, his mouth was on mine, and I didn't even know which of us had moved first.

It had been less than forty-eight hours since we'd been together last, but it felt like longer. The moment our lips touched, I forgot why this wasn't a good idea. I forgot that I'd come over here to avoid going home and thinking about work. Forgot that if anyone found out about this, it could destroy my career.

When I'd agreed to come over, I'd told myself that it wasn't a date, and I'd learned from the last time. Alec hadn't indicated that he wanted to sleep with me again, and I'd assumed that if he hadn't wanted me to come, he would've told Evanne no. He was the parent, after all.

He buried his hands in my hair, knocking loose the pins I'd used to keep it up during the day. The low growl that vibrated through him brought me back to myself, and the hands that had been clinging to his shirt now pushed him back.

He stopped immediately, letting me go as I'd known he would. He was breathing as heavily as I was, though our kiss hadn't lasted long. Every inch of me thrummed with energy, and I saw my own desire reflected in his eyes. Still, I felt the need to apologize.

"I'm sorry." I pushed my hair back, flushing with embarrassment as I realized what a disaster my hair was right now. "You were so kind to me today, even after I left without a word. That was rude of me. I should have called or texted, or at the very least, left a note—"

He cupped my chin and ran his thumb along my bottom lip, effectively stopping all words and all thoughts that weren't about him touching me.

"You don't owe me an explanation," he said, his eyes lifting from my mouth to meet my gaze. "You don't owe me anything, Lumen. Not for being kind, not for dinner."

What he was saying was so different from what Harvey had said earlier today that it sent a rush of affection through me.

"I want to kiss you again," he continued, "and I want to see where things go from there, but I don't want you to feel any pressure from me. Ever."

I focused on the first part of what he said, not wanting to read too much into *ever*. "Thank you." I waited a beat and then said, "I want you to kiss me, but I still need to apolo—"

He cut off my sentence with a hungry kiss, and everything else disappeared. He wanted me and wanted it to be my decision. That was all I needed to know to choose.

Without breaking the kiss, I swung a leg over his lap and then settled on my knees, the change of position making him tilt his head up to continue stroking his tongue across mine. He groaned, his hands moving to my hips, then down to my knees where my skirt was starting to bunch up. When his fingers slid under the hem, I shivered, then rocked closer to him. His hands slipped higher, burning their way up my legs as he pushed my skirt higher and higher until he cupped my ass.

I gasped as he moved his kiss to my jaw, and I let my head fall back, trusting that he wouldn't let me fall. He pressed his lips to my neck, his mouth hot, surrounded by the lightest brush of stubble.

I buried my hands in his hair and moaned. Alec placed a hand over my mouth, a gentle reminder that Evanne was sleeping upstairs. Now that my skirt wasn't constricting my legs, I slid down his body and settled on his lap, intentionally shifting against the hardness I felt pushing up against his zipper.

He moved his hand to my cheek and covered my mouth again, this time with his. Our lips parted, and our tongues met. I could hear Alec breathing through his nose, hear the need, the animal desire. My hands dropped to his shoulders, then slid down his chest.

As I struggled with the buttons on his shirt, he pulled mine over my head. I made an annoyed sound at the loss of his kiss, but it wasn't gone long. Then he was exploring my torso with strong hands, running them from my hips to shoulder blades to ribs and then over the fabric of my bra. Then under my bra

to squeeze my breasts. When I moaned again, his fingers floated to my lips.

“I know,” I mumbled. But it was hard *not* to moan when his fingers were playing with my nipples, and his teeth were scraping against my collarbone.

It was also hard to concentrate on the task at hand. Damn buttons. Before I’d managed to get even halfway down, he had my bra off and his mouth where his hands had been. My brain went white with a lightning bolt of pleasure that shot straight to my core, making me hot, wet, and aching.

Once again, Alec shushed me with a kiss. I hadn’t even realized I was making sounds until I could hear my own little mewls melting into Alec’s mouth.

Finally, I got Alec’s shirt open, and I leaned back, gliding my hands over the packed muscles of his abdomen, then down to his pants. Just as I got them open, he stood, taking me with him. I let out a surprised yelp, wrapping my legs around his waist.

“Shh,” he said, his shoulders shaking with amusement. “We’re going to go see my office.”

I pulled back far enough to see his face. “And why, Mr. McCrae, are you taking me to see your office?”

“Because once the door is shut, it’s soundproof. Also, the couch is really comfortable.”

“What if Evanne needs you?” I asked as he took us into the spacious room.

“The intercom works in every room.”

That was good enough for me.

He lowered me to my feet, and we watched each other finish undressing, openly admiring each other in a way I wouldn’t have thought possible in such a short amount of time. As I watched, he went around the desk and opened a bottom drawer. He winked at me as he held up a condom packet, and I laughed, loving the humorous glint in his eyes.

“You have condoms in your office?”

“I believe in being prepared.”

He held the condom packet out to me like a question. After a moment’s hesitation, I took the packet from him, tearing it open, and pulling the sticky rubber out. I put it to the head of his cock and tried to roll it down, but for some reason, it wasn’t going. When I realized I had it backward, I blushed.

“I love it when you blush,” Alec murmured.

“I do that a lot.” I looked up at him before turning my attention back to

the task at hand.

“Lucky for me.”

“*Because of you.*”

Alec chuckled, pulling the hairpins out of my hair until it fell around my shoulders. By the time he was done, I was too. I ran my hand down his length and then back up again, enjoying the way it twitched against my palm. I could feel the heat of him through the latex, feel how hard he was. Knowing that I was the reason he was like this was a rush of arousal like nothing else.

He took my hand and led me over to the couch. He sat down first, then put his hands on my hips and pulled me toward him until I was straddling his legs. His cock brushed against the insides of my thighs, and I reached down to hold him steady.

Working together, I eased down onto him, taking him in inch by inch. I could feel his pulse pounding deep inside me as he filled me up. I buried my face against the side of his neck, tasting the salt from his skin on my lips and tongue. The pressure was familiar and welcome, but I still needed a minute for my body to remember that too.

“That’s it, lass,” Alec said softly, his arms going around me. “Whenever you’re ready.”

I nodded, rocking back and forth. Then I pulled my hips up a little before sinking down again, this time tightening around him until he cursed, his fingertips pressing into my back. I raked my nails across his broad shoulders, and he spread his wide fingers over my back, squeezing my body even closer to his chest.

As I moved up and down over his cock, I scraped my teeth over his throat, wanting to mark the tanned skin, wishing I could ask him to mark mine. As far gone as I was, I still had enough common sense to know that would be a bad idea.

I just hoped that bit of intelligence would last through the heat twisting inside me, because this was feeling...explosive. As my lips parted and my breath halted, Alec wrapped an arm around my waist and lifted me higher, then let me sink all the way down to his base.

Fuck, it was almost, *almost* too deep, but he started rubbing against my g-spot with every thrust, and the slight pain of the deep pressure couldn’t keep me from shivering head to toe and biting my lip to keep from screaming, soundproofed walls or not.

The pleasure was building to release. He leaned me back and bent his

head to give him access to my nipples. He ran his tongue around one and then the other, adding more sensations to the ones already threatening to overpower me. Then his teeth latched on, and what I felt crashing into me was too big for me to scream.

“Alec,” I whimpered, “I’m coming...”

He chuckled low in his throat. “I know. Keep going. I’m right behind you, *mhurninn*.”

