

**Scenes from On Dublin Street**

**By Samantha Young**

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## **BRADEN'S POV – THE PLANE TICKET**

Ellie's bedroom had been transformed while she was in the hospital. Braden took in the changes. The bed now looked like something out of a homestyle magazine. There were more cushions on there than twenty people needed. However Ellie seemed delighted. Everywhere Braden looked there were touches that proved Jocelyn had come to know Ellie extremely well over the last few months. Sitting on a new breakfast tray, that swung over the bed so Ellie didn't have to get up to eat, were fresh flowers. Chocolates. On her bedside table were her favorite magazines. Puzzle and crossword books. There was now also a small flat screen television and DVD player in her room. And the bedding and cushions were all in her favorite shades of green.

He studied Ellie's face and his heart started to pound harder at the wonderment and affection that softened her features. "Oh my God." Her gaze flew to Jocelyn. "You did all this?"

Jocelyn shrugged. "It's not much."

The fact that she was uncomfortable with what she'd done made Braden want to stride across the room and hold her. He'd never met anyone so capable of love and so bloody terrified of expressing it. Braden was trying to show her that loving him, loving this family, would be the best thing Jocelyn would ever do. But the woman was trying his patience. He thought giving her space would make her miss him. That she'd see how shit life was when they were apart. However, he'd underestimated her stubbornness.

"You're a little bit awesome." Ellie moved toward Jocelyn slowly, reminding him of the physical trauma his sweet wee sister had just gone through. "I love it, thank you."

He glowered as the two friends hugged. For fuck sake, Ellie had been braver than most people this week. Surely to hell her courage was inspiring to Jocelyn.

Eyes narrowed on his woman, he watched her boss his sister around and felt his heart pound faster as the last of his patience diminished.

Adam helped Ellie off with her shoes and into the bed and Elodie started giving Jocelyn instructions on her care. She happily accepted her role as Ellie's nurse. Braden knew it was a start. But her defenses weren't crumbling fast enough for his liking. In fact, she hadn't looked at him once since they'd gotten there. While her defenses with Ellie were down, her defenses with him seemed to have grown a new armor-plated layer.

What. The. Ever. Loving. Fuck?

"And then she has a check-up three months after that." Elodie was telling Jocelyn. "If everything's fine, it'll be a year after that."

Jocelyn's frown melted into a soft smile of hope as she gazed at his sister and in that moment he envied Ellie. Which was bloody ridiculous, he knew. "Wait. You got your biopsy results?"

Ellie glared accusingly at them. "No one told her?"

Irritated by the assumption that it was their fault he threw Jocelyn a pointed look. "Maybe if she would stop avoiding everyone someone might have."

Again she ignored him as she waved at the room. His irritation grew to anger. "Hello! Results please?"

Ellie grinned. "Benign."

Watching her sag with relief made Braden even madder. He should have been the one to give her the news when they first heard it and his arms should have been around her to catch her as she deflated with assuaged fears.

"That really should have been the opener."

"Sorry," Ellie said.

Braden felt like snapping at her not to apologize. None of this was Ellie's fault. The fault belonged to this fucking woman who couldn't just admit she had a fucking heart and she fucking loved them with it.

Conversation passed between the group but he wasn't listening anymore. He needed to get Jocelyn alone. Ellie needed her rest and not to be witness to an upcoming confrontation.

Suddenly Jocelyn was heading for the door. Braden automatically blocked her path. "We need to talk." He gave her no time to respond, turning on his heel and walking out of the room. He strode down the hall and into her bedroom, hearing her follow behind him.

As soon as she was inside the bedroom, he strode past her to lock it so she couldn't escape.

"We could talk in the sitting room," she said, sounding put out and irritable.

It was something at least. Anything was better than avoidance and indifference.

And there it was. The thing that had taken root. The indifference. The fear the indifference had created. Because indifference suggested she might have moved on. If his woman had moved on...

Bloody hell.

He almost rubbed his chest where a sudden pain had blazed.

Like always when Jocelyn was near he needed to be nearer. He stalked her, loving the way her chin tilted in defiance as he invaded her personal space entirely. He knew her well enough to know that she wanted to back up, take some breathing space, but wouldn't give him the satisfaction of thinking she needed it. Even when it annoyed him, her steely determination turned him on.

Let's face it, everything this woman did turned him on.

She'd forever changed him.

That wouldn't bother him so much if she could just admit the feeling was mutual. But times like now, when she fought him, when she made him work so fucking hard for it, he almost resented her. He'd more than resent her if he found out there was someone else.

"I've been trying to give you space," he snapped. "but this is ridiculous."

If he wasn't mistaken she looked genuinely confused by his comment. "Uh, what?"

Wondering at the confusion, his eyes narrowed as he studied her, trying to understand her response. Was this another game of defense? Or worse. She did believe their separation was real and she'd found someone else? He needed to know. "You're never here. Are you seeing someone else? Because I swear to God—"

"Are you kidding me?" She yelled.

That flush of indignation. That anger.

The pain in his chest disappeared and he had to stop himself from grinning. There was no one else then. That still didn't explain anything. "Well, what the hell is going on?"

Jocelyn drew in a shaky breath. His fingers itched to touch her but he held himself in check. "You're an asshole. Coming in here and accusing me of messing around behind your back when you're the one who's screwing his new nightclub manager."

Shock rocked him back.

What. The. Ever. Loving. Fuck?

Where did she get this shit?

Was this her latest attempt to push him away?

For the second time since they'd met he found himself truly disappointed in her. The last—her behavior toward Ellie—she'd more than made up for. But he couldn't see her making up for this. This was a new low. And he hadn't expected it of her. He tried to control his anger as he said, "Isla? You think I'm fucking Isla? I don't believe this."

She crossed her arms over her chest, giving him a look of disgust. “Ellie told me everything.”

Now Braden was flabbergasted.

Jocelyn hadn't invented the idea? His sister... What? “Ellie? What exactly did Ellie tell you?”

“She met you for lunch. The two of you met her and Adam for lunch and she said that you were all over each other.”

Trying to process this new information he took a step back, crossing his arms over his chest. When Jocelyn stared at his body and flushed he almost growled. He'd bet his life she'd just had a dirty thought about him and instead of pouncing on that he had to stand here and work out what the hell had been going on lately. If he didn't know she was worth the drama...

“Ellie told you she had lunch with me and Isla, and that I was all over Isla?” He repeated slowly, needing the facts absolutely straight before he reacted.

“Yes.”

His wee sister. His bloody annoying wee sister had fucked up. “If she hadn't just had brain surgery I swear to God I'd kill her.” He should never have confided in her his plan to give Jocelyn space. He knew Ellie hadn't agreed with it but he'd never thought she would meddle and make everything worse. And Jocelyn. Oh he was going to deal with her. How bloody fickle did she think he was? How clearer could he make his feelings for her?

Braden stalked her and this time she did take a step back to avoid their bodies meeting. “I never had lunch with Isla and Ellie. They met when she and Adam stopped by the club to drop off a USB stick I left at the flat. They met for two seconds.”

At least Jocelyn had the decency to look chagrined. “Why would she tell me that?”

He turned away, his whole body humming with frustration and he couldn't bloody have a go at the one who had caused it because she'd just gone through something he couldn't imagine. But when she was back to 100%, they were going to have a little chat. He sighed. "I don't know. Probably because I told her I was giving you space as part of the next stage in my plan to get you back, and Ellie didn't agree it was a good idea. Apparently, Ellie thought jealousy was the next step." He shot her a look now, perturbed to realize that jealousy hadn't worked. He knew enough to know that Jocelyn felt possessive of him. It was disconcerting to realize, however, that in this case that feeling had made her run from him not toward him. "Apparently she was wrong." Braden wandered around her room slowly, trying to process this. His possessiveness of Jocelyn made him fight harder for her. If it did the opposite for Jocelyn, he feared how long it would take to break down her barriers. The idea exhausted him. Life was too short for this shit. Hadn't Ellie just proven that?

"I still don't understand. I met Isla, buddy, she's exactly your type, and she was definitely flirting with you."

That heat, that almost growl in her words, sparked to life the hope Braden needed to cling to. "Why do you care?" he found himself grinning as he ran his hands along her bookshelf. A bookshelf filled with love stories. God, she was in such fucking denial. "You said you don't—" he cut off abruptly as his fingers caught the edges of a ticket.

A plane ticket.

To Virginia. He shifted it, looking for the return ticket. But there was only one ticket. One way.

"What?"

Braden picked it up, turning toward her as his ears filled with the rushing of blood in his ears. She thought she could leave him? She thought she could just fucking give up? Hurt and rage suffused him as he glared at her and held up the e-ticket. "Going somewhere?"

“I’m going home,” she blurted out. And then she paled at whatever she saw on his face.

If he stayed in that room with her, he would explode. He would say shit he didn’t mean.

He’d fuck up as royally as her.

So he left.

But not because he was done fighting. He tucked the e-ticket into his pocket out of sight.

This time Jocelyn would come to him.

Braden tried to shrug off his foul mood as he sat with his wee sister but he felt a complicated mix of worry and irritation with her. And his foul mood toward Jocelyn filled the entire apartment. Not wanting to overshadow Ellie’s return home, Braden decided to leave.

He stewed all the way home, anticipating Jocelyn realizing he hadn’t put her ticket back. He wondered what she’d do. How she’d feel? All that really mattered, he decided, as he let himself into his flat, was that *she* chased *him*.

Once he had her alone... well he was going to love and fuck the stubbornness right out of her for good.

Thankfully Braden didn’t have to wait long and he found that extremely reassuring. His woman was looking for a fight and a person only fought when something was important to them. He heard the buzzer on his door and strode down the hall to see Jocelyn glaring into the camera. Satisfaction roared through him as he let her into the building.

He stood in the doorway, waiting for her, knowing he appeared more casual than he actually felt. As soon as the lift doors opened, that casualness threatened to disappear. Jocelyn strode out, those gorgeous eyes blazing with indignation. He stepped back to let her into the flat, smirking as she spun so fast on him she almost lost her balance. Yes, she was good and angry.

Much, much better than indifference.

“This isn’t funny,” she snapped as he wandered by her into his large sitting room.

He scowled at her. “I know it’s not bloody funny. Believe me.”

She held out a hand. “Give me my ticket, Braden. I am not even kidding.”

Seething, but holding onto his control, he merely nodded and pulled the ticket out of his back pocket. “This ticket?”

“Yes. Give it to me.”

Wanting her to understand succinctly what he thought of the whole fucking ridiculous situation he casually tore the ticket to pieces, letting little bits of paper fall to his floor.

“What ticket?”

And then she lost it. More so than he ever thought possible.

Jocelyn flew at him, her face contorted with pain and anger as she shoved at him. So fueled by emotion that she used to force him back into a stumble. “I hate you!”

The words cut even though he didn’t believe them.

She spun away, her shoulders shaking as she tried to control her breathless sobs. “I was fine until you!” She looked back at him with so much pain it almost took him to his fucking knees. “Why? I was fine. I was safe and I was fine. I’m broken, Braden. Stop trying to fix me and just let me be broken!”

NEVER!

The sight of her tears made his own eyes bright as he shook his head slowly. As much as her agony wrecked him, he knew this was good. She needed to get this shit out. Unable to bear being even this far from her, Braden walked toward her like she was a wounded animal and when he touched her, she closed her eyes, her pain momentarily disappearing. The fool woman didn’t even realize he was exactly what she needed.

He wrapped his arms around her, feeling her soft curves melt into him, and the desperation to take away her pain made him tremble as he whispered, “You are not broken.”

Her eyes opened, those startling, magnificent eyes, and he saw only sorrow for him in them. “Yes I am.”

Realizing she pitied him for loving her, he shook her in anger without thinking. She was twenty fucking two. She was too young to give up. “No, you’re not.” God she killed him. “Jocelyn, you are not broken, baby.” His voice turned hoarse, but a whisper as he pleaded with her to fight. “You’ve got a few cracks in you, but we all have some.”

Fresh tears spilled down her soft cheeks. “I don’t hate you.”

Agony blazed in her eyes.

No. She loved him.

That’s what hurt so fucking much, he knew.

His anger turned to passion. Need for her blazed through him, quicker than a match to tinder, and that same need was mirrored in her eyes. They reached for one another, his mouth covering hers as he pulled at the clip in her hair so he could feel the silky strands fall through his fingers as he devoured her.

As he made her his.

For good.

And just like that the kiss became a culmination of all their emotions. Their anger leading the charge. It turned it bruising, punishing, and suddenly they were ripping at their clothes.

Braden pushed her up against the wall, needing to kiss, touch every inch of her and remind her just who she belonged to. Remind her of who she really was. That she was stronger when she *loved* and allowed herself to be loved.

He hooked her thighs around his waist, his hard cock throbbing against the seam of her jeans between her legs.

“Fuck,” Braden murmured hotly, his mouth dipping to the rise of her breast. He loved everything about this woman, but he really did have a particular fondness for her spectacular

tits. He held her up with one hand on her pert backside, the other peeled her bra down, letting the cool air whisper across her nipple. It puckered up for Braden's kiss and he relished the sound of Jocelyn's gasp as he sucked it into his mouth. Desire flooded him as she rubbed against Braden's erection.

"I can't wait," She breathed, gripping at his shoulders.

