



prequel

THE SCOTTISH BILLIONAIRE SERIES

M.S. PARKER

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

PREQUEL

THE SCOTTISH BILLIONAIRE

M. S. PARKER

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ONE

LIVING IN SEATTLE, WASHINGTON SINCE JULY, I STILL DIDN'T MISS THE sunshine that had filled my world for years when my family moved from Scotland to California. Just like I'd never missed the sun when I'd gone back to Scotland for university. Perhaps that was why I'm now in Seattle, of all the cities on the West Coast that Da had suggested, to establish a second office in our business, MIRI – McCrae International Research Institute.

I was only a kid when we left Scotland, but I'd always missed the country of my birth. Its beauty was only a part of it, though. Scotland, for me, would always be the place where my family had been complete. The place where I'd had my mother for the first eight years of my life.

My maudlin thoughts of the past were interrupted by the ringing of my doorbell. I still had half a giant bowl of candy to give away, and most of the trick-or-treaters had already come and gone. Whatever was left by the end of the night would go to MIRI with me tomorrow morning. I expected a lot from my employees, but I also believed in having occasional fun perks. Halloween candy should qualify as fun.

"Trick or treat!" Three kids on the other side of my door chorused the words they'd been saying all night.

"Well done on the costumes, lads." I smiled at a Superman, a cowboy, and what appeared to be a large turtle with a mask.

"You talk funny," the turtle said as he reached for chocolate.

"Aye, lad, that I do." I purposefully added more of my brogue simply to entertain them.

I earned laughter as well as thanks, and I waved at them as they ran back to the people waiting in my driveway. Officially, trick or treating had ended

twenty minutes ago, which meant those three were most likely the last I'd see tonight.

I carried the bowl into my kitchen and poured the candy into a smaller container, then washed and dried the bowl before putting it away. Once I finished, I set off to check my windows and doors to ensure they were locked.

My realtor had been surprised that I, as a bachelor, had wanted a spacious house rather than an apartment, but when I'd explained how large my immediate family was, she'd found me something perfect. Now, if any of my siblings wanted to visit, I had plenty of room to host them.

And when they weren't here, I could enjoy having all this space for myself. Being one of the oldest of a blended family of eighteen meant, despite the massive estate my parents owned, peace and quiet had been rare growing up. I loved my siblings, biological and otherwise, but I appreciated being able to stand in my kitchen, close my eyes, and hear only silence.

Thoughts of my family were still on my mind when my phone rang. I reached for it automatically, even though the screen showed a number I didn't recognize. Someone calling this late meant it was important.

"Hello?"

"Is this, um, Alex?" The voice belonged to a woman, but the hesitation told me she was most likely barely in her twenties.

"With whom am I speaking?"

"Oh, sorry, um, my name's Keli Miller. I'm Ester Difranco's roommate, and I was supposed to call an Alex McCrae for her."

"Alec," I corrected automatically, used to most people getting it wrong. "Did Ester say how she knows me?"

I placed the name easily, but I needed to know that this Keli Miller hadn't simply taken Ester's phone for a prank or was trying to find a news story or something else I couldn't fathom at the moment. One could never be too careful. I'd learned that the hard way.

"Hold on."

Sound became muffled, as if Keli had turned the phone against her shoulder while she talked to someone. The background noise made me think that they were at a party, which made sense if Keli was who she said she was.

"Hello?" Keli seemed even more hesitant now.

"I'm here."

"Her cousin is friends with your brother," she said. "I didn't get names

because Ester's pretty hammered, and that's why I'm calling in the first place."

I cursed under my breath. College freshmen.

"Look, Ester and I came to a party with some other girls from our dorm, and they left us here. Ester's too drunk for me to feel comfortable just calling for a taxi or whatever. First week, she told me that if we were ever in a tight spot, you were who I was supposed to call."

My younger brother, Eoin, and his best friend, Leo, had enlisted in the army together and were currently serving their first tour overseas. When Leo heard I planned to move to Seattle, he'd asked me to keep an eye on his cousin, Ester, who was an incoming freshman at the University of Washington. With five younger sisters ranging from seventeen to thirteen, I knew all too well the sort of worry that came with being overprotective, so I'd agreed.

I'd met Ester once when she had first moved in, making a point to introduce myself, but since then, she hadn't called on me. Until now.

"Where are you?" I asked as I headed for the door. I put on my shoes and picked up my keys and wallet while Keli gave me the address. I did a quick calculation in my head while I went to my car. "I'll be there in twenty minutes. Will you both be safe until then?"

"Yeah." Keli blew out a shuddering breath. "We're on the porch, and considering how much Ester just threw up, I'm pretty sure we'll be left alone."

I picked up two garbage bags from the box in my garage and chose my 'sensible' car. If I ended up having to pay for cleaning, better this upholstery than what was in my other vehicles.

Despite the multitude of costumed college students still out and about around campus, I was able to make good time and pulled up to the house in question seventeen and a half minutes after I'd gotten off the phone with Keli. Two women sat on the porch steps.

I parked at the curb, not wanting to risk someone parking behind me in the short time it would take me to get these two young women into my car. The last thing I needed was to get into an altercation with some inebriated frat boy with something to prove.

When I was only a dozen steps away, one of the young women raised her head. Ebony curls framed a pretty face, and teal-colored eyes regarded me warily. She tightened her arm around the brunette leaning heavily against her.

“Keli Miller?” I held out my hands so she could see that they were empty. “I’m Alec McCrae. You called me.”

Relief swept over her features. “Thank you for coming.” She gently shook Ester. “Hey, wake up. Alec’s here. He’s going to take us back to the dorm.”

“He’s hot,” Ester mumbled. “But Leo says he’s off-limits.”

Keli blushed, seemingly embarrassed for her friend. “Come on, Ester. You need to stand up.”

“Don’t wanna.” Ester’s head rolled back, and she looked up at me from bleary eyes. “Hey you.”

Keli rolled her eyes and got to her feet. She was taller than I’d realized. I was six-and-a-half feet tall and used to towering over most women, but this one was less than a foot shorter than me and had legs that went on for days. When she leaned over to pull Ester to her feet, I couldn’t help admiring her ass.

I didn’t allow her body to turn me from my purpose for being here, though. Keli had her arm around Ester’s waist, and when I moved to the other side, I took Ester’s arm. Together, we walked Ester to the car and eased her into the back seat.

“Let me buckle her in, and then I’ll sit up front.” Keli leaned across her friend, taking care to make sure she would be safe.

“There are garbage bags on the floor, in case she’s sick.”

“I’m pretty sure she’s already emptied everything in her stomach,” Keli said dryly.

Not wanting to appear like some sort of creep hovering over a couple coeds, I got into the driver’s seat. A minute or so later, Keli settled next to me, buckling up before she looked at me.

“Thank you for coming for us.”

“You’re welcome,” I said, starting the car. “You’re a good friend.”

Keli shrugged, but I could see a pleased expression on her face, her cheeks pink. “I know I probably could have gotten a cab or car service, but I didn’t think I could manage to get her in and out of the car without putting us both at risk.”

“You did the right thing,” I assured her. “A lot of good people exist in this world, but a single bad one is all you’d need when your attention is on something else.”

“How long have you lived in Seattle?” she asked, shifting so that she was

angled toward me. “I mean, that accent’s not exactly Pacific Northwest.”

“I was born in Scotland but moved to California as a child. I came to Seattle in July.” I waited for Dorothy and a scarecrow to finish crossing the street before I made my turn.

Keli’s face lit up. “Where at in California? I grew up in Monterey Bay.”

The small talk continued until I reached their dorm. I walked them to their door, exchanging nods with the security guard sitting just inside the lobby both when I came in and when I left.

Keli could more than handle getting Ester to bed, and I’d done as I’d been asked. Leo could sleep easier knowing that his cousin had a good roommate who would help keep her safe.

TWO

SEATTLE WAS A LARGE ENOUGH CITY THAT WHEN THE LOCAL COLLEGES LET out for break, there didn't seem to be much of a population drop unless one was near the schools themselves. Until I went to the University of Washington to meet with a mathematics professor regarding a paper he had recently written, I hadn't realized classes had ended for the semester.

My meeting with Professor Mirax went well. He'd written a phenomenal new algorithm, and MIRI was interested in using it. Da had asked me to personally meet with the professor to show him how serious MIRI was about its work. Unsurprisingly, Da had been right. Mirax had been impressed and promised to come in after the holidays so we could discuss more concrete plans.

When I stepped out of the mathematics building, the snow that had dusted everything earlier in the day was gone, washed away by the sort of freezing rain that turned everything to miserable slush. I ducked my head and hurried to my car, grateful that I'd taken the advice of my assistant, Tuesday Boswell, and put snow tires on my car.

I was just getting ready to turn out of the parking lot when I noticed a familiar figure walking down the sidewalk, her dark curls whipped about in the wind. If it hadn't been for *Monterey Bay* written on the bag she had over her shoulder, I wouldn't have recognized her. Even though I didn't actually know her, I couldn't let her walk in this weather.

I rolled down my window and shouted, "Keli!"

She turned, a smile breaking across her face when she saw who was calling for her. "Hey, Alec."

"Would you like a ride? This is some shite weather."

Her expression lit up. “If you don’t mind.”

“Not at all.” I rolled up my window and unlocked the passenger door. After she was in and buckled up, I turned the heater up several degrees. “Where can I take you?”

“I was heading for the diner down the street. Shelly’s Place.”

“I’ve seen it.” I turned the direction she’d been walking. “I’m surprised to see you here, with classes being done. Did you have a late final?”

Keli brushed her hands over her hair, dislodging the half-frozen water that had clung to the strands. “No, my parents decided they were going on a cruise for Christmas, so I figured I’d just stay here. It’s why I’m going to Shelly’s Place for dinner. The dining hall’s food is...less than appetizing during the break between semesters.”

I glanced at her. “Do you have any plans after dinner?”

“Just a movie. Nothing special.” She shot me a shy smile. “You could join me if you want.”

My eyebrows went up. I’d always had my fair share of female attention, but because most women knew who I was, they either tried to be coy and flirtatious or purely sexual.

The fact that she wasn’t fawning all over me was refreshing, and it was a huge factor in my decision to counter with a proposal of my own.

“Will you allow me to take you out for a better dinner than you can get at Shelly’s Diner? When we’re done, we can see if you still want me to join you for that movie.”

Her cheeks turned pink. “I’m not sure I’d be able to pay—”

I shook my head. “I never ask a lady to pay when I’ve asked her out.”

She looked surprised but pleased at my response. I hadn’t used the word *date* intentionally and waited to see if she would use it. Whether or not she chose to label the meal would determine if I accepted her movie invitation, should she make it again.

“Thank you.”

Genuine appreciation. A good sign. “There’s a small restaurant not far from here that specializes in unique cuisine. The Phileas. It’s the sort of place that counts on word of mouth rather than normal advertising venues.”

“Phileas?” She laughed. “As in the main character from *Around the World in Eighty Days*?”

“You know Jules Verne?” Perhaps I shouldn’t have been surprised, but I hadn’t met many young women who enjoyed classic science fiction unless

they were literature or theater majors. Then again, I didn't know Keli's area of study.

"My English teacher senior year gave a list of authors for us to choose from for our term paper. I chose Jules Verne." She made a face. "The other choices were Hemingway, Faulkner, and Tolstoy. I'm pretty sure my teacher did it because he wanted us all to write about Verne but didn't want to give us room to complain that he assigned us all the same subject."

I'd never been the type of person who'd been any good at small talk, but with Keli, I didn't need to be. She moved easily from one topic to the next, but it never sounded like meaningless chatter. She just enjoyed talking, and I didn't mind listening to her.

Phileas was wonderful, as usual. I ordered my favorite strip steak and baked potato while Keli had a chicken and kale salad. Somehow, she managed to continue the conversation between dainty bites.

As we finished our meal – including a decadent chocolate and strawberry cheesecake – I decided that if she invited me back to her dorm room, I'd agree and see where things led from there. She wasn't throwing herself at me, but little signs of attraction were there. Touching my hand. Leaning in toward me. If I was reading her wrong, I'd thank her for the nice company and then go back home, but I didn't think that would be the way the night ended.

By the time we arrived back at her dorm, she hadn't given me an invitation yet, so after I parked, I asked if she wanted me to walk her to her door.

"No expectations," I added.

"What if I want you to come inside instead of just walking me to the door?" She touched my arm. "Join me for a movie? Maybe more..."