I’d tipped over an edge I hadn’t known was possible, and then he shuddered underneath me, and I knew he was coming too. We rode the wave together, our bodies clenching and trembling until I couldn’t tell what was my climax and what was his. It stretched out into infinity...

At last, we relaxed, and I slowly slumped forward against Alec’s chest.

“That was...”

“Risky,” I finished.

He huffed a silent laugh. “Aye, a bit. But also incredible.”

Now for the awkward part...

I just hoped he’d let my legs stop shaking before he asked me to leave.

“Stay the night.”

I looked up at him, eyes wide. Shit. He was serious.

“I...can’t,” I said, running a finger down his beautiful jawline.

“Why not?”

I blinked. “Because...” It took me a minute to remember why I couldn’t. “I can’t go into work with the same clothes two days in a row.”

“I have clothes you can borrow,” Alec said. “They’re in the room next to Evanne’s.”

I leveled my eyes at him. “Women’s clothes?”

“It’s not like that.” He smiled. “I have many siblings. Including sisters.”

“Wow. Sisters.”

“I can show you a picture if you’d like.”

“Is that so?” I hoped he could hear the teasing in my voice.

“I can prove it if you really want,” he said, tucking strands of hair behind both of my ears. “I’m sure I have a picture of all of us around here somewhere. Or you could take me at my word that none of my family would mind if you helped yourself.”

I lifted a playful eyebrow. “You’re sure about that, are you?”

“Aye. I mean, this hasn’t happened before, but...”

“Good answer,” I said wryly.

He chuckled. "I'm telling the truth, Lumen."

He did look genuine, but that was only one of the things I knew we had to think about. Things weren't that simple.

"What kind of message would this send to Evanne? And the other teachers might find out. It's a brand-new job, and—"

"I hope it would send the message to my daughter that there is nothing shameful about what we did." He ran a thumb over my bottom lip. "But, I can make certain no one finds out we were together. I will not let anything bad happen."

Exhaustion settled over me. "Are you sure?"

"Lumen, I wouldn't have offered if I didn't mean it."

"All right, then." I ran my fingers through his hair. "I'll stay."

TWENTY-SEVEN

LUMEN

I WOKE UP NEXT TO ALEC AT SIX O’CLOCK SHARP THANKS TO MY BUILT-IN alarm clock. Last night, we’d agreed that I’d be dropped off at school before Evanne woke up, so I’d made a mental note to wake early, but Alec was still sleeping. As I thought about it, I realized I hadn’t seen him set an alarm when we’d moved from his office to his bedroom. I lay in his huge bed watching him and trying to decide what to do. He looked too peaceful to disturb.

How much did I really want to wake him up just so he could call his driver to take me to work early? I could call for my own ride, but if I didn’t wake him up, how weird would it be for me to use his shower, find clothes in the guest room, and then leave?

My stomach rumbled, interrupting my train of thought. I had an hour and a half before I needed to be at school to teach. If Alec’s driver took me there this early, I’d be stuck with a vending machine breakfast or none at all. Or I could get a ride from the school...

I shook my head. It was far too complicated. And for what? To keep Evanne from seeing me here in the morning? Was it really that big of a deal? If Alec didn’t care, should I? He was the parent, not me.

Going in now also meant I’d be alone at the school until everyone else arrived. It wasn’t the solitude that bothered me, but rather the knowledge that Cornelius Harvey was generally the first person to work. If he realized I was there too – which he would unless I turned off the lights in my room and hid – he could easily continue to pursue the conversation from yesterday, and no one would be there to help me if things got out of hand.

Maybe I just wasn’t in a hurry to go back after what’d happened yesterday, or maybe I was just too hungry to think. Either way, I didn’t want

to wake Alec. Instead, I decided I'd make him and Evanne breakfast. All other reasons aside, I thought it might be better for Evanne to find me in the kitchen rather than her father's bed.

I carefully slid out of Alec's enormous bed, watching his face to make sure I wasn't waking him. He twitched and mumbled, but he didn't open his eyes. Good. He hadn't said anything, but intuition told me that he'd been more tired than he looked.

I hadn't gotten out of bed last night, which meant I hadn't put on any clothes. A shower and clean clothes had to come before anything else, no matter how hungry I was.

I wasn't about to walk naked across the hall to the guest room Alec had mentioned before, so I grabbed a t-shirt that was hanging over a nearby chair and pulled it on. It wasn't something I'd feel comfortable wearing in front of anyone, but it covered all the essentials. Still, I peeked out into the hallway to see if Evanne was out and about yet.

It looked like I was in the clear, so I tiptoed to the guest room and slipped inside. I fumbled for the light switch, blinking when I flipped it, and light flooded the room. It was clearly a guest room, but when I opened the closet, I found it full of women's clothes of various styles and sizes. It took a little rummaging around before I found something that I liked that fit me, but once I did, I headed to the attached bathroom and took a quick shower. After that, it was time to get started on breakfast.

Alec's kitchen had all the resources for a nice big meal. Whole grain toast, eggs, bacon, avocado, hash browns, coffee, and orange juice. I hoped he wouldn't mind if I used his food. Or that I'd stayed to make myself at home instead of waking him to get his driver to get me out of there.

I tried to put those negative thoughts out of my mind as I cooked. He'd been the one who'd asked me to stay, and I'd been the one who'd made excuses. He surely wouldn't want me dropped off hours before class began, would he?

The bacon and coffee smelled good enough to relax me, and I forced the "should I or shouldn't I" questions from my brain.

At least until Evanne came sprinting into the kitchen.

"Ms. Browne! You had a sleepover!"

Shit. I hadn't expected Evanne to come down first and alone.

"Good morning, Evanne. How do you like your eggs?" I asked, stalling. I wondered if I should say I decided to drop by this morning and that I didn't

stay the night, but I wasn't sure she'd buy it. Besides, I wasn't a good liar. Especially to kids.

"Sunnyside up," Evanne said. She was still beaming.

"Did you, um, brush your teeth?" I asked. I knew how to deal with kids, but my relationship with Alec made this particular kid different. Well, not a relationship, because we weren't in one of those.

"Not yet," Evanne said, "but I just wanted to smell the bacon." She took a big, exaggerated whiff. "Mmm!"

"You better brush those teeth quickly," I said, "or your OJ will taste funny when breakfast's ready."

She saluted me and dashed off, leaving me laughing. What a cutie.

I was starting on Evanne's eggs when Alec wandered into the kitchen. He'd put on a pair of flannel pants and a t-shirt, both of which looked rumpled enough for him to have slept in. Which, of course, turned my thoughts to what he *had* been wearing when I'd left him in bed. Or, rather, his lack of clothing.

"Oh," he said, a confused expression on his face. "Uh. Hello."

"Good morning," I said, smiling. "I hope it's okay that I made breakfast?"

He looked at the stove like he was in a daze. Then he nodded. "Aye. I mean, yes, it's okay."

Dammit. He was being weird. I shouldn't have stayed. I should have called for a ride and left before he'd woken up like I'd done before

Except...*he'd* asked me to stay the night. He must have wanted me here. Maybe not making his breakfast, but he shouldn't be acting like finding me there was some big shock.

Unless it'd just been the sex talking. I'd heard of declarations of love, marriage proposals, that sort of thing, slipping out during pillow talk, but he hadn't seemed like the sort of person who relinquished enough control to not be absolutely certain of every word that came out of his mouth.