Yeah well, neither could he. Braden unbuttoned her jeans and slid his hand inside her underwear to test just how ready she was. "Christ." His head fell against her chest as he slid his fingers in and out of her sweet body. "So wet and tight, babe. Always." It made him feel like the luckiest man in the goddamn world that he could elicit such a reaction in her.

"Now," Jocelyn growled, digging her nails into his skin and spurring him on. "Braden."

Needing to be inside her he held her and moved across the room only to bring them both down onto the couch. And then his hands couldn't act fast enough. Soon he had her completely naked, her needy pleading filling his ears and making his heart thump hard.

Braden tried to control himself. He didn't just want this to be a passionate coupling where they took out their frustration and anger on one another. He wanted Jocelyn to be fully cognizant of what she was asking and that by asking for it, she couldn't run away afterward.

He gazed at her sprawled beneath him, her breasts heaving with excitement, her hair spread out all around her head like spun dark gold. And those eyes. Those exotic, fierce eyes that were soft with seduction. She was so beautiful it actually hurt.

He pressed a hand to her belly and felt it quiver beneath his touch with desire. Teasing her, he smoothed his hand gently up her stomach, between her luscious breasts, to her silky jaw. He bent his mouth to hers and whispered against it, "Ask for it."

Her answer was to pull down the zipper on his jeans, slide her fingers into his boxer briefs and close a fist tight around his dick. A groan fell from his lips as she tugged him out of his jeans. His eyes closed with the pleasure of her tight grasp and his breathing stuttered.

“I want you to fuck me,” She licked at his lips and his eyes shot open. “Please.”

And that was it. He was a goner. He shoved his jeans further out of the way and helped her guide his cock to her entrance. Her slickness eased his way and her hands moved to his ass, her fingers biting into his muscle as she urged him to fuck her.

Which he did with pleasure.

“Harder,” She moaned. “Harder, Braden. Harder.”

Nothing made him harder nor more desperate than her sexual pleas. He kissed her and then slammed *home*. Because this, right here, with Jocelyn *was* home for him. God, he needed her to see that.

When climax finally hit them both, Braden thought it would never end. He saw the awed, glazed look in Jocelyn’s eyes and new she’d felt it too.

Had sex ever been better this? He couldn’t think when.

Fuck.

She was going to be the death of him. But Christ it would be the sweetest death.

Braden groaned and collapsed against her, unable to hold himself up any longer. He salivated over the stroke of Jocelyn’s hands on his ass, a tender caress that pleased him.

Feeling her skin damp with perspiration, he turned and pressed a kiss to her skin.

Was she as sated as he was? Or was she still pissed? No better way to know than to ask. So he did.

She sighed and then explained. “I was going home to do what I should have done eight years ago. I was going home to say goodbye to my family.”

Braden grew still as remorse flooded him. He’d torn up her fucking ticket. Shit. “God, I’m so sorry, babe. About the ticket.”

“I can reprint it. And... I was thinking about staying in Virginia permanently after Ellie is back on her feet.”

The remorse fled quickly, replaced by cold panic. “Over my dead body.”

“Yeah, I thought you’d say that.”

Annoyed he grunted. “I’m still inside you.”

“I can feel that.” She had the audacity to smile.

“Well at least let me get out of you before you tell me you’re attempting to leave me.”

“I don’t know if that’s what I’m doing yet.”

Braden exhaled slowly and withdrew from her reluctantly. He tucked himself back into his jeans and sat up, holding out his hand to her. She let him pull her up to her feet, and followed him up the stairs to his room. He nodded at his bed. “Get in.”

To his surprise she didn’t argue with his command. He stripped off the rest of his clothes and slid into the bed beside her.

He settled Jocelyn into his side, loving the feel of her melting into his arms, the silky caress of her hair on his chest as she rested her head. If she ran again, he didn’t know what else he could do to convince her to run back toward him. “So what are you doing?” he asked reluctantly.

She was silent a moment and he held his breath waiting.

Then... “I had a really good family, Braden.” The pain in those few words made his arm tighten reflexively around her. He waited, hoping she’d give him more. She didn’t disappoint.

“My mom was an orphan. She grew up in foster care here, and then moved to the States on a work visa. She was working at the college campus library when she met my dad. They fell in love, they got married, and for a while they lived happily ever after. My parents weren’t like my friends’ parents. I was fourteen and they were still sneaking around, making out when they didn’t think I could see them. They were crazy about each other. They were crazy about me and Beth. My mom was overprotective and a little overbearing because she didn’t want us to ever feel as alone as she had felt growing up. I thought she was cooler than all the

other moms because, well, she had a cool accent, and she was kind of blunt, but in a really funny way that shocked some of the preppy housewives that lived in our town.”

He smiled at the thought. “Sounds like someone I know.”

He felt her smile against his chest. “Yeah?”

Braden gave her a squeeze feeling that ache inside him grow. He wanted to give this woman everything and he couldn't bloody well give her the one thing she wanted: her family back.

“Well, she was awesome. And my dad was just as great. He was the dad who checked in with you every day to see what was up. Even as I got older and became this entirely new creature called a teenage girl, he was still always there.” A tear splashed onto his chest and he squeezed his eyes in empathy. “We were happy,” She whispered.

He kissed her hair, holding her tight, probably too tight, but he couldn't help it. “Babe, I'm so sorry.”

“Shit happens right?” She swiped at her tears. “One day I was sitting in class and the police came to tell me that my dad had swerved into a truck to avoid a motorcyclist who'd come off his bike. Gone. Mom. Dad. Beth. I lost my parents and I lost a little girl I hadn't really had a chance to get to know. Though I knew enough to know that I adored her. I knew she would cry if she couldn't see her favorite teddy bear—this ratty old brown bear with a blue ribbon around his neck that used to be mine and still smelled like me. His name was Ted. Original, I know. I knew that she had a sophisticated taste in music because all you had to do to stop her from crying was play *Mmmmbop* by Hanson.” She laughed sadly. “I knew that when I was having a bad day, all I had to do was pick her up, hold her close, smell her skin, feel her tiny warmth against me and know that everything was okay... “

Braden was a grown fucking man and yet he wanted to bawl like a baby for her. All he'd wanted was for Jocelyn to give him this — this trust. Now that he had it, he'd do anything to turn back the clock for her, even if it meant he'd never get the chance to meet her.

And although he already knew he loved her, it was in that moment he realized what that love meant.

He loved Jocelyn Butler more than he loved anyone. More than he loved himself.

Braden hadn't known this kind of love even existed. But he guessed it made sense. She tapped into his emotions like no one else could. Emotions he didn't even know he had.

"I went off the rails when I lost them." Jocelyn continued. "My first foster home was full of other kids, so my foster parents barely even noticed I was alive, which was fine by me since it meant I could do whatever I wanted. The only thing that numbed everything was doing stupid shit that made me feel like crap about myself. Lost my virginity too young, drank way too much. Then after Dru died, I just stopped. I was moved to another foster home on the other side of town. They didn't have much, but there were less kids there and one kid in particular who was pretty cool. She wanted a big sister though..." She sucked in breath before admitting, "I didn't want to be anything to anybody. She needed someone, and I didn't give it to her. I don't even know what happened to her after I left."

He could feel her regret as she sighed. "When I was there, I went to a couple of parties over the years, not a lot. Always ended up with some guy I didn't know or care to know. Truth is, I went out on the same night every year. To a party, to a bar. It didn't matter as long as it helped me forget. I've spent eight years burying my family, pretending they never existed, because yeah — like you said — it was easier to pretend I'd never had them, than to deal with how much it hurt to lose them. I realize now how unfair that was to them. To the memory of them." Fresh tears dripped onto his chest and he readied himself for what she was about to say. "The one night I went out was the anniversary of their death. But I stopped

doing that when I was eighteen. I went out that night and I went to a party and I can't remember anything that happened after I arrived. I woke up the next day and I was naked in bed with *two* guys I didn't know."

It wasn't jealousy that made him curse under his breath and say her name hoarsely. It was anger and fear, knowing anything could have happened to her.

"Believe me, I've been there," Jocelyn said, seeming to understand his reaction. "I was furious at myself, violated, scared. Anything could have happened to me. And sexually..."

"Don't." he couldn't hear it. Just imagining Jocelyn being so young, so out of control and being used by two strange men made him want to put his fist through a fucking wall.

"I got checked out," she hurried to reassure him. "And those guys hadn't given me anything, thank God. But I never slept with anyone again. Until you."

The confession eased him. Jocelyn had given him her trust before she even realized that was what she was doing. He was honored. And so goddamn grateful she'd chosen him to reawaken her sexuality. She'd chosen someone who would never hurt her or use her. And never would.

"I might never stop fearing tomorrow, Braden," she admitted. "The future and what it can take from me, scares me. And sometimes I freak out, and sometimes my freak outs hurt the people closest to me."

Braden smiled tenderly. As if he hadn't already clued into that fact. "I understand that. I can deal with it. You have to trust me."

"I thought you were the one with the trust issues," she grumbled, sounding put out.

He gave her what she needed to hear. The thing she normally ran from. He prayed this time she stayed put under this kind of responsibility. "I trust *you*, babe. You don't see yourself the way I see you." he braced.

She traced a little “J” across his heart and he relaxed even before she said, “I do trust you. I just didn’t expect Ellie to lie to me, so I took her word as gold. I’m sorry.”

Although he didn’t ask for it, her apology soothed him all the same. He would never betray her and he was glad she finally realized that. “I love you, Jocelyn. These last few weeks have been a nightmare for more reasons than one.”

“And Isla?” she asked tentatively.

Ellie had planted concerns with her tall tale... “I swear I never slept with her.”

“Did anything happen?”

He would have been pissed off at her asking if there wasn’t some validity to the question. He froze beneath her, not wanting something that meant nothing to him, to affect such an important moment between them.

She felt his tension and he heard the worry in her tone as she said his name in question.

Not wanting lies between them he heaved a beleaguered sigh. “Yesterday she kissed me. I didn’t kiss her back. I pushed her off and told her about you.”

Her silence caused a flare of panic. But then... “You have to fire her.”

Amusement and gratification subdued his panic. Jocelyn acting outright possessive was something he could get used to. “Are you finally admitting you love me?”

“I can’t promise it’ll be easy, Braden. I’ll probably always be a little irrational about the future. I’ll worry a lot.”

Joy began to bubble up in him as he realized she was finally giving in to them. “I told you I can handle it, babe.”

“Why?”

Why was he fighting so hard for her? “Because you make me laugh, you challenge me, you turn me on like no one else can. I feel like I’m missing something really important when you’re gone. So important I don’t feel like myself. I’ve never felt like someone was mine

before. But you're mine, Jocelyn. I've known that from the moment we met. And I'm yours. I don't want to be anybody else's, babe." It wasn't hard to admit his feelings now that he wasn't tiptoeing around Jocelyn's. Braden wanted her to know that she was loved beyond any of her wildest imaginings.

She leaned up on her elbow to look him in the eye and he saw all of her love for him shining out. Relief, unlike anything he'd ever felt, flooded him.

He felt her soft, tender kiss on his mouth. A kiss that deepened as she sunk into him with a physical outpouring of that love.

A little breathless when they finally came up for air, Jocelyn caressed his lower lip with her finger as if memorizing him. And then she blew him away by asking, "Do you think you might be able to come to Virginia with me? To go through my parents' things?"

There was so much in that one request and happiness bloomed like an ache in Braden's chest. Jocelyn was going to try to move on, to face her loss, and she wanted him by her side while she did it. "Of course. We'll go whenever you want. But we're coming back." He reminded her that they still hadn't discussed the fact that she'd been planning to take off on him.

"I was only moving to Virginia because I thought you were moving into Isla."

He grunted at her usual charming way with words. "Nice."

"You're firing her, right?" she insisted.

Although perversely pleased with her possessiveness, it didn't sit quite right to fire someone just because they had a crush on him. Yet, he didn't want to deny Jocelyn either. He felt her out to see if she really meant it, "You just want me to fire her?"

"If I told you that Craig had kissed me last night would you make me quit?"

Fuck.

"Point taken. I'll find her a job elsewhere."

“Elsewhere as in nowhere you work.”

His lips twitched with renewed amusement. “Christ, you’re bossy.”

“Uh, do you not remember dry humping me to a desk after Craig kissed me.”

Yes, he did. It was one of the sexiest encounters between them. So far. “Again, point taken.”

Jocelyn suddenly buried her head against his chest. “I thought I’d really fucked up.”

Not wanting her to take all of it on herself, Braden squeezed her nape, reassuring her. “We both really did. But that’s over now. From now on I’m completely in charge.” He teased. “I think we’ll have a lot less drama, and definitely no more breakups, if I’m in control of this thing.”

She gave his stomach a condescending pat. “Whatever you need to tell yourself to get through the day, baby.”

He smirked... and then pushed, “You still haven’t said it yet you know.”

Thankfully she didn’t torture him with a long wait. Jocelyn lifted that gorgeous head of hers, gave him that sexy little smile and confessed, “I love you, Braden Carmichael.”

He was wrong before about the joy. This. *This* was joy. He couldn’t contain it, grinning so hard it made her beam right back at him. Greedy, he insisted, “Say it again.”

She giggled. Bloody giggled and it was the sexiest and cutest fucking thing he’d ever heard. He vowed to hear it more. “I love you.”