I'd read her correctly. The little spark between us was clearly mutual.

"I'd like that."

Between my own university experiences and occasionally visiting my siblings, I'd come to believe that all college dorm rooms were the same. Two beds or three, if there was a bunk bed. Two or three desks. Maybe a shared bathroom with the room next door. Keli's was no exception.

She and Ester had, however, added some things to give it a personal touch. Christmas lights ran from corner to corner on the ceiling, creating soft lighting that most people preferred over the harsh industrial lighting that most big buildings had. Both of the beds had colorful pillows and blankets, and the walls in front of the desks were covered with pictures. It wasn't hard to spot

which side was Ester's and which was Keli's. At least three or four of the pictures on the left side of the room had Leo in them.

I processed all of this in only a few seconds, returning my attention to Keli as she offered to hang up my coat. At least with the weather as bad as it was, I didn't need to feel awkward about taking off my dress shoes at the door. I always hated this part of spontaneity. The how far and how much and where were things going. I had reliable intuition when it came to business, and when women threw themselves at me, their intentions were clear enough.

When I planned a date, I had a few things I always did to gauge a woman's level of desired physical contact, such as a hand at the small of her back as we walked or touching her fingers when we both reached for something. I wanted to be in control, but I never wanted to be the kind of man whose desire to take charge went too far. It was a fine line to walk at times.

"We should probably get out of the rest of these wet clothes," Keli said, a mischievous glint in her eyes.

She pulled her sweatshirt over her head, giving me a glimpse of a dark green bra before she bent to take off her pants as well. When she straightened, I saw that her panties were made of the same cotton as her bra. She put her hands on her hips, her smile telling me she enjoyed my attention as much as I enjoyed looking at her.

"All right, it's your turn."

"You're still wearing something," I pointed out.

She shook her head. "They're called bargaining chips. You don't get to see the goods until you're at least down to your boxers." Her cheeks turned pink as her gaze dropped below my waist. "Unless they're briefs."

I loosened my tie, then took it off. Next, I unbuttoned my dress shirt, all the while keeping my eyes on her. Each movement I made was deliberate, specifically done to register her response. The way her pupils dilated and her lips parted.

When I was left in my boxer-briefs, she wet her lips. "Damn."

I chuckled. "Thank you. You're quite stunning yourself."

She flushed, clearly happy with the compliment. A smile on her face, she held out her hand. Curious as to what was in her mind, I took it and let her move me to the bed.

"Lay down."

I raised an eyebrow.

“Please.” She ran her fingers up my arm and then down my chest. “I want you in my mouth.”

That wasn't an offer I could refuse, but I did intend to modify it.

I climbed onto the bed, shaking my head as my feet hung over the edge. I spared a moment's thought to hope the athletic dorms had bigger beds. I couldn't imagine many of them would be able to sleep on one this size.

“You can scoot up if that's uncomfortable.” She gave me a saucy smile. “I can work that way.”

I shook my head. “I want you up here.” She looked confused, so I added, “I'm going to reciprocate, lass.”

Her smile widened, and she hurried to do as I asked, settling with her knees on either side of my head. I curled my hands around her thighs, helping her balance as she leaned forward.

I made a sound as she mouthed the bulge in my underwear, teeth blunted by the fabric. Cool air wafted over my damp skin as she freed my cock, and I shifted my attention to her.

I ran the tip of my finger down the center of her underwear, then pulled it aside. Despite the thick curls on her head, her pussy was smooth and bare. While I didn't actually have much of a preference when it came to this sort of grooming, bare skin meant extra sensitive skin. I'd enjoy working with that.

Her hand wrapped around my cock, and I pulled her hips down to my mouth. The tip of my tongue moved between her folds, and she let out a little gasp. When her lips wrapped around the head, my shaft thickened. It had been far too long since I'd had the hot, wet pleasure of a mouth on me, and she knew what she was doing. Up and down, her fist moved in sync with her head, creating dual sensations that could have driven me to distraction had I been a less focused man.

I found my own rhythm, my tongue moving up to her clit, and then down to her entrance. She cursed when my tongue slipped inside her, tasting the fresh, salty taste of her, but it was when I rubbed the flat of my tongue over her clit that she jerked, letting out a muffled squeak.

I chuckled but didn't take my mouth from her. My curiosity had been piqued, and I wanted to know how many other sounds I could get her to make before she came. Her hips rocked back and forth as she sucked on me, deep pulls of her mouth that seemed to go straight through me. Neither of us spoke as we mutually gave and took.

The muscles under my hands trembled, and I suspected she was close. I

shifted her, giving me the perfect angle to work over her clit harder and faster until she let out a cry and her body went stiff. Her grip tightened, and she raised her head, my cock falling from her mouth.

“Fuck, Alec,” she moaned. “Again. Make me come again.”

I slid two fingers inside her, searching, stroking as she fisted my cock in short, jerky movements that made up in friction what they lacked in finesse. My thumb found her clit, even more swollen now, and it took very little to coax her over the edge again.

This time, I followed, groaning her name as pleasure flooded me. Cum spilled over her hand, and she kept stroking me, dragging out my climax until her touch was almost painful. When she finally released me, my entire body was limp and sated...for now.

I wasn't even close to finished, but I did need a few minutes to recover.
And some water.

THREE

SHE WAS ONE OF THE MOST RESPONSIVE WOMEN I'D EVER HAD.

My grip on her curls tightened as I drove into her from behind. She pushed back against me, our bodies coming together with a slap of skin on skin. I was pinching and pulling her nipples until high keening sounds meant she was close to coming again.

I released her breast and leaned forward, sliding my thumb into her mouth. "Make it nice and wet because it's going in your ass."

Her pussy tightened at my words, and her tongue swirled around my thumb, both positive responses assuring me that she was enjoying herself. When I pressed my now-wet thumb against her anus, she tensed, and I let go of her hair to run a soothing hand down her spine.

"I'll stop if that's what you want."

She shook her head, and her muscles unclenched. Slowly, I applied more pressure until my thumb popped past that ring of muscle up to my first knuckle.

"Oh, fuck!"

A shudder went through her, and as I started twisting my thumb back and forth, she came. I fucked her through that orgasm and into a second one, finally allowing myself my own release. As our muscles went weak, we collapsed onto the bed in a tangle of sweaty limbs.

MY FINGERS CREPT beneath the boy shorts Keli had put on to answer the

door for our food less than an hour ago. She'd kept on her shirt and shorts to eat, but I'd just kept the sheet over my lap rather than dressing again. I didn't plan on donning clothes until I left. What was the point if I would just be removing them again?

Right now, she sat between my legs, her back to my chest, and I let my fingers stroke her bare skin. She moaned, her head falling back against my shoulder as she spread her legs wider. I slid my middle two fingers inside her slick passage and let the heel of my hand press against her clit.

"Fuck, yes." She grabbed my thighs, nails sharp even through the sheet. "Make me come again."

She rocked her hips forward, my fingers going deeper inside her. I moved my hand from side to side to give her more friction, and she cursed again. When she came, she screamed loud enough that I was grateful that the only other people in the building were far enough away that they wouldn't be able to hear her.

I NEEDED A NEW BED.

That thought registered even as I realized that I wasn't in my bed. Memories came forward as I woke more fully. I wasn't in a bed at all.

Today was Sunday morning, and I'd fallen asleep after spending hours having sex with Keli yesterday. But we hadn't been in bed because, after that first night, I'd decided sleeping bags on the floor would actually be better. I'd left not long after Keli had woken up, and when I'd returned yesterday afternoon, I'd brought sleeping bags, food, and a change of clothes. If Keli had thought it was strange that I'd come to her dorm rather than asking her to come to my house, she didn't mention it.

By the time I opened my eyes, I was fully aware of where I was, who was lying next to me, why I'd come here, and what I wanted to do next.

Keli and I were both on our sides, and I'd thrown an arm around her in my sleep. I rarely slept – literally, that is – with the women I took to bed, but this weekend had been different all the way around. Things had been excruciatingly slow at work, and I'd found myself with extra time on my hands. Hence my return to Keli's dorm.

Despite the fact that the two sleeping bags underneath us were far from as

comfortable as a regular bed, having the room to move was worth it.

Keli shifted under the blanket, and I was suddenly reminded of one other important fact.

Neither of us were clothed at the moment.

I moved my hand just a bit and cupped her breast. Soft and full, I appreciated the way it filled my palm. I gave it a gentle squeeze, then moved my hand so my fingers could roll her nipple. Tugging and teasing it, I coaxed her to wakefulness. She was still half-asleep when she pushed her ass back against me, but I could see the smile forming on her face.

“Good morning,” I murmured as I pressed a kiss to her shoulder. “I’m going to make you come on my fingers, and then you’ll come again on my cock. If you don’t want that, tell me to stop.”

She made a pleased sound that I took to mean she liked what I was doing, so I released her breast and slid my hand down her stomach. She let out a sharp breath when my fingers reached the apex of her legs. A single finger between her lips found her clit easily enough, and I lightly stroked the tip of it.

“More,” she moaned the word, finally opening her eyes.

“Patience,” I chided.

I kissed the side of her neck, then moved up to nip her earlobe. She gasped, squirming against me, but my hand between her legs was enough to keep her from moving too much. What that bit of movement did do, however, was bring my cock fully to life. Before I started thinking with my dick instead of using common sense, I looked around to make sure I had a condom nearby. Putting aside work on a weekend to spend it having sex was unusual, but unprotected sex with a virtual stranger was something I’d never even been tempted to do.

Once I found what I was looking for, I turned my attention back to fulfilling my promise to make Keli come.

I began to move my finger in leisurely circles, her arousal coating my fingers and turning the friction into something less harsh. When she started to make desperate noises, I latched onto the skin at the point where her shoulder met her neck, sucking and worrying at the skin until I left a mark.

“Close.” Keli gasped. “Fuck...yes...so close...fuck fuck fuucckkkk...”

The last word came out in a cry, and her body shook as she came. I used the time wisely, rolling on a condom while she came down from her high. When I moved back to my place behind her, I lifted her leg and pulled it back

to rest on my thigh. My cock slipped between her legs, coating it with her natural lubrication.

“Yes.”

She answered the question I hadn't asked. I shifted us until I was able to slide into her, burying myself with one smooth motion. I closed my eyes, allowing myself a couple seconds to enjoy the sensations of being inside her before I started moving. Short, slow strokes that built the heat between us from low embers to a full roaring flame in seconds. Her nails dug into my hand, leaving half-moon imprints. I slammed into her, and she begged me to take her harder.

We chased the high together, as if it had been years since we'd last felt it. Desperate. Eager. A single-minded focus that brought us to climax only moments apart. We clung to each other while our minds went blissfully blank, our bodies shaking with the force of our orgasms. In that moment, the world was clear and simple in a way that it never was at any other time and place.

Then it was over.

As I took care of the condom, I shifted to sit up, looking at the clock on the dresser for the first time in hours. I would need to leave shortly to prepare for work tomorrow. I hadn't taken this much time off all at once since...I honestly couldn't remember when. I'd had fun, but I had my family business to manage, and that didn't allow for much free time.

“Let me guess. You have to go.” Keli was smiling as she rolled over to face me. She propped herself up on her elbow, the sheet draping across her body in a way that made the sight of her a sensual delight.

Unfortunately, I had run out of time to enjoy it. “I do at that, but I have enjoyed myself this weekend.”

“Me too.” She leaned forward and kissed my arm. “Maybe we can do it again. Is your company closed on Christmas Eve or just Christmas Day?”

The hopeful expression on her face sparked some guilt as I realized that she would be alone during the holiday as well.

With my massive family spread out across the country – and even outside the country in some cases – it wasn't usually feasible for all of us to come together all at once, even on major holidays. When my older stepbrother, Austin Carideo, turned eighteen, our parents decided that with Austin, then myself, and our cousin slash brother, Blaze Gracen, preparing for life after graduation, we needed to find a way to be together for at least one day a year,

even if it wasn't actually on a holiday or even if we couldn't be physically present.

In the seven years since, we hadn't missed a year. With Eoin overseas, we had wondered if it would still be possible, but he'd managed a video call last year and had arranged for another one this upcoming Saturday.

It was almost a full week before Christmas, but it was the only day Eoin knew for certain he could call. I didn't mind the change, even if it meant I'd lose another weekend at MIRI. Family trumped work.

"We're closed both Christmas Eve and Christmas Day," I confirmed. "Both paid."

