



A First Sight

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Description: Sixteen years ago, I lost Belle, the love of my life, in a tragic car accident.

Devastated, I left Scotland to work in Uncle Ben's brokerage firm in Manhattan. Dedicating my life to the job, I rose to the top of the ladder, next in line to head the billion-dollar company. Belle, however, never left my heart. Every year—on our anniversary—I dine at the restaurant where we first met. And that's when I saw her again...today! She was three tables away—the spitting image of Belle from sixteen years ago. It couldn't be a coincidence. It had to be fate or at least a sign. Now, there's only one thing on my mind; I must find out who she is. When Drake Mac Gilleain lays eyes on Maggie McCrae, he believes he's seeing the ghost of his late wife and decides to follow her. Maggie has found her dream as a violinist in the New York Philharmonic, but her personal life is scared by a controlling and abusive boyfriend. During a violent argument on the sidewalk, Drake intervenes and saves Maggie. Shaken but determined to rid herself of her boyfriend, Maggie stays with Drake while sorting out her situation, and an instant attraction ensues. Drake is falling hard for Maggie, but as the truth comes out, how can Drake explain he stalked her for weeks because she reminds him of his late wife?

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ONE

DRAKE

“Have a holly,jolly Christmas. Have a holly, jolly Christmas. Have a holly jolly Christmas.”

I smiled at the man who’d been singing the same lyrics from the moment he stepped into the line. At least he had excellent pitch. Repetition was one thing. Being off-key was worse.

“Would you like ham or turkey?” I asked.

Without missing a note, he pointed to the ham, and I picked up two pieces of meat with metal tongs and placed the ham on his tray. He moved on, taking his music with him, though he was loud enough for me to hear still.

“I’d say it’s nice to see someone in the Christmas spirit,” the woman behind him said, “but he sings that damn song all year-’round.”

I chuckled. “I suppose that would grate on one’s nerves in the heat of summer.”

“Especially since I always end up in line next to him,” she added. “Can I have one of each?”

“Certainly.” I gave her a slice of ham and then switched to the other set of tongs for a piece of turkey.

I learned my first time serving here to use only the serving utensils for their specific foods.

“Turkey,” the man across from me mumbled without looking up from his tray. Despite not seeing much of his face, I recognized him.

“Merry Christmas, Ramin.”

His head jerked up at his name, and his eyes narrowed. It took a moment for recognition to set in, and his posture relaxed. “Merry Christmas, Mr. Drake.”

“I thought Drake was your first name,” the teenager serving food next to me said.

“It is,” I said, “but Mr. Mac Gilleain can sound pretentious.”

The kid stared at me. “Do you volunteer like this all the time?”

“I try to volunteer a few times a year,” I said. “Usually on holidays.”

He pointed to a gray-haired pair near the desserts. “My gran and gramp decided this was how we needed to spend our Christmas this year. They said it would be good for us, but I think it’s because my aunt and uncle and cousins all went on a cruise, and we’re the only ones left.”

I felt the smile on my face tighten and hoped it didn’t show. The boy didn’t know the sharp pain that went through me at his words. How could he? “Most of my family is in Scotland.”

“You’re Scottish?” His entire face lit up. “That’s so cool! Now I can totally hear the accent. Where in Scotland? My gran’s been doing this whole genealogy thing and found out her great-great-something-grandfather came to America from there in

1762.”

“Inverness,” I said, trying to ignore the way my heart squeezed painfully at the name. I loved my home country, but memories were too close to the surface this time of year.

“I don’t know where that is, but I bet my gran does. When we’re done, come talk to her. She’d love to pick your brain about Scotland.”

I gave him a vague, noncommittal nod and greeted the next person in line with a cheerier ‘Merry Christmas’ than I felt. I’d been here since dawn as I had for the past fifteen years.

I was tempted to beg off early, except that my uncle, Ben, and his partner, Stellan, were spending Christmas Day with Stellan’s family. I’d have nowhere to go but home by myself, and being alone around the Holidays was something I avoided at all costs. At least until I was too exhausted for anything but a shower, a whisky, and bed.

As we continued to serve and greet those who came to eat, the boy maintained a steady stream of chatter, only stopping when Simone Riddell, the woman running today’s dinner, came toward me.

“Drake. Can I have a word?”

I nodded, and she motioned for another volunteer to take my place. I followed her down a short corridor to her office. I took a seat as she walked around the desk.

“Is everything all right?” I asked. I had only ever been in her office a handful of times and never in the middle of serving.

“Not really,” she said with a sigh. It brought a weariness to her face that aged her

considerably. “Malone just informed me our electricity will be turned off Friday morning.”

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“What happened?” I could hear the indignation in my question. “How could anyone consider doing that to a place like this? And two days after Christmas?”

She gave me a crooked smile. “Yesterday, I learned our bookkeeper has vanished with most of our money. Not only that, but there were a few bills she neglected to pay over the last few months.”

I could see where she was heading with this. While I usually detested being approached for money at a non-donation-related event, I made exceptions.

“I know you like to keep a low profile when you volunteer, and I’ve always respected that.” She twisted her fingers together, a clear sign of how this was bothering her.

“Don’t worry,” I said, taking out my phone. “How much do you need?”

Instances like this were when I was exceptionally grateful for technology. With it being Christmas Day, getting money from my account to theirs and then to the electric company in time would have been nearly impossible without various banking apps.

As I went through the details of processing a transfer, I reassured her it did not upset me she had come to me.

Five minutes later, I was on my way to the restroom when my phone buzzed with a text message. I didn’t check it. My family had been sending texts throughout the day, as they did every Christmas, and as always, I would wait until I got home to answer them.

None of them had ever taken my leaving Scotland and not returning personally. They never pressured me, and, though I rarely said it, I loved them for it.

TWO

MAGGIE

I rubbed my ears and worked my jaw as the plane landed back at JFK. I never had a problem with airsickness, but my ears were another story, especially when taking four flights in a little over a month.

“You should chew some gum.” The older woman on the other side of the aisle held out a stick of gum. “That’s what I do, and it always helps.”

“Thank you.” I popped the gum in my mouth and tried not to grimace at the stale peppermint flavor.

“Were you visiting family in California?” she asked.

“I was.” I smiled at her. “Yourself?”

“My third grandchild was born on Christmas Eve.”

“Congratulations.” My mind flew back to the video chat my older brother, Eoin, had with our parents. “I found out on Christmas Eve that I’m going to be an aunt again.”

“That’s wonderful, dearie.”

Wonderful, yes, but also weird. Mostly weird because no one knew Eoin was seeing anyone, and he wasn’t just announcing a pregnancy. He was engaged, too. Aline Mercier.

At first, Aline and Eoin looked utterly mismatched. She was small and delicate, with a sweet face. Eoin was six and a half feet tall and had been intimidating even before receiving the scar that ran down the left side of his face. But then I saw the way they looked at each other.

It made my heart ache for him, but in a good way.

I wished I didn't live so far away. I loved New York and playing with the Philharmonic, but I always missed my family.

I pushed aside the wistful sadness. While most of my family was on the West Coast, I had my older brother, Carson, and my younger sister, London, in New York. That was more than many people had.

That thought reminded me I needed to let my boyfriend Dale know my flight had landed.

I grabbed my phone to turn off airplane mode, when the latest picture on the lock screen made me smile. It wasn't my entire family, but everyone in San Ramon was in it, and it was a good one.