Needing to be inside her while she said it, Braden sat up quickly and got out of the bed, pulling Jocelyn along with him. He gently pushed her towards his bathroom. “You’re going to say it again while I fuck you in the shower.”

She grinned up at him. “This whole taking control thing is kind of hot.”

“It’s about to get hotter, babe.” He smacked her lightly on the ass and she let out a little squeal that surprised him. He laughed as he reached into turn on the shower and for no reason

at all but happiness, Jocelyn laughed with him. They stumbled into the shower together and Braden made it his business to turn her laughter into gasps of pleasure.

And when he was deep inside her he growled, “Again.”

Jocelyn’s fingers bit into his arms as she undulated into his thrusts, and she gazed into his eyes, her own smoky with desire. When the words came, they were a promise, almost a vow.

“I love you, Braden Carmichael.”

In awe that he’d finally won her love and trust Braden pressed his forehead against hers as he moved inside her. “I’ll love you forever, Jocelyn Butler.”

## CAM'S POV – THE PARTY

*So much for breaking things off*, Cam thought sourly as he pretended to listen to one of Becca's pretentious friends.

After the moment in his kitchen with Jo, the feel of her skin on his tongue, the warm press of her body against his, he'd been determined to have more. To have it all. No matter what lies Jo tried to tell herself.

First on the agenda was to break up with Becca but his resolve had wavered when he got to her flat and saw how excited she was to see him. Fuck, it was her birthday. He couldn't break up with her on her birthday.

He'd give her tonight and then he'd break it off tomorrow.

With that in mind Cam planned to avoid his soon-to-be ex-girlfriend until then. He didn't want to lead her on but he also didn't want her to realize there was something up. It was one messed up situation.

He was nodding along, not really paying attention to a guy who kept talking about money, when the hair on his neck rose. Bloody well sensing her, that was how attuned he was to her, Cam turned his head and caught sight of Jo walking into the party on Malcolm's arm.

The breath whooshed out of him as he took her in.

She wasn't dressed how she usually dressed for her older, wealthy boyfriend. Gone were the designer dresses. She wore a tight mini-skirt that showed off her long, fantastic fucking legs, a pair of casual winter boots, a printed T-shirt and a fur jacket.

She looked her age. Urban. Sexy. And totally Jo.

He had to wonder at the change because she certainly wasn't dressing up for Malcolm in that get-up.

“Cam! Come say hello!” Becca shouted over to him and he realized his girlfriend had been talking to the couple and he was so busy staring at Jo he hadn’t even noticed.

Fuck.

Approaching them with an ugly burn of jealousy in his gut, Cam felt that jealousy darken to anger as Malcolm murmured something against Jo’s lips that made her giggle in a way that was fake. He fucking hated that fucking fake giggle.

If she was his, Jo would never have to fake anything ever again in order to keep him by her side. He wanted her for who she really was and it pissed him off that money could mean more to her than that. It pissed him off that he could care about someone who would put money before what really mattered.

Shit!

“Uh hullo, need a room much?” Becca chuckled as Jo and Malcolm finally looked up from each other.

Cam couldn’t even hide his fury as his eyes clashed with Jo’s beautiful green ones. To his relief he saw the turmoil in them and knew Jo was uncomfortable as hell. Cam was determined to make her more so if it meant pulling her gorgeous head out of her tight arse.

“Oh Cam, Sondra and Jerry have just walked in,” Becca said excitedly, like he was supposed to know who the hell those people were, “Come say hello with me.”

There was nothing he could do but be dragged away and he had to force himself to tear his eyes off Jo before he gave his feelings away.

Unfortunately, Cam had to endure standing with Malcolm and Jo not much later. Becca drew him into a huddle with them and another couple whose names he couldn’t remember. He tried to concentrate. He tried to detach and be cool. But every time that rich fuck put his hand on Jo’s arse or she touched his cheek in affection, laughing at his inane bloody jokes, Cam wanted to punch someone. Preferably Malcolm who was so obviously using Jo.

This guy didn't know Jo. The real her. They'd been dating months and he wasn't even trying to know her. And as for Jo... well... she stood there and agreed with shit the man said that Cam knew for a fact she didn't agree with because she told him her *real* opinions on politics and the economy and art.

But she just stood there, nodding along to everything Malcolm said, and the moron never questioned it. He didn't want to question it. All he cared about was having a stunning twenty-two year old in his bed.

Suddenly, the thought of Jo having sex with this guy made Cam's vision almost blacken with jealousy. He'd never felt jealousy before. He had no goddamn clue it burned this badly.

They lost each other's company when Becca moved him onto another crowd of guests but Cam surreptitiously watched Jo throughout the evening, that jealousy taking him to the edge of reason. Possessiveness clouded his rational mind and it was what made him follow her when he saw her leave the room solo and head to the bathroom.

The bathroom was at the front entrance and there was no one else around to witness... anything.

Mind only on confronting her, forcing her to admit she was living a lie, Cam followed, pushing the bathroom door open when she tried to shut it behind her. He stepped inside and she stumbled back from him, wide-eyed with surprise.

He not only shut the door behind him, he locked it.

Seething with anger and emotional and sexual frustration he fried her arse to the wall with his glare.

"What are you doing?" she gestured nervously to the door. "Someone could have seen you."

"Malcolm you mean."

"Or Becca," she hissed. "Remember her? Your girlfriend?"

And there it was. The jealousy she couldn't hide burning in her eyes. Good. Thank fucking Christ he wasn't the only one losing his mind.

His skin was hot and tight with need and that coiling tension low in his belly only grew tighter with want as he dragged his gaze down her body. Every inch of her was beautiful and he could only imagine how much more beautiful she'd look naked and spread out on his bed. Finally he looked into her eyes. "You look gorgeous tonight. I've never seen you like this."

Her skin flushed and he saw the flash of need in her eyes as the tension between them mounted.

"Let me out of here, Cameron."

The hot blood flowing toward his dick rushed there at the sound of his name on her lips but he held up his hands in a gesture of surrender and stepped aside.

He had every intention of letting her go.

But her perfume licked at his senses and he remembered that as soon as she walked out there she was walking out to Malcolm.

Fuck that.

Cam needed to show her what she would be missing if she made the wrong choice.

Before Jo could touch the lock he turned her as he shoved her up against the bathroom door, pressing his body into hers and feeling lust shiver down his spine at the feel of soft curves against all his hardness. Wanting her to be aware of nothing but him, he braced his hands on the door at either side of her head, barricading her in.

"Wha—"

"Hush," he shut her up gently and saw her eyes heat with desire she couldn't bloody hide. Triumphant, he dropped his hands to rest them on her slim waist. "You feel this too. You've felt it since the night we met."

Something like pleasure, joy, mixed with guilt and confusion in her stunning eyes. Her chest was rising and falling in shallow breaths, her body giving the truth away. She wanted him. And when she licked her lips, Cam lost all control.

He captured those lips, lips he'd fantasized about, in a deep wet kiss that left no questions about how much he wanted to fuck her. Jesus, he wanted to fuck her so hard he imprinted on her. Owned her. Like she bloody well owned him.

Maybe, by the enthusiastic way she kissed him back, he already did.

Needing to touch her, he coasted his hand up the slender curve of her waist and deliberately swept his thumb against the underside of her breast.

Just that little touch and it sent Jo off like a firecracker. He had no choice but to catch fire too.

Her arms curled tight around his neck, her body pressed harder against his until they were grinding against each other. Her moan slid down his throat and his dick somehow got impossibly harder.

"I've fantasized a million times about this," he confessed hoarsely before kissing her breathless again.

Feeling her undulate against his erection, Cam groaned, needing more. Needing to feel that sweet heat between her legs. He slid his hand up her inner thigh, waiting a moment and when she moaned and kissed him harder, he took it as permission to slip his fingers beneath her knickers.

She was dripping. Fucking soaked.

Jo cried out against his mouth as he finger fucked her and his dick strained painfully. Vision of unzipping his jeans and thrusting his cock into her tight heat made him shudder with need. Shit! He broke the kiss, panting for breath, "If we don't stop, I'm going to fuck you right here."

When her body suddenly locked, Cam lifted his head from her neck and took in her expression.

Goddamn it.

Reality intruded at seeing the guilt and shame on her beautiful face. Fuck. Fuck! He never wanted her to feel that between them. “Jo...” he slipped his fingers out of her body and she shook her head frantically, trying to push him away.

Tears trembled in her words, “We can’t do this. What are we doing?”

What they were doing was right. It was just useless bloody timing! “I’m ending it with Becca. Tonight.” And suddenly realized he meant it. Her birthday or not, he couldn’t be this guy. He *wasn’t* this guy.

Seeing Jo’s appalled expression he winced. “I know. It’s shit. But I can’t go on like this. I’m not the guy who cheats on his girlfriend. And I can’t continue to be the guy who fucks his girlfriend wishing all the time she was someone else.”

Confusion blazed at him from her eyes.

Confusion?! Was she kidding?

“Cam, I...”

Feeling her pull away, desperation clawed at him. “You want this. I know you do.” He pressed his forehead to hers, wanting to be close but knowing anything else would push her away. He took a breath, afraid to ask what he needed to ask her but more afraid not to, “Will you leave Malcolm?”

Jo immediately froze against him and he felt his grip on her tighten at the idea of her fleeing. “Johanna?”

Her silence said it all.

Anger, disbelief, disappointment like he’d never felt in his goddamn life ripped through him so violently he shook with it. “You’re telling me you’re going to stay with that guy?”

You're going to go through the rest of your life standing at his side at a party laughing that stupid bloody fake giggle, with your eyes contradicting your mouth every time it opens?"

Unable to bear the idea that he could feel this way about someone who wasn't even strong enough to fight for what she really wanted, Cam pushed away from her. Where was the fire in her belly he knew existed because he'd seen it when she stood up for her little brother? Where was that Jo? "That girl you were out there is not Jo. I don't know who that is but she's an arse who pisses me off. She's fake, she's simpering and she's a fucking bimbo. She's not you."

Hurt flared in her expression and he felt that like a punch to the gut. But he wouldn't take the words back because unfortunately they were the truth. Cam waited, hoping that brutal honesty would wake her the fuck up.

But she just stared at him, mute with longing and confusion.

Confusion.

He wasn't confused.

He knew exactly what he wanted.

And the fact that Jo even had to think about it meant she didn't feel about him the way he felt about her.

Hurt, furious, he let it all show in one awful look before he forced her to move aside as he unlocked the door and threw it open.

Cam strode out into the party, a part of him hating Jo a little for making him feel something he'd never felt in his entire life, and then refusing to admit she felt it too.

For money.

Jesus fuck.

One thing was for certain though, he needed to get out of this party and he needed to do it a free man. He searched the room, looking for Becca. When he found her, guilt stalked his

every step toward her. She would hate him for this. She'd forever remember him as the shitty bastard who broke up with her at her birthday party but Cam couldn't stay here and when he left he needed to know he left, freeing both him and Becca from the lie that was their relationship.

Maybe it would wake Jo up.

He cursed to himself at the thought, realizing even as he'd stormed away from Johanna, he hadn't given up.

As much as his blood boiled with anger, frustration and hurt, he knew deep down he couldn't give up on her.

No.

And he never would.

She'd seeped into his blood and dug herself in deep.

One day Johanna Walker would be his. He'd get what he wanted. And Jo, she'd finally get to be who she really was. And who she was, who she *really* was, was fucking magnificent. Someone just had to show her that.

That someone would be him.

## NATE'S POV – THE REQUEST

Nate felt impatient as he sat with his friends in Club 39. Joss and Jo used to work at the bar on George Street, so although it was a wee bit up its own arse for Nate's taste, he didn't really care where they hung out as long as there was alcohol and good company.

That night, however, his usual ease was replaced by anticipation.

He was waiting on one of his best buds. Olivia.

When she first confessed the depth of her insecurities, Nate was surprised. Not shocked, because Olivia had never pretended to be an overly confident sex kitten. But if someone had told him that Liv looked in the mirror and saw what she saw, it would have fucking floored him.

It did floor him.

In Liv Nate found the perfect woman. She was hilarious—like seriously made him laugh more than any other person on the planet—and sweet but with edge. She was kind, loyal, adorable and pretty fucking loveable really. Problem was Liv was also sexy. And the fact that she didn't realize she was sexy made her this complicated mix of cute and sexy which was really quite disarming, he'd realized.

All of this relegated Liv to 'off limits'. To be fair Nate had relegated her to 'off limits' the moment they met. If she hadn't been Jo's pseudo cousin and a permanent fixture in his mate Cole's life, Nate would have taken one look into those exotic golden brown eyes of Liv's, felt her smile tug at his cock, and then proceeded to seduce her into his bed for a weekend marathon of no frills sex.

But Liv was a permanent fixture which put her in the friend zone.

Then she well and truly put herself in the friend zone by insinuating herself into his affections.

Adding sex to those affections would lead to bad places.

But the affection couldn't be ignored. Nate cared about Olivia. A fuck of a lot. Which meant he hated how down on herself she was. He hated that she felt lonely. He hated that she didn't feel wanted. So it had become his particular mission in life to get her confidence levels up so she could go after this Benjamin guy she had a crush on.

That included a shopping trip for a sexy new outfit that would have been funny if she hadn't surprised him once again by being all sassy and shit and maneuvering him into paying for her stuff in retaliation for him smacking her arse.