"Does that mean you'll be spending those days with your family?"

I studied her face, wondering if she was hinting at an invitation, but her expression was only open and curious. I gave her the truth. "My family is having a party this Saturday, as it's the only time we can all be together."

"Are there a lot of you?"

The idea that popped into my head was as impulsive as anything I'd done over the last three days, and perhaps that was why I did it, but a more likely reason was that I had yet to work through all the family issues in my own past. Either way, I still said it.

"If you don't have plans, would you like to come to the party with me?"

FOUR

I HAD ALWAYS BELIEVED MYSELF TO BE A MAN WHO MADE LOGICAL AND WISE decisions with confidence. I didn't second guess the choices I made because doing so could be disastrous for business. I came to meetings prepared. Went into conference calls with facts memorized.

All of this should have meant that taking Keli to my parents' house in San Ramon was something I shouldn't have regretted, yet as I handed her a glass of eggnog – non-alcoholic so my underage siblings wouldn't be tempted – I found myself wishing that I hadn't extended the invitation. Not because of anything Keli had done, but rather because I hadn't accurately predicted how my family would react to me bringing someone to this particular gathering.

"You look well, lad." Da came up beside me and clapped a hand on my shoulder. "Not burnin' the candle at both ends, are ya? Balance, aye?"

I raised my eyebrow at my sire. "As if I hadna inherited my workaholic tendencies from the master himself."

I'd also inherited Da's blue eyes, though his were lighter. Now, those eyes sparkled with good humor. Our personalities were also similar. He often came across as stern and forbidding, but we family members knew better. Patrick McCrae loved as hard as he fought and worked, and it didn't matter if we were his through biology or through marriage or however else we came to be family. I liked to think I was equally loyal to those I loved. I might not have been the sort of person who said the words often, but I tried to show them every day by how hard I worked.

"Your accent gets thicker when you're talking to your dad," Keli said, leaning against my arm.

"Aye, it does," I agreed, smiling at her. "Brody's as well. The twins have

to be good and riled to fall back into it. The younger two lost theirs years ago.”

“There are so many of you.” Keli’s whisper was louder than she realized, and her cheeks turned pink when my fifteen-year-old half-brothers, Sean and Xander, grinned at her.

“You must be an only child.” My stepmother, Theresa, wore her best polite smile as she came up beside Da and squeezed his hand. “Patrick, you’re needed in the kitchen to settle a debate between the girls.”

“If you’ll excuse me.” Da headed off to the kitchen, but Theresa stayed.

“Once your father gets things sorted out with London and Rose, we’ll be gathering in the den for Eoin’s call,” Theresa reminded me.

“That reminds me.” I put my hand on Keli’s back and angled myself so Theresa was facing both of us now. “I don’t believe I told you how Keli and I met. Her roommate, Ester, is Leo’s cousin. Leo asked me to look in on Ester as she’s attending the University of Washington as a freshman, and I drove the two of them back to their dorm after a Halloween party.”

“You’re a good man,” Theresa said as she stretched up to kiss my cheek.

The two of us had struggled those first few years after she and Da had married, but she had been patient with me, and that, more than anything else, had gotten through to this grieving child.

“London is such a unique name,” Keli gushed. “What made you think of it?”

“Patrick chose the twins’ names, so when our daughter was born, I wanted to do as I’d done with my other children and name her after a city.”

Keli looked puzzled, and even as she opened her mouth, I knew what she was going to say.

“Alec isn’t a city name, is it? Or is it one in Scotland?”

“Theresa isn’t my biological mother,” I said quietly before things could become more awkward.

“Oh. Sorry.” Color flooded Keli’s face. “Um, I need to freshen up.”

“I’ll show her,” Theresa offered. She smiled at Keli. “This way.”

Shite.

Theresa wouldn’t be openly rude to a guest, but I knew my stepmother. Only a few inches over five feet tall and delicate-looking, people often assumed that she was sweet and soft-spoken. While she did display those character traits to people she loved, underneath that exterior was a spine of steel and a tongue sharp enough to cut. She was protective of her family, and

if she felt someone threatened us in any way, she wouldn't hesitate to act. When we had come together as a family, she had embraced us all with open arms, but she'd always been wary of newcomers outside of our family, and she was clearly assessing Keli.

A low whistle from my left drew my attention to my younger brother, Brody. He'd turned twenty-two shortly after Thanksgiving, and in true Brody fashion, had celebrated by going skydiving.

"That's brave," he said. "Letting your girl go off with Mom like that."

"What are you haverin' on about?" I glared at him. "It's not like that."

He gave me a look that said he didn't believe a word I'd just said.

"Does she know how it is?" Austin came up on the other side of me. "You should be careful, Alec. Women look at men like us and see dollar signs."

Austin and I were as similar in personality as we were different in appearance. He had raven-black curls, deep brown eyes, and had inherited his father's olive-toned skin.

What I was to MIRI, he was to CarideoTech, the tech company his biological father, Marcus, had started at just eighteen-years-old. By the time Marcus died, the company had been worth billions. Just as each of us McCraes had a stake in MIRI, the Carideos had a share in their father's company, with Austin holding the majority share since he was the CEO.

Theresa's niece and nephew who'd joined our family after their parents' deaths had already each been given a share in CarideoTech when they'd been born. Our half-siblings had stakes in both companies that added up to approximately the same total as the rest of us.

Fairness and equality had always been important to both Da and Theresa.

When our families had first come together, Austin and I hadn't gotten along at all, both of us used to taking on extra responsibilities since the deaths of our respective parents. The one place where we'd agreed, however, had been our work ethic. The tension between us had eased over the years, but we still both preferred to focus on our work rather than personal lives.

"I take that to mean, big brother, that nothing has changed for you on the romantic front."

Rome Carideo was six days short of a full year younger than me, putting him right between Brody and me age-wise. The two of them had always been quite the pair, their contrasting good looks and likable personalities making them easily more popular than the rest of us. Neither Austin nor I minded.

Austin gave Rome an exasperated look. “No, little brother. Things haven’t changed, because women haven’t changed. Besides, it’s not like you’re exactly settling down and giving Mom that daughter-in-law she’s been hinting about for years.”

Rome grinned. “What? And deprive so many women of my fine company?”

“Haven’t you already made your way through all the coeds at UCLA?” Brody asked. “I mean, I always figured that was why it’s taken you five years to get your MBA.”

Rome rolled his eyes and punched Brody in the arm. “Not all of us can decide to make booze and end up being brilliant at it. Some of us actually have to work at figuring out what we want to do with our lives.”

Before the two of them could start their usual back-and-forth banter, Keli returned. She was smiling and looked more relaxed than she had when she left, which I took to be a good sign.

“Hi.” She beamed at everyone. “What are we talking about?”

“School,” Brody said with that easy smile of his. “Rome is set to graduate this spring with an MBA.”

“Where do you go to school?” Keli asked.

“UCLA.” Rome’s eyes slid over to me and then back to Keli. “What are you studying?”

“Art history.”

“Are you hoping to become a teacher?” Brody asked. “I mean, what can you really do with an art history degree? Though I guess it’s easy to change your major, especially if you’ve just started. Are you a freshman, then?”

“Shut it, *clot-heid*,” I snapped at him. I hadn’t even thought to ask Keli how old she was, and the last thing I needed was my family to realize it. She was a freshman, which meant she was at least eighteen – or so I hoped. I’d need to find out soon, though.

Fuck.

“It’s all right,” Keli said, putting her hand on my arm. “Actually, I’m an artist myself. Art history gives me the opportunity to mingle with people in the art world, to make the sort of connections artists need to get their name out there.”

“What kind of artist are you?” My sister, Maggie, joined the conversation. She’d twisted her honey-blonde hair up into something that made her look older than seventeen. “I’m a musician.”

“That’s great.” Keli smiled. “I’m a painter. Sometimes I do landscapes, sometimes portraits. Depends on what mood I’m in. My versatility makes me quite the commodity. When someone realizes that I can paint whatever it is they want me to paint, I hope they’ll commission all sorts of work.”

I hadn’t really heard Keli talk much about her future plans, only that she liked to paint and enjoyed her art history classes. Those conversations had come out of my having seen the books in her dorm room and not wanting the silence to stretch out between bouts of sex.

“That’s what I want to do,” Maggie said. “Well, with music, not paint, but you get the idea.”

The pair started talking to each other, their shared passion making them both animated and clearly enjoying themselves.

“Is it just me, or does your girl – sorry, your *friend* – sound and look more like a teenager daydreaming rather than a college student working toward a career?” Rome’s voice was pitched low, so only Austin, Brody, and I could hear him.

I didn’t respond. The uneasy feeling in my stomach made me move asking her age to the top of my priority list. We weren’t even close to serious, but I needed to make sure I hadn’t done something immensely foolish.

FIVE

“WE COULD HAVE STAYED AT YOUR PARENTS’ HOUSE IF YOU WANTED TO,” Keli said as our driver took us back to the hotel. “I hope you didn’t feel like you had to get a room just because I’m with you.”

I shook my head. “I was glad to have a reason to stay at a hotel. I love my family, but I sleep much better knowing my brothers won’t be sneaking into my room in the middle of the night to dump cold water on me or steal my clothes.”

She laughed. “Which brothers? I mean, seriously, you have so many of them.”

“Usually Brody and Rome, but they’ve passed the mantles of mischief makers to Sean and Xander, the younger twins.” I paused, then asked, “You know, Maggie will be eighteen in February. How close is that to your birthday?”

If Keli suspected that I really wanted to find out how old she was, she didn’t show it. “I actually turned nineteen a few days before you and I met.”

Relief went through me. Keli wasn’t a barely eighteen co-ed. Aye, there was still a five-year age difference, but it wasn’t as if either of us was doing anything more than having fun. My family had simply overthought the meaning behind me bringing Keli tonight. I’d enjoyed the time we’d spent together, and I had felt for her, being away from home during a holiday.

“What about you? When’s your birthday?”

“July twentieth.” I didn’t tell her how old I was, and she didn’t ask. If she didn’t care, that was fine with me.

“What time is our flight leaving tomorrow?” she asked.

“I told the pilot I want to be wheels up by eight o’clock at the latest since

he's flying Fury and Cory to Stanford in the afternoon. No one else has to be back by a specific time."

"Does that mean we'll be able to have some fun when we get back to our room?" She put her hand on my thigh and leaned close enough for her breasts to press against my arm. "I mean, if you want to get to bed early, I completely understand, but I'm not exactly *tired* right now, you know?"

I wrapped a curl around my finger. "I can think of a few things I'd like to do before turning in for the night."

Without even a glance toward the front of the car, Keli's hand moved from my leg to my crotch. As she squeezed my cock through my pants, her mouth went to my neck. I shifted in my seat, sliding my hand up her dress and between her legs. The last ten minutes we had before reaching the hotel would be prime foreplay...and it made me think she wouldn't be opposed to an idea that had just popped into my head.

By the time our driver opened the car door for us, Keli was soaked, and my cock was pressed painfully against my zipper. After I got out, I draped my jacket over my arm, holding it in front of me as I reached out my hand to Keli.

I thought it likely that most people who saw us would write off her flushed appearance as weather-induced, but I didn't actually mind if anyone suspected what we had been up to in the car. I doubted I'd have much in the way of anonymity once MIRI's reputation spread. I planned to enjoy the privacy I had for as long as it lasted. I enjoyed the work I did for MIRI, and I enjoyed the influence and money that came with being the CEO, but I wasn't a person who sought the spotlight.

When the elevator door closed, Keli put her mouth as close to my ear as she could get. "Want me to go down on you here? I bet I could get you off before we get to the room."

"Cameras, *m'eudail*." I cupped her face, running a thumb over her lower lip, sorely tempted to take her up on the offer. "Or do you like the thought of someone watching us?"

Her breathing quickened, and her pupils dilated, giving me her answer without words.

Aye, this would be enjoyable.

"When we get into our room, I want you to open the curtains, and then undress."

She shivered, but the way her eyes devoured me, it was a positive

reaction, not a negative one; further confirmation that she would go along with my suggestion for a bit of minor exhibitionism. The room was high enough and had tinted windows, making the chance of anyone seeing us practically nothing, but the idea of it was thrilling enough.

As I opened the door to our room, I half-expected her to change her mind. I'd respect whatever it was she wanted or didn't want to do, but I was curious as to how far she would go. I'd never considered myself particularly 'kinky' when it came to sex, but I wasn't strictly vanilla either, and I couldn't deny that the thought of showing her off while we fucked turned me on.