As my phone reconnected to the network, texts from my parents came in, asking me to let them know when I arrived home. I told them I'd just landed, and then I sent the same to Dale. Within a few minutes, Mom and Da both responded. Dale didn't. If he didn't text me back or show up, I'd get a taxi or something. The great thing about living in New York, there were plenty of options for people who didn't have cars. I could drive, but when I moved here, I decided not to subject myself to the insanity that was city traffic.

By the time I retrieved my suitcase from the baggage carousel, I still hadn't heard from Dale, so I headed straight to the exit. Luck was with me, and I got into the back

of a beat-up cab after only ten minutes.

The driver complained about the weather as he drove through the slushy streets to Murray Hill, where Dale and I had a condo. They had decorated the bushes in front of our building with lights, but the recent snow was heavy enough that they were a muted glow. Still, they looked pretty, and I smiled as the car pulled to the curb.

“Have a glorious New Year,” I said as I added my tip to the fare.

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Walking up to the third floor, our neighbors, the Ferguson family, were at their door. The youngest of the brood, Kenny, insisted on telling me what presents everyone in his family had gotten for Christmas, much to the embarrassment of his parents.

“Come along, boys.” Mr. Ferguson smiled at me. He looked tired.

I waved as they went inside. I liked the idea of a Christmas with children in my future. Definitely not now.

Shifting my bag to free a hand, I knocked on my door. I had keys in the purse, but the security chain would block the door if Dale were home.

I was about to knock again when I heard the deadbolt turn and the chain rattle before the door opened.

“Oh. Hey.” Dale looked surprised to see me, which I assumed meant he never received my texts. Or, rather, hadn’t bothered reading them.

I wished I could say it surprised me, but that’s how he was sometimes.

“Hi.” I smiled at him as I went inside. “I didn’t wake you, did I?”

“Naw.” He scratched the back of his head. “I was just watching a movie.”

I glanced at the television on my way to the bedroom, but it was off. I wondered what he was watching. It wasn’t as if I hadn’t seen him watching porn before. He even wanted me to watch it with him a few times.

“Did you have dinner already?” I asked.

“Yeah, Mom sent me home with leftovers. She made a huge spread for Christmas. Spiral ham with pineapple slices. Mashed potatoes. Sweet potatoes. Candied yams. And a bunch of different Christmas cookies.”

My stomach rumbled, and I remembered how long it had been since I last ate. Although I flew in first class, which included a meal, I’d never been fond of airplane food.

“Dad got us some shooting lessons,” Dale continued.

The ‘us’ meant Dale and his dad, not Dale and me. I was glad about that. Not that I had an issue with guns, exactly. It was more the idea of having to be around Dale with a gun that made me nervous.

I moved Dale’s violin case from the bed to make room for my suitcase. We met three years ago when I first got hired for the New York Philharmonic. He also played the violin and helped ease me into the routine of performing in one of the world’s most famous orchestras. With his strong arms and charming smile, I fell for him quickly, and it didn’t take long before I’d moved in with him.

I sat my suitcase on the bed, as Dale leaned against the doorframe, watching me unpack.

I took out a small, wrapped box with his name on it and held it out to him. “Mom and Da got this for you.”

“Thanks.” He took it, but didn’t open it before putting it down on his dresser. “You’re about done unpacking?”

“Almost,” I said. “If you’re not done with your movie, I can get something to eat and join you.”

“I don’t want to finish my movie.” He was suddenly behind me, his breath hot against my skin. “Move the suitcase.”

His arms went around my waist, hands sliding to cover my breasts. He squeezed and pressed his hips against my ass. He was already hard, and he never liked to wait. My dinner, however, could.

“Move the suitcase, unless you want me to fuck you on top of it,” Dale said.

I pushed it aside and let Dale bend me over the edge of the bed. The comforter was bunched up, and I grabbed onto it as Dale yanked down my pants and underwear in one go. His fingers slid between my legs, and I shivered at the friction. I wasn’t wet, but while I knew he could get me there eventually, I could feel his urgency and knew he would not take the time.

As I heard his zipper, I dropped one hand underneath me to help myself along. I doubted he’d last long enough for me to come, but after he finished, I could excuse myself to shower and take care of it on my own.

It wouldn’t be the first time.

THREE

DRAKE

Dinner was fantastic, as always. Uncle Ben had the talent in a kitchen that could have led to tremendous success as a chef, should he have changed career paths. I was glad he had stayed with money management, whatever the loss to the culinary world. I

would never have joined him in business had he chosen the food route.

“Whisky?” he asked as we moved into the den. “I recently found a new brand from the West Coast. Shannon’s. It’s quite good.”

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While Uncle Ben had come to the US at nineteen and became a citizen six years later, he was born and bred in Scotland, which meant his compliment carried more weight than the average American. We Scots took our whisky seriously.

“Thank you,” I said as I accepted a glass. I swirled the amber-colored liquid before taking a sip. Uncle Ben was right. “Really, it’s American?”

“Technically.” He settled on the couch with a sigh.

His dark auburn hair had little silver and his face only a few lines, making him look younger than his seventy years. I often forgot how old he was, especially since he was my father’s youngest brother, and Da still referred to him that way. The Mac Gilleain had good genes. Da barely looked seventy himself, and he would be eighty-seven this spring.

“Brody McCrae, son of Patrick McCrae, started Shannon’s.”

My eyebrows shot up. There was a name I knew.

“McCrae International Research Institute?”

“The very same,” he confirmed. “His eldest, Alec, has taken over MIRI, but it seems one of his other sons, Brody, has pursued a career in distilling quality liquor.”

“Do either of you know the McCraes?” Uncle Ben’s partner, Stellan Brockmire, said as he joined us. “Or is it one of those Scottish families everyone knows?”

“A bit of both,” I said. “My sister, Darlene, lived in Edinburgh with her first husband when she was in her early twenties. And according to her, they met Patrick McCrae and became great friends.”

“But you don’t believe that?” Stellan asked.

“Let’s just say Darlene tends to...embellish things,” I said dryly. “I love my sister, but anything she says needs to be taken with a grain of salt.”

Stellan grinned, dimples deepening on either side of his mouth. “I’ve met a few people like that. Knowing who to believe is the secret to my success.”

Uncle Ben laughed and put his arm around Stellan’s shoulders. “And here I thought it was because you were simply a phenomenal lawyer.”

“It helps.”

I smiled as the two of them teased and joked with each other. Uncle Ben didn’t come out until he was fifty, and even though he met Stellan not too long after that, it took them years to move from friendship to romance.

“So, any plans for the new year?” Uncle Ben’s words cut through the joy. “Resolutions? Perhaps ones that involve working less and getting out more? Meeting new people?”

I tried not to scowl. I knew exactly what Uncle Ben meant by ‘meeting new people.’

“There’s a wonderful young woman who just moved into the building,” he continued. “She’s lovely.”

“Thank you,” I said, my voice tight. “But I’m not interested.”

He looked at Stellan and then back at me. “It’s been fifteen years.”

“Almost sixteen,” Stellan corrected. “In a few days, it’ll be sixteen years since the accident. Belle would want you to be happy,” Stellan said to me, his usually cheerful expression serious. “She’d want you to find love again.”

I shook my head and drained the rest of the whiskey. “That’s not in the cards for me.”