When she threw him that wicked smile, leaving him no choice but to pay he felt a dangerous rush of blood to his cock. She needed to stop that shit.

"You seem quiet, Nate," Jo said loudly over the music.

He flashed her a dimpled smile before taking a drag of his beer.

She rolled her eyes at Ellie. "I'll take that to mean his quietness is none of my business."

"I'd say I'm happy to make it your business but your fiancé might clock me one."

Everyone but Cam laughed. His friend smirked but there was still a hint of warning in it.

*Fuck me, Nate thought, shoot me before I ever get that possessive over a woman.*

Suddenly Cam, Jo and Ellie turned to look at something and his and Adam's eyes quickly followed suit to see what had caught their attention.

And there she was. Liv. Looking a million times even hotter in the outfit they'd picked out than he'd imagined.

Blood shot southwards as his eyes travelled down the form-fitting outfit to the high blue heels she wore. Those legs. Shit, those legs. Even before he reluctantly agreed to offer her help in learning to flirt, Nate had been fascinated by Liv's legs. There was more than a few times they'd been lounging around watching TV, and she was wearing those tight yoga

trouser thingies or a pair of pajama shorts. Her legs had inspired many a fantasy of them wrapped around his back while he fucked her.

This didn't bother Nate too much. He was a hot blooded male with a high sex drive and Liv was a gorgeous woman. Of course his dick would want in there. But there was a difference between fantasizing about it and making it a reality.

Christ, though, lately she wasn't making it easy on him.

"Oh my God, Olivia, you look... amazing," Jo grinned.

It bugged Nate a little that they all looked so surprised that Liv was gorgeous. Did they not have eyes before she put on a sexy dress and some make up?

As for Liv she fidgeted, looking uncomfortable with the attention, and he immediately wanted to touch her, soothe her. "Uh thanks," she said and then shot them an adorable smile, "Moving on."

Sensing she was going to move by him and sit by Ellie, Nate grabbed her hand and tugged her down beside him so her side was flush with his. Her perfume was different. She usually smelled fresh and citrusy. Tonight she wore something feminine, floral. Musky. Sexy.

He ran his gaze down her body again, wondering how the fuck she could be so blind to her own appeal. The plump tops of her breasts trembled a little against the tightness of her neckline and somehow they looked even more mouth-wateringly impressive against the smallness of her waist in the black top she wore. Then there were those shoes and how they managed to make her legs look even more amazing.

He looked back at her pretty face and into those stunning, feline eyes. He fought a hard-on and felt she should know this in a roundabout way. "You look insanely fuckable."

Liv's whole face lit up as she laughed in surprise. "As always I'm charmed by you, Nathaniel."

Nate grinned, knowing she sounded sarcastic but actually meant it. He could see her almost preening with feminine pleasure and it made him pleased as fuck to give her that.

“You have such a way with words, Nate,” Ellie said.

“He’s worse than Braden,” Adam agreed.

He shrugged, taking a swig of beer, thinking he and Braden got on so well because they both were men who said it like it was. “I say it how I see it.”

Glancing back at Liv he caught her profile as she scanned the bar like she was looking for someone. It was then he remembered their bargain. Shit. Of course. The whole point to the clothes. She was supposed to ask someone out tonight.

“Another round?” she suddenly asked the group.

Nate glanced down at her knee and saw it was bouncing ever so slightly. She was nervous. He just curbed the urge to slide his hand along her thigh to calm her. He and Liv might understand their relationship, their closeness, but he didn’t want their friends getting the wrong idea and filling Liv’s head with romantic shit about him.

“I’m buying.” Adam stood up. “Corona and lime?”

“Talisker and ginger ale. On the rocks,” she replied.

Bloody hell she *was* nervous.

“You okay?” Liv asked Jo for some reason.

Jo nodded. “Are you? Whisky?”

“I just felt like something a little different tonight.” She looked away, scanning the bar again.

Nate leaned into her and murmured in her ear, “See anything you like?”

“I’m looking.” She murmured back. “I feel like I’m going to throw up all over my new shoes.”

And this was why he liked her so damn much. Liv said it how it was too. He felt affectionate sympathy for her and tried to tease her out of her nerves. “Please don’t. I know how much they cost.”

It did the job. She beamed that Hollywood smile of hers at him. The first time she ever smiled at him it knocked him for six. Liv was pretty with unusual eyes that made you look at her. But when she smiled... well, fuck, she was just drop dead gorgeous. “I’ll try not for your sake.”

“Appreciated,” he murmured back, again resisting the urge to touch her. Instead he shifted a little closer so his thigh pressed deeper into hers, letting her know in his way that he was there and that he believed she could do this.

Then suddenly he felt her freeze against him. Concerned, he took hold of her wrist, drawing her toward him. “What?”

Liv looked like a cat in the headlights for a second and then she threw a look at the bar. “I found him.” She nodded toward a group of guys at the bar, not sure who she was talking about. The one that stood out was a tall blond guy but he was not at all what he pictured Liv would go for. For a start he was blond.

He thought she had thing for dark-haired dudes.

Shrugging that thought off since it was unimportant Nate decided to push her. Once she did this she’d realize how easy it was. It was being scared of the unknown, of rejection, that made a person nervous. Nate wanted her to realize that whether or not this guy gave her his number or rejected her, that it wasn’t the end of the world. Though, he doubted the way she was looking tonight any man would be stupid enough to reject her unless he was already spoken for and loyal.

“Good. Now, go up to the bar to retrieve your drink from Adam, and start flirting with the guy you’ve picked out.”

His girl still looked nervous but he was proud of her for nodding and standing up to do as he'd asked. He watched her make her way across the bar, her round, pert arse swaying from side to side in that tight skirt. Nate sighed and ran a hand through his hair. He needed to get fucking laid, pronto.

Watching her at the bar, he smirked a little when he saw her throw back the whisky Adam had bought her and make a face at the obvious burn. Feeling heat on his face, Nate followed the feeling and his eyes collided with Jo. Hers were narrowed, speculative, and he realized why when she threw a disbelieving look at Liv and then back to him.

No.

Fuck no.

Like he said he didn't want anyone getting any ideas about him and Liv and stirring shit between them. If anybody messed with his friendship with Liv he'd take them down, whether they happened to be engaged to his childhood friend or not.

Irritated, Nate looked away not only for distraction but to find something to throw Jo off whatever scent she thought she was following.

Almost immediately his attention snagged on a petite blonde with curves in all the right places. She smiled outright at him and he gave her a chin lift as he got to his feet. The blonde immediately made her way over to him and was forward enough to plant herself against him.

She got on her tiptoes in her strappy sexy heels and said in his ear as she rested a hand on his chest, "I'm Georgie."

Georgie smelled nice, not as nice as Liv, but she was hot and her body language told him he wouldn't have to work for it.

For some reason, Nate was suddenly bored out of his fucking mind. Disgruntled he looked over at the bar and saw Liv was flirting.

And with the blond guy.

Huh.

He felt a pang of something in his chest.

“Your name?”

Distracted, Nate turned back to the blonde and leaned down to say his name in her ear.

When he pulled back she grinned at him. “Want to get out of here, Nate?”

Nate was not shocked by this and usually not turned off by it. Sure he liked the chase but easy was good, too.

Tonight, easy held no appeal whatsoever. “Sorry, darlin’, here celebrating with some friends,” he lied.

Not at all put off, the blonde opened the little clutch she had tucked under her arm and pulled out a business card. When a strobe light hit it he saw it was for a law firm. She was a solicitor.

“Give me a call some time.” She got on her tiptoes, pressing her chest to his upper body and a kiss to the corner of his mouth.

He gave her a smirk and a nod and headed back to the table, tucking her card into the back pocket of his trousers. Just in case.

Jo and Cam seemed to be deep in conversation, smiling and murmuring to each other in that secret way folks in love did. It was good. It meant Jo’s focus was off him and where his attention was this evening. So as Adam and Ellie engaged him in conversation he got away with casting looks toward the bar to see how Liv was progressing.

The guy was into her.

Unfortunately, he also seemed to be doing all of the talking which meant he was more into himself.

*You can do better than this prick, Liv*, he thought, irritated.

When he saw her pull her phone out of her bag and hand it to the guy that irritation became full blown agitation. Obviously she wasn't put off by the prat prattling on (about himself, no doubt).

Then Nate froze completely as the guy handed the phone back to her and used the move to tug her into him and kiss her.

What the fuck?

Nate nearly came out of his seat with the intention of rescuing her and decking the prick when the red haze of anger cleared and he realized Liv was kissing him back. In fact letting the guy stick his tongue in her mouth.

"Nate?" Ellie said and then he heard, "Oh. Oh my. Looks like Liv found a date." She giggled.

Nate wasn't giggling.

Not that he ever fucking giggled. The point was this wasn't funny and was so not funny he had to bury how not funny it was. He buried that shit deep.

"What was that?" Ellie asked Liv as she returned to them.

Liv waved off the comment, nonchalantly. "I got myself a number." She said it like she was in the habit of asking men for their numbers. That shit he buried deep leaked a little, burning his gut. When she looked at him, he forced the burn back down again and gave her a chin lift.

Understanding he wanted her to come to him, Liv sat down next to him.

Her lip gloss had come off and he couldn't help but wonder if she liked that guy's kiss. Nate knew she liked it when *he* kissed her because her gaze got all hazy with lust. Remembering their kiss and how close he'd come to throwing off his concerns and suggesting they fuck, Nate discarded the memory. However, he couldn't help but ask, "Enjoy yourself?"

She shrugged. "I passed your little test."

So was that all it was? Just part of his test. His test hadn't involved sticking her tongue in a stranger's mouth after all. "I didn't say you had to kiss a stranger."

"No. But I did."

Frustrated by her non-answers, he replied, "Seems I've got an overachiever on my hands."

Liv didn't say anything. In fact she barely said a word for the rest of the night. Nate wanted to know what she was thinking. If she liked the guy at the bar enough to go on a date with him and what that would mean for their friendship.

That was it. Christ, Nate breathed a sigh of relief.

That was what was fucking with him. He hadn't thought about what it would mean for him and Liv when she actually started seriously dating a guy. Things would change between them and the truth was he didn't want them to change. He'd miss getting to hang out with her whenever he wanted.

Oh Jesus, he felt much better.

That made total sense.

However, it was selfish. Liv deserved to find love. He needed to put his feelings aside and still help her do that. In fact, he should be proud of her tonight. She did brilliantly.

Insisting on seeing her home safe, Nate tried to think of a way to tell her he was proud without it coming across as patronizing, but Liv beat him to conversation.

"So," she said breezily, "It looked like you got a number too tonight."

Aye, he still had the card in his back pocket and now that he understood what he was actually feeling toward Liv, he thought he might give it a call once he dropped Liv off at her flat. "The blonde."

She snorted. "Is that her name?"

Liv knew he made no apology for his manwhore ways and gave her a look that reiterated that. He didn't need his friends giving him shit about it when most of the women he slept with didn't. "It's the only name I need to know."

He could tell Liv wanted to say something sarcastic but she proved time and again she was smart and bit her lip, keeping her opinion to herself. And before he knew it they were at the main entrance to her building.

"Nate?" she said his name tentatively, drawing his frown to her.

"Aye?"

She cleared her throat, obviously nervous, which annoyed and upset him because he thought by now she knew that she could say anything to him.

"When we kissed it helped."

That fucking kiss. He held his breath waiting to see where she was taking this.

"I felt better. I felt more confident."

Nate's heart started to pound a little harder. "What are you trying to say, Liv?"

"Um," she wet her lips and suddenly his gaze was transfixed by her shining mouth, "I want you... I want you to teach me how to be... good at sex."

So focused on her lush mouth it took Nate a second to process the words that had just come out of it. Calmer than he was inside he asked, "In theory or in practice?"

"Practice."

The word, the meaning, seemed to bounce between them and visions Nate really wished he could shut out swam in his head and every single one of them involved his cock buried inside Liv.

And there was no denying his cock was very, very interested in burying itself inside Olivia Holloway.

Fuck.

“Nate—”

“How much have you had to drink?” Before he even contemplated thinking about this, weighing the risks etc, he needed to know she wasn’t pissing about.

“I’ve only had a few whiskies,’ she insisted. And she did look and sound sober. Nervous but sober. God, it took guts to ask him this. “I’m not drunk. Look, I’m sorry if I’ve made you uncomfortable. I didn’t mean to. We can—”

He reached up and pressed a finger to her trembling mouth to shut her up. “You are one of my closest friends. I don’t want to do anything that might ruin that.”

“If I promised it wouldn’t, would you think about it? I just... I want to feel like I know what I’m doing. If I do, I feel like I’d be able to approach Benjamin with confidence knowing that if he said yes to a date and afterward, if the date went *there*, it wouldn’t be this traumatic, nerve wracking thing for me. I trust you, Nate. And it wouldn’t exactly be a hardship.”

Nate barely saw the smile she gave him. He was too busy trying to tell himself he wasn’t pissed off that she pretty much wanted to use him to seduce another bloke. “So let’s get this straight,” he blurted out before he could stop himself. “You want me to fuck you in order to teach you how to fuck another guy?”

“You make it sound so sordid.”