He scratched the back of his head. "Listen, Lumen..."

Before he could finish his thought, Evanne rushed into the room, hair brushed, teeth brushed, and dressed in jeans and a purple t-shirt.

"Done in record time!" she announced. Her hair was a little staticky, and I was pretty sure her shirt was on backward, but her speed was still impressive.

Alec gave Evanne a high five, his smile genuine. "Your shirt needs fixed, *mo chride*. But good effort." Evanne groaned and pulled her arms inside the shirt to turn it around. He looked back over to me, his voice softer as he said,

“I’ll have my eggs scrambled, please.”

“You got it,” I replied, hoping this meant things were back to easy between us.

He avoided my eyes, made an excuse about needing to get dressed and then disappeared.

Or not.

Breakfast would have been quiet if it hadn’t been for Evanne. Occasionally, Alec interrupted her for one reason or another, at least half of which were to remind her not to dawdle. He glanced at me after those reminders, like he was silently assuring me he’d get me to school before the other teachers arrived. I was grateful for his concern, but I was more worried about what he was thinking at the moment. He wasn’t easy to read.

I offered to help with dishes once we were done, but Alec said he’d take care of it later. Better for us to get moving. Soon, we were on the road, back in Alec’s fancy car. Like at the breakfast table, Evanne did most of the talking. Alec only said one thing to me the whole ride, and it was near the end.

“Let’s talk after you’re done with work today.”

He said it quietly enough that Evanne didn’t stop chatting, and he watched the road the whole time, but it was clear he was talking to me. I smiled at him and nodded politely, whether he saw me or not. Inside, my stomach was churning. I had a feeling I knew what he wanted to talk about. Despite our nights together and our dinners, Alec didn’t want a relationship.

Then again, I didn’t either.

I had a plan for my life. I’d known that was the only way I’d get out of the system. Come up with a plan and execute it. Career first, then think about dating. And even then, dating a student’s father was *not* in the cards. I needed to get back on track. I promised myself my relationship with Alec would be professional from here on out.

We arrived at the school early enough that the parking lot was almost empty. No one was outside, which meant no one would see me getting out of this easily identifiable car.

“Oh, honey,” Alec said before I could thank him for the ride. For a second, I thought he was talking to me, but he turned and looked at Evanne. “We forgot your binder, didn’t we?”

Evanne blinked in confusion, whether at the endearment or his statement, I didn’t know. “It was in my backpack.” She opened her bag, but the binder

wasn't there.

"We will need to go back and pick it up," Alec said. "We can let Ms. Browne off now, though."

I hadn't thought about giving Evanne an excuse for not joining me in my classroom early. The teachers who had kids brought them in early. There was no reason for her to think it wouldn't be the same for her. I was glad Alec had thought of something, even if he'd had to take her binder out of her backpack to do it.

"I'll see you in class, Evanne," I said, waving. "Thanks for the ride, Mr. McCrae."

He opened his mouth right away, like he was going to ask me to call him Alec, but he hesitated before speaking. "You're welcome, Ms. Browne."

I got out of the car, feeling a little sick. I didn't know why.

The feeling only got worse the closer I got to the school. I heard Alec turning around and driving away behind me, but I didn't look back. I had my old clothes in a plain canvas bag I'd borrowed from him, and everything else in my regular school bag. The clothes I'd found fit well enough to be taken as mine, so from the outside, I didn't look any different than normal. As long as I could keep a good poker face, I'd be fine.

That didn't help me shake the bad feeling in my stomach.

Which had a lot to do with the reason I'd gone home with Alec in the first place.

Harvey.

I'd nearly forgotten about him during the trip here. But now, I couldn't do anything *but* think about him. A part of me wanted to walk away, but the stronger part knew I had to face him. I still had lesson plan work to do that I didn't get to yesterday, and a lot of my work was still on my desk, but it was more than that. If I ran now, he'd win. He'd think he could bully anyone into giving him whatever he wanted.

No way. My knees were shaking, but I was there.

As I walked inside, one of the custodians waved at me on her way to the custodian's closet, but other than her, the hallway was empty. My heart pounded against my ribcage as I moved toward my classroom, half-convinced I'd find Harvey in there already.

I hoped not. After all, before yesterday, he hadn't been nearly as pushy or aggressive. Maybe yesterday had been a one-off, and after my hasty retreat, he'd gotten the message and would leave me alone.

My stomach continued to churn despite my attempt at positive thinking.

When I finally made it to my classroom, it was still dark inside, and the door was closed, which I took to mean that it was empty. Harvey would've had to be a different kind of twisted to be in there waiting for me.

I slipped inside and shut the door. I had some basic classroom stuff to do at the back of the room, and it would take me at least until a few more teachers were here. If Harvey came looking for me, I hoped that would be enough to discourage him. At least for today.

Now, if only the *other* man in my life could be so easily understood.

Even though I'd made up my mind about my relationship with Alec and distancing myself from him was undoubtedly the right thing to do, I'd enjoyed the time with him these past few days. Even this morning, with him being quiet, it'd still been nice to just have a meal with him and his daughter. Every time he smiled at Evanne, I liked him more.

More than I knew I should.

I just hoped I could stop before meeting with Alec later.

TWENTY-EIGHT

ALEC

BY THE TIME I WENT BACK HOME, DROPPED EVANNE OFF AT HER SCHOOL, AND made it to my office building, my head hadn't cleared up in the slightest. I hadn't really been thinking when I'd asked Lumen to stay the night. The rest of my day would be spent agonizing over what exactly I was going to say to her later today when we had our talk. Because we needed to have it. We couldn't keep doing whatever *this* was that we were doing.

"Good morning, Mr. McCrae," Tuesday said as I stepped off the elevator. She held out a large black ceramic mug with *Best Big Brother* on it.

"How do you always know when to be at the elevator?" I asked. I took a sip of my coffee. Black with a dash of cinnamon. Just how I liked it.

"I can see your car pull up through the office window," she confessed. "If you ever start driving a Honda, you'll be able to sneak up on me."

Tuesday ran me through the morning's updates and reminders as we headed for my office. I nodded at everyone in the halls, smiling politely, but not so politely that they'd stop me to chat. Since I wasn't exactly known for being social, it wasn't uncommon for me.

The MIRI offices had undergone renovations last year, leaving them sleek and modern in order to instill confidence for the new batch of tech-focused industry giants who were looking to start conventions and trade shows of their own. Most of the office was an open floor plan with solid hickory workstations, an industrial-looking roof with long LED lights hanging, a polished concrete floor, and walnut-slatted walls. I'd overseen the remodeling myself.

My office was pretty much the same, but I was always in and out of it, preferring to discuss things with people face-to-face rather than dealing with

inter-office emails and the like. Today, however, I wasn't feeling overly social, so when I reached my office, I thanked Tuesday and requested I not be disturbed unless it was urgent. She nodded at once and left, closing the door behind her.

I drank my coffee in silence as I stared at the Seattle skyline out the window. It had been nice to wake up to someone making me breakfast this morning, even if I had been thrown off by Lumen's presence in my kitchen. In my sister's clothes. Evanne had been ecstatic to have Ms. Browne to talk to over her eggs. For that bit of time, it had almost felt like we were a family, the three of us.

I shook my head. I needed to stop thinking like that immediately. Lumen and I weren't parents, at least not of the same child. The three of us weren't a family. How could I even be thinking that? I barely knew Lumen, and the little I knew wasn't anything important. Why would I ever think that would lead to the three of us being a family?