Keli didn't even hesitate, going straight to the window as I closed the door. I heard the curtains go back as I turned to hang my jacket on the hook next to the door. Before I'd toed off my shoes, her dress was in a puddle at her feet, and she had bent over to take off her heels.

"Keep them on," I said. "You have amazing legs."

Her eyes practically glowed as she unhooked her bra and let it join her dress. Taking off her panties became a show as she eased the tiny lace undergarment over her hips and then down her thighs before letting them drop as well.

I unbuttoned the top two buttons of my shirt and then my cuffs, taking deliberate steps toward her with each one. My eyes stayed on her while I rolled up my sleeves, and the raw desire on her face was as much an aphrodisiac as her nudity.

I'd never been unpopular with women, but growing up with brothers who not only had looks but charisma and charm meant that I'd rarely been the first choice. Tonight, Keli hadn't shown the slightest interest in any of my brothers, and I planned to show her my appreciation.

I was still a few steps away when I said, "Turn around."

She did, her gaze automatically seeking out mine in our reflections. I continued watching her as I unzipped my pants and finally released the pressure on my aching erection. I stroked myself as I took the last steps needed to put me only a couple inches from her.

"Are you still wet?" I asked, my free hand moving down her spine and over one firm ass cheek.

She nodded, skin flushing a delicious shade of pink.

"I think I should check." My hand dipped between her legs, and she widened her stance to allow my fingers room to slide inside. "*Shite*. That's not wet, lass. That's soaking."

“Fuck me.” She pushed back against my hand. “Please. I need it.”

I pressed my lips to her shoulder blade. “Shh, *m’eudail*. I’ll give you what you need.”

A tearing sound. Latex unrolling and encasing. A hand on the small of her back, bending her forward just enough to get the angle right. Then I was pushing into her.

She squeezed me like a vice, almost to the point of pain, and I cursed. Our teasing in the car had wound us both tight, and I had no doubt we’d only last a few minutes. Not that it mattered. Despite the time of our flight in the morning, we had all night. The best thing about having a private jet was that it made sleeping during a flight quite comfortable.

Keli’s hands went to the window, steadying her as I filled her completely. Her mouth was open, her eyes glazed. Her muscles quivering around me. I slid my hands up her sides and cupped her breasts, teasing her nipples into hard points before reaching higher and taking her wrists in my hands. As I pulled her arms behind her, she came out of her daze enough to give me a questioning look.

“Leverage,” I explained as I withdrew all but the first inch.

If she didn’t understand what I meant by the word, she figured it out only seconds later when I held her wrists tight and used them to pull her back on my cock at the same time I drove forward. She keened as I bottomed out, her entire body shaking. A second thrust made her come, and that was when she began to beg.

“More. Please don’t stop. Please. Please. Alec. Fuck. Oh, fuck yes!”

Her words poured over me until they became meaningless. All that mattered was that she didn’t want me to stop. I couldn’t tell if she came again or if she hadn’t stopped coming from the first orgasm, but her entire body was a trembling, keening mass.

When I felt my balls draw up and the pressure inside me reach that critical tipping point, I released her wrists and wrapped my arms around her. Two final, jerky thrusts, and I came, holding her to me as we both staggered. Even through the haze of pleasure, I managed to get us to the floor without dropping, and that’s where we stayed as we finished riding out our high.

SIX

WE ARRIVED BACK IN SEATTLE ON SUNDAY MORNING, AND I'D HAD A TAXI drop Keli off at her dorm before taking me back to my place. I could have simply given her money for the cab and taken one of my own, but I would have felt like a jerk, sending her away with cab fare after we'd spent the weekend together. I'd even walked her to the door of her room so she didn't feel as if I was blowing her off.

In hindsight, that probably hadn't been the best way to handle things.

That particular thought struck me yesterday evening when I'd sent yet another of Keli's calls to voicemail. Monday, she'd sent me a text to say good morning, and I'd returned an appropriate and polite response, assuming that would be the end of it. An hour later, I'd ignored a call from her, assuming it had been a misdial, even after I'd seen she'd left a voicemail.

Then I'd listened to it.

"Hey, it's Keli. I just wanted to see if you wanted to get some lunch. It's meatloaf day at the cafeteria, and that just doesn't sound appetizing. So, um, call me or text to let me know when you want to go. Bye."

I sent a text telling her that I'd planned to work through lunch, but that I'd appreciated the invitation. I thought that had been the end of it.

I'd been wrong again.

Between Monday and yesterday, she'd sent me two dozen texts and had called at least six times. I'd tried ignoring her, and I'd tried being polite, but she either hadn't understood anything I told her, or she hadn't cared that I'd been working.

The next text that came through was one too many.

It's almost noon, and I was thinking about picking up some Chinese food

for lunch. I thought I could bring it by and we could have a picnic in your office. Just let me know what you want.

I sighed and pinched the bridge of my nose. She had to stop. I'd tolerated this for two entire days. I had too much work to do today to deal with continual interruptions.

I pressed the voice-to-text button and dictated my message. "I have important work to do as MIRI will be closed for the holiday, and it is difficult for me to accomplish anything if I'm constantly being distracted by your calls and messages. I need you to stop."

After sending it, I turned back to my computer and spent the next uninterrupted ninety minutes answering every email still in my inbox and then dictating several more that needed to be sent prior to end of business today.

I had a few things I could do during a half-day tomorrow, but anything where I needed to interact with other businesses had to be done today, which meant I was on a bit of a deadline. It wasn't until my intercom buzzed that I realized how long I'd been working uninterrupted.

"Yes?"

"Alec, Mr. Gervelis is on line two. He has a question regarding next week's meeting." Tuesday had one of those perfect assistant voices. Calm, polite, professional...and she could scare the shit out of anyone who crossed her.

"Thank you. I'll take it now."

The call was simple enough to handle, but as I hung up, I realized that it had been two hours, and I hadn't heard from Keli at all. Not even a response to my text.

I frowned. I hadn't known her long, but it seemed out-of-character for her to not at least acknowledge a message. I reached for my phone, opening up our conversation thread.

Five minutes later, I was mentally kicking myself for how absolutely rude my text had been. I'd reacted out of irritation rather than logical thought. While I'd never had a problem keeping my cool when it came to business, my personal life, it seemed, wasn't quite up to the same standard.

A text message wouldn't be a worthy enough apology. She and I weren't in a relationship, but I'd been rude for no reason other than her not understanding that I needed to work uninterrupted. And I'd been a right arse for being upset when I had given her no inkling of what I felt or thought.

I placed the call, fully prepared to apologize to her voicemail, as it would have served me right for her to send my call straight there.

Except she didn't.

"Alec?" Her voice was strange, as if she was congested.

I really hoped she hadn't been crying because of what I'd done.

"Keli, good afternoon." I closed my eyes. "I'm sorry, that sounded...*shite*..." I sighed. "I called to apologize for my text. It was abrupt and rude."

When I paused, she said, "Go on."

"I needed to put in extra work these past few days because MIRI is closed tomorrow and Christmas, but I had no right to expect you to know any of that. I'm sorry I behaved so abominably."

"Thank you, Alec, for telling me and for apologizing." Her words sounded sincere. "I'm so sorry about calling you so much. I didn't even think about you having to work. You know how it is when you're in college. You get that big break between semesters, and it completely screws up your whole internal clock, right?"

I didn't, actually, remember that from college, but that was most likely because I didn't easily lose track of time. And never during the week. I always knew when it was. But that wasn't something that needed to be addressed at this moment. What I did need, however, was to feel like less of a bastard. Fortunately, I had an idea of how to do that.

"Let me apologize properly," I said. "Since neither of us have plans for the holiday, will you let me buy you dinner tomorrow evening?"

SEVEN

THE GOLDFINCH TAVERN AT THE FOUR SEASONS HOTEL WASN'T THE SORT OF place that anyone could call the day before Christmas Eve and obtain a reservation at an excellent table.

It *was* the sort of place that a wealthy and well-connected businessman could use their connections to get a reservation for a great table...and have a bit of a pass if attire wasn't quite as fancy as the other patrons.

Keli wasn't exactly underdressed as much as she was simply dressed. She wore a dark green number that clung to her curves in a way that made men sit up and take notice. Women too, though only some in admiration. Most didn't appear pleased at the attention being taken from them and turned toward a beautiful young woman.

As aggravated as I'd been at her only yesterday, right now, I was glad to be at her side. I didn't think of myself as a particularly prideful person, but I enjoyed the fact that everyone in the restaurant knew she was with me, at least for the time being.

Dinner with a beautiful woman on Christmas Eve trumped a glass of scotch alone at home.

"Do you do this a lot?" Keli asked after we ordered our drinks – nothing alcoholic since she wasn't yet twenty-one. "I mean, eat at hotels and fancy restaurants? Or do you have a private chef or something like that?"

For a moment, Austin's warning about women only seeing money signs echoed in the back of my head, but then I pushed it aside. She was just being inquisitive. She hadn't once made a request for me to pay for anything or buy her something, not even a hint about a Christmas present.

"As you've discovered, I tend to focus on my work." I smiled at her as I

answered. "I plan my meals around my work schedule."

"Okay, so you work a lot, but what do you do for fun?" She toyed with her napkin. "I mean, do you go to the movies? Concerts? The opera? Play sports?"

Her question wasn't one that should have stumped me, but it did. What was the last thing I'd done for the sheer pleasure of it? Aside from sex, of course, but I definitely wouldn't consider that a 'hobby.' Some of my brothers, however...

An answer popped into my head. "I enjoy classic jazz."

"Oh, okay." She sipped at her sparkling water. "I don't really know much about it. In fact, I'm pretty sure I've never heard any sort of jazz."

"What type of music do you like then?" I asked, grateful for a question I could turn back to her for conversation.

"I absolutely love Lady Antebellum. I mean, 'Need You Now' is so beautiful, isn't it?"

It was my turn to be baffled. "I've never heard of her." The quirk of Keli's lips told me she was trying not to laugh at whatever blunder I'd made.

"What about Katy Perry? Bruno Mars?"

I shook my head. "I'm partial to Doug Watkins and Rufus Harley."

"I have no clue who they are." She laughed. "I don't think we're going to find common ground there."

"I have to agree."

Our appetizers came, giving us something to do besides talk for a few minutes. Even with food, however, the silence between us grew stiff. Before it could get too uncomfortably awkward, Keli asked another question.

"Did you go see *Deathly Hallows* opening day?"

It took me a moment to realize that she was referring to the first part of the last *Harry Potter* book. "No, I don't generally go to the movie theater."

"But you've read the books, right? I mean, you're British like J.K. Rowling, so you must've read them as a kid. It's got to be required reading or something over there."

I chose the easiest way to answer. "I've never been much of a reader, though I do enjoy the occasional audiobook."

"I'm guessing since you don't go to the movies, you haven't seen *Black Swan* either."

"I'm sorry, no." After a pause, I asked a question of my own. "Who are some of your biggest influences? Artistically, I mean."

Her face lit up. “I love Rembrandt. His painting *The Jewish Bride* is one of my all-time favorites. Oh, and Henri Matisse. Monet, of course, and van Gogh.”

“I’ve heard of three of them, though I’m not familiar with their works beyond their most popular.” I thanked the waiter who set my meal in front of me and then turned my attention back to Keli. “I appreciate the beauty of art, but I’m far from a scholar on the subject. You can tell me about them if you like.”

For the next twenty minutes or so, I listened to her describing the artists she’d mentioned. Her idea that she would be discovered and skyrocket to fame and fortune wasn’t realistic, but she did have passion for the subject.

I knew better than anyone that a person’s determination, enthusiasm, and hard work was often more responsible for their success than their measure of talent. A tenacious artist willing to put in the time and effort could go further than someone with more talent but less drive.

“I feel like I’m doing all the talking,” Keli said. She drained the last of her water, and a waiter appeared to refill her glass. “I want to know more about you. Do you dance?”

“On occasion,” I admitted. “I’m not one to frequent dance clubs, but I have been known to step out a time or two. I also work out to stay in shape, but I’m not a – what’s the American phrase – *gym rat*.”

“Well, your time in the gym has definitely paid off.” Her eyes moved over my body, the desire in them making my cock stir. “Please tell me you weren’t planning on just dropping me off at my dorm.”

I shifted in my seat. “I could speak to someone here about renting a room for the night. If you’re interested, of course.”