Nate sighed. She sounded so forlorn and unsure that all his pissiness melted away. She was asking for his help because she trusted him. That wasn’t something to be pissed off about it. In fact he should feel fucking honored. And he realized he did. But now was not the time to discuss it. She needed to really think about it properly. And so did he. Nate pressed a kiss to her forehead. “Go to bed, babe. If you still feel the same way in the morning, ask me again.”

“It was hard enough asking you the first time,” she muttered as she unlocked the main entrance door.

He smiled. Fuck she was cute. He leaned toward her, resting a hand on her lush hip and he whispered in her ear, “It was brave, Liv.”

The grateful smile she shot over her shoulder at him made him want to push that skirt up and—

Christ.

He pulled back. “Dutch courage or real courage, I guess we’ll find out tomorrow.” And then he left before he did something he shouldn’t.

As he wandered out of the lane where her flat was and up hill toward Heriot Row hoping to see a taxi, Nate had no plans whatsoever to call the blonde. Instead his head, heart and body were all messed up. His head told him to let Liv down gently. But his heart rebelled against that because he’d do anything for her and he knew that her lack of sexual confidence had already held her back from living her life to the fullest. As for his body... well obviously all the blood in his body started shooting straight between his legs at the mere thought of getting Olivia naked and under him. Or riding him. Or on her knees. Against the wall. On the couch—Fuck!!!!

When he got home he climbed into the shower and lived every possible sexual position with Liv in his mind with his hand wrapped around his cock. Feeling only marginally satisfied Nate dropped into bed and stared up at his ceiling in the dark.

Maybe it wasn’t such a bad idea.

If Olivia really wanted this, then maybe they could make it work.

She had a massive crush on this Benjamin guy after all.

She just had to promise that she wouldn’t fall for Nate while he guided her to sexual confidence.

And as for Nate well he *could* separate sex from his emotions and get this insistent attraction for his best friend out of his system.

They could do this.

Aye, if anyone could it was him and Liv.

Nate sighed and turned over to try and find some sleep. He ignored that feeling in his gut, the one he'd had earlier in the night while waiting for Liv to arrive at the bar. Anticipation.

His last thought as he drifted off was that he'd be really bloody disappointed if Liv woke up in the morning and decided she didn't want him sex lessons after all.

Aye.

Disappointed.

Fuck.

## **MARCO'S POV – THE TRUTH**

The sounds of the site often played in his head as Marco tried to sleep at night. It became a buzz of machinery, men yelling, and harsh, loud noises that could dull over time with familiarity. But working construction meant always being aware of your surroundings and what each noise meant.

Marco watched as his boys carefully took hold of a window that had been craned up to the third level of the building they were constructing. He gave Andrews, the guy operating the crane, a chin lift in acknowledgment of a good job, and was about to head up into the building to oversee the window fit when he heard a male voice yell in the distance, “Marco? Where the fuck is Marco D’Alessandro?”

His whole body tensed with the unmistakable aggression in his seeker’s voice. He turned and began making his way toward the person who was still yelling for him and when he rounded the corner near the site entrance Marco froze at the sight of Cole Walker.

A visibly furious Cole Walker who was asking one of his men where to find him.

At work, Marco had to force thoughts of Hannah out of his head. Construction could be dangerous and a site supervisor whose head was up his ass over a woman, was an incompetent fucking site supervisor.

That didn’t mean Hannah wasn’t the first thing he thought about in the morning and the last goddamn thing he thought of at night. He’d twisted himself into knots for weeks trying to figure where it had all gone wrong. That shit she spewed about not wanting to take on his kid hurt. It also didn’t sit right.

He felt like he was missing something.

And that something by the looks of it had just stormed onto his site.

Marco would never tell Hannah who she could and could not be friends with but he wasn't going to lie. He did not like the fact that her best friend was a guy like Cole Walker. He knew there was only friendship between them. Or at least he thought there was until the asshole showed up at his site looking ready to kill him.

“Looking for me?”

Cole's head swung around so fast Marco braced.

And he was right to brace.

It took Hannah's friend less than five seconds to breach the distance between them and drive his fist into Marco's face with a power punch that knocked him back on his feet.

Burning pain ached in his mouth and he tasted copper on his tongue.

Dazed, confused, he didn't give himself time to feel that shit, sensing Cole's next punch and blocking it.

Fury shook through him. All his anger, pain and disappointment at losing Hannah suddenly laser-focused in on Cole Walker and Marco could give not one fuck why the guy attacked. He just wanted to attack back. It took everything within him to bottle the rage and remind himself that he was not that man. Not like his grandfather. Not like his uncle. Thinking first with their goddamn fists.

Cole came at him again and he caught his fist, jerked his arm away and then grappled him by the throat. Walker was tall, fit and a martial artist. But Marco was taller, bigger and had learned long ago to control the burn of anger that lived permanently in his gut.

“Back off, Walker,” he warned.

Then he thrust him away, hoping his show of strength would put Cole off.

It didn't.

“You fucked her over. You never gave one shit about her,” Cole hissed, surprising him enough that he didn't catch Cole's fist before it slammed into his cheek.

His tightly leashed anger slipped its rein at Walker's words and he threw a punch that almost took Hannah's friend to his knees.

"Stop!" Marco heard Hannah scream and looked up through the crowds of men who had gathered to watch him fight. Suddenly she appeared, bursting through the onlookers and racing right for them. Movement from Walker drew his attention back and he braced himself for another attack. Hannah cried out, "Cole, stop i—" and was cut off when Walker's elbow slammed into her head.

She stumbled under the force of it, her hands flying to her head in protection and horror flooded him as one of his guy's grabbed hold of her as her knees gave way.

That burn in his gut, that beast Nonno and his uncle had created, a beast he'd fought hard to repress, roared to life. It wanted Walker's face in the fucking dirt.

But just as he moved to lunge at Cole, Hannah was suddenly there. Her hands on his chest. Her scent in his nose. Her beautiful face pale, eyes wet, pleading with him not to hurt her friend.

He wanted to hurt Cole for hurting her.

But, despite the pain she'd caused him, Marco would move the fucking earth to make Hannah Nichols happy. Body coiled with tension, he reluctantly took a step back to let her know he wouldn't hurt Cole. He'd tell her that but he couldn't talk for the goddamn emotion choking him.

After weeks of silence from her he'd been accosted by her best friend and treated like the bad guy and he had no fucking idea why. He wanted to ask her but he was afraid he'd yell at her and he didn't want their business aired in front of all of his men.

Hannah swung toward Cole. "He doesn't know, Cole. He doesn't know."

Cole's nostrils flared. "He still fucking left you."

"Yeah. He did. But everything else... he doesn't know."

His gut churned. Not only did Walker know something about Hannah he didn't, that something was obviously something he should goddamn know! "I don't know what?"

Walker looked more than happy to tell him but Hannah snapped, "Don't you dare."

Cole gestured to him, still bristling with his own anger. "He needs to know."

"And now he will. But *I'll* be the one to tell him." she said.

*Done with this schoolyard shit*, Marco thought. "Will someone please tell me what the fuck is going on here?"

"And me," Tam, his site Manager appeared, scowling at them all.

Fuck.

If he lost his job over this...

Thankfully, Tam focused his glower on Walker. "You want to tell me why you attacked one of my men on a worksite?"

"I'd like to know the same thing," Braden Carmichael walked through the crowds with Adam Sutherland at his side. Great. Was the rest of Hannah's family hiding in the fucking bushes somewhere? His fingers itched with impatience. He just wanted Hannah alone so he could find out what the hell was going on.

"Mr. Carmichael?" Tam's eyes widened. "I didn't know you were planning a visit today. I can assure you this has never happened before."

Shit. If Braden made an issue out of this Marco was definitely in the firing line. Fucking hell, Walker was lucky he wasn't a vengeful man.

"Keep your trousers on, Tam," Braden assured him. "That's my little sister." He looked back at Hannah and asked her what was going on.

It was on the tip of his tongue to angrily reiterate that question.

She took a step toward her pseudo-brothers. "I need to speak with Marco privately. I'll explain everything to you but first I need to explain it to him."

As far as he was concerned what happened between him and Hannah was none of Carmichael's business and the man was taking too long to answer. Ready to throw his career away and voice that very thought, Braden finally spoke to Tam. "My sister needs the use of the office cabin."

"Of course," Tam said congenially, obviously not wanting to fuck off the man who provided most of his business. He gestured to the site office. "It's empty."

Marco didn't hesitate. He pressed a guiding hand to Hannah's lower back and led her upstairs to the cabin as his site manager yelled at everyone else to get back to work. Hannah was tense beneath his touch, as if she didn't want it, which only made his frustration build to epic fucking proportions. In his head Hannah Nichols was his woman. There was a time she craved his touch almost as badly as he craved hers.

Feeling her put up that guard between them was just as painful as it was the day he hurried back to her apartment to explain about Dylan only for her to shut him out of her life completely.

Once inside, door closed for privacy, he gave Hannah the distance she seemed to need and strode across the room. His questioning gaze met her soulful, tortured one. Her eyes dipped to his split lip and darkened with apology. "I'm sorry about Cole."

He could give a fuck about Walker. "I could give a damn about *what* he did, I want to know *why* he did it."

She refused to meet his gaze, chipping away at his patience.

"Hannah?"

Marco watched as she raised a shaking hand and rubbed her lips nervously.

That feeling, that sick, ball of ugly that had sat in his stomach since the day they broke up suddenly grew. Whatever she had to tell him was bad. Really bad. He suddenly knew that deep down to his bones.

His heart began to beat faster with something like fear.

“When you left me five years ago I was in a really bad place.” She began, and although Marco was prepared to not like what she was going to tell him, knowing that it went all the way to a time he was most ashamed of, to a time he hurt the one person he never wanted to hurt, made his blood run cold. “I thought at first I was just heartbroken, that that was why I wasn’t feeling great. But a few months after you left I was out with Jo and Cole and I felt this indescribable pain. I passed out from it.”

That ugly ball grew even larger.

Suddenly he wasn’t sure he wanted to know anymore. The idea of Hannah being ill—

“When I woke up it was almost forty eight hours later and I was in hospital.”

*“You should have told me you had a son.”* She’d said that day. So cold. So empty.

Not empty.

In pain.

In so much fucking pain.

Because... no. God. No. Please, no. “Hannah,” he said, hearing the plea in his voice.

Anything but that. Fuck anything but that.

Her tears began to fall, cutting him to the quick. “I miscarried. But it wasn’t just a miscarriage it was something called an ectopic pregnancy. That means the egg implanted inside one of my tubes instead of the womb, but because I didn’t realize I was pregnant, the egg grew until it ruptured the tube and I started bleeding internally.”

Jesus— “You almost died?” *Say ‘no’, Hannah. Say no. I can’t—*

“Yes. I had surgery. They removed the damaged tube.” And then what she had to say next was what Marco imagined was the emotional equivalent of a sword slicing open his chest. “I lied to my friends and family about who got me pregnant. I protected you. I protected you but you weren’t there to protect me. I had to cope with having a miscarriage at *seventeen.*” Her

voice quivered with pain and resentment that cut his fucking insides to shreds. “And you weren’t there for me. And I know you had your reasons and I tried to forgive and I tried to forget. But you weren’t even back in Edinburgh a few months when you got Leah pregnant. You were there for her, Marco, and as much as I know it’s not rational, I feel like you betrayed me somehow. You were supposed to be the love of my life, but how can you be? You don’t go through what I went through alone and then discover that the supposed love of your life was there for some other girl when he was never there for you.”

Silence rang out around the office as he looked into the tear-stained face of the woman he loved. A woman he’d loved since she was a girl.

All he’d ever wanted was to protect her.

And not only had she suffered through the unimaginable because of him and without him, but he’d hurt her more than he’d hurt anyone in his life.

*Hannah.*

Self-directed rage burst out from the depths of him, an explosion of emotion he had to release or it felt like it would burn him alive. He was barely cognizant of putting his fist through the wall of the office until her voice, calling his name, stopped him.

“Marco,” she whispered now. Hearing the concern in that whisper undid him.

He would have moved heaven and earth for this woman.

Instead he fucking shattered her world and left her to bleed without him. For years. Then he’d unwittingly ripped open a wound that had never healed.

He would never regret Dylan.

Marco loved his son. Lived for his son.

But before Dylan there was Hannah.

And he’d broken her.

How could he ever possibly fix that?

That's what burned the most. Because for weeks he'd held onto hope that somewhere down the line he and Hannah would find their way to each other again. They always did.

But this... this felt insurmountable.

He stared at her in anguish, needing her to know in case it was the last time she let him near her, what she meant to him and that he understood. That her resentment wasn't fucking irrational. "You were this precious, beautiful gift that came into my life when I needed it the most," he said, remembering a time in his life when he'd felt nothing but anger. Until her. "I never felt safe as a kid. I knew what it was like to not feel safe and I hated the idea of anyone I cared about ever feeling that way. I started to care about you pretty quickly so it feels like I've always only ever wanted to protect you, you know. And I didn't. So I *did* betray you. And I'm so sorry. I'm so, so sor..." The emotion overwhelmed him, and tears that fucking unmanned him clogged his throat. He dragged his hand down his face, pushing away from the wall as he turned from her, unable to handle the guilt and pain he felt just looking at her.

He heard the door open behind him and Carmichael's voice asking, "Do you want me to take you home?"