I hadn't been able to make one with Keli, and Evanne was her biological daughter. The fact that I hadn't wanted to be in a relationship with Keli hadn't helped matters much, of course, but I was daft to think things with Lumen would be different just because we'd had a few good times together.

No, I needed to walk away. I had my daughter to focus on and a huge tech conference to organize. I didn't have the time or resources to try to make something happen with Lumen. It wasn't fair of me to keep letting her cook meals for us and read bedtime stories to my kid and...then spend the night in my bed.

When we first slept together, we'd agreed what we were doing was just fun, but after these past few days, I didn't know if that still applied. I needed to end things before they got out of hand.

She was my daughter's teacher. Nothing more. Someone I would occasionally see at school functions and parent-teacher meetings. I'd only talk to her about Evanne's progress as a student. Nothing else, nothing personal. That was the way it had to be.

The thought left a distaste in my mouth and a pain in my head, neither of which managed to distract me from thinking about how difficult it was going to be to stay away from Lumen. I knew it was the right thing to do for all of us, but not how I'd manage it. Not when all I could think about was how I'd had more genuine fun with Lumen in the short time I'd known her than I'd had with Keli the entire time we'd been together.

When it came to getting advice about this sort of thing, there was only one person I could talk to.

Da answered on the second ring.

“Alec, good mornin’, lad.” His familiar Scottish brogue filled my office, that one sentence giving me a measure of calm. “How’re ye finding full-time fatherhood?”

“Challenging,” I said.

“And ye’ve only the one,” he reminded me with a laugh.

Aye, that was true. I might’ve been a single parent at the moment, but my father had been a parent to five after my mother died. I’d been the oldest at eight, and my only sister – at the time – Maggie, had been less than a year. When he’d met Theresa Carideo, a widow with four children, that had brought us to ten kids when they married. To that, they’d added three of their own, my half-brothers Sean and Xander, and my half-sister, London.

A little over two years after Theresa became my stepmother, her brother and sister-in-law died, making orphans of their three children. Those had been added to our already large family to make us eighteen total, two parents and sixteen kids.

I couldn’t imagine having even one or two more children, let alone that many. And most of us had been a mite more mischievous than my own child.

“Aye, lad, it seems no matter how many, children are always a challenge, even a bonnie lass like yer own.”

“She is something special, all right. I’m getting used to having her around, even if I’ve had to spend less time at the office.” I traced a squiggling scratch that ran across one corner of my desk. Evanne had made it when she was four. I’d brought her to the office during one of my weekends, and she’d tried ‘drawing’ with a pair of scissors before I’d managed to catch her.

I’d nearly had a heart attack when I’d seen her, and I’d never had the courage to tell anyone but my father about it. I kept the scratch to remind me of how close I’d come to hurting my daughter simply because I’d cared more about work than making sure my office was safe for her.

“Time away is good for the soul, Alec. Ya won’t regret putting Evanne before work. MIRI doesna need ya there at all hours.”

While I’d never doubted how much my father loved me, he had always spent a vast amount of time at work. Even after he’d officially retired from MIRI, he’d been unable to stay away completely. I’d inherited my workaholic tendencies from him, but I’d been at it much longer and on my

own. It was a much harder habit to break at my age than it would have been if I'd been younger.

I swallowed thickly. I'd never been good at this sort of talk. "I'm having other...problems, though, Da."

"Spill it, lad."

I told him about Lumen and just about everything that happened between us, including the fact that Lumen was Evanne's teacher. That led into my worries about how she was affecting my work, and how I was worried that it would only get worse.

"I'm not understandin' why this is an issue," he interrupted. "If ya like the lass, take her on a proper date."

I closed my eyes. It was like he wasn't even paying attention. "She's Evanne's teacher, Da. And with that tech conference coming—"

"Don't be daft! Tech conference! I been seein' MIRI's books, including all the employee information. There are at least three people I personally hired who are able to handle that conference." His voice softened. "Take some time off. It doesn't need to be anything crazy. Weekends. Evenings."

"I always take weekends off when Evanne is with me," I countered. I couldn't exactly admit to evenings, since I often spent them on my laptop, but considering my time at the office now lasted only from eight-thirty to two-thirty, I felt like I wasn't spending enough time here to get anything done.

"Take a week off, then. Take Lumen and Evanne to Edinburgh."

"Da, this conference—"

"Will happen even if yer not the only one in control. Ya have good employees, lad. Ya can trust 'em. Don't go thinkin' you'll regret a moment ya spend with yer wee one. And if this Lumen is already cookin' yer meals and readin' Evanne bedtime stories, that's more than just a teacher. Marry that lass, and be quick about it."

I laughed, heat flooding my face. "I think you're getting ahead of yourself, Da. I've known Lumen less than a month. That's shorter than you knew either Ma or Theresa."

I shouldn't have even needed to explain that. Marriage wasn't even on the table. I thought Dad would understand better than anyone my obligations to MIRI. What I did impacted the entire company, and that company was the lifeblood of our family and countless other families who count on a paycheck each month. I couldn't steal away a teacher because I wanted someone to cook dinner and put my kid to bed. Not even if I felt the way I did...

Shite.

No. I didn't *feel* anything but lust and appreciation. Maybe some *like* in there, but nothing more than that.

"It was a joke, Alec," he said, a serious note in his voice. "But maybe it wasn't for you. Yer a grown man, and I cannae tell ya what to do, not even with the company. I put that in yer hands years ago. But I can give ya a piece of advice. Whatever ya decide, ya better make it quick. Life's too short to be wastin' it on regrets."

He was right on all points. Not for the first time, I was grateful for my father.

"Listen, lad, I know ya'll make the best decision for you. But if ya ask me, ya should be spendin' more time with that blonde than the job."

I blinked. "I never said she was blonde."

He laughed. "I can hear it in yer voice."

I chuckled. "Thanks, Da."

"Cheers, son."

He hung up, and I was back to square one. Well, not exactly. Now, I was even *more* conflicted about what to do.

Either I had to make a clean break with Lumen or take the risk and try for a real relationship. If she even *wanted* one.

I was starting to wonder how this talk of ours was going to go.

TWENTY-NINE

LUMEN

MY STRESS LEVELS WERE THROUGH THE ROOF ALL DAY, AND I ONLY HOPED IT hadn't affected my teaching.

I'd been watching the clock all day, counting the seconds from one lesson to the next. This time, it was their approaching gym period. At the moment, the room was quiet since all my students had their heads down for a quiz. Unfortunately, that meant there was nothing to drown out the chaos in my head. I was trying not to think about what would happen after school when Alec arrived.

As the minutes ticked by, one by one, the kids brought their tests to me, and I thanked each of them by name with a smile. Soon all the tests were in, and the bell sounded for gym class. I walked the kids to the gym and then returned to my classroom, my nerves on edge at the prospect of forty minutes alone.

Almost immediately, I started thinking about Evanne's behavior so far today. She'd smiled a lot, even more than usual, but I hadn't spotted her whispering to any of the other students, so I hoped no gossip would spread about her dad and me.

Then again, I couldn't know who she spoke to during recess or special classes like gym and art. The story was probably going to come out sooner or later. That meant I needed to clear things up before the story got out of hand.

Dammit.

I rested my head on one hand and got to marking the tests I'd just received. I needed to focus on work. I'd feel better if I just—

“Knock knock.”