I wasn’t feeling sorry for myself or being pessimistic. It was simply the truth. I had fallen in love with Belle Brockmire almost from the moment I laid eyes on her, and though the grief had tempered with time, I simply didn’t have it in me to love anyone else like that again. I had friends and family who I loved dearly, and that was enough.

It had to be.

FOUR

MAGGIE

I shivered as Dale and I made our way from our parking spot to David Geffen Hall where today’s rehearsal was taking place. We ended up having to walk several blocks in the sort of sleety, slushy weather that made me not want to get out of bed in the first place.

My fingers around the handle of my violin case felt frozen, and the ones on the handle of my umbrella weren’t much better. I wore gloves, but the wind was wicked. It didn’t help that Dale kept bumping against me, sending me half out into the rain while he tried to keep himself dry under my umbrella. He hadn’t bothered bringing his own.

When we entered the building, the rush of warm air felt like a blazing fire against my

near-frozen skin. Dale made his way to the rehearsal space as I struggled to close the umbrella. I rolled my eyes and winced as I uncurled my stiff fingers and fumbled with the catch on the umbrella handle.

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“This weather is just awful.”

I looked up to see Chelsey Tyler, the first chair cellist, scowling as she stamped her boots on the rug. Not a single light brown hair was out of place, and I wondered how well my hair had held up out there.

“Oh, hi, Maggie.” Chelsey smiled, but it had all the warmth of the weather outside. “Did you have to walk?”

“Just a bit.” I finally got the umbrella closed and tapped it on the rug to get the last of the water off. “You?”

“I usually take the subway, but I splurged for a cab today,” she said. Her gaze ran over me. “Glad I did.”

“Thanks,” I muttered as I shrugged out of my coat while Chelsey walked away. I was glad she didn’t wait for me. I could only handle so much of her.

As the assistant concertmaster and second-chair violin, I got along with almost everyone in the orchestra, but I couldn’t say I was close to any of them.

Except for Dale, of course. He was my boyfriend, so I was close to him.

I flexed my fingers as I walked into the rehearsal space, curling and uncurling them while I looked for the dark curls of Irene Sheppard—the concertmaster and first chair violinist.

She was standing next to our principal conductor, Nehemiah Plight, so I walked over to them.

Irene turned to me. “We need these changes made to the sheet music and copies distributed,” she said. “Would you?”

“Of course.” As I took the papers, I looked over the music first. If anyone asked questions when they received the pages, I needed to explain the changes.

As I started toward the exit, I caught sight of Dale out of the corner of my eye. I smiled and waved, but he seemed engrossed in a conversation with Chelsey. The way she leaned into him made my smile falter, but I didn’t stop. I couldn’t let personal annoyances interfere with my job.

Still, I kept seeing it in my mind’s eye, the way her blue eyes were wide and focused on him. I heard that she and her husband separated last year. I wasn’t sure if they officially divorced yet. Either way, she knew Dale and I were more than dating. We lived together. She was treading the line of what was appropriate.

When I finished with the copies, I headed back into the room and began distributing papers.

“What’s this?” Dale asked as I reached him.

“Changes to the score from Irene,” I said.

“She’s really putting you to work,” Dale said. “Handing out papers. Are you getting her coffee next?”

Some of the other string players overheard and exchanged uncomfortable looks, but Chelsey smirked. A flare of anger burned for a moment before disappearing. Nothing

good would come out of responding. I knew why Dale said it. He wasn't happy when I became assistant concertmaster over him.

"If you'll excuse me." I gave everyone a polite smile, but didn't look at Dale's face.

As I moved away, he said something too quiet for me to hear, but the laughter that followed was plenty loud. Heat flooded my face, and I walked faster. I didn't know if they were talking about me, but it was likely. And I doubted he said anything nice.

When I finished handing out the new sheet music, I glanced over at Dale brushing hair from Chelsey's face. I wasn't jealous when he flirted with other women, so he shouldn't be jealous of me for getting something I had worked hard for.

I pushed my thoughts aside and picked up my bow and rosin. Rehearsal wasn't the time or place for introspection. As I played a few notes, I realized no matter what happened in my future, I always had my biological mother's Stradivarius. I never knew her, but it was the one thing I had that connected us from the beyond.

FIVE

DRAKE

A knock on the office door made me look up from my computer screen. Uncle Ben stood in the doorway, and I waved him in. He had stayed home sick the last two days and still didn't look entirely up to par, but it didn't surprise me he was back. While he was planning to retire later this year, he would continue to be involved as much as possible until the end.

"I hear everything went smoothly while I was out," he said as he took the seat across from me.

“I doubt you’d be leaving me your company if I wasn’t capable of handling things without you,” I said with a hint of a smile.

“That’s exactly what Stellan reminded me of when I wanted to call and check in.” Uncle Ben chuckled. “You’re both right. It’s just not in the Mac Gilleain family’s nature to ‘take it easy.’”

“What can I say? I’m a work-hound.” I glanced at the time. “You’re here early. I thought we were meeting for lunch to discuss questions about the Gold call.”

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“Yes, that’s still on the calendar,” he said. “But I’m here to ask a favor.”

I hid my surprise. This was out of context for Uncle Ben.

“What can I do?”

“It’s Homer Kensit. I have some papers regarding his account that need to be signed today.” Uncle Ben looked slightly embarrassed. “I forgot about them until about an hour ago. I could send a courier, but Homer is an old friend.”

“With me taking over the company, you want Homer to know he’ll continue to receive the same personal attention,” I finished Uncle Ben’s thought.

He nodded. “I would go myself, but Stellan made me promise to take it easy today.”

“Got you. I can take him the papers and then pick up lunch on my way back,” I said. “Homer is the head of marketing for the Philharmonic, if I remember correctly?”

“He is.” Uncle Ben coughed. It wasn’t a bad sound, but he needed to rest. “Anyway, Homer is at David Geffen Hall.”

After a short briefing, it was time for me to be off.

I used the company car and driver to avoid walking from the parking lot in the miserable weather.

Once inside the building, it took me a moment to get my bearings. It had been years

since I'd last been here, and I usually came in the VIP entrance because of my patronage. Before I made a complete pass around the vast lobby, a lean young man came toward me in a neatly pressed uniform.

"Good morning." He smiled widely. "Can I help you?"

"I'm looking for Homer Kensit. I'm Drake Mac Gilleain, and I have some business with him."

"Of course. If you just give me a moment, I'll see if I can locate Mr. Kensit. Take a seat if you'd like." The young man gestured to one side with chairs.

A few minutes later, Homer appeared. His ebony-colored hair had more gray in it than the last time I'd seen him, but other than that, he hadn't changed. When he smiled, his teeth flashed white against his dark skin.

"Drake, good to see you." He held out a hand.

"You, too." We shook, and I took a manila envelope from inside my jacket. "Uncle Ben sent me with some papers for you to sign."

"He usually shows up himself," Homer said with concern on his face. "Is everything all right?"

"He's been under the weather the past few days." I liked that he cared about Uncle Ben. "And with him retiring this year, he thought it'd be a wonderful opportunity for us to connect."

"Hope he feels better soon, but sounds good. Let's get somewhere more comfortable." Homer gestured toward the way he came. "Shall we?"

I followed him through the lobby to a corridor. We stopped at the door with his name. His office was neat, organized, and quite similar to mine. After we settled on either side of the desk, I pushed the envelope across the desk to him.