There was a moment of silence and Marco could feel Hannah's eyes on him. But he couldn't look at her. At that moment he was paralyzed by a thousand memories.

Young Hannah beaming light on his dark goddamn world.

Seventeen year old Hannah forcing him to admit his feelings.

A drunken fumble with Leah.

Dylan in his arms. The kind of love he'd never experienced before, changing him.

Seeing Hannah at the wedding and knowing in an instant that Dylan had made him the kind of man who deserved her now. That he'd fight like fuck to get her back.

Hannah laughing.

Hannah beneath him in bed.

Hannah caressing his face with love in her eyes.

Hannah's eyes empty as she broke up with him.

Hannah crying.

Hannah's anguish.

Her fucking anguish.

He bowed his head, trying to get himself together.

It took him some time but finally he drew in a shuddering breath. His body felt like it had gone three rounds at the boxing. Even his ribs ached with the pain of Hannah's confession.

Turning to face her, he was shocked to discover himself alone.

She was gone.

He stumbled back a step, fear almost knocking him on his ass.

Hannah was gone.

Marco blew out a breath, his eyes swinging to the gaping holes in the office wall. Holes he'd made because he couldn't contain his feelings.

Feelings for Hannah.

Yes, he had fucked up and he had fucked huge... but Marco still believed, deep down in his soul, that no man would ever love Hannah Nichols the way he did. He couldn't take back the past. But he could work like hell to give her the kind of future she deserved.

Hurrying out of the office and down the steel steps his eyes alighted on Tam. "I need to patch up the wall in there," he said.

Tam's expression was concerned. "Okay."

"I'll do it first thing tomorrow but I need to take off early. My head is not in the right space to be on site."

"I'm getting that." Tam patted him on the arm. "Go home, see to yourself."

"Appreciate it," he murmured.

Marco strode out of the site, ignoring the curious eyes of the men he worked with. Instead he got in his car and he called Leah.

“Need to see Dylan,” he said.

As usual Leah was cool with that, though he could hear the curiosity in her voice too. She was his friend, he’d explain when he could, but right now all he could think about was holding his boy in his arms. Dylan gave him his strength because his boy needed him to be strong. Dylan needed his daddy to be strong and whole and complete to be the best goddamn father Marco could be.

And Marco would never be whole, would never be complete until Hannah Nichols was his forever.

And after what he’d put her through Hannah needed to know she was his moon, stars and fucking sky.

So for Dylan, for Hannah, and yes, for himself, Marco would never give up until Hannah Nichols agreed to spend the rest of her nights safe in his arms.

## COLE'S POV – THE TATTOO

After tossing and turning through the night, his mind on Shannon Macleod and the history she'd imparted to him last night, Cole should have been exhausted when he walked into INKarnate that morning.

Instead he was wired.

He couldn't wait to see Shannon.

Since the moment she'd walked into the tattoo studio she'd taken him on a fucking rollercoaster ride of emotions. At first he thought she was stunning with her hair like fire and violet eyes. Then when he recognized her it brought back that instant connection he'd felt toward her when they were only fifteen. She had a boyfriend back then and disappeared before he could get her number.

Cole had decided he wasn't going to let her slip away so easily now even if she said she didn't remember him (now he knew she was lying when she said that). But if he'd known about her past he wouldn't have come on so strong. But he didn't know so he fucked up. Then she fucked up and she fucked up so badly he was done with her. The hell of it was, though, that he was so attracted to her he still wanted her, which made him resent her.

Then she apologized and he realized she wasn't all bad after all. Still, he didn't trust her. Shannon seemed convoluted. Like two different people. It reminded him of how his mum could be. One minute sweet. The next a drunken bitch who knew how to shred his confidence to tatters.

He was a boy then. There wasn't much he could do about that.

Now, however, he was a man and he didn't need to put up with that shit.

The only reason he'd made friendly overtures to Shannon now was because the studio was like a family and everyone else liked her. Cole needed to make the effort to keep the peace.

She'd been fantastic company at the art gallery and even more so at dinner with Hannah and Marco. When Hannah interrogated him about her in the kitchen Cole had been roiling with frustration because everything within him told him that Shannon Macleod should be his perfect match.

But he could still hear her calling him 'nothing' with her beautiful face twisted in distaste.

Last night's revelations, however, had changed his entire perception of her all over again.

*"I need you to know that you're not nothing and when I said that, that was my issue. Not yours. You shouldn't have to carry that."*

He felt a pang in his chest, remembering the way she'd looked into his eyes with that sad, luminous violet gaze that could bring a man to his goddamn knees.

*"I tried to fight. I tried, but he was so much bigger than me."*

Cole winced, his fists clenching at his sides as he stood in the doorway to his private studio.

*"He stopped hitting me. And he started touching me, tearing at my clothes, repeating over and over that I was his. And I—I knew. I knew he was going to rape me."*

"Fuck." Those words felt like a punch to his gut.

*"No... I got away... I should have gone to the police."* He could hear her sobs, felt them still, *"I didn't think. I didn't mean to be so selfish."*

Now he knew.

Shannon blamed herself for her brother's imprisonment. She believed she made bad decisions about men. So she tried to protect herself and Cole could understand that. Now he knew all the glimpses of the woman who offered chocolate to clients, soothed those with broken hearts, won over Rae of all people, and worried about a stranger's dog was the real Shannon. The one that shredded him, pushed him away and was bitter was the one in cold metal armor trying to hold everyone at bay so she didn't get hurt again. Maybe if her family

hadn't turned their backs on her she would have come out of the bitterness. But she'd been left to deal with it all by herself.

Cole had decided as he laid in bed the night before that the pain in his chest put there when she told him what had happened to her, and stayed there at the thought of her being lonely and feeling unloved, meant he had feelings for her that couldn't be ignored. So Cole was going to show her there were good guys out there. A guy who would cherish her and protect her. A guy who would stop her from growing bitter and alone. A guy who would make her laugh again.

Him.

The fact that she trusted him enough to tell him her story gave Cole the confidence he needed to start Operation Seduce Shannon. Between that and the off-the-fucking-charts chemistry between them Cole felt it wasn't a case of 'if' but 'when'. And he didn't care how long it took as long as the end result was Shannon in his bed.

"Right, enough," he muttered to himself. Distraction in his line of work could mean bad things so for now it was time to get his head in the game. Still, a little while later as he sat reading over some new legislation documents Stu had left for him to look through, his body tensed with awareness at the sound of the bell tinkling from the front of the studio.

Shannon had arrived at work.

He didn't have to wait long for her to appear with his morning coffee.

She, thankfully, looked well-rested, her gorgeous hair spilling down her shoulders and back in waves and silky ringlets. Fuck, but she had the kind of hair a man just wanted to run his hands through, or fist as he—

Cole grinned, throwing the wayward thought away as he stood to accept his coffee. Instead of taking it and letting go, he wrapped his hand around hers and asked, "How are you feeling?"

She gave him a reassuring smile. She had the sweetest smile he'd ever seen. He needed to make her smile more. "I'm fine," she said. "Honest."

Sensing she wasn't lying, Cole finally took the coffee but as his big hand slipped away from her small one, he couldn't help the dark thought intrude that she was so petite her ex, if he was anywhere near Cole's height and build, could have fucking killed her when he beat the shit out of her. And it was a goddamn miracle she fought him off before he raped her.

Cole's whole being revolted at the idea of putting his hands on her in anger and violence.

"Cole." She smiled again and as if sensing his thoughts continued to reassure him further, "I know I had a meltdown last night, but honestly, I'm okay. I have a good life here—a good job, good friends. I've found more than I ever hoped to find when I moved here, so please don't worry about me."

Small she may be but she was fierce. To have gone through what she'd gone through and been left alone to deal with it herself in the aftermath was quite a feat. She didn't seem to realize that or give herself credit for it. "That's a tall order," he said but shook his head in amazement. "You're made of stern stuff, Shannon MacLeod."

"It's the hair. It's magic hair," she teased.

He laughed, pleased she really seemed okay. "It is definitely magical."

"Am I getting my coffee any fucking time soon?" Rae suddenly called from next door, ruining the moment of camaraderie between them.

Cole would have frowned except Shannon giggled and the sound was startling and so goddamn adorable he wanted to sweep her up into his arms. He wondered if what he was feeling translated on his face because Shannon's giggles quieted to a warm, almost shy smile. "I'd better..." she gave him a little wave before she walked out and Cole's eyes immediately dropped to where her hair swayed above her pert, surprisingly round arse.

Fuck but she was perfectly made.

Cole groaned inwardly and sipped at his coffee. Maybe he wasn't going to be as patient as he thought during Operation Seduce Shannon. Sexy and cute. Lethal mix.

"Thank God," Cole heard Rae say loudly. "You don't know how excruciating it is having to listen to you two lovebirds when I haven't had my caffeine fix."

Cole threw a disgruntled look at the wall between their two studios, wondering for not the first time if he could convince Stu to institute a ban on Rae talking in the morning.

"Don't be mean," He heard Shannon say.

"Why?" Rae retorted. "Are you going to kill me with your magical hair?"

Cole smirked despite himself.

"It is thick," Shannon replied, sounding serious. "It *would* make good rope."

*Good for you, Shortcake*, he thought, grinning.

"Dark. I like it, wee fairy." Rae's response was not surprising.

Shannon's light footsteps made their way to Simon's room and Cole heard him he say, "Tony kept me up late last night."

Rae also heard because she immediately yelled, "No fucking sex talk!"

Cole didn't hear what was said in Simon's room next but whatever it was made Rae shout, "I heard that!"

"She has radar ears," Shannon said loud enough for Cole to hear.

"So what?" Rae shouted back. "You have magical fucking hair!"

At that Cole burst out laughing, hearing Shannon giggle down the hall too. His laughter died to a grin but a warmth remained in his gut. A much needed warmth and reassurance after last night's horrible revelations.

Shannon fit at INKarnate. She fit with Rae and Simon and even Tony. Now Cole just had to show her that she fit with him, too.

\*\*\*

Over the weekend and much of the next week Cole stuck to Shannon as much as he could. He invaded her space in a way he hoped was non-intrusive. He wanted to give her a chance to get used to him, to get to know him, and build on the trust she already had for him without shoving his attraction for her down her throat.

He didn't flirt too obviously with her, but he showered her with attention that couldn't be misconstrued.

While he did that he worked on the drawing for the dragon tattoo Shannon had wanted but her ex hadn't allowed her to get. Prick.

Together they finally decided on a predatory black-and-petrol-blue dragon in profile. It was perfect for Shortcake. It matched her fierceness.

Finally, Thursday morning, the day they'd agreed he'd do her tattoo for her, arrived. Cole woke up with anticipation. He got to put his mark on Shannon MacLeod. Whatever happened between them, she'd always think of him when she caught a glimpse of her tattoo in the mirror. Cole had felt pride over his tattoos, satisfaction and even humbled by the reaction of his clients. But he had never felt a possessiveness about a tattoo before.

Now his fingers itched with the feeling.

He wanted to touch her. Mark her. Bleed his art into her skin where it would stay forever.

*It was fucking sexy*, he thought.

And not long later as Shannon sat straddled on his chair with her top pulled up and bunched in her fists at her chest, Cole realized he'd underestimated just how sexy it was.

*She was.*

Her skin was smooth and like ivory, her jeans riding just low enough to reveal the dimples on her lower back. Dimples he wanted to kiss. Although slender, Shannon had slight curves that made Cole's hands flex for want. And then there was her arse which was... fuck. Her

slender waist sloped into gentle hips and then a fantastic, tiny but rounded apple bottom that he just wanted to bite.

He'd just shifted her hair over her shoulder and dirty, horny bastard that he was had an immediate vision of fucking Shannon on her knees with her hair fisted in one hand while his other grabbed a handful of that tight little rounded arse of hers.

Fighting getting hard, Cole concentrated on her tattoo, talking quietly to her and then letting a comfortable silence reign once he felt her relax. Usually he totally lost himself in his art when he had a tattoo gun in his hand but there was no way he could forget that it was Shannon's skin underneath his needle.

"Are you okay?" he asked after a couple of minutes.

"I'm fine," she said, her voice soft. "You?"

He grinned. Turned on but otherwise great. "I'm good, Shortcake."

"How does it look?"

Trying not to laugh at her cute impatience he replied, "Like I just started it three minutes ago."

She giggled and his free hand that was resting gently on her hip wanted to curl into a grip, an involuntary reaction to pull her into him. He stopped himself just in time and laughed at her giggling and at his own fucking ridiculousness. "It's going to be pretty cute when it's done," he assured her.

But she stopped giggling.

Shit.

He knew 'cute' wasn't really what she was going for.

"Cute but fierce," he hurried to say and this time allowed himself to squeeze her hip.

"Perfect for you."

She laughed and he relaxed. "Cute. That's my lot in life."

Despite her laughter there was something forlorn in her tone. “How do you mean?”

“That’s how people describe me. ‘Oh, Shannon, you look so cute in that picture,’ et cetera. I suppose it’s better than ‘you look like you’ve been pulled through the bushes backwards,’ so I’m not complaining.”

Was she kidding? She really thought she was just... cute? Wanting her to see herself how he saw her, Cole gave it to her straight. “There’s more to you than cute. People call you cute because you’re petite... but you’re sexy too... Mostly you’re beautiful in a way that stops a man in his tracks.”