Fuck.

I looked over to Harvey's shit-eating grin and gray suit and tried not to scowl. My stomach flipped, then froze.

Before I could say anything about yesterday, Harvey said, "You got a message from Evan's dad again."

"Evanne," I corrected without thinking, then frowned. "A message?"

"A phone call, actually," Harvey said, reaching my desk. "He wanted us to put you on the phone, but we said you were in class so he'd have to wait, as per school policy. Can't make it too easy on him, am I right?" He winked.

I smiled thinly.

"Anywho," Harvey went on, "he ended up leaving a message. Just to call him if you can. Here, I wrote down his digits."

He held out a sticky note. I peeled it from his fingertips, careful not to touch his hand. I didn't mention that I already had Alec's phone number.

"Thank you for the message, Mr. Harvey," I said as professionally as I could.

It was too much to hope that he'd turn around and leave immediately, accepting the fact that I wasn't interested in him.

"Looks like you're really going above and beyond for this guy."

My heart gave a skipping beat. "What do you mean?"

"Saw you talking to him after school yesterday. The email, the meeting, and now the phone call..."

I waited for him to make an accusation. He was taking his time getting to one. I wanted to come up with a good explanation that wouldn't get me fired, but I was having trouble coming up with something. Being silent seemed like the best idea.

"McCrae is our richest parent," Harvey reminded me. "And that's saying something. McKenna's pleased as punch you're making a special case for the guy."

Principal McKenna knew about this?

Harvey's smirk faded into something ugly. "I'm sure it's all professional, right? After all, it's not against any policy to have the private number of a parent on your private phone. Just remember who you work for. Have a nice afternoon, Lumen."

He turned and strutted out of the room, apparently confident he'd put me in my place. I released my breath even as annoyance crept in. Who did he think he was with all that 'remember who you work for' shit? He sounded like he was watching too many mafia movies, giving me some sort of cryptic

warning or something like that.

I hoped it was just because he was still trying to get in my pants, but I had to consider the fact that he suspected I'd been doing more than having conferences about Evanne.

While there wasn't anything specific in the rules about not dating parents of students, I knew in a place like this, it wouldn't take much for them to find some reason to fire me anyway.

I never should have agreed to dinner with Alec. Not the first time, and definitely not the second. And then to stay for breakfast...

I dropped my face in my hands. I was so stupid.

I looked at the sticky note with Alec's number on it. He wanted me to call him. The clock said gym class was nearly over, so I didn't have time for a whole phone conversation. But putting it off wasn't a good idea either. I decided to send him a text instead.

Hello, this is Ms. Browne. You wanted to speak with me?

It was weird to be so formal with him now, but I didn't want to risk having anything on my phone that wasn't one hundred percent professional. I sent the message and put my phone down, trying to steady my breathing as I returned to marking papers, but my phone buzzed seconds later. It was Alec.

Hi. Evanne has karate after school at five o'clock. Can I pick you up after I drop her off? We can talk then.

I'll be in my classroom until five, I sent back. It was the most professional way I could think to answer his text.

OK see you then

Voice to text, I thought as I read it. That particular program had always driven me crazy how it used all caps for certain things like *OK* instead of *okay*.

At least having time after school would give me more room to mark these tests, since I'd barely gotten two of them done since gym started, but that also meant I'd be alone for over an hour with Harvey stalking the hallways. Ugh.

The bell rang, reminding me that I needed to get them from the gym, which meant I needed to put a smile on and get back in teacher mode. Whatever happened after school, I'd worry about it when the time came. I refused to let my personal troubles affect my students. They were more important than what was going on in my personal life.

THIRTY

ALEC

DESPITE THE FACT THAT TALKING TO DA HADN'T PROVIDED ME WITH THE clear direction I'd wanted, he had reminded me that the only person who expected me to put in insane hours was me. No one would think less of me if I took some time off. No one other than me, of course, because it didn't matter how many times people told me to cut back, I kept pushing myself as if I had something to prove.

The strange thing was, I never expected my employees to sacrifice their relationships, romantic or otherwise, for the company. In my head, I'd always told myself that I worked these crazy hours so they didn't need to, but that had been a half-truth at best. Throwing myself into work was the easiest way to keep relationships at a distance. That reasoning had only grown after things between Keli and me had gone south.

Lumen wasn't Keli. In fact, Lumen wasn't like anyone I'd ever met before. I just needed to figure out what I wanted to do with that information. Even after I'd called and left a message, I hadn't known what my decision was going to be. I'd been a little annoyed when she'd sent me a text in reply, more by the fact that she'd been so formal than anything else, but since I'd gone through the school to contact her, I couldn't really blame her for wanting to make certain the line between us was drawn for anyone who might happen to see her phone. That had probably been the reason why she hadn't called me in the first place.

By the time I had to leave to pick up Evanne, I was feeling fairly confident that today would continue to be a good day. Tuesday went over a few last-minute notes with me on my way out, and I passed along responses for anything on which my team needed confirmation. After Da's reminder of

the quality employees at MIRI, I trusted that they could handle anything else that came up, enough so that I told them not to message me unless the building was on fire.

I pretended not to notice Tuesday staring at me as I exited the building with a smile. It didn't take me long to get to the school, and as I pulled into line, I watched the cars in front of and behind me, noticing for the first time that my car didn't actually stand out from the crowd. It was unique because of what it was, but not because of how much it cost. I hadn't really known what to think about Keli wanting to send Evanne here, but it was nice to know that she wouldn't stand out simply because of who her father was.

It wasn't long before it was my turn, and Evanne was skipping over to me. She got into the passenger seat instead of the back seat this time. She'd been so excited when she'd passed the four feet, eight-inch height rule and had been able to ride without a car seat, but it had only been recently that I'd let her sit in front with me. And then, it was with the seat as far away as possible from the airbags.

The measures it took to keep a kid safe was terrifying.

"Hi, Daddy."

"Hello, *mo chride*. How was school?"

"Fun! We played floor hockey during gym class, and I scored three times."

I pulled out of the pickup zone and left through the school gates. "That's great! And what did you learn in class?"

"I learned that America didn't have any buffalo."

"Really?"

Evanne nodded. "Mmhmm! Positive. Ms. Browne said so. *Buffalo* are only in Africa and Asia. America has *bison*, but some people called them buffalo and made a song about them so now everyone thinks bison are buffalo."

"Is that so? I didn't know that. I think you should tell me something new every day."

"Or Ms. Browne could tell you when she has dinner with us."

I wasn't about to address that before I'd talked to Lumen. Maybe it made me a bit of a coward, but I changed the subject. "Excited for karate?"

Her face lit up. "So excited! My sensei always makes us run laps as training."

I shot her a glance. "Do you keep up with the others?"

She narrowed her eyes at me. “Daddy...”

“What?” I widened my eyes and tried to look innocent. “Are you fast?”

“I’m the fastest kid in my class!”

I hadn’t known an eight-year-old could look scandalized.

“Are you?”

She rolled her eyes. “Yes! You’re being silly.”

I shook my head. “Not me.”

“Uh huh.”

“Nuh-uh.”

Soon, she was giggling. “You’re funny today, Daddy.”

I stuck out my tongue, making a funny face, hoping for another beautiful laugh. “Aren’t I always funny?”

“No. You’re usually quiet.”