A sultry smile curved her lips. “I’m very interested. I even bought myself a little something, just in case. I’m sure you’ll like it too. I’ll give you a hint. It’s under my dress.”

I signaled to the waiter. The faster we could get to a room, the faster I could unwrap my unexpected Christmas present.

EIGHT

“I CAN’T BELIEVE YOU GOT THE GOVERNOR’S SUITE,” KELI SAID AGAIN, grinning from ear to ear.

“I had to sign away my firstborn, but it was worth it.” My attempt at a joke made me mentally cringe.

When it came to business, I could talk about anything MIRI did, about the people who worked there, the policies and procedures for every position. Small talk, however, hadn’t ever come easily for me. Neither had trust. Both were reasons I wasn’t looking for a serious relationship. Maybe I never would be.

“Holy shit! This place is awesome!” Keli practically ran into the room. I half-expected her to jump on one of the beds like a five-year-old.

It was a beautiful suite.

I hung up my jacket and took off my shoes, watching her bounce around the room, opening drawers and doors, checking what was in the fridge. By the time she’d finished exploring, I’d also taken off my tie, unbuttoned my dress shirt, and taken a seat in a big, comfortable armchair.

“You look like you’re waiting for something,” Keli said as she turned around and found me watching her, a bemused expression on my face.

“I believe you promised to show me what was under your dress.”

A glint came into her eyes as she reached for the zipper behind her. When the dress fell away, it revealed a matching crimson bra and panty set. Her pale nipples were visible behind the sheer lace, the cut of it such that her breasts appeared to be on the verge of spilling over. She did a slow turn to let me appreciate the entire view. The panties were little more than a tiny triangle in front, a strip between her cheeks, and little bows on each hip.

“Do you like it?” She walked toward me, putting a little extra sway into her hips.

“I do,” I answered honestly.

The awkward parts of our dinner didn’t seem as important as they had less than thirty minutes ago.

When she reached me, she bent over, putting her breasts right at eye level. While her hands were busy with my pants, I kissed the tops of her breasts, nipped the fair skin until she shivered. Instead of straightening, however, she went to her knees.

“Condom?” she asked.

“Wallet in my right back pocket.” I gestured to the pants on the ground. I held out my hand for it, but she shook her head.

“I have a little trick to show you.” She winked at me as she opened the packet.

I watched as she used her mouth to roll the condom over my cock. The heat through the smooth latex was something new...and damn sexy. She took me deep, the end of my shaft going into her throat and her nose bumping my pubic bone.

“Fuck!” I buried my fingers in her hair, resisting the urge to hold her in place. “Keli...”

She raised her head, letting my cock slip from between her lips an inch at a time. Once free, it curled up toward my stomach, and I wrapped my hand around it. She started to climb onto my lap.

“Turn around, lass,” I said. “I want to admire you while we fuck.”

“I like that idea.”

She faced the mirror, her eyes locking with my reflection as she pulled aside her panties and lowered herself onto my cock. Her hips rocked back and forth as she leaned against my chest. One arm curved up behind her to wrap around my neck, her nails scratching at the base of my skull.

Using both the leverage her position gave her and her long legs, she began to ride me. I put my hand on her stomach, watching in the mirror as my cock disappeared and reappeared with the fall and rise of her body. It should have been mesmerizing, hypnotizing. I should have been utterly fixated on the hard points of her nipples pushing against the fabric of her bra. I should have been unable to think about anything but this beautiful woman and the way our bodies came together.

Instead, my admiration was strangely detached. The feel of her skin

against mine, the friction and pressure of her pussy around my cock, were enjoyable but not all-consuming. The pleasure building inside me promised an imminent and satisfying release, an answer to my physical needs. And I'd ensure that she reached hers first.

I moved the hand on her stomach down and under the little triangle of fabric covering her. My fingers found her clit easily enough, and she whimpered the moment I touched it.

Perfect.

"Come for me." I put my mouth at her ear, flicked my tongue against her earlobe. "I want you to come."

Quick back and forth passes over her clit had her gasping in seconds and writhing in less than a minute. I wrapped an arm around her waist, holding her in place as I drove her toward climax. She came with a scream, muscles clamping down hard enough to make me curse even as I followed.

Everything went white, then gray, and then black.

KELI SLEPT on as I slid out from under the covers and made my way to the bathroom. I wasn't usually a fan of the big, fluffy robes that hotels provided for guests, but I didn't want to turn on any lights to search for my clothes, so I put the robe on before going out to the main room.

I could have stayed nude, since it wasn't as if Keli hadn't seen me naked more than once, but I wasn't in a particularly amorous mood at the moment, and I'd never been one to walk around completely unclothed without sex being a factor.

A blanket of fresh snow greeted me as I opened the curtains enough for me to see outside. It wasn't much, and it wouldn't last long, but it was beautiful to look at while it was here.

A white Christmas.

I turned my back to the view and went to the kitchenette to make myself some coffee. I wasn't the sort of person who needed coffee to wake up, but it was part of my routine, and it was more than time for me to return to it. I'd never been irresponsible or lazy, but in college, I'd seen far too many classmates who had burned out because they'd never let up.

I'd discovered that if I allowed myself a few days to spend less time

working – one or two weekends a year – my productivity remained high. Since taking over MIRI, I hadn't done anything but work, with the only exception being annual family functions.

After Keli and I checked out this morning, I would spend the rest of the day at home on my laptop, going over the schedule for the upcoming three-and-a-half-day week. With New Year's Eve being on a Thursday, I'd decided to allow employees to leave after lunch if they so chose. Those who stayed until the end of their usual day would receive holiday pay.

I planned to return to my normal twelve-to-fourteen-hour days, and I hoped that the additional time off or the extra pay would prompt people to do their best work as we finished up the year.

I'd spend next weekend preparing for the January fourth meeting where everyone would receive their department goals for the year, the schedules I expected us to keep, as well as any changes I might decide to implement. They could also set up appointments with me to discuss anything that came to their mind.

The Seattle branch of MIRI had been open less than six months, but I fully intended what we did this year to become standard practice, at least in principle. I understood the need for companies to adapt, to learn, but the precedent I wanted to set was one of discipline and pride in our work.

The fact that I was in a hotel, drinking coffee on a snowy Christmas morning when I had a beautiful, naked woman in bed nearby was a testament to where my thoughts were once again focused. I enjoyed my time with Keli, and we had good sexual chemistry, but the physical could only hold my attention for so long. And if dinner last night had been any indication, sex was all we had.

As I heard movement from the other room, I resigned myself to breakfast conversation. Anything less would be rude, and Keli deserved better than that. I might not want things between us to go much further, but I didn't want to hurt her. I was unsure if I was ready to completely cut things off, but the end was coming. And it would probably be sooner rather than later.

NINE

HIRING MIRANDA NEWTON HAD BEEN A STROKE OF GENIUS ON MY PART. I'D interviewed three people for the department head position, and she'd been the one with the least practical experience, but there had been a determination in her that I'd recognized. She had a thirst to prove herself and the talent to make it happen. She worked as hard as I did, and I didn't offer that compliment lightly.

In fact, she was the reason I'd agreed to go to Liam Barclay's New Year's Eve party with Keli rather than sitting at home, working. It wasn't because Miranda had talked me into going, but rather that she'd done such outstanding work that I actually didn't have anything to work on until Monday when the information I needed for my first project of the year would be delivered.

"I still can't believe you know Liam Barclay," Keli said as she looked around us in awe. "I mean, I knew you had money, but I didn't realize you *knew* important people like Liam. Real celebrities."

I probably should have been insulted by the comment, but the fact that it didn't bother me spoke volumes regarding how important Keli's opinion of me was. Besides, it had been more thoughtless and poorly worded than cruel. In her mind, someone who was busy working in an office more than forty hours a week wouldn't commonly associate with a reality show star who rented out the Sky View Observatory for three hundred people on New Year's Eve.

"Liam has a head for business," I said as Keli handed her wrap to the woman at the door. "We've worked together on a few things."

"Like what? And did you personally work with him, or was it like a 'have

your people call my people' thing?"

I gave her a small smile. "I'm afraid I can't be sharing that with anyone. The details of our dealings are confidential."

"You mean you don't tell *anyone* about anything you do?"

"Not all of our work is confidential but, aye, many of our clients hold non-disclosure agreements."

"Does that mean you can't even tell me something tiny?" She batted her eyes at me, the grin she wore telling me she was at least half-joking.

"I'm afraid not." I breathed a silent sigh of relief as I spotted Liam coming our way. "But I can introduce you to him."

"Alec!" His teeth flashed white against his dark skin. "I'm glad you could make it."

We shook hands, Liam's grip as strong as ever. "Liam, I'd like you to meet Keli Miller. Keli, meet Liam Barclay."

"I am such a huge fan," Keli gushed. "I mean, I voted for you every round on *Daredevil Island*. I knew you were going to win the first time I saw you. And I subscribe to your YouTube channel too. My roommate and I watch it all the time."

"Thank you," Liam said, giving Keli a winning smile. "Now, if you'll excuse me, my brother just arrived."

"His *brother*?!" Keli managed a stage whisper as Liam headed off. "Is it Sean or Ian?"

"I'm not sure," I answered without looking. "I've never met either of them."

"Oh." She sounded disappointed, but only for a few seconds because she spotted someone else she recognized. "Is that Kinsley?"

"I don't know who that is." I gave Keli a smile to let her know I wasn't annoyed at her enthusiasm. It was simply my lack of knowledge in these particular circles.

"We have to meet her." She grabbed my hand and dragged me off after a petite woman with purple hair.

I had a feeling this was going to be the longest night of the year.

TWO HOURS of noise and the press of bodies were more than enough to

remind me why I generally stayed away from any parties that weren't either family or necessary for business. As Keli dragged me from one celebrity to the next, I also remembered why I didn't bring dates to anything work-related. She wasn't being rude or crossing any lines, but she clearly thrived in this sort of environment. I did not.

"Thank you so much for bringing me," Keli said as we finally took a break from mingling. "I mean, you said a New Year's Eve party, and I was thinking it'd be like loud music and drunk people grinding on each other. I never in a million years would've thought up something like this."

"I'm glad you're enjoying yourself." The sentiment itself was true, but I could honestly say that I had no desire to ever do this again. Granted, the view from up here was amazing, but even that didn't make up for the crowd.

"It's almost midnight," she said. A mischievous glint came into her eyes. "I have an idea. Come on."

She took my hand and pulled me after her. It wasn't until I spotted the restroom sign that I realized what she was doing. My dick gave an interested twitch. Perhaps the year would end with a bang, as they say.

The family bathroom was empty, and since no one here had any children with them, I felt no guilt over following Keli inside and locking the door behind me. A hint of exhibitionism was one thing. Having a client or one of his friends walk in on me having sex in the bathroom was something completely different.

By the time I turned back toward her, Keli was sitting on the sink counter, twirling a pair of black panties on her finger and giving me a sultry smile.

I wrapped my hand around the back of her neck, pulling her face toward me. My mouth crashed into hers, and my free hand grabbed her underwear and pocketed them. Her tongue tangled with mine, and she tugged my shirt out of my pants. The muscles in my stomach tightened as she ran her hands over me. I squeezed her breast over her dress, and her nipple hardened.

"Condom?" she asked before lightly biting my jaw.

I closed my eyes. "Shite." I hadn't put a new one in my wallet yet.

She bit her bottom lip. "That's okay. There are other ways to get off."

Her mouth was back on mine as she took my hand and slid it under her skirt. She moaned as I lightly stroked the back of my fingers across her smooth skin. She'd waxed recently.

I didn't know when she'd undone my pants, but suddenly her fingers were curling around my semi-hard cock. I cursed, taking her bottom lip

between my teeth and worrying at it. The angle I had was awkward, but I managed to slide a finger into her. I matched her rhythm, pushing inside when her hand moved up my shaft, pulling back when she went down.

“Ya kin be rougher than that, lass.” My brogue thickened as the pressure inside me built. “Ya willna break me.”

She tightened her grip, and my eyes closed. “Like that?”

“Aye.” I shoved a second finger inside her. In and out, I twisted them every other time, my thumb strumming over her clit.

She whimpered as my knuckles rubbed against her g-spot, and her forehead fell forward onto my shoulder. Losing her rhythm, she swiped her thumb over the head before sliding her hand down to the base. Her fist worked in short, erratic movements, and her breathing came in bursts that told me she was close. Fingernails lightly scratched up and then down my sensitive shaft, sending a bolt of pleasure through me.