“I’ll let you read through them, and if you have questions, just ask.” I folded my arms and waited, letting my attention wander around the room.

The bookshelves mainly held volumes about music or musicians, but there were a couple of surprises in there, classics like Anna Karenina and Silas Marner. The walls had a few pictures of various orchestras.

“Everything looks good,” Homer said finally. He picked up a pen, signed at each marked place, and then returned the papers.

I quickly checked them over to ensure he had missed nothing and then returned them to the envelope.

“Ben’s always done a fine job with my accounts,” Homer said. “I’m confident that you will do the same.”

“Thank you,” I said with a smile as I got up.

“Are you in a hurry? You haven’t seen the changes we’ve made.” Homer stood. “If you have time, I’d love to show you around a bit?”

I looked at my watch. This hadn’t taken as long as I thought. My lunch order wouldn’t be ready for another hour. Even with traffic, I’d be early. “I’d like that.”

As Homer led me back down the corridor, he talked about the Philharmonics.

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I listened and nodded, appreciating the history and knowledge, but I found my mind drifting a bit. Then something caught my attention, and my brain registered it.

“Music.”

“Ah, yes.” Homer stopped. “The orchestra is rehearsing today.”

We listened as the instruments faded until only one was left. A violin.

“I believe that’s our second chair violinist and assistant concertmaster,” he said after a few minutes. “She’s quite talented.”

“She sounds like it,” I agreed. I was tempted to stay longer, but it was time to pick up lunch.

As I excused myself, I decided to come back as soon as I could find space in my schedule. If a single violinist sounded that good in rehearsal, I could only imagine how magnificent the entire orchestra would sound. It was something to look forward to.

SIX

MAGGIE

I set my bow in its place and closed the lid to my case. Rehearsal had been strenuous today, and I was exhausted. We spent the last two weeks trying to get through the changes Irene had made, and it had everyone on edge as our opening performance drew closer. Nehemiah and Irene were more annoyed than I’d ever seen, and I

couldn't blame them. The changes were simple, but we just couldn't seem to get them right.

"I don't see why we had to change it in the first place," Dale complained behind me. "The changes were completely unnecessary."

I liked them. I felt they tied the pieces together much better than they had been before. Not that I'd tell Dale that.

"Are you ready?" Dale was suddenly at my side. "I'm starving."

"I'm ready," I said, flashing him a smile. "Do you want to pick up something?"

"We're going out to eat." He put his arm around my waist and patted my hip. "Tuscany Grill in Brooklyn."

I forced a smile. It was Dale's favorite restaurant, and usually, I didn't mind, but all I wanted to do was to get something quick, take a bath, and go to bed.

"Come on." He squeezed my hip before letting go. "Let's go home and change, then go eat."

I stifled a sigh.

By the time we made it to the restaurant, my stomach was growling, and I had a bad feeling we would have a long night. Dale insisted I wear a dress rather than slacks and a sweater, which made me think he had plans for us after dinner. I hoped he didn't want to be out too late.

"Yes, that table will be perfect." Dale gave the hostess a charming smile and held out a folded bill, neatly tucked between his first two fingers.

She let her fingers linger on him, her eyes flickering to me for only a moment before dismissing me.

I hated when women gave methatlook. I wasn't an idiot. When a woman dismissed me like that, it wasn't because she didn't think I was pretty enough for Dale. It was because she didn't see someone who could be a threat to anything she wanted.

Dale put his hand on the small of my back, and I lifted my chin. It didn't matter how she saw me. When Dale and I left here, we'd go back to our home. Our bed. My life wasn't dependent on the opinions of a woman who judged me with a single look.

After we settled and ordered our drinks, I turned my attention to the menu.

"Order something light," Dale said. "We're going to a club next, and you won't want something heavy on your stomach."

I pressed my lips together and swallowed a complaint. Going out to dinner and then dancing was a nice date night, and it had been a while since we'd had one. Sure, it would've been nicer if it hadn't been in the middle of the week or if he'd asked me first, but it was still a date.

When the waiter came back, I ignored my stomach's protests and ordered the Chicken Tuscany with no sides. I wanted a pasta side and all the extras, but I already knew I was pushing it with my entrée order rather than a salad.

"No wine for her," Dale told the waiter. "Just water."

The two of us drank very little, but we rarely declined when wine came with the meal. I didn't argue, though. It wasn't worth it for a glass of white wine that I didn't care about.

“Very well, sir.” The waiter took our menus and disappeared.

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“A salad isn't good enough?” Dale asked, his tone casual. “Does that mean it's a good thing I canceled your wine?”

It took me a moment before I realized what he asked, and color flooded my cheeks. “No!” I immediately softened my voice. “No, of course not. It's been a long day, and I need some protein, especially since we're going to a club.”

“Oh. Good.” He reached across the table and took my hand, squeezing it. “For a minute, I was worried that you were pregnant and hiding it from me.”

I shook my head, desperately trying not to reveal how, a little over a month ago, I had thought exactly that. “No, I'm not. And I wouldn't hide it if I was.”

“I'm glad to hear it.” He let go of my hand and leaned back in his chair. “We don't need that headache. Our life is perfect just the way it is.”

I smiled and nodded, taking a long drink of water to avoid having to respond. I didn't think of children as a headache, and someday, we would have kids, but there were other things we both wanted before we started making room for a child. Besides, I wanted to be married before I wanted children, engaged at the very least. And Dale hadn't said or done anything that even hinted he was thinking along those lines yet.

The waiter returned with our food, and we ate in silence for a few minutes before Dale turned to me. “My parents want us to come to dinner on the second.”

“Of course.” I was surprised they gave us a couple of weeks' notice. Usually, when Mr. Leighton got it in his head that we needed to have dinner or lunch, he called a

day or two in advance, and if we had any plans, they'd be canceled.

"They wanted us to come this Saturday, but I told them we had a concert that night. With all the new shit Irene is giving us, we both need to focus."

I already knew my part, but I wasn't about to tell him that.

"The second will be great," I said. Now was a perfect time to remind Dale of my plans for the weekend. "This Sunday, I'd like to have lunch with Carson and London. If that's okay."

He shrugged. "Sure. I have a big campaign with the guys planned all day."

And now I knew the real reason he didn't want to go to his parents' place on Saturday. Dale liked to be well-rested for his marathon gaming days.

"Will you be having dessert?" the waiter asked as he stopped by the table.

"Definitely not." Dale gave me a meaningful look. "We don't need it."

Heat flooded my cheeks, and I busied myself with my silverware. He always said he liked me the way I was and didn't want me to change. That's all it was. He wasn't purposefully trying to be mean with that comment. After all, I knew all too well what he sounded like when he was trying to be mean.

SEVEN

DRAKE

Uncle Ben and Stellan had told me many times my way of remembering my anniversary with Belle was...unwise. Perhaps they were right, but I liked to remember

and celebrate the beginning.

Every year—on our anniversary—I dine at the restaurant where we first met. I was visiting Uncle Ben in the US and after some sight-seeing, I felt hungry, so I went into the restaurant. She was sitting at this table, with Stellan sitting across from her.

She was beautiful, my Belle, but that wasn't the first thing that drew me to her. No, it was her laugh. She was a slender woman, delicate-looking, but her laugh was loud and brash, drawing the attention of everyone around her.