I’d always been a quiet kid, the serious one. Responsible, hard-working, all the things that made me a good businessman. Evanne was the opposite, so it was no surprise that she thought I was quiet. Something about her thinking that about me, though, bothered me. I didn’t want serious and quiet to turn into her thinking I wasn’t open to her.

“Well,” I considered my words carefully, “I like to spend a lot of time in my head. But I promise to work at talking to you more. Deal?”

She nodded, unaware of how much of what I’d said I’d taken to heart. I wasn’t going to put that on her, though, so I asked her more about her day, and we were still talking about it when we arrived home.

I prepared dinner, and she changed into her karate uniform, then came down to do her homework while we waited for our food to cook. Until today, I’d been worried that I wouldn’t be able to keep up with Evanne’s extracurriculars, but after my talk with Da, I’d realized that I hadn’t yet fully accepted my new role. A role that required me to take another look at where my priorities were.

I’d never considered myself a control freak, but it was clear that I hadn’t given my people the chance to prove themselves that they deserved. I wasn’t walking away from my responsibilities. I was just re-ordering them. My employees were going to give me the freedom to do that.

After dropping Evanne off at karate, I headed toward Kurt Wright School, finally allowing myself to think about what would happen next, what Lumen’s response would be to what I had to say.

She was sitting at her desk when I reached her classroom, and the first

thing I noticed was that she was still wearing my sister's clothes. Then I realized how stupid that was because of course she wouldn't have gone home, changed, then come back here just to meet me.

I knocked on her door.

"Come in," she said. Her expression was tight, even though she smiled. "Would you like to have a seat?"

"Why don't we go to a café instead?" I asked. "Keep school-related talk here. How does that sound?"

"That makes sense," she said. Her eyes darted up over my shoulder. "I'll...just be a moment to grab my things. I can meet you outside."

I was happy to wait, but maybe she didn't want to be seen with me in the hallways. Something about her seemed off, but she wasn't asking me to leave, or insisting we stay, so I put my curiosity to the side and agreed to wait by my car.

A minute or so later, she joined me. She gave me another of those tight smiles and thanked me for opening the car door but didn't say anything else as we headed to a hole-in-the-wall café not far from the school. Once we were settled at a table in the corner next to the window, we ordered our coffees.

I opened my mouth to tell her everything I'd been thinking since I'd seen her last, but then I realized her hands were pressing down on the table hard enough to make her fingers whiten.

"Are you all right, lass?"

She shook her head and wouldn't meet my eyes. "You were the one who wanted to talk."

I hadn't been imagining it earlier. Something was off. How had she gone from making me breakfast this morning to...this?

"Okay," I said, "I've been doing a lot of thinking about how we've been these past few days..."

The waiter came over and set our drinks in front of us. She immediately took it in her hands, seeming grateful for having something to physically hold onto.

I continued as the waiter walked away, "I never expected this would go on as long as it has. In all honesty, I never thought I'd see you again after our night at the hotel."

"Me neither," she said in a quiet voice. She stared at the steam rising from her cup.

“I’ve loved every second of it.”

Finally, she raised her gaze to meet mine.

I smiled, but it was tentative. “I hope I’m not alone in that feeling.”

Her eyes grew wide, the hopeful light in them twisting something in me.

“You’re not,” she whispered.

Relief flooded through me. I reached over and lifted her hands away from the mug and held them. “I know we both agreed for things to be *fun*, and maybe that’s still what you want, but I’ve been happy having you in my life. More than just as Evanne’s teacher, I mean.” I squeezed her fingers. “I want to make this work.”

“What...what does that mean?” Lumen asked. “Make what work?”

“Us,” I said. The word didn’t choke me, and fear didn’t make me pass out, so I kept going. “As in, a real relationship. Not spontaneous nights that we swear won’t happen again. I want to do it right, lass. Take it a little slower. Get to know each other. See if what we have can exist outside the bedroom.”

I’d said my piece and now stopped to let her process and respond.

“It would be hard,” she said finally.

I had a feeling I knew what she was thinking. “Would your job be okay?”

“I...I don’t know. It’s not against any specific rules. It’s just...”

“Aye. But we met before either of us even knew you were Evanne’s teacher. This isn’t some weird teacher fetish.”

She let out a surprised laugh. I rubbed her knuckles with my thumbs, smiling at being able to make her laugh.

“We don’t need this to be anything but a decision to let this go,” I said more seriously. “Just say the word and—”

“I want to,” she said, cheeks flushing. “I...I want to try.”

“Let’s start now.”

She tilted her head. “Start what now?”

I let go of her hands and reached for my as-yet-untouched coffee. “Tell me about yourself. Something I should know about you.” I took a sip of coffee while she composed herself.

“Wow. Um, that’s a big question.” She chuckled. “Let me see. Uh, my birthday is May the thirtieth?”

I tucked away that knowledge for future reference. “What else?”

“Well, I...I went to Seattle Pacific University. Um, it was straight after high school as an early admission. Full scholarship.” She raised her mug. “Go

me.”

“Cheers, lass.” I tapped my mug against hers. “What about your childhood?”

Her smile flattened, and I immediately wished I could take back that question.

“Let’s just say I didn’t exactly have a...perfect life as a kid.”

I frowned. “You don’t have to—”

“No, it’s okay. You might as well know.” She took a deep breath and squared her shoulders. “My parents...well, my dad...he drank. And my mom was clinically depressed.”

Shit. “Lumen, I—”

“It’s okay, Alec.” She had an almost resigned look on her face. “Really. I haven’t seen or talked to them since I was a kid. I don’t remember a lot. I had to learn to take care of myself. Not well enough, though, apparently. The January after I turned seven, I walked to school without a coat. It was the first day after Christmas break, and my mom was going through a really hard time, and my dad was still dealing with holiday hangovers, and they didn’t notice. But my teachers noticed. They called child services, and before I knew it, my parents had signed over all rights and walked out of my life.”

Fuck.

She took a drink from her mug. I touched her hand again to show support, but I didn’t say anything. I got the sense she wasn’t done.

“After that,” she went on, “I was in and out of foster homes and group homes for the next decade. It’s such a flawed system. Despite all the interviews and background checks, my foster families were never much better than my real family. And they never kept me long. It was like they were renting me.” She shook her head, staring at her drink. “They never hurt me or anything, but...it was hard.”

I hadn’t expected this when I’d asked the question. I’d automatically thought that my own childhood would have the saddest story.

“I aged out at eighteen, but my last group home wasn’t so bad. I still volunteer there, actually.”

“Aye? Even now, while you’re teaching?”

“Even now,” she said. “Always.”

“You’re an amazing lass. No doubt about it.”

She shrugged, clearly embarrassed.

“I mean it. I support several charities, but mostly just with money. You

actually use your time and care. That's above and beyond."

"Money is probably more important to them," she laughed, "but thank you, Alec. You know most of it from there. I worked my way through graduation at my roommate's family-owned massage parlor, graduated last year, and landed my first teaching job at Kurt Wright."

Who knew a simple question would prompt *that* story?

"Now, tell me about you," she said. "Mr. Bigshot."

I laughed. "Mr. Bigshot?"

"I have it on good authority, by which I mean my roommate Mai, that you're from one of the richest families in Seattle or something."

My cheeks burned, and I skirted the truth. "My family isn't from Seattle, but our company does have its American headquarters here. When my father retired, I took over."

Lumen showed me her dimples. "Consider my interest piqued. What's your origin story?"