Noise from outside permeated the room. Counting. A *countdown*. As the other guests chanted from ten...nine...eight...

Keli gasped, her body jerking forward. Her muscles clamped down on my fingers, but my thumb was still free. I pressed it hard against her clit, and she bit down on my shoulder to keep her cries muffled. The pressure through my jacket and shirt wasn't much, but the knowledge that I'd made her lose herself so completely was heady. Her hand stilled, all of her focus on her own orgasm, but I was close enough that I didn't need much more stimulus. My hips rocked forward and then back again, pushing my cock through the circle of her fingers once...twice...

“Fuck.”

In the background, I could hear people yelling, but my brain wasn't quite functioning enough yet to place the sound.

“Happy New Year,” Keli murmured as she rested her head on my shoulder.

Right. New Year.

As my post-orgasmic haze cleared, I realized what a mess we'd made of ourselves. There was only so much clean-up we could do here, and I was grateful for it. Perhaps it made me a jerk, but I wasn't interested in lingering here any longer, and it was only due in part to this.

I stepped back, grimacing at the feel of my now-wet boxer briefs against my skin. I washed my hands in silence, then handed Keli a damp paper towel before getting one for myself. As I did the best I could with what I had, my

mind raced, searching for a way to tell her I wanted to leave without coming across like a cad.

Even after I figured that out, I knew I had other things to deal with as well. Like how I would explain dropping her off at her dorm rather than having her come home with me or getting another hotel room together. Or how, now that the holidays were over, there'd be no more long hours spent in bed or meals in expensive restaurants. If we saw each other, it'd only be for mutually beneficial sex, and the trysts would be short.

I just hoped our incompatibility everywhere but in sex was as clear to her as it was to me. She was a sweet, funny young woman...but she wasn't for me.

No one was.

TEN

KELI HAD UNDERSTOOD THINGS BETTER THAN I'D EXPECTED. MY explanation that I had an important project that needed my attention had been readily accepted. Perhaps I had misjudged her intentions, mistaking her boredom at being alone at university between semesters for a clingy personality.

Ester had come back less than a week after New Year's, complaining about how her parents had given her a ten o'clock curfew, and then classes had started two weeks ago. With Keli being busy, she hadn't bombarded me with calls or texts or invitations.

We'd sent messages back and forth a few times over the last three-and-a-half weeks, mostly setting up meetings for quick rounds of sex whenever the two of us had breaks in our hectic schedules. If she wanted more, she hadn't said anything, and I could hardly be expected to read her mind.

I hadn't lied about the project, though I did feel slightly guilty at implying it was entirely my responsibility and no one else could handle it. I could have delegated a few things, but it needed to be perfect. I could have Miranda take point and completely trust that she would do a great job. This, however, needed my personal attention. It had nothing to do with having an excuse to slow things down with Keli without actually having to talk about anything real.

I hadn't heard from her in two days, so when she called in the middle of the afternoon and I'd just finished dictating an email, I answered.

"Alec! I'm so glad you're there!" Her voice was almost shrill with excitement. "I know you've been super busy at work, and I would have waited if it'd been anything else, but when I got the news, I just had to tell

you because it's so amazing—”

“Keli, what is it?” I hated interrupting, especially since she was clearly happy, but I had a feeling if I didn't, she'd forget to breathe at some point.

“Oh, sorry. I was talking too fast. I do that sometimes.”

Just when I was about to remind her that she still hadn't shared her news, she finally did just that.

“I have an artist showcase!!”

At least this wasn't an answer I needed to think about. “Congratulations! That's wonderful!”

“Thanks.”

And then she was off again, but I didn't plan on stopping her this time. At least not right away. Even in the short time we'd known each other, I knew how important this was to her, how she'd see it as the beginning of the grand life she foresaw for herself. I'd have to have been the worst sort of bastard to not let her share this moment.

“...so even though I'm only a freshman, Professor Elliot said that I could take Ambrose's spot. It's on February nineteenth, but I already have more than twelve paintings, so the hardest part will be deciding what I want to use. Ester said she'd help me choose, which is good because I've never been able to choose a favorite, let alone which ones I should use for my first ever showcase...”

I was relieved to hear she wasn't asking me to help her choose paintings because I knew absolutely nothing about art. I also suspected that it would be a fairly lengthy process.

“...I know you have a lot you're working on, but I was wondering if you might be able to get off on the nineteenth and come to the show, at least for a little while. I figured that if I told you ahead of time, you could maybe plan for it or something like that.”

When she paused, I knew she was expecting an answer. I chose my words carefully, not wanting her to read more into it, but knowing that she also needed someone to be proud of her. She deserved that.

“I'd be honored to come to your showcase.”

“Thank you.” Her tone softened. “I don't think my parents will be able to make it, so it'll be nice to have you there.”

No pressure...

ELEVEN

IT HAD BEEN SURPRISINGLY EASY TO ENSURE THAT FEBRUARY NINETEENTH was cleared off my schedule. What hadn't been easy over the last couple weeks was convincing myself that I'd made a wise decision committing to going to this showcase.

While Keli hadn't said anything specific to make me think she thought this made us something more than we were, my intuition said that I might need to have a serious discussion with her sometime soon.

Not tonight, though.

Keli had needed to be at the showcase early to set up her paintings, which meant I arrived on my own, a few minutes after the showcase began. I'd dressed well, though not in a suit, and saw that I'd chosen wisely. The others walking around the gallery were attired similarly, which meant I blended in, even if I didn't feel as though I did.

Once inside, I stepped to the side and scanned above the crowd, looking for Keli. It took a minute or two, but I finally spotted those familiar dark curls piled up on her head in some sort of haphazard thing. The gallery was large enough that once everyone spread out, it wasn't difficult for me to make my way across the room to where Keli stood, her back to me.

"Good evening," I said, stopping a foot or so behind her. She turned around, and I smiled at her. "You look lovely."

"Thank you." She leaned toward me expectantly, and I bent down, kissing the corner of her mouth in a chaste but not entirely platonic kiss. She wore the same dress she'd worn on Christmas Eve, and it looked just as good now as it had then.

"Do I get a personal tour through your contributions?" I asked as I

stepped up to put my hand on the small of her back.

“Of course.” She beamed up at me and gestured in front of us. “This is the first one. I call it *Incriminating Evidence*.”

“Why that particular title?” I asked as I studied the painting in front of me.

The content was fairly simple. A woman standing on a cliff, overlooking a body of water. The lake was surrounded by a forest, and all that could be seen of the woman was her back. It was a nice picture, and the fact that I couldn’t see anything spectacular probably had more to do with my lack of artistic knowledge than it did with her skill.

“When I was working on this one, I was in high school, and this jerk was harassing the entire art club. I was trying to ignore him, and when he got in my face and asked what I was drawing, I snapped back that I was drawing the lake where I’d dump his body.”

Incriminating Evidence.

I chuckled. “I like it.”

“Not all of them have stories like that,” she said.

“What’s next?” I asked.

She pointed to the painting on the right. “That one’s *Dancing Lilies*.”

This title, I could understand. In a way. Five lilies, one in each corner and one in the center. I wasn’t quite sure why they were dancing, or the point of the painting, but it was nice.

One by one, she showed me her work and told me the titles of each one. Every time, I expressed my approval and appreciation. I didn’t tell her that I didn’t have much knowledge when it came to art, not wanting her to think I was trying to belittle her work.

While we stood in front of one she’d named *Untitled Solitude*, two men came up behind us. A small, almost secret smile curved Keli’s lips, and I realized she wanted to hear what these men had to say about her work.

“The quality of work in this year’s showcase isn’t up to par with previous years.” The taller of the two men spoke first. “I told Ray that quality should take precedence over quantity, but he insisted that people would rather dismiss a few lesser artists than see empty spaces.”

I hoped the pair were simply finishing up a conversation they’d been having, and not talking specifically about Keli’s work. Perhaps it would be better for all of us if I moved Keli away from them, but I had come too late to the realization.

“Take this, for example,” the tall man continued. “The artist has some talent, but their process is still clearly in its juvenile stage. They have yet to come into maturity. The title itself is enough to make that clear.”

“I agree,” the other man said. “With training and hard work, this artist could continue their art as a hobby, perhaps selling to the occasional painting to family and friends, maybe a doctor’s office, that sort of thing.”

I put my arm around Keli’s waist. “Let’s go, lass. You dinnae need to hear this.”

For a moment, I was worried that she’d resist, confront the men, make a scene, but her entire body seemed to fold in on itself as she nodded. I kept her close at my side as I maneuvered us through the crowd to the exit. Her head was down, hair concealing most of her face, and I hoped people were too busy looking at paintings and making pretentious conversation to notice that one of the artists was leaving before the evening was over.

I was glad I’d driven tonight because it meant we had only a short distance to cover rather than having to stand outside, waiting for a car to arrive. I started the car to turn the heat on, but we didn’t go anywhere just yet. Getting her away from the showcase was one thing. Whether or not we left completely or went back inside after a few minutes was entirely up to her.

We sat in silence, but I didn’t push her to talk. I’d never been good at these sorts of conversations, ones where I was supposed to offer comfort or advice on something personal. Business advice, I could give, but how to make someone feel better after being insulted? I was completely out of my element.

“I don’t want to be here anymore,” Keli finally said. She stared straight ahead as she spoke, her voice quiet and flat.

“Back to your dorm room?”

She shook her head. “Ester’s working, and I don’t want to have to explain things to her when she gets back. She’ll want to hear all about it, and...I can’t.”

I’d intended to maintain distance between us, but I couldn’t very well drop her off at a hotel, not after what had just happened. I didn’t see any other option available that wouldn’t be rude. I needed to know one thing first.

“Do you want to be alone?”

She looked at me, eyes bright with unshed tears, bottom lip trembling. “No.”

“All right. You’re coming with me then.” Before I could list all the ways

this was a bad idea, I pulled the car out of my parking space and drove out of the lot.

Keli stared out the window as I drove, but she didn't seem to actually see anything until I pulled up to my house. Only after I turned off the car did she turn to me, a confused expression on her face.

"I thought we were going to a hotel. Where are we?"

"My house, but I can take you somewhere else if you'd prefer."

She shrugged, and that told me just how upset she really was. All the questions and irritations I'd had in my mind for the past few weeks weren't important right now. Keli was a sweet young woman, maybe a wee bit immature, but she was a good person.

The worst part was, the men at the gallery hadn't been trashing her work. If they had, she probably would have been able to completely dismiss their opinions. Extremes were easy to brush aside. Hearing that she was good but wouldn't ever be great...that was the sort of middle-line opinion that could tear into a person's confidence.

A great scotch was my favorite way to unwind after a bad day, but I doubted she'd want one of those. I didn't have anything else in the house I could offer her alcohol-wise. What I could do, however, was take her mind off things and make her feel good without contributing to underage drinking.

"Would you like some coffee or tea?" I asked as I took her coat. I put it on the hook next to mine, and she put her shoes on the rug beside mine.

"No, that's okay. Thanks anyway." Her voice was fairly flat, but she at least was looking around, showing interest in her surroundings. "You have a beautiful home."

"Thank you, lass." I followed her as she made her way into my living room. When she plopped down on the couch, I took a seat next to her. "Do you want to...talk?"

"Not really."

"Is there anything at all I can do?" What I did next would be determined by how she answered that question.

"Not unless you can make my brain stop thinking." She sighed.

I cupped her chin, turning her face toward mine. "I think I might be able to do that, at least for a while, if you're interested."

I covered her mouth with my own, coaxing her lips apart. My hands moved to her hair, my fingers taking apart her updo as I buried my fingers in her soft curls. She leaned into me, her hands fisting my shirt. Tension

radiated from her, and I knew a kiss, no matter how passionate, would be able to wipe away the words she'd already taken to heart.

She needed more.

I stretched her out underneath me, my hands moving over her curves, caressing and squeezing. I pushed up her dress, her skin soft beneath my palms, and kissed my way down her neck. When I went up on my knees, she scowled at me.

"I'll take care of you," I promised, reaching for her panties.

As I slid them down her long legs, I let my fingers brush her skin, and she shivered. Once I dropped her underwear on the floor, I leaned down and hooked her legs over my shoulders. The position was awkward, but my own comfort wasn't at the forefront of my mind. With her pleasure as my main focus, I palmed her ass and lifted her high enough for me to reach her with my mouth.