And that was no lie.

She’d stopped him in his tracks when he was fifteen. Literally.

Now she’d made his whole fucking world stop.

She was silent so long he worried he’d pushed too much. But then she let out this breathless little sound followed by, “Thank you.” and he heard the amazement in her voice.

And the pleasure.

He squeezed her hip again, impatient now for the day he could touch her all he wanted because she belonged to him.

They fell into an easy silence and Cole concentrated on finishing the dragon. To be honest he went slowly, drawing the moment out, and a tattoo that might have taken him forty minutes took him an hour. He was disappointed when he said, “Done.”

“Really?” She sounded surprised.

Cole chuckled, wondering how long she thought these things took. “Really. I’ll put some film wrap over it to protect it.”

He took his time doing that too.

Once he’d finished he sat back and said to the back of her head. “I know you’ve probably heard the aftercare speech a million times, but I have to give it to you anyway.”

She glanced over shoulder, giving him a smile he knew she didn't even realize was sexy.

“Hit me with it.”

Oh he wanted to hit her with it alright.

Fuck.

“Take the film off in four to six hours. Clean the tattoo with a mild soap—Rae will definitely have some—and warm water. Massage, don't scrub. If you're showering tonight or in the morning, don't let the spray hit the tattoo at full force and keep the water lukewarm.” *Don't think about her naked in the shower, don't, don't, don't. Fuck, too late.* “It also helps to run the shower at ice-cold on just your tattoo before you get out—this closes any pores the warm water might have opened, allowing the tattoo to heal better and keep the ink vivid. You don't need to rebandage, but moisturize it lightly twice a day—again, Rae has the best product to use. Do this for the next few days. Wear loose tops, low jeans, so your clothing doesn't rub against it.” Cole stood up, shocked by how much a speech he gave every day of his life took on a new meaning with her. Every word provoked his libido. But it didn't stop him from putting his hands on her again to help her down off the chair.

She stumbled into him and he felt her heat, smelled her light, fragrant perfume and fought control as he murmured in her ear an apology about not lowering the chair height.

Then she shivered underneath his touch and Cole forgot about taking things slow. All he could think about was sex.

Sex with Shannon.

And he wanted it to be all she was thinking about. “It might be better to sleep on your side tonight, and for the next few days try not to rub your tattoo against anything and... eh... missionary is probably out for the next few days as well.”

Shannon jerked in his hold and turned to look up at him with those wide, stunning eyes. “That won't be a problem,” she whispered.

Cole felt that whisper in his dick. He opened his mouth to tell her he wanted to make it a problem he was happy to solve by fucking her on her knees but his door burst open before he could and Rae strode in.

Frustration kicked him in his gut (and other harder places) as Shannon stepped out of his touch to show Rae the tat.

“Cool,” she pronounced. “I’ll be able to see it better when the cling film comes off. So, what do you think? Did it hurt?”

“Not as bad as I thought it would.”

“Are you going to get another one?”

Shannon snorted. “I think I’m good for now.”

Cole was almost relieved he wouldn’t have to go through the torture of tattooing her again. Almost. It was a pleasurable torment, after all.

Rae clapped her hands together suddenly. “Tomorrow night! Drinks to celebrate Shannon’s tat.”

Any chance to spend time with Shannon was a good idea to him, he thought as he started to clean up. “Sounds good.”

“Okay.” Shannon replied. “But I’m buying for Cole since he won’t let me pay for the tattoo.”

His eyes flew to her but before he could reply Rae whirled on him in indignation. “Free? You only gave me fifty percent off!”

Laughter bubbled on his lips and he just shrugged, even though he knew it would piss her off more. What could he say? A woman that drove him to distraction and made his blood this hot, didn’t pay for her tattoo. Especially when he was trying to make her so attached to him she wouldn’t fight it when he decided to take their relationship to the next level.

As if she'd read all that in his shrug, Rae turned to Shannon and yelled, "Fucking magical hair all right!" before storming out.

Shannon stared after her flatmate in shocked bemusement before turning to him.

Cole winked at her.

And better than anything else that had happened that day Shannon burst out into tinkling, sweet laughter that hit him in his chest. It seeped right in there, settling like the best kind of weight.

Oh aye, his mission in life was to make Shannon MacLeod laugh every day for as long as she'd let him.

## LOGAN'S POV — GRACE'S DATE

Logan wished like fuck he knew how to cope with a teenage girl that happened to be his daughter. Growing up with two sisters, he had learned to give them space when they got broody and crabbit. When they slammed into their rooms and told everyone to bugger off he let them. The only times he didn't was when someone had hurt Shannon. He never let her shut him out then.

But he didn't know how to deal with Maia right then. And he wished he did because dealing with his newly discovered teenage daughter would take his mind off Grace and the anonymous fuckwad who could at that very minute be touching her.

Logan's hands curled into fists as a burn scored through his gut at the same time a sharp ache flared across his chest.

Jealous.

He was jealous.

He couldn't bloody remember the last time he'd ever felt jealous over a woman.

Shit.

He stood up and strode out of the living room to stare at Maia's closed door again. A dark cloud had appeared over his daughter's head as soon as Grace told them she was going on a date. Maia no longer wanted movie night with him. She just shut herself in her room to brood.

Although Logan was beyond grateful for everything Grace had done for Maia there was a part of him that was peeved her actions could affect his daughter so much. It wasn't her fault. Grace was entitled to a life outside of them. But Maia had latched onto Grace with a possessiveness that worried him... mostly because she wasn't the only fucking one.

"Maia?" he called softly.

No answer.

“At least grunt, sweetheart, so I know you’re alive.”

“I’m alive,” she muttered. “Tired.”

He frowned but replied, “Okay, sweetheart. Night.”

“Night, Dad.”

That produced another flare in his chest. This time a good one. He wandered back into the sitting room and picked up his phone. He didn’t know what he was hoping for. A text from Grace to tell him she was bored, that she needed rescued.

That it was him she wanted fucking her senseless and not some asshole her friend had set her up with.

Jesus, his head was all over the place because it wasn’t as if anything could happen with Grace. Maia was acting weird whenever he showed an interest in a woman and according to Grace it was because she still didn’t feel secure in his affections. Truthfully, if someone had told him he would be a full-time dad a few months ago he would have told them to bolt. No way. But as soon as he clapped eyes on his wee girl, who unfortunately, wasn’t much of a wee girl anymore, he’d felt something shift inside him.

When he realized everything she’d been through, it became his mission in life to make Maia’s life the best life possible. She’d had a shitty start but Logan would make sure she never felt neglected again in her life. He couldn’t make up for those years, and it killed him that he’d lost those years. It killed him he’d missed her first steps, her first words, the possibility of her first word being ‘daddy’.

He’d never get that with her.

But he’d get her sweet sixteenth, her first date (when she was thirty), her graduation, her first day at uni. He’d walk her down the aisle. He’d dance with her at her wedding. And he’d hold her in his arms as she held her first child in hers.

He'd make bloody sure of that.

Maia would know she was loved in all of that. However, that would all take time. Right now it was important she knew she had his entire focus and attention. These feelings he was developing for Grace had really bad timing.

They needed to be shoved aside for Maia's sake.

Still, as much as he tried to convince himself of that, he found himself pacing the flat, driving himself crazy with what ifs. What if this guy she met she liked? What if they started dating and it grew serious? What if she no longer had time for Maia? For him?

Logan grew more and more agitated, and more and more pissed off by his agitation. The moment he stepped out of his apartment and saw her standing in the hallway, glaring at a dripping thong on the banister he was done for. He just didn't know it then. Instead he'd taken her in, in classy clothes with her perfect honey hair, and perfect complexion that needed no make-up it was that fucking flawless, and he'd resented her on sight. Once upon a time she was exactly the kind of woman he thought he'd end up with. Classy, stylish, soft-spoken, and smart enough to make him laugh. Really fucking laugh. She'd never be easy, she'd be a challenge, but one that would never bore him.

Then he went to prison and it fucking hurt to realize that a woman like that was forever out of his reach. So he made an art form out of sleeping with easy.

And when Grace had stared at him in distaste he thought someone had told her about his time in prison, and he'd thought how goddamn right he'd been.

Until that day with Shannon and his bitchy neighbor and he realized Grace could give a shit he'd been to prison. Grace was pissed off because he was interrupting his sleep... and to his shock as she'd blushed under his surprised stare, she was pissed off because she was attracted to him.

He quickly realized, too, that she didn't want to be attracted to him, because she thought he was a manwhore. And to be fair, he was at the time. Before prison he'd had a very healthy sex life and two years without was not easy. He had simply been making up for lost time.

And he still wasn't done. Making a move on Grace would mean making a move toward something permanent and he just wasn't sure he was ready for that then.

Instead he found himself a classy, stylish American who was all that and *easy*.

When Maia made it clear she was threatened by other women in his life, he'd ended things with Sharon.

There was the regrettable slip up which he was pretty fucking sure led to Grace going on this bloody date. If only she knew she was the reason for his slip up. Opening the door to Maia and him, still sleep-rumpled in a fucking barely there silk top and tiny shorts. He'd always thought Grace was beautiful in a fresh-faced English rose kind of way, but that morning she hadn't been expecting them to appear so early. So he got to see her long, fucking, toned legs and sweet nipples hard against her silk top.

It was only for a second because she'd dashed off into her bedroom to put on a robe.

But the image was burned in his brain and she was oblivious to what she'd done to him.

Grace was not just sweet and kind and beautiful.

She was seriously sexy in this innocent way that worked for him.

*Worked.* For. Him.

All morning he'd been at the club, distracted by her, fantasizing about her, getting bloody hard at work like a school boy. And then Sharon called him. He'd gone to her.

It wasn't something he was proud of.

And it pissed off Maia, and as much as she'd tried to hide it and he'd tried to explain and then gloss over, it hurt Grace.

Now she was on a date.

Logan didn't know whether to wring her neck for being so clueless or thank her for putting much-needed distance between them.

The latter went completely out of his head when he heard the clattering sound of high heels on the stairwell. Instead he found himself in the hall with his eye to his peephole like a well... like an asshole Peeping Tom.

As soon as he caught sight of her honey hair as she came up the stairs, he threw his door open and glared at her as she stepped onto the landing. She'd taken extra care with her hair and make-up. Her make-up was so glamorous she didn't even look like herself.

He glared harder.

She looked resigned. "All right, then," she said as she walked calmly on sexy high heels. He couldn't see what she was wearing under her coat but if her hair and those shoes were anything to go by...

"You're early," he blurted out as she opened her door. He didn't think she'd sleep with the guy but that didn't mean he didn't need to know.

"I am."

Frustration burned in him at her one word answer and before he could stop himself he was across the landing and right at her back, her light perfume tickling his senses. "Why?"

Grace jerked in surprise to find him so near, glancing over her shoulder. She had beautiful shining dark brown eyes that a man could easily get lost in. Right now they were narrowed in anger and fuck if that didn't turn him on.

Jesus Christ.

"Just because. *Dad.*"

In no mood for her sarcasm, he pushed into the flat behind her, ignoring her huff of annoyance. Why was she evading? What happened on this date? He'd had to rescue her

before so he already knew she had a track record of going out with pricks. “Did he do something to you?”

“Where is Maia?”

“She’s sleeping. I’ve locked her in.”

“Oh good,” she strode toward the kitchen. “If there’s a fire, at least her chances of escape are narrower.”

Not only was she evading she was insinuating he was an incompetent parent. Christ, she was asking for a fight. “She can unlock it from the inside.”

Grace went immediately to the fridge and pulled out a bottle of wine.

Shit. Not a good sign.

“Logan, I am not in the mood for whatever this is.”

Impatience non-existent, not wanting her focus on anything but him, he pulled the bottle out of her hands, quickly poured the drink she wanted and slid it haphazardly across the counter to her. “Speak.”

She didn’t. She took a sip, avoiding his eyes, and wandered away from him. “Grace,” his tone warning her not to push his patience any further.

The dirty look she threw him only pissed him off more.

In fact, Logan didn’t think he could get more pissed off at her right then.

Until she snapped, “I don’t know if you realize this, Logan, but I don’t actually have to tell you anything about my life.” It wasn’t the words that threw him over the edge, although every possessive cell in his body screamed at him that he did actually have a fucking say in her life.

But right then he was too busy losing his mind over her outfit because she’d shrugged out of her jacket, revealing what was beneath.

A little black fuck-me dress.

It was molded to every inch of her curves and her tits pushed up against the neckline.

Logan had never seen her like this. Between the make-up and the shoes and that fucking dress, he barely recognized her. Every time he thought he had Grace figured out she did something else to surprise him, and standing in her kitchen looking like a wet dream threw him completely.

And all he could think was that she hadn't done herself up like this for him. She hadn't given this sexy, so goddamn sexy it hurt, side of her to him. She did this for some bloody stranger.

"Logan?" she asked in that soft, posh voice that made his dick twitch.

"Is that what you wore?" he asked, the words coming out guttural with his agitation and frustration. "For him."

She looked down at herself and then back to him and whatever she saw on his face made her blush.

Blood shot downwards.

"Was he worth it?" he gestured to her, wanting to push that dress up around her waist and lose his body in hers. The idea that someone else had touched her fucked with his head in a way he could never have imagined.

"There's nothing wrong with this dress," she snapped, no longer flushing with embarrassment but anger.