I was twenty-three and confident of my appeal to the opposite sex, but my stomach was still in knots when I pondered how to approach her, especially when I wasn't sure if the man was her boyfriend or husband. Then, I heard her tell him that being family didn't mean he could tell her what to do. So I asked her out.

She was hesitant to get involved with someone who didn't live in the US, but Stellan encouraged her to give me a chance. Eighteen months later, we married and lived in Scotland. Of course, like every other couple, we had our bumps in the few years we were together, but they were good years.

I rubbed my chest as if it would ease the ache I still carried in my heart. I had been without her so much longer than we were together, but the passage of time only reminded me of the life we would have had together. Our daughter would have been a teenager. There would have been more children. Holidays and birthdays. Trips. All the bright things our future could have held.

Instead, I had spent the last sixteen years working in a world that offered very little in the way of that kind of brightness.

With a sigh, I looked for my waiter. As I turned, something caught my eye. I followed it without really thinking about it and realized it was a woman standing up.

My breath caught, and everything else went dim and silent.

Belle.

Hair the color of honey. A thin nose just shy of being too long. High cheekbones. Medium height. Slender build. And not a day older than the last time I saw her.

I stared as she walked past me, my heart pounding in my chest so loud that I thought everyone must have heard it. I waited for her to vanish, for the spell to break, but she didn't disappear from my sight until she turned toward the corridor with the restrooms.

I had to be seeing things. I was thinking about Belle so much and so hard today it was no wonder I would see Belle in a random blonde. That was the only rational explanation. And I'd prove it to myself when she came back out. This time, I'd be prepared and let my mind see what was really there.

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Except, when she reappeared five minutes later, it hit me like a punch to the gut. The same lips and smile. Fair skin. Even her eyes were the same shade of turquoise.

Our Scottish culture, like many others, was one rich with stories of magic and the supernatural, and while I respected that, I was never one to believe in it. At this moment, however, thoughts of ghosts and the wee folk came flooding into my mind, the shock taking me back to a childhood place where most anything was possible.

I shifted in my seat as she went by, desperate to keep her in sight for just a few moments longer. By angling my chair, I could watch as she took a seat across from a man with reddish-brown hair a few shades off from my dark auburn. I couldn't see much of his face, but I wasn't interested in him.

They were too far away for me to hear them, and I couldn't see more of her unless I completely turned around, but I wasn't so far gone as to do that. Still, as I motioned for a waiter to bring my check, I was all too aware of every movement the young woman made. There weren't many. She was still, contained as if she didn't want to draw too much attention to herself. I could have told her that was impossible. Mine wasn't the only head to turn when she walked by.

After paying my bill, I continued to nurse my coffee until the couple was getting ready to leave. When they stood, I did the same, surprising myself. I wasn't an impulsive person, but my actions didn't seem to be my own at the moment. I pulled on my jacket as I followed them from the restaurant. Had I gone mad? This was pointless. What did I intend to do when they got into their car or hailed a cab? Behave as if I was in some sort of action film and chase after them? To what end?

Except they didn't go into the parking garage nor wave for a cab. The man put his arm around the woman's waist in the sort of possessive gesture I recognized. There was no mistaking. They were a couple. Still, I walked. We passed a few businesses, but they didn't pause until they stood in front of a place I hadn't noticed before.

The Hunt said the sign above the door and a rather large man stood in front. A bar or a club. I enjoyed going to a pub with friends once in a while, but it had been a long time since I stepped foot inside an actual club.

I handed money to the man at the door and followed the couple inside. It took a moment for my eyes to adjust before I scanned the area to find her. With it being a Tuesday night, the place wasn't full, making it easy to spot the pair. They were at the bar. After a momentary hesitation, I started in that direction.

I kept a few feet between us at the bar, pretending I was looking at the crowd rather than a single person. She had her back to me at the moment, but I could still see her face in my mind. Of course, I could because it was Belle's face.

"What can I get you?" The bartender's question distracted me.

"Scotch," I said. "The best you have."

I handed over my credit card, and he nodded. While this place was far from a dive, I had my doubts about what their best would be, but I wasn't here for the alcohol.

While not overpowering, the music was loud enough that I couldn't hear the conversation between the couple, but I could tell it was mostly one-sided from the way the man's mouth never stopped moving. Even when he wasn't looking at her, he was talking.

I thanked the bartender for my drink and sipped it. Not bad, although a far cry from

the batch Uncle Ben had gotten from Shannon's.

The man set down his empty glass and took her hand, leading her to the dance floor. This wasn't a first date, I could tell.

I didn't know why that thought entered my mind. I had no intention of approaching her. How long they'd been together, and the status of their relationship, was none of my business.

And yet, I couldn't help but wonder about them. About her. How they met. If they were married. Engaged. Only a few months into their relationship. Had they met each other's families? Made plans for their future? Were they discussing having a family? Did they already have one?

The last question hit me hard.

This woman could be a mother, happily married for years, and I could only see my Belle.

I needed to leave. Silently wish her all the best and then forget about her.

But I couldn't.

I wasn't ogling her. Undressing her with my eyes and having thoughts I shouldn't have about another man's woman. She just reminded me so much of Belle.

And I hoped she was happy.

But what if she wasn't?

I frowned.

I needed to know more before I could let the matter rest.

As if that was linked to the future Belle never had.

Logically, it made no sense. Perhaps logic would have won out on a normal day, but today wasn't normal. The ghost of my lost love was too close for me to reason.

I took out my wallet and plucked out a hundred-dollar bill. The man had paid for their drinks with a credit card. All I needed was the name listed on that card, and I could take things from there. I was pretty sure the bartender would appreciate a nice tip in exchange for a name.

EIGHT

MAGGIE

It surprised me when Dale ordered a beer, but I didn't say anything. I planned on sticking with water, so if he wanted to drink, that was fine. I could drive us home if necessary.

“Let’s dance.” He put down his glass and took my hand. His grip was tight, making me wince, but I didn’t pull away.

Once a few feet onto the dance floor, he took me in his arms, his hands settling at my waist, fingers digging in from the first. I shifted closer, wrapping my arms around his neck, hoping my proximity would ease whatever reason had him holding me so tight. He didn’t let up, but he didn’t make it worse.

Our bodies moved well together. We’d had three years together, not only living together but working together. And our work was music, rhythm. We didn’t dance often, but when we did, it was good. Tonight was no different. As his hands moved from my hips to the small of my back, I let myself relax. It had been a long time since Dale and I did something like this, and despite being tired I was glad we had a date night.

He pulled me closer until our bodies were pressed tight against each other, our feet barely moving as we swayed. This was nice, being here with him like this. When he put his mouth against my ear, I expected him to say he wanted to head home.

A split second before he spoke, his fingers dug into my back. “There’s a man watching you. Staring at you.”

I swallowed hard and fought not to tense as I turned my head slightly so he could hear me. "I'm sure he's looking at someone else, but it doesn't matter. You're the only one I'm interested in."

"He shouldn't be looking at you," Dale continued, his voice low and dangerous. "You're mine."

I nodded in agreement, my reactions without thought, instinct.

"Why do you do this?" he asked. "Flaunt yourself in front of other men?"

I barely held back a pained sound as he dropped his hands to squeeze my butt.

"Wearing this shit," he growled.

It wasn't my idea to wear it in the first place, but I kept my mouth shut. Saying anything would only make it worse.

"Doesn't matter what he's thinking, though. None of this is for him. It's all for me."