I leaned back in my chair. "I don't have much of one. I don't fight crime, for starters."

"Come on. I told you mine. Now it's your turn."

"I believe I told you I was born in Edinburgh but was raised in California. San Ramon to be specific."

"Why'd you move?"

I took a sip of my coffee to give myself a moment. "My, uh, my mother died of a pulmonary embolism when I was eight, and—"

"Oh, shit." She looked horrified. "I'm so sorry. I shouldn't have pressured you."

"No, lass, it's all right. I miss her, of course, but it's been a long time. The grief is...different now."

Lumen frowned. "Wait, I met your...the woman with Evanne at the open house...?"

"Da remarried about a year later. A woman named Theresa Carideo he met in San Jose. She was a widow and lived in San Jose with her four kids. Austin, Rome, Paris, and Aspen."

"And they didn't want to move to Scotland?"

I shook my head. "Da had been in San Jose scouting possible locations for an American branch of MIRI. When he found property in San Ramon, he decided it would be better to pack up my siblings and me, bring us here."

"How many?"

“Five.”

“*Five* siblings?”

I chuckled at the surprise on her face. “Four brothers, one sister. All younger. Brody, and twins, Carson and Cody along with Eoin and Maggie.”

She looked down at her clothes. “Are these Maggie’s?”

“Aye.”

“So, with Theresa’s kids, there are ten of you. That’s a huge family.”

“And we’re not done,” I said. “Theresa and Da had three kids of their own. Sean and Xander, another set of twins, and our youngest sister, London.”

Her eyes kept getting bigger. “Holy shit. Lucky thirteen.”

“Three years after Theresa and Da got married, her brother and sister-in-law died in a car crash, and their three kids came to live with us too. Blaze, Fury, and Rose.”

Lumen leaned back in her seat and crossed her arms over her chest. “You’re messing with me.”

“I give you my word, *mo nighean bhan*.”

“What did you say that meant again?” she asked, cheeks turning that lovely shade of pink. “You called me that during...before.”

“My fair-haired girl.”

Her beautiful eyes practically glowed. “Oh.”

We both took deep draughts of our respective drinks and then I continued, “Anyway, I went back to Scotland after high school to get my business degree at the University of Glasgow. I took over the MIRI head office in Edinburgh for a while and brought on a lot of new business. After about two years, we had enough business in America to start a new office here in Seattle. My father wanted to retire, so we moved the headquarters from San Ramon to Seattle and let San Ramon become our secondary office.”

“And Evanne?”

I nodded. “Shortly after I moved to Seattle, I started dating a woman named Keli. She was nineteen and in college. We’d only been together a couple months when she got pregnant. We weren’t as careful as we should have been. We tried to stick it out, but by the time Evanne was born, we realized it wasn’t going to work between us. Up until just before school began, Keli had primary custody, and I had Evanne on whatever weekends and holidays we worked out between the two of us.”

Lumen didn’t say anything, but her slow nod and lack of a follow-up

response indicated she wanted to ask the obvious question but didn't think it was her business. I'd come this far, and she'd shared a lot with me. It didn't hurt to tell her more.

"Keli moved to Italy with her boyfriend," I said. "She didn't think it would be fair to take Evanne to a new country with a new language, so she brought Evanne here for what was supposed to be a regular weekend and gave me the change of custody paperwork. It's been a crash course in full-time parenting."

"You're doing a great job," Lumen said, smiling.

I was sure she was just being polite, but something about her words hit me. I'd been so worried about properly taking care of my daughter, I hadn't realized I needed someone to tell me I was doing well. She put her hand on mine. When I looked down at her hand, I could see my watch. It was almost time to pick Evanne up from karate. I could hardly believe how fast the time had gone.

"What are you doing Friday?" I asked.

"I didn't schedule any volunteering or anything. Unless I'm forgetting something, I'm free."

"Will you have dinner and a movie with me and Evanne?"

"You guys are kind of a package deal, huh?" The way she said it told me she didn't think of it as a bad thing.

"I'm afraid so," I said with a smile.

"I'm glad," she said sincerely. "And yes, I'd be happy to."

I breathed a sigh of relief. Before I'd picked up Lumen, I hadn't known if she'd want to see me again after today. Now that she'd agreed to see where things went with us, it was time to find out if the risk we were both taking was worth it.

THIRTY-ONE

LUMEN

SURREAL WAS PROBABLY THE BEST WORD TO DESCRIBE HOW I FELT WALKING up to Alec's door. The fact that I was carrying his sister's freshly laundered clothes didn't do much to dispel the feeling. After having eaten dinner – and breakfast – with Alec and Evanne before, this shouldn't have been strange. Or maybe it was strange because, even after the time I'd spent with them and the nights I'd had sex with Alec, tonight was our first official date.

"I'm baking a homemade pizza," Alec said as I followed Evanne into the living room. He took the bag of clothes and set it aside.

Then he leaned in and kissed me, a chaste kiss, but a public one.

"Go, Dad!" Evanne cheered, making both of us flush when we separated.

Despite its brevity, the kiss sent butterflies whirling around in my stomach. Alec's smile when he moved away just made them flap harder.

This was really happening.

After the time I'd spent reminding myself that Alec and I had agreed to nothing but a 'fun' night, here we were. Dinner and a movie at his place with his daughter knowing that I wasn't here as her teacher but as her dad's date. I almost couldn't believe it.

Alec frowned. "I forgot to ask if pizza was all right with you. The wee one would eat it for every meal if I let her."

"Pizza!" Evanne cheered.

I smiled, equally entertained by Alec's revelation as I was by Evanne's enthusiasm. "Pizza is wonderful, especially when it's homemade."

The relieved expression on Alec's face sent a burst of warmth through me. As controlled and confident as he seemed, the vulnerability I'd glimpsed when he'd shared about his family the other day was still there, just below the

surface. I had a feeling that wasn't something most people got to see.

Evanne sat on the floor in front of a low table, a stack of notebooks and papers next to her. She'd changed out of her school clothes and into a pair of jeans and a Disney's *Brave* t-shirt. I assumed Alec had changed after work as well since he now wore a pair of nice jeans and a dark blue long-sleeved shirt, both of which made him look even more delicious than usual. A pair of comfortable ash gray slacks and my favorite black fitted sweater had seemed the best outfit choice, and I saw now that my instincts had been correct.

"Working hard?" I asked, unsure if I was supposed to stay out here with her or go somewhere else.

"Always," she said. "I'm almost done, and then we can watch *Brave*. It's my favorite!"

"Good choice," I said.

She returned my smile and went back to work. Alec touched my arm, smiling as he motioned for me to follow him to the kitchen. The moment we were out of Evanne's eyeline, he pulled me close and kissed me again, this one thorough and lingering. Hot enough to scorch, the kiss left me breathless and weak in the knees.

"Good to see you too," I whispered as I leaned into him, partly because I didn't trust my legs to hold me but also because I didn't want to let him go.

"I couldn't resist, *mhurninn*." He brushed his lips across mine.

"What does that mean?"

He flushed. "*My darling*."

"It's sweet either way," I said, my toes curling at the words, "but I prefer the way you say it."

He lowered his head to kiss me again when Evanne interrupted us by calling from the living room, "Is the pizza almost ready?"

We both laughed as we stepped apart, faces flushed. It would be far too easy to lose ourselves in each other.

"Soon," Alec called back. "How much work do you have left?"