That fire buried beneath her lady-like façade was addictive. Logan wanted to believe it was just for him. Only he could make her lose her self-control like she did with him. But had she given her fire to someone else? Dressing that way... like she'd wanted to. "Well, he could be in no doubt what you were offering when you turned up in it. So what the hell happened? Or was it the true definition of a quickie?"

He cursed himself as soon as he said it, hating the hurt he inflicted.

“Get out of my kitchen.”

But he couldn't. He was driven like a mad man. He needed to know. He moved toward her. “Not before you tell me what that bastard did to you.”

“It's none of your business. For the fifteen hundredth time.”

Bullshit.

“I beg to fucking differ.” He towered over her, his fingers itching to touch her.

She glared that fire up at him. “You're being ridiculous. I am not your sister!”

The words rang out around her kitchen and he stumbled back under their weight. Under the bloody goddamn realization that she thought his behavior was because he felt brotherly protectiveness of her.

Jesus Christ if he didn't want her so much he'd walk out over her absolute fucking cluelessness. He could barely speak, his voice hoarse with disbelief, when he retorted, “Believe me, I know you are not my sister.”

Grace skirted past him, seeming to need distance.

Her confusion calmed him. Just a little. Enough to say, “I just want to know if he hurt you.” What he really wanted to know was if she let this guy screw her but she might throw him out if he asked it out right.

“No, he didn't.” She threw back the last of her wine and leaned heavily against the wall at her back.

He took the opportunity to devour her with his eyes. His body locked with incredible tension as he forced himself to stand still, to not go to her, to not put his hands and mouth on her and see if that fire caught ablaze.

As if sensing his regard, Grace looked up from beneath her lashes, a look she had no idea was unbelievably seductive. “No, he didn't,” she repeated, “But he was only after one thing.”

Logan bet he was, Grace turning up in that bloody dress. “What did you do?”

“I told him I didn’t do one-night stands because when I went to bed with a man I wanted him to do whatever he wanted to me, and for that I needed to know and trust him.”

Her words might as well have been her hand wrapping around his cock and jerking on it. The idea that sweet, classy Grace came with a sexually adventurous side was more than he could take. And he couldn’t stand the idea of some other guy knowing that about her. “You said what?”

“I was being funny.”

So. Not. Funny. “Aye, well, I’d expect a phone call from him tomorrow. Saying shit like that to him, wearing that fucking dress...” he took a breath, afraid he’d say something he’d regret.

Those dark eyes of hers flashed with anger. “Why are you acting like a complete sod to me tonight?”

That was it.

Patience fucked.

“Are you really that fucking clueless?” he yelled, exasperated.

“Apparently so!” she shouted back, her chest heaving and making the curve of her breasts tremble.

All other thoughts, worries, concerns, people, fled his mind. His entire focus was on Grace and fucking some sense into her. “Well, here’s a damn hint!” Logan stormed her, capturing her elegant wrists in his big hands to pin them against the wall as he pushed his big body into her soft one. His dick swelled with need as her pretty lips parted in surprise, her eyes flared with lust, and her cheeks flushed. So fucking gorgeous. So feminine and soft.

Class.

Pure class.

She deserved to be made love to gently by a gentleman.

He couldn't give her that right then. Logan wanted to brand her, possess her, make her lose her mind with need. Punish her a little for making him lose control.

He wanted to fuck her hard against her kitchen wall.

“Tell me to get out, Grace.”

Her breath stuttered as her gaze grew hazy... and then he felt her squeeze her legs together and wondered if she was already wet.

Jesus— “Grace, tell me to leave.”

“No,” she whispered, staring at him with so much longing he melted against her in relief. “I want you to stay.”

She was honest so she deserved his honesty in return. “If I stay I'm going to fuck you.”

And that's when he knew Grace Farquhar was a prize beyond his wildest imaginings. She licked her lips and spread her legs in invite before whispering against his lips, “I'm counting on it.”

His control, what little he'd been holding onto, snapped.

He'd never lost control with a woman.

When he fucked a woman it was hot, he was generous, and they both got off. But Logan liked to control the whole encounter.

However, as soon as he kissed her, as soon as Grace's tongue touched his, as that sweet moan slid down his throat, he was lost. Lost in sensation. In the taste and feel of Grace.

The way her pleas for more filled his ears.

The taste of her sweet nipples on his tongue.

The blaze that consumed him when she slid her hand inside his jeans and wrapped her fist around his dick and whispered, “I want you inside me. I need you.”

So fucking passionate, it shocked the shit out of him in the best way.

When he slipped two fingers between her slender, silky thighs and found her drenched and tight, he nearly came inside his jeans.

“I never thought you’d like up for the likes of me.”

She didn’t seem to hear him, so lost in what he was doing to her body. Her breathy gasps filled his ear as she clutched to him and undulated against his fingers.

God, she needed to come now because he seriously needed inside her. “Jesus, you’re killing me.” He whispered kisses along her the satin skin of her elegant jaw and whispered in her ear, “I’m going to fuck you until you see stars.”

Just like that her inner muscles convulsed around his fingers.

Dirty talk turned her on. Good to know. He swallowed her cries of release in a wet, rough, uncontrolled kiss. It was the sexiest kiss of his life.

Still, it wasn’t enough.

As he continued to kiss her breathless, Logan pushed her dress up to her waist and ripped the lacy knickers she was wearing down her legs. As he reached for the zipper on his jeans so did Grace and they fumbled together in urgency to get them and his boxers off.

He broke from the kiss, wanting to see her face when he pushed into her.

Grace used the opportunity to look down his dick.

“Oh God,” she breathed, her eyes widening adorably at the size of him.

He didn’t think it was possible but he grew even harder, so hard it was painful. “All for you, babe,” he promised her, wanting her to know that he had never been this turned on his goddamn life. Then he gripped her legs, spread them wide, pressed his dick to her sweet heat and thrust in with impatience.

She cried out his name and tensed at the intrusion and Logan fought for control, holding still, straining against her. She was so tight. So fucking mind-blowingly tight.

And she was Grace.

He was inside *Grace*.

She deserved his patience, she—

She pushed her hips impatiently against his and when he looked into her eyes he saw her silent plea for more. When she lifted her leg, he accepted the invitation and eased her up the wall so she could wrap her legs around him. The movement caused him to slide deep inside her, the breath knocking out of him as lust splintered down his spine.

“Logan!” Grace arched against the wall, her beautiful breasts he’d freed from the confine of the dress, bouncing in his face. Her dark, tight nipples begging for attention.

Licking, sucking, teasing her tits, he pounded Grace into the wall, and lost his ever loving mind as she went wild.

Classy, sweet, kind... and totally wild for his dick.

He was screwed. Figuratively and literally.

And when she climaxed around his cock, her tight inner muscles tugging and throbbing around him, Logan came so hard *he* saw fucking stars.

It took a while to come back to reality. Grace kept rippling around him in little aftershocks that felt so good he didn’t want to pull out.

But soon reality intruded.

The black haze of sexual frustration and then the red haze of lust had dissipated so he was no longer thinking with his heart or his dick.

He’d just fucked Grace and he couldn’t have her.

Shit.

The loss of her pressed hard on his chest as he kissed her soft, sweet, memorizing the taste of her before he pulled out of her and lowered her legs to the floor.

That's when he realized he'd been so out of control he hadn't even stopped to put on a condom and he *always* wrapped up.

Not knowing how to say this but needing to he asked, "Are you on the pill?"

Grace tensed and he felt like a bastard. Did that really have to be the first thing he asked her?

"I'm on the pill," she whispered.

Relieved that at least he hadn't screwed up her life in that way, Logan bent down to pull up his underwear and jeans. As he zipped up, his eyes drifted over Grace. Her hair had come down from its up do at some point and fluttered around her flushed face. Her breasts were still naked, her nipples swollen from his attention and her dress was still around her waist.

He was getting turned on again. Logan moved in to cover her up.

Jesus, he hadn't taken it easy on her. So out of control he'd pounded her against that wall. Guilt flooded him. "Did I hurt you?"

Grace shook her head but he wasn't entirely convinced. "I'll let you get cleaned up and then we need to talk."

She practically fled the kitchen and Logan's gaze drew back to the wall where he'd screwed her brains out. Her cries of pleasure filled his ears and he could still feel her coming around him. Grace had enjoyed every second. He was sure of it.

But he shouldn't have done it.

Tearing his eyes from the kitchen wall he got on a stool and sat there, waiting for her, trying to think how he could explain this in a way Grace would understand. In a way that meant he would still have her in his life.

Their friendship wouldn't be easy now that they both knew what kind of passion could exist between them. Sex with Grace was hotter than hell.

But Maia was more important than that.

His daughter needed stability.

He and Grace needed to cool it for now. Whatever happened in the future, happened. But now... it was just really bad timing.

At the sound of her stool moving beside him, Logan watched as Grace slid onto it.

She flinched at what he put there in his eyes, needing her to know where this conversation was going.

He felt that flinch of hurt score across his chest.

Jesus fuck.

Unable to see her hurt, he lowered his gaze as he tried to explain something he knew she would understand. "This can't happen again, Grace. I have to focus on Maia. Every day I'm reminded that I've lost out on fifteen years of being her father, and I still haven't scraped the surface of the damage Maryanne did to her. I need to make up for it, Grace, and the only way I can do that is by giving her all of me right now. She deserves that. She deserves to be number one. I can't be in a relationship at the moment." And Grace wasn't a woman you casually fucked. He knew that if they continued this it would go somewhere deeper, and if Maia reacted badly, he'd have to end it and that would only hurt them all worse.

When she didn't say anything, he felt the beginnings of panic. "Grace, I should never have with you... I acted on impulse. I have to stop. I have to take control of my life. Be a fucking man. Look where impulse has gotten me. It put me in jail, for Christ's sake."

He knew as soon as it was out of his mouth that it was the exact wrong thing to say. It came out all bloody wrong. Grace's anger swelled into the room. "Are you comparing having sex with me to what you did to get yourself imprisoned?"

Bloody hell! "Of course not."

"Oh good," she huffed, sliding off the stool to get away from him. He had to curb the urge to reach out and haul her back against him. "I might have taken exception to that."

“You’re pissed. Shit, Grace, I never meant to—”

“Fuck me?” she cut him off. “Yeah, I got that memo. You can go now, Logan.”

No way. He wasn’t leaving until they’d hashed this out. “Don’t be like that. Please. You’ve been so good to Maia and me—you have to know that you are the last person I’d ever want to hurt. I’m a dick, okay.” He held up his hands in surrender, hoping honesty would buy him her forgiveness. “I shouldn’t have done it. I care about you, and I’m attracted to you—of course I’m fucking attracted to you; look at you—but I had no intention of crossing that line with you and spoiling what the three of us have. You know how Maia has been acting when she gets even the sniff of a woman in my life. I can’t do this. Please understand.”

Grace narrowed her eyes and he struggled to read her expression. Then she spoke and her hurt came tumbling out, making him feel like the biggest bastard that ever existed. “Why did you, then? I was content in the knowledge that you didn’t reciprocate my feelings for you, so why did you cross the line.”

Feeling two inches tall, he could only offer up the honest and unpleasant truth, “I let jealousy get the better of me.”

“So you’re saying you got upset because another boy was playing with the toy you hadn’t had a chance to play with yet?”

Feeling the situation run away from him he bit out, “Don’t. Don’t make this worse. I had no idea how you felt about me.” And he hadn’t. He knew she wanted him. He hadn’t known that she might care for him.

It was fucked up but he also couldn’t help but be glad she cared about him.

“Oh please, Logan. That may have been true when we first met, but we have been past the antagonistic-neighbor routine for a while now.”

“I suspected you were attracted to me, but nothing deeper. I never imagined you could.”

“Because that’s me... the shallow hookup girl. You know me better than that.”

Her voice broke on the last word, slicing him to ribbons. “Apparently, I don’t,” he snapped, not angry at her at all. Furious with himself. “But if you want me to take full responsibility for this, then I will. I’ve been an asshole, I hurt you, and I hate that I’ve hurt you. I do. I am sorry.” He needed her to say it was okay. That she forgave him.

Instead Grace wrapped her arms around her body as if trying to protect herself from him. “I’m an idiot that forgot you like your quick fucks to come hassle free, with an even quicker good-bye.”

It felt like she’d slapped him. That she could think he’d think that way of her. “Jesus—”

“Don’t. Just go. There’s no point to arguing. You were right before. I should have asked you to leave then. I’m asking you now.”

Leaving killed him but deciding Grace needed some breathing space, some time, and that he’d come back later to smooth things over, he strode across the kitchen to leave.

She called his name.

Hope dashed through him as he turned back to her.

But her face was hard. He’d never seen such a hard, cold expression on Grace’s face before. He didn’t know she was capable of it. Something ugly, brutal, churned in his gut and it only intensified when she said, ‘I don’t want you back here. Maia is always welcome and I will be civilized to you for her sake, but you and me... our friendship is officially over.’”

Hurt scored through him, knocking the breath out of him. “You’re killing me here, babe.”

The tears that spilled down her cheeks as she begged him to leave hurt even worse.

In that moment he hated himself.

Selfish fucker.

So he did what she wanted.

He left.

And when he lay in his bed that night, and the night after that, and the night after that...

he endured the torment of wanting her and knowing he couldn't have her.