I nodded again.

"Right?" He placed his hand between my legs.

"Yes. Of course."

I wanted to shove his hand away, but when he got like this, he had a short fuse, and I didn't want to be the one to light it.

"Let's head home, and I'll fuck you so you can't walk the next day."

My stomach turned over. “I—I’m on my period.”

I could see his expression darkened.

“I guess I’ll have to settle with a blowjob. You better make it a good one. You know how I like my cock deep in your throat.” He removed his hand from under my skirt. “Let’s go.”

I bit the inside of my cheek, desperate not to let him see my expression change.

I’d get through it.

I always did.

NINE

DRAKE

I let out a sigh of frustration and closed my eyes. Rubbing my forehead, I gave myself a mental kick in the ass. I’d been here since six and had barely made it through a review of two accounts. My mind kept wandering back to last night.

Toher.

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I left the club right after the bartender gave me the man's name. Dale Leighton.

Not that I cared about him. I couldn't stop thinking about her. Who was she?

Could she...somehow be related to Belle?

I'd hardly slept when a startling thought came to me at some point between midnight and dawn.

She could be a Brockmire.

That's who Belle resembled. Her father's side of the family. Maybe that was why this woman looked like Belle, because she was a Brockmire.

I wanted to know.

I could have asked Stellan if he had a relative in her late twenties, someone in the family who looked similar to Belle, but that would've led to a whole awkward conversation.

"Mr. Mac Gilleain?"

I looked up to see my assistant, Melvin Borden, standing in the doorway. In his mid-thirties, he looked younger. He'd worked for me since he had graduated. Uncle Ben had asked more than once if there was another position he was interested in, but Mel said he was content. I was grateful I wouldn't need to train a new assistant while taking over the company.

“Good morning, Mel.” I smiled at him.

“Are you alright? You look tired.”

I shrugged. “I didn’t sleep well.”

“I’ll get you more coffee.” He flashed a bright smile and disappeared into the hall.

As I waited for my coffee, I made a decision. I would look into Dale Leighton. From him, I could possibly find out the woman’s name, my Belle look-alike. After that, I would decide if I should ask Stellan about her.

By the time Mel returned with my coffee, I’d outlined the plan.

“I have an odd and non-work-related request,” I said.

“I’m intrigued.” Mel’s hazel eyes shone with excitement.

“I can’t tell you why, but I want as much information as possible about a man named Dale Leighton living here in the city.”

Mel pulled out his phone. “Dale Leighton? Anything else you know about him? I mean, this is New York City. Who knows how many Dale Leighton’s there are.”

I thought back to the man, trying to remember what he looked like. “Probably about your age. Reddish-brown hair. Tall. Broad shoulders.”

Mel nodded. “Okay, so if I find a picture, you’ll be able to tell me if it’s him?”

I’d gotten a pretty good look at Leighton. I nodded. “Most likely.”

“How much work do you want me to put into this?” Mel asked next. “I can do a basic internet search, narrow things down that way...or I can talk to a PI friend of mine and hand it over completely.”

“Do you think he’d be able to start right away?” I asked.

“He owes me a favor that I’m more than happy to call in,” Mel said. “He’s good at what he does.”

I nodded. “All right then. Talk to him. Whatever the rate is, it will be fine. He can bill me directly.”

“Great.” Mel stood. “I’ll take care of that right now.”

“Thank you.”

As he left, I leaned back in my chair and wondered.

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Had I completely lost my mind?

TEN

MAGGIE

I breathed a sigh of relief when Nehemiah called the morning rehearsal to a close. I lowered my arms, trying not to grimace. After a long performance, my muscles would sometimes be sore. Like my jaw and throat was today.

As soon as I could get up without drawing attention to my eagerness, I excused myself to the restroom. I didn't need to use it. I wanted some privacy, which was the best way to get it.

I was alone for a minute when I heard the door open, and two laughing women entered.

"...of course, I know he's got a girlfriend, but if it was really serious, she'd be a fiancée by now, right?" The woman cleared her throat. "I can't get rid of this cold," she said. "I swear I sound like I've been smoking for thirty years."

I didn't recognize her voice, but I didn't care about either of their identities, though. I wanted them to leave so I could be alone again.

"I'm just worried about you," the other woman said.

Water ran in the sink, and then the door closed again. They must've been touching up

their make-up or something similar. Whatever their reason, they were gone, and I was alone again.

I stepped out and scrutinized my reflection as I washed my hands.

I turned my head and winced. When I stretched my neck to the side, the collar of my shirt moved enough to show a hint of purple. I adjusted it off my left shoulder as much as I could, already knowing what I'd see. Five ovals the approximate size of Dale's fingers.

His hand pressed on my shoulder, forcing me to my knees. I knew what he wanted...

I shook the memory free and adjusted my shirt to cover the bruises. At least the weather was still cool enough to wear high-necked sweaters and long sleeves without looking out of place.

Once satisfied I was in good shape, I made my way back to the rehearsal room. I started toward Dale's seat, making it only a few steps before I stopped cold.

Dale's arm was around Chelsey's shoulders, and his face was next to hers. She laughed at something, and I recognized that sly grin on his face. Whatever he said, I was sure it had been sexual. Everything he said was sexual, even filthy, whenever he had that expression.

"Hi, Maggie."

I turned to greet one of our percussionists as he walked by, and when I looked back, Dale was staring straight at me. He didn't step away from Chelsey or take his arm from around her. Nor did he have the decency to pretend to be embarrassed or remorseful. He cocked an eyebrow at me, as if daring me to say something.

But what could I do?

If I spoke up now, asked him what he was doing, I'd come across as a jealous bitch. He'd come up with some excuse. He'd use one of those charming smiles of his, use the right words to make everything look like my fault. Like I was the irrational one.

That's how it would go, because I knew him. He was already ten moves ahead of me.

I swallowed hard and lifted my chin.

Without a word to Dale, Chelsey, or any others who might watch me, I returned to my seat and picked up my violin. Ignoring everyone, I played the first few bars, testing my memory, losing myself in the notes. The music was all that mattered.

ELEVEN

DRAKE

Knowing a private investigator was working to find information on Dale Leighton and my mystery woman made it easier to concentrate. Before long, I was on track.

My heart beat faster when Mel knocked on my door. It'd been a long dry spell since I last had something that piqued my interest.

"My friend did some searching." Mel closed the door when I nodded. "And I'm pretty sure he found the Dale Leighton you're looking for."

My throat went dry, and I straightened in my chair, trying not to look too eager.

Before taking a seat on the other side of the desk, Mel handed me his tablet. The picture on the screen made my chest tighten. It wasn't only the man, but her as well.

Even if I couldn't recognize Leighton, seeing my beautiful ghost of Belle would have confirmed it.

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“Aye.” I cleared my throat. “Yes, that’s him.”

Mel nodded and held out his hand for his tablet. I stole one more look at her and reluctantly gave it back.

He tapped the screen to pull up the information and started reading. “Dale Leighton, thirty-four. Native New Yorker by way of Queens. Father Ronald Leighton is a successful importer/exporter. Dale graduated from New York University. Been with the Philharmonic for three years, where he plays the violin.”

I nodded and pretended not to be waiting to hear about my mystery woman.

“The girl in the picture is his girlfriend, Maggie McCrae. Based on Leighton’s social media accounts, she also plays in the Philharmonic. He lives in Murray Hill, but it’s not apparent if she lives with him.”