"Half a page of math," Evanne answered.

"We should be ready about the same time you're done, *mo chride*." He glanced at me and answered my unasked question. "My heart."

That was the sweetest thing I'd ever heard of a parent calling their child, but I had a feeling it would embarrass Alec if I said that, so I kept my observation to myself.

As we finished getting out what we needed for the meal, Alec told me

he'd had a talk with Evanne about us, and that she understood she shouldn't talk about our relationship until we told her it was okay. The weight that lifted off my shoulders allowed me to relax as Alec and I settled into our date.

After clearing Evanne's things from the table, we brought in the food, then took seats on the couch opposite the TV with Evanne between us. Pizza with a third-grader while we watched a kids' movie was far from the sort of romantic dinner date a woman might've wanted, but I liked the fact that he wasn't trying to give me some fairytale version of his life.

This was more like I'd been brought into his real life, like I'd become a part of his life. A part of his family. I knew he said he wanted to take things slow, but I couldn't help feeling like we weren't really starting at the beginning.

The surreal feeling I'd had when I first arrived didn't go away, but rather continued. Alec and I snuck smiles at each other throughout the movie, laughing when one of us couldn't seem to sever a cord of cheese between our mouths and our pizza. Evanne kept shushing us because the movie was 'getting to the good part' which, according to her, was about ninety-five percent of the movie.

I didn't blame her. It was an awesome movie.

She was already nodding off by the time the credits rolled. Alec carried her up to her bedroom, and I followed. As I had before, I read her a bedtime story, picking up from our last reading of *Charlotte's Web*, while Alec went back downstairs and took care of the dishes. Once Evanne had fallen asleep, I returned to the living room where Alec waited with a bottle of wine ready and a new movie lined up on his TV. Something non-animated this time.

"Do you feel like sticking around a wee bit longer?" he asked, handing me a glass.

"I could be persuaded." I smiled as I took the glass.

As much as I'd enjoyed spending time with both of them, it was nice to settle onto the couch without an eight-year-old separating us. I leaned against Alec and sipped my wine, enjoying the feel of his fingers playing with my hair. Neither of us paid much attention to the movie, to be honest. We were both too occupied laughing and sneaking casual kisses and gentle touches. Soft caresses that didn't stray to the places I most wanted his hands.

I didn't know how slow he wanted to take things, exactly, but I hoped it wouldn't be too slow. Now that I'd had a taste of what I could have with him,

I had a feeling I might explode if we went at too leisurely a pace.

Gradually, the wine bottle drained as we kept refilling our glasses. The more we drank, the longer our kisses lingered. The more our touches moved from safe territory. The more heated the air between us. The more like moans our laughter became.

Soon, we stopped any pretense of watching the movie. Our lips moved in perfect sync, parted, and our tongues twisted together. His hand slipped down between my thighs, fingertips tracing the seam of my pants. One of my hands dropped to his leg, slid up to the bulge behind his zipper.

He cursed as I gave him a gentle squeeze, but he wasn't distracted from the task he'd given himself. He pulled the collar of my shirt to the side and leaned in to kiss down my jaw to my collarbone. A shiver ran down my spine just before his teeth scraped across my skin.

I moaned and was rewarded by a sharp nip. The sound turned into laughter when he licked across the bite.

"Shh." Alec continued kissing up my neck until he reached my mouth again. "Let's go to bed."

My legs were wobbly despite the removal of Alec's hand, but somehow, we both stumbled our way to his bedroom, kissing and groping each other the whole way, barely suppressing our laughter. As soon as we were through the door, our hands turned greedy, grabbing and pulling at each other's clothes. It didn't take long for us both to get down to our underwear. As I kicked my pants aside, I leaned back against his bedroom door and let him get an eyeful of the new lingerie I'd bought yesterday. I'd never owned anything like this before, but the blue fire in Alec's eyes told me I'd made the right choice with scarlet silk.

"Like a fucking goddess," he breathed, moving in to feast on my neck.

I was just glad it was the weekend, and I wouldn't have to worry about hiding any bruises he might leave. I ran my hands down his torso. If I was a goddess, he was a god. With or without those tight black briefs.

At some point, we both lost the last of our clothes and tumbled onto the bed, caught up in a haze of arousal. Each touch sent flames licking over my skin, every kiss turning me on more than I thought possible. Then he slid down my body, kissing a trail to my stomach and lower. It wasn't until he spread my thighs that I realized what he was going to do. As much as I wanted it, I wanted something else more.

"Wait."

He sat back on his heels, fingers stroking my legs as he waited for me to continue.

“I want to taste you too.”

His eyes darkened, and one hand tightened on my knee. “Do you want to be on top?”

“I-I think so. I’ve never...”

His nostrils flared. “I’ll take care of you, lass.”

A few moments later, we were in a new position, with Alec on his back and me on top. My knees were on either side of his head, his hands on my hips, and I found myself in the perfect position to finally have a taste of him.

I moaned as his tongue slid over my lips, but I wasn’t going to be distracted. I balanced myself on one hand and gripped his cock with the other. The thick shaft was hot and hard, twitching against my hand as I slowly stroked him from base to tip. As my hand reached the bottom again, I leaned down and took the head of his cock into my mouth. Alec’s fingers dug into my flesh, and he groaned, the vibration sending new sensations through my sensitive flesh.

I circled the tip with my tongue, then took more of him into my mouth. Up and down my head moved, advancing, taking as much as possible before backing off. As his tongue rubbed against my clit and then dipped into my core, I experimented, gauging what he liked by his sounds and body language. His hips jerked, pushing him a little deeper even as he sucked on my clit, and then I was coming, my cries muffled by his cock.

A sharp pain went through my scalp as he grabbed my hair and pulled me up. I went up on my knees, bending backward even as his mouth kept me climaxing. I writhed, unable to stop myself from squirming, riding his face until I was begging him to stop.

My vision grayed, and then I was on my back, muscles trembling. Alec loomed over me, lightly kissing the corner of my mouth before lifting his head so his gaze could meet mine.

“All right, lass?” His voice was rough, his eyes dark.

I nodded, not quite trusting myself to speak.

“More?”

I nodded again, mouth opening in a silent scream as he buried himself inside me with one smooth thrust.

Fuck!

I was too full, too fast, but I wouldn’t have had it any other way. He

pressed his face against my neck, murmuring words I didn't recognize, in a tone I did. I wrapped my arms around his neck, rocking my hips up against his. He responded, teeth skimming my throat as he moved inside me.

We found our dance quickly, coming together with an urgency that only made us move faster, bring our bodies together harder. Lose ourselves in each other. Come apart so fully that we couldn't tell where one of us ended and the other began.

When I finally came back to myself, I was in Alec's arms, my back against his chest, his lips on my shoulder.

"This wasn't exactly slow, was it?" I said, running my fingers over his forearm.

"No, it wasn't," he agreed. "Do you regret it?"

I didn't even need to think about it. "No, I don't."

I felt the tension leave his body and then he kissed the space behind my ear.

"Would you be opposed to me giving you a gift?"

I turned until I could see him. "A gift?"

What did a man like him give as a gift?

"A key." He brushed some hair back from my face. "A key to the house, so you can come and go as you please."

Definitely *not* moving slow.

But I didn't doubt for a second that it was what I wanted.

"I'd love your gift."

THE END

Alec and Lumen's story continues in *Breaking Rules* (The Scottish Billionaire Book 2)

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