"Ahhh..." A sound of pure bliss came from her as I ran my tongue from her entrance up to her clit. Her head fell back.

"That's right, lass. Relax. Let me make you feel good." I kissed the inside of her thigh and then returned to her pussy.

I gripped her hips tight, holding her in place as I licked her slit, my tongue flicking back and forth over her clit. I made circles around it, pressed the flat of my tongue against it. She cursed, her words mixing with unintelligible sounds that became higher pitched the longer I worked.

When I took that bundle of nerves between my lips, her entire body shuddered, and she called out my name. I kept at her for another few seconds, letting up before the friction crossed the line into something painful. Only then did I ease her down onto the couch.

By the time she opened her eyes, I had a condom in my hand and a question on my lips. "Do you...?"

Her kiss-swollen mouth curved up in a lazy, sensual smile. "Oh, yes."

Moments later, I was thrusting inside her, driving her back toward orgasm even as I chased my own release. I pushed her knee toward her chest, opening her wider, taking her deeper. Her body rose to meet mine in the back-and-forth dance that we'd been doing since the first time we'd come together, and we danced well.

Our mouths collided, my tongue invading, mimicking the motions of our lower bodies, joining us in the same way countless people had been joined since the beginning of time. Her nails scratched the back of my neck, and the

bite of pain sent a jolt of pleasure down my spine.

I caught her bottom lip between my teeth, biting down a little harder than necessary, but it was what she wanted, apparently, because she came again with a cry. Muscles tightening around me, it took only three more strokes before I came too, a short burst of pleasure that was little more than fleeting, but enough to relieve some tension.

I took her with me as I turned, laying us both on our sides. I held her as her breathing slowed, and her racing pulse came back down. Absently, I ran my hand over her hair and down her spine, troubled. Something had shifted between us, at least it had for me.

“Thank you,” Keli whispered, kissing my chin. “I needed that.”

I pushed away my unease. I had made no promises for the future, just for tonight. I would hold that vow to her for the night. We didn’t need to add to our troubles.

“Well, lass, if you’re not fully satisfied, I will see to you again.” I kissed her forehead. “Perhaps in the shower this time, aye?”

TWELVE

I WAS STARTING TO WONDER IF MY FEARS HAD BEEN UNFOUNDED AGAIN. KELI hadn't taken our fucking marathon two nights ago as a declaration of intent. She'd gone home in the morning with just a smile and a thank you. Since then, I'd only received two short texts, both of which were simple and friendly.

Still, I felt as if I was in a holding pattern, as if something big was on its way, and I needed to prepare myself. I simply couldn't put my finger on what it could be.

Fortunately for me, that particular quandary was fairly easy to put aside since I was a firm believer in fact and reason. Gut instinct and intuition was well and good to help with business decisions, but I didn't believe in fate or destiny or karma.

My phone rang, and the number on the screen surprised me. Not because I knew it, but because it wasn't a local call. The country code was one I knew well.

Scotland.

"Hello?"

"Haw, Alec, fuckin' walloper." The man on the other end of the call laughed, and it was that riotous sound that gave me his identity even more than the Scots words and accent.

"Duncan?"

"Aye, ya dobber."

"Gies peace man, wheesht." The response was as automatic as the return of my accent full force. No matter how American I could sound, two things always guaranteed I'd sound like I came from Brigadoon. Emotion and a

fellow Scot.

Another laugh. “Hou’s it gaun?”

Duncan MacLean and I had been children together in Edinburgh. We’d met during one of the lowest points of my life, a few weeks after my mother died. His family had just moved to our street, but I’d been too caught up in my grief to even notice. I’d been on my way home from school when four bullying bastards had decided insults about my intelligence weren’t cruel enough, and one made a negative comment about my mother.

I’d attacked, uncaring that I had been outnumbered four-to-one. I’d been in the middle of having my arse beaten when someone had come swinging a cricket bat.

Duncan MacLean.

After my family moved to the US, he and I had only seen each other on trips back home, but we had always been the sort of friends who didn’t need to speak on a regular basis. Whenever we spoke, our friendship had fallen right back together, no matter the years that had passed between us. When I’d gone to university, the first thing I’d done was reach out to him.

“Same’s always, ya ken?”

“Aye, ah ken. Still in Seattle?”

“Aye. Last I heard, ya were in Canada?”

He laughed. “Aye. Newfoundland, but I’m scunnert, want a change o’ scenery.”

“Yer always welcome here anytime ya visit, ya ken.” I didn’t even have to think about making an offer. I loved my family, but Duncan and I had no friction or responsibility between us, which made for a different sort of friendship.

“Aye, but I’m thinkin’ somethin’ a wee bit more...permanent. Ah been savin’ for a move. Open up a brewery. Buy a bar.”

“Yer off yer heid. Givin’ up the family business?” I couldn’t imagine him doing anything else. He’d started working in his family’s merchant fishing business when he was thirteen. Him taking over after his da died hadn’t even been a question. Him moving to Newfoundland had almost caused a breach in the family.

“Aye. The cousins want tae buy me oot.”

“Gregor and Malcolm?” I vaguely remembered them. A few years younger than us, they’d been nuisances, trailing along after us constantly.

“Aye. Good lads. They’ll do the family name proud, ya ken.”

A suspicion formed in my mind. “Yer not just calling to tell me yer headin’ my way.”

“I was wonderin’ if ya’d be willin’ tae sponsor me. Yer a citizen, right?”

“Aye. I have dual citizenship, like Da.” My other siblings who’d been born in Scotland had chosen to give up their Scottish citizenship when they’d been naturalized, but with MIRI still having a headquarters back home, it had made more sense for Da and me to have both. “I dinnae ken if that means I cannae sponsor you, but if I cannae, Brody will. Matter of fact, he’s into brewing as well.”

Brody and Duncan hadn’t been close friends, but they’d gotten along well enough for Brody to know that Duncan was trustworthy. I’d look into the law of the matter and reach out to my brother if necessary.

“Pure dead brilliant. Ah kent ah could count on the McCraes.”

“Aye. Always.” I paused, glancing at the clock. My next appointment wasn’t due for a while yet. “Now that we’ve got that done, I’d like to hear more about this bar of yers...”

THIRTEEN

I'D SPOKEN TOO SOON ABOUT KELI'S REACTION TO OUR NIGHT TOGETHER after her showcase. Again. I'd thought she'd settled into a casual pattern that would be acceptable to both of us. While she no longer inundated me with messages and calls, the content of her communication had shifted.

Not long after I'd ended the call with Duncan, I'd received a text from her stating that she had planned something for us to do the following evening. It hadn't been a "are you interested in" type of message either, but rather one that had assumed the two of us would spend that time together.

Even after I'd explained an increase in my workload due to one of my best employees, Miranda Newton, suddenly needing to move out of state to take care of her ailing father, Keli had continued with her attempts to insert herself into my life on a more regular basis.

Her persistence reminded me why I had never been interested in traditional dating. I enjoyed sex, as well as periodic accompaniment at business events, but this need to be together, to plan around each other's schedules, I had yet to meet the person for whom I'd be willing to do that. Casual sex, where I rarely slept with the same partner on multiple occasions, suited both my personality and my needs.

Conveying that to Keli, however, had become a challenge.

While I didn't want to hurt her, that wasn't the biggest problem I faced when it came to ending things with her. If she was the vindictive type, breaking things off with her could cause her to go to the media and trash not only my name, but my family's name, and that wasn't something I could allow.

Perhaps I was using this as an excuse to avoid a direct confrontation with

her, but it was a reasonable one. Also, I didn't think it made me a bad guy to not want to hurt her. Having a consequence that benefitted me was simply a side effect.

My plan was simple. I used Miranda's leaving to create legitimate work for myself, making honest reasons to decline her invitations and delay communication. Eventually, she'd grow tired of asking, and if she didn't want a relationship on my terms, she'd be the one to end things.

True, it wouldn't be pleasant for either of us, but her being upset with me for working too much and her having to make the decision to break up would be far better for her than the alternative. Anger was preferable to heartbreak.

None of these things made me feel like less of a selfish coward, though.

Neither did the fact that I'd actually been relieved when Miranda had come to me with an urgent need to leave. No two-week notice. No one-day notice. I would have responded to her the same way had circumstances with Keli been different. I would have written the same severance check and still told her to let me know if she needed any job references. I also would have said that if she came back to Seattle, I would find a place for her at MIRI, regardless of whether or not I'd found someone to fill her position.

All of that would have remained the same.

Only my relief would have been different.

I felt guilty about that too. Almost as if I was grateful that Miranda's father had had a stroke. I wasn't, of course, but that had been the reason she'd had to leave, and for that excuse...I couldn't deny that I was thankful.

As if I could feel any more like a fucking jackass.

The best thing about having a shitload of new work to do, though, was that it was difficult to berate myself while wading through pages and pages of technological babble. It was enough to give me a headache, and that enabled me to forget everything else.

I leaned back in my chair and closed my eyes, going over the last paragraph one more time. I had a phenomenal memory. Most things I saw or heard I could remember, which meant when it came to reviewing information, I didn't necessarily need to find the source and go over it that way. In fact, I tended to do better when I stuck with what was in my head, anyway.

Beyond the use for which it was originally intended—

My phone rang, interrupting my mental recitation. I braced myself to see Keli's name, but it wasn't her name showing on my screen. It was my

brother's.

"Brody, is something wrong?"

A momentary pause, and then, "Shit. I forgot about the time difference."

I frowned. "We're in the same time zone."

"I'm in Australia, actually. Anyway—"

"Wait," I interrupted. My stomach twisted as the past came back with a vengeance. "Why are you in Australia?"

"You remember Leon Jessup?"

Another twist. "Aye, I ken who he is."

How could I forget? Leon Jessup was the reason I had almost lost one of my brothers. I couldn't say any of that to Brody, though. He didn't feel the same way about the incident as I did.

"He's in a junior competition and asked me to come watch him."

I hoped my voice sounded less accusatory out loud than it did in my head. "I dinnae ken you kept in touch."

Brody let that comment go. "That's not why I called."

I allowed him to shift the conversation. We had talked about Leon before, and Brody was an adult. Rehashing the past wouldn't change anything.

"Aspen turns eighteen next month, and I think we should go in together on something for her."

That was definitely *not* what I had expected. "You called me from Australia to talk about buying a gift for our sister?"

"When you say it like that, I sound off in the head." Humor laced Brody's voice. "I had a reason, and a good one."

"Let's hear it then." If I'd been the type of person to roll my eyes, I would've done it now.

"Aye." Someone in the background shouted something and made him laugh. "I was sampling some local wares—"

Translation: he'd been drinking under the guise of research for his own alcohol business.

"—and I stumbled over a local artist who does these amazing workshops for budding artists. I think we should give Aspen two weeks of workshops here in Australia."

"The artist is a bonnie lass, aye?"

He laughed. "She is, but I promise that's not the reason I want to give this to Aspen."

I believed him. Brody may have had a reputation of being popular with

women, but he wasn't the sort of man who'd use family as an excuse. Especially not our younger stepsister. Aspen was as quiet and serious as I was, often pulling into herself when in crowds. She often seemed to live in her head.

"The price is exactly in our budget if we go together on it," Brody continued.

Each member of our family, regardless of biology, had money, and even the most money conscious of us was generous when it came to gifts. After we'd merged our families, our parents made a price limit for Christmas and birthday presents. Even though many of us were adults now, we still respected our parents' wishes and stayed within the limit.

I was fairly certain it was Brody's fault since that first Christmas, he'd tried to buy our new brothers and sisters ponies. Plural. Two of them for each kid.

"Send me the information," I said.

"I'll do that when I get back to the hotel." The song in the background changed. "Will you be coming down to the house for the birthday party? Perhaps with a...friend?"

I sighed. "I should've kent that was coming."

"Aye, you should have." He chuckled. "But that doesn't get you out of answering the question."

"I ken." I rubbed my forehead. "If I come, I'll be alone."

"When did you break up with her?" When I didn't answer, he sighed. "You haven't. What the hell?"

"I never meant it to get this far," I admitted. "She was alone here on Christmas. We had fun. I hadn't intended for anyone to think more of it than that."

"What did she say when you talked to her about it? Or haven't you done that either?"

I rubbed the back of my neck, hoping to release some of the tension there. "We both ken I'm not good at talking, especially about emotions."

"Aye, I do." Brody's voice grew serious. "But that doesna mean you can avoid it and hope it goes away."