Maggie McCrae.

A Scottish name, of course. The surname gave me a moment’s pause, tugging at something in my memory. Could she, by any chance, be related to Patrick McCrae? Likely not. There would be thousands of McCrae’s in the world.

“That’s all my friend has right now, but he said he could dig a bit more.”

I wanted to know more about Maggie McCrae, not Dale Leighton, but switching to ask for more information on her would undoubtedly make me look like a creep. Now that I had her name and place of employment, I could do a little investigating myself

and avoid awkward questions.

Still...

“Not at the moment,” I said. “That may change in the future, but for now, thank your friend and have him send an invoice. Include a bonus for how quickly he worked.”

Mel nodded, making a note on his tablet. “Has anything come up that isn’t already on my list for today?”

“No, thank you.” I hoped I didn’t sound as impatient as I felt.

“All right.” Mel stood. “I’ll check in before I leave.”

I nodded, my fingers tapping on my thigh as I waited for him to leave. He closed the door, halfway as usual. I almost asked him to close it all the way, but I didn’t want to do anything out of the ordinary. I wasn’t doing anything wrong, but this was the sort of thing I didn’t want to have to explain to anyone. Especially since I didn’t understand it myself.

Once I was sure he settled at his desk, I turned to my computer and pulled up my web browser. A minute later, I was on the website for the New York Philharmonic. No longer my mystery woman, she was easy to find. The website showed her as the assistant concertmaster and second chair at the top of the violin section.

My conversation with Homer came back to me, and I realized I heard Maggie practicing that day I went to the opera house. It shouldn’t have surprised me that Maggie was a talented musician. Simply because Belle hadn’t possessed a musical bone in her body didn’t mean that her doppelganger couldn’t have.

The biography on the website was brief.

Violinist Maggie McCrae comes to New York from San Ramon, California. Accepted in Julliard straight out of high school, she earned a Master's degree in music in five years. Having joined the Philharmonic shortly after her graduation, she's risen quickly, having reached principal assistant concertmaster and second chair violinist a year ago.

San Ramon, California.

It took my brain a moment to process, but now, I was certain. Maggie was related to Patrick McCrae, the McCrae International Research Institute founder. While McCrae wasn't an uncommon surname, I didn't believe there were many of them in San Ramon.

If my guess was correct, Maggie McCrae and I had a connection of sorts, though not exactly the type that fostered conversation.

Not that I planned to hold any with her. I didn't intend to meet her.

But...I clicked on the link to take me to the event calendar. I had been a long time since I attended a concert, and I told Homer I would have to come to a performance soon. I already planned on it, so it wasn't strange to purchase a seat for tonight's show. I was merely continuing my patronage.

And seeing Miss Maggie McCrae would simply be a little bonus.

That's all.

* * *

I fidgeted with the cuffs of my tux, wondering again if I should have chosen a suit instead. A Friday night performance wasn't as informal as a matinee or a Thursday

evening, but I hadn't been in a long time, and I wasn't sure what to wear.

Better to be overdressed rather than underdressed. Exiting my car, I made my way to the VIP entrance. I couldn't stop the strange onset of nerves that grew with each passing step.

There was no reason to be nervous. Or so my mind told me. I'd go to my seat, enjoy an excellent performance, then go home. I'd see her, of course—Maggie—but only alongside the other members of the orchestra. Including Dale, her boyfriend. It didn't matter what I was wearing.

But I'd still chosen the tux.

I smiled and nodded at people as I passed, some of whom I knew. With nearly twenty minutes until the concert started, I stopped and did the sort of small talk that came with moving in these circles.

There were only a few minutes left when I stepped past the curtain to my seat. The other seats in the box were empty, and they would remain that way since I had reserved the entire box. I hadn't minded sharing space with others in the past, but tonight, I wanted to enjoy the show with no distractions.

I settled in my seat and looked through the program, forcing myself to not rush to the one profile I wanted to read, the one picture I wanted to see. Fortunately, Maggie was among the first, considering her position in the orchestra.

The orchestra walked on stage, and I set aside the program, every fiber of my being hyper-focused. Soon I would see her again. It took me only a few seconds. It was as if my eyes knew precisely where to go, where to find Maggie McCrae. I heard the brass as they began tuning, knew that the violins would be next, but it was all in the periphery. She was the only person I had eyes for.

I couldn't see her features from where I sat, not without opera glasses, but I knew each line. If I had the slightest artistic talent, I could draw her in my sleep. With her picture in the program, I could get a closer look, and although I could see her clearly, I preferred her in real life.

Her every movement was graceful, just as it had been on the dance floor with her

partner. He was a few seats over from her, but I didn't look at him.

Maggie's hair was twisted up behind her head, making her look older than she had at the restaurant, but still as young as my wife had been. Belle rarely wore her hair up, which meant the resemblance wasn't as strong tonight as before. Still, they had the same features, the same eyes.

As "Overture to Candide" began, however, the role music had in Maggie's life made me realize she differed from Belle. My mind stopped cataloging and categorizing individual traits and started enjoying the music. Without taking my eyes off her, I let myself follow the magic she made. I would follow Maggie McCrae wherever it was she wanted to take me.

TWELVE

MAGGIE

It was no surprise Dale was okay with me going to lunch with Carson and London. He wanted me out of the house while he was gaming.

I didn't care.

I didn't want to think about him at all.

La Maison, a small French restaurant, was reasonably close to my place, but Carson and London beat me there thanks to a late bus. I spotted them right away. It wasn't hard considering who they were.

Carson was over six feet tall, with burnished copper curls that looked like he'd just run a hand through them. He had baby blue eyes and a face that made people stop and take notice. If he wasn't a designer, he could have been a model. Well, if he was

someone who enjoyed being the center of attention, anyway.

Then, London. She was tiny, barely over five feet tall. Long, strawberry blonde curls and brandy-colored eyes. She was stunning to look at, with a spirit that was even more beautiful. She was sweet and bubbly, just an absolute joy to be around. Since she was five years younger than me, I had spent little time with her when she was a kid, so now I tried to take any opportunity I had to do just that.

A smile broke across my face as I hurried over to their table. Carson stood and pulled out my chair, which was typical of my brother. Not all of them would've done it, but that was Carson. I did not know why he was still single. I knew there was speculation about his orientation, but no matter who he was attracted to, he'd be a catch.

"I was getting worried," he said as he kissed my cheek.

"The bus was late," I said as I sat down next to London. "Hey."

"Hi." She leaned over and hugged me. "How did things go last night?"

"Really well," I said. I paused to order a drink and then continued, "Irene made some changes recently, and we've been working our butts off to get them right. It was worth it, though. We sounded great."

"I'll have to look at my schedule to find a time to get to a concert," London said. "That's one thing that sucks about our careers. They overlap so much."

"Yeah, I'll have to see you perform," I agreed. "How long is this show running?"

"Three more weeks," she said. "There's some talk about getting an extension, though."

“That’s great!” I said.

“I saw her opening night,” Carson said, “and she was phenomenal.”

London blushed prettily. “It’s a minor role.”

“That didn’t make you any less amazing,” he said.

As we turned to the waiter to order, I wondered if I could persuade Dale to go to one of London's shows before it closed. If not, I would go on my own. Or with Carson. Dale wouldn’t worry if I was with my brother.

* * *

“Miss McCrae?”