"I dinnae want to hurt her," I protested.

"Pretending will hurt her no matter what," he countered. "You need to be honest with her, big brother."

As much as I hated it, I knew he was right. Which meant I needed to stop

being a fucking coward and deal with the mess I'd made.

One thing I knew for certain. I'd never put myself in this position again.

FOURTEEN

IT HAD BEEN TWO DAYS SINCE MY CONVERSATION WITH BRODY. I HADN'T talked to Keli yet, and each day that passed made me feel even more like the bastard I was.

Even the fact that I'd worked a sixteen-hour day yesterday and had come into the office this morning at seven to finish my notes on an upcoming presentation was an excuse. It was Sunday afternoon. The only person who expected me to be in the office, working like this, was me. We weren't behind schedule. I'd chosen to be here, anyway.

The building was empty of all but me and two security guards. Not even janitorial staff worked on Sundays. Some might have found the solitude creepy, but I had always enjoyed silence. I supposed that came from having so little of it growing up. The quiet was why, despite my office being located on the opposite end of the building as the public elevators, I heard an elevator door ding open.

I assumed one of the two security guards had come up to do his second-floor rounds, which meant the knock at my door came as a surprise. I raised my head and found the younger of the two guards, Collier, standing next to Keli.

"Sorry to disturb you, Mr. McCrae, but this young lady said you were expecting her."

Keli flushed, her eyes darting to mine and then away. "I wanted to surprise you."

I caught a flicker of annoyance in Collier's eyes – which I completely understood – but he didn't say anything. I made a mental note to give him a commendation.

“It’s all right,” I said to him. “You can go.”

“Yes, sir.” The way his heels clicked together when he said it reminded me that he’d served in the military a few years prior to coming here.

“Sorry,” Keli said as she came into my office. “I didn’t mean to bother anyone. I just remembered you said you were working today, and I thought I’d come by and offer to take you to dinner. I mean, you have to eat, right?”

I bit back a sigh. “I appreciate the thought, but—”

“But you’re busy.” She sounded annoyed, and I wondered if this would finally be the last straw.

“I am,” I answered honestly. “I have a conference call later, and I’m afraid that doesn’t leave time for anything but a rushed reheated meal.”

“A conference call.” The annoyance grew to irritation. “On a Sunday night?”

“It’s overseas,” I explained. “It won’t be Sunday night for them.”

“Oh.” For a moment, she looked more like a petulant child who hadn’t gotten her way than she did an adult. Then, she smiled, a gleam coming into her eyes. “But you have a little time before then, right?”

I regarded her warily as she walked toward me. She moved slowly, putting an extra swing into her step. She came around my desk, trailing her fingers over the edge. I had a suspicion as to what she was thinking, but I didn’t want to assume and embarrass her if I was mistaken.

“If we can’t have dinner together, maybe we can still have a...snack.” She stopped when her knees touched mine, and then she reached for my pants.

I caught her wrist. “I’m at work.”

She rolled her eyes. “Come on, it’s not like there’s anyone else here. We could fuck with the door open, and no one would see us.”

“That’s not the point.” I released her and stood. “This is my place of business.”

“Yeah, and you’re the boss,” she countered. She folded her arms, a sullen expression settling on her face.

“All the more reason to maintain professionalism,” I said, keeping my voice even. I’d never responded well to this sort of debate. “How can I expect my employees to refrain from bringing their personal lives into the workplace if I don’t do it myself?”

“Bullshit.” She practically stomped as she moved away from me. “You’re just like every other man. When you want to get off, then it’s any time, any

place, but when you aren't thinking with your dick, it's all about appearances."

I raised an eyebrow. This was a side of her I hadn't seen before. "I don't mix business with pleasure. Period."

"You're full of it," she snapped. "You act like you're some big deal because of your job and your money, but you're not. You're just a frat boy playing at being a man."

If I hadn't wanted this relationship to be over, I might've been upset by her behavior, but if anything, I was more convinced than ever that she and I were not a good match. I waited for the inevitable "we're through" – except it didn't come.

"You know what? Consider my dinner invitation taken back. I don't want to be around you, and I definitely don't want to have to look at you while I'm eating."

I hoped my expression didn't reveal just how relieved I was that she wasn't going to keep after me about it. I'd never had a problem with confrontations in business, but in my personal life, I'd always tried to avoid them whenever possible. Never had that particular character trait of mine been more obvious than it had been over the last couple months.

"Let me have my driver take you back to your dorm," I offered. "It's the least I can do."

"You're right, Alec. It is the *least* you can do." She went to the door, and I braced myself for a slam. "In case you're wondering, that's a *fuck you* to your guilty conscience. I can get home on my own."

Unsurprisingly, she slammed the door behind her, vibrating the jamb.

I sank back into my chair, my head spinning. That had been an unpleasant experience. Two positive notes, however. She'd clearly had enough of my busy schedule, and the outburst had occurred when no one else had been around to hear it.

The last thing I needed was to have gossip undermining my position, especially since the offices here were so new. The impression I made on the people here came without any of my father's influence. The only person who had transferred here with me from the San Ramon office was my assistant, and we'd already established a good rapport.

When my phone rang, and I saw Da's number, I added another positive item. He'd never have to hear about what had just happened. He wouldn't have lectured me, or even expressed his disapproval, but I would have known

that I'd disappointed him. Now, I could answer the call and not dread what he had to say.

"Hi, Da."

"Workin' yerself to death, are ya?" The amusement in his voice kept the question from coming across too harsh.

"How'd ya ken I was at work?"

"Because I ken ye well, lad."

I loved my father, but I sometimes wondered about the truth of that statement. Now wasn't a time for introspection, though. "Are you well?"

"Aye, I am." He laughed. "I spoke to Brody today about your gift to Aspen."

I'd almost forgotten about that. "Is something wrong with it?"

"Not at all. I gave him a suggestion and wanted to give it to you as well. I think you should speak to Eoin about also going in on it. Get her the best hotel, rent a car, that sort of thing. He cannae be home for her birthday, and this is somethin' to which he can contribute, even from overseas."

The idea was a good one, and I was more than happy to shift my thoughts in a happier direction. Hopefully, this was simply the start of my return to normal life.

FIFTEEN

SPRING WAS ON ITS WAY, AND WITH IT WOULD COME SEVEN BIRTHDAYS, TWO college graduations – Carson and Cory – and two high school graduations – Maggie and Aspen. All were happy occasions, but they were also instances where I'd need to answer uncomfortable questions about why Keli wasn't with me.

Unless, of course, by the time I saw them again, they'd forgotten about her or Brody told them I'd intended to break things off. Either one was a good solution, in my opinion.

It'd been less than a week since Keli had left my office and I hadn't heard from her since. The last two times I'd thought she'd had enough, however, had led to her trying to seduce me in my office. I didn't want a repeat performance, which meant I wasn't getting my hopes up.

At least things at work were going well. I hadn't hired a replacement for Miranda yet, but her team had risen to the challenge of working with me, and we'd completed her project on time. The presentation had been this morning, and the client had been thrilled enough that they'd promised to use MIRI for all future needs.

I'd just finished sending an email to Da to give him the good news when a call came through.

Keli.

I shook my head. If she wasn't calling to tell me that she didn't want to see me anymore, I'd finally take matters into my own hands. I couldn't let this go on any longer.

"Hello?"

"Alec, hi." She sounded strange, but I couldn't put my finger on why.

“What time are you leaving work tonight?”

I glanced at the time. “I can leave in ninety minutes.”

“Wow, out at a decent hour. How do I rate?” Sarcasm practically oozed from the words.

I ignored the tone. This was almost over.

“Doesn’t matter,” she muttered. “Can we meet after you’re done?”

“Where would you like to meet?” I kept my response cordial.

“Can you come here?”

Having this discussion in a college dorm room wasn’t exactly where I would have chosen, but I’d reached the end of my patience. One way or another, this would be done today.

“I’ll text you when I’m on my way.”

She ended the call without saying another word. I closed my eyes.

Fuck.

I gave myself a minute to appreciate how little I was looking forward to the rest of the day, and then it was back to work. With an end in sight, I was able to put everything else aside and focus on work. Then, once it was time for me to leave, I used the drive over to Keli’s dorm to switch gears and prepare myself as best I could for what was sure to be the worst of the types of confrontation I usually avoided.

I pulled into the parking lot next to the dorm and remembered why I’d rarely left my room when I’d been in college. With the exception of classes, of course.

People. Everywhere.

Still, if I handled this now, I’d never need to come here again. My life would go back to normal...and I’d never be this foolish again.

With that in my head, I ignored the looks and whispers sent my way. Not everyone was staring, but enough were that I found it annoying. I didn’t think anyone knew who I was, but I was wearing a suit that cost close to a semester’s tuition. A suit alone would be out of place, but this particular suit was *extremely* out of place.

By the time I knocked on Keli’s door, I’d decided to ask her if we could move this conversation elsewhere. Maybe Ester would be there, and Keli would have already thought of leaving. Except when Keli opened the door, it was clear the room was empty.

“Come in.”

And then I saw her.

Sweatpants. A hoodie. Pale skin. Hair back in a ponytail.

It wasn't that she looked *bad* per se, but she'd always been so together, as if she planned every aspect of her outfits down to the last accessory. At least, that was how she'd been every time I'd been with her. Maybe this was how she was when we weren't together. Maybe she thought she had to dress a certain way because of who I was—

It didn't matter.

Things between us weren't moving beyond today. I didn't need to overthink about any of this anymore.

I came into the room and waited for her to close the door before speaking. "Do you want to get something to eat while we talk? We can go to—"

"I'm pregnant."

Everything stopped.

My ears began to ring, and my chest felt tight. Then I realized that I wasn't breathing. I sucked in air, and the world started again.

"Did I hear you correctly?"

"If you heard me say I was pregnant, then yes, you heard me correctly." Her voice was flat.

"We...we used protection." I'd never felt more like a fumbling teenager than I did at this moment.

"Not in the shower."

I frowned, not following what she was saying.

"Don't you remember?" She sighed. "I guess I shouldn't be surprised that you don't."

I opened my mouth to apologize, but she shook her head.

"After my showcase, you took me back to your place. We had sex on the couch, and then in the shower. You didn't have a condom when we were in the shower."

The memory came back, all of it. "I didn't...finish...inside you."

She rolled her eyes. "Yeah, that's not exactly one hundred percent effective, Alec. Clearly."

For a moment, I remembered the conversation I'd had with Austin about women seeing money when they looked at us. Keli had never asked me to buy her anything, but there was such a thing as a long con, and a good one would be to get pregnant.

She'd never encouraged me to not use protection, but that didn't mean she hadn't made a plan. A hole in a condom. A less-than-reliable method of

birth control.

Or she could have just had sex with someone else, and it wasn't my baby.

Or she was mistaken or lying.

So many possibilities.

"The test is over there, if you don't believe me." She pointed to a box on what I assumed was her desk. "And if you want a paternity test, I'll think you're an asshole, but I'll do it."

"Does that mean you've decided to keep the baby? Or, at least have it?" The questions sounded awkward and stiff, but I didn't know any other way to say what I needed to say.

"Why? Are you saying you think I shouldn't?" She glared at me.

I shook my head and held up a hand. "No, not at all. I'm...processing."

"I'm a feminist," she said, crossing her arms. "Choice all the way...but I can't...I'll do this, with or without you."

I may have been a coward when it came to confrontation, but for this? I had no hesitation at all.

"Ya willna do it without me." My voice was low but firm. "We dinnae need to answer everything now, but we will figure it out. Together."

My plan to end things, to say goodbye and never see her again, was no longer a plausible solution. Keli was going to have my child, and I'd be damned if I subjected my son or daughter to any of the pain I'd gone through, not having a parent.

Everything in my life had centered around my family, and that hadn't changed with Keli's pronouncement, but my definition of *family* had suddenly expanded.

Straightening my shoulders and taking in a deep breath, I came to a single conclusion. I'd make things work with Keli. I had plenty to make up for, but to give my child – *our* child – a family, I would do whatever it took. We would be a happy family. Parents and child. MIRI's legacy would have a new generation.

This might not have been how I'd envisioned the next steps of my life, but it was what it was. When things happened that couldn't be undone, I adapted and persevered. It's what I'd done my entire life, and I would do it again.

I might not ever be able to fully love the mother, but I would love the child.

With all of my being.

I'd do anything for that baby. Whoever it was, he or she just become my whole world.

THE END

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