I jumped in my dressing room chair as the voice startled me from my thoughts about tonight’s concert. Pressing a hand to my heart, I turned.

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to scare you.” The young woman gave me a tentative smile.

“It’s all right.” I smiled back. “Leyla, right?”

“Yes, ma’am.” She held out a bouquet. “These came for you.”

Blinking in surprise, I took them. “Who are they from?”

Leyla shrugged. “I’m not sure.”

“Oh, okay. Thank you.” I looked at the elegant white roses. Half a dozen, with little sprigs of baby’s breath in between. A simple bouquet, but absolutely lovely. I bent my head to breathe in the scent.

“Who are those from?”

Chelsey’s voice made my smile freeze. I lost myself for a moment, forgetting I wasn’t the only person in the room.

“I don’t know,” I said as I carefully looked between the flowers. “There’s no note or

card.”

“Is that so?” Dale asked.

For a wild moment, I thought they were from him, a romantic gesture of apology for being such an ass, lately.

Then I saw the fury in his eyes, and I went cold. No, he didn’t send them.

“They’re probably from Carson or London,” I blurted. “I saw them Sunday, and they know we have a concert tonight. I’m sure they just forgot to send a card.”

I forced myself to keep calm. We were surrounded by people, about to go on stage.

“Tonight’s not a special occasion,” Dale pointed out as he moved closer. “They’ve never randomly sent them before.”

He had a point.

“Since there’s no card, it could’ve been a mistake,” I suggested. I set the flowers on a nearby table. “Whoever sent them probably meant them to go to Irene. She is the concertmaster, after all.”

My gaze slid to her, but I didn’t see her eyes.

“I think everyone here knows the difference between you and Irene,” he said. He was only a foot or so from me now. “Do you honestly think it was a mistake?”

I shrugged. “Could be. She’s the one who usually gets the flowers, after all.”

“But that doesn’t mean no one’s noticed you,” he said. “Maybe someone’s trying to

get your attention. Some new...fan.”

I swallowed hard and hoped that my nerves didn't show on my face. “I wouldn't know. I haven't talked to anyone.”

The corners of Dale's mouth tightened.

Shit.

Ignoring the pang in my heart, I picked up the flowers and tossed them in the trash can.

“If I find out who sent them, I'll let you know.” I smiled at him and then moved to reach for my violin. “Besides, I've never liked white roses much. Anyone who knows me knows that.”

A blatant lie. I hoped it would ease his suspicions. Dale had no idea what flowers I liked. The few times he bought me any, they'd been carnations and daisies with lots of ribbons. I appreciated the gift, but I would've preferred a single white rose over something meant to be showy.

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A coincidence, of course, that the mysterious sender had chosen those flowers, but I was thankful Dale didn't know they were actually my favorite.

THIRTEEN

DRAKE

She was stunning, just as she had been during her performance five days ago. A trifle paler, I realized a few minutes after she first came onstage, but it could be the lighting that was different.

I had flowers sent to her backstage. I only hoped my attempt to show appreciation for her talent wouldn't come across as...creepy?

I should've signed my name. That would have been the best way to go.

But, with my name, she would know who I was. She could find me. And I didn't want that.

Did I?

I had thought about it, of course. Since the first time I saw Maggie, I had thought about what it would be like to speak with her. To hear her voice clearly and find out if she sounded like Belle, as I imagined.

The idea also petrified me.

I understood the difference between fantasy and reality, what ‘the grass is always greener’ really meant. Chances were, if I met her, I would be disillusioned. Experience taught me all too well that life was more likely to hand down disappointment than anything real.

Except, as I watched her, I wondered if that would be the case with Maggie McCrae. She seemed pretty extraordinary on paper.

“Drake, there you are, lad.”

I turned in time to see Stellan follow Uncle Ben through the curtain. I jumped to my feet, my head spinning. “Uncle Ben! Stellan! What are you doing here?”

“Well, you raved about the performance you went to last week, so it inspired Stellan and I to join you.” Uncle Ben beamed at me and came forward to hug me. “Thanks to some people I know, we found the box you were sitting in. An entire box to yourself, really? You don’t mind us joining you, do you?”

Normally, I would’ve been thrilled to have them join me. But could I keep them from noticing Maggie, her likeness to Belle, and when they did, how would I explain? I could lie, try to convince them I didn’t see the bizarre resemblance, but there was no way I could pull that off.

“You know,” Stellan said, “I’ve never actually been to see the Philharmonic.”

“Stellan’s always been more of a Broadway fan,” Uncle Ben said.

“And once you retire, we will have time to go to both,” Stellan said with a smile.

Uncle Ben put his arm around Stellan’s shoulders. “Sure, and we’ll come back once a week if you enjoy yourself tonight.”

They moved into their seats, and after taking a deep breath, I followed. Should I tell them about Maggie, or let them see her either in the program or on stage? Before I could decide, Stellan opened the program.

I sat next to him and waited. It didn't take long, and I didn't need to guess when he arrived on the right page. He sucked in a breath and went stiff.

"What's wrong?" Uncle Ben said. He leaned over. A moment later, the color drained from his face. "Drake...?"

"Aye," I mumbled. "I know."

"Who...who is she?" Stellan sounded like he'd been punched in the gut, a feeling I understood all too well.

"Maggie McCrae," I answered, even though the information was in front of him. "The first time I saw her, I thought I was seeing a ghost."

"The first time you saw her?" Uncle Ben gave me a look so sharp I could feel it. "At the performance last week? Why didn't you say anything? And why would you come back?"

"Because the first time I saw her was actually at a restaurant last week." I closed my eyes, the memory as clear as the event. "Tuscany Grill."

Stellan made a pained sound.

"She was there with her boyfriend, Dale Leighton. He's a violinist too."

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“Drake...what...” Uncle Ben couldn’t say the question he wanted to ask.

I wasn’t proud of the answer, but I confessed anyway. “I got her boyfriend’s name and had a PI do a little digging. He found out that he and his girlfriend, Maggie McCrae, are musicians here, so I decided to see a concert.”

“Do I want to know how you got his name?” Uncle Ben asked with a sigh.

“Probably not,” I said.

“She...” Stellan tore his gaze from the program. “Fuck, Drake, it’s like seeing Belle again.”

I nodded. “At first, I thought maybe she was a relative I didn’t know about.”

He shook his head. “No one in the family looks like her. Not that much.”

“I figured you would have warned me.” I managed a slight smile. “And if I would’ve known you’d be here tonight, I would have warned you.”

“This wasnohow I thought this evening would go,” Uncle Ben said as he reached for the opera glasses. A minute later, he let out a low whistle. “It’s uncanny.”

“Belle couldn’t play an instrument to save her life,” Stellan said. The color returned to his face.

“No,” I agreed, “she couldn’t.”

“Have you—have you spoken with her?” Stellan held out his hand for the glasses, and Uncle Ben handed them over.

I shook my head. “When I first saw her, I was so shocked. I don’t think I could’ve spoken a single word even if she’d started a conversation.”

“And now?” Uncle Ben asked. He turned his attention from her to me, many emotions written in his eyes.

“I came last week. I didn’t speak to any of the performers. And now I’m here.”

Not telling him about the flowers made it a lie of omission. Of a sort, anyway. He asked if I spoke to her. I hadn’t. I hadn’t even been close enough for her to see me. And I didn’t sign my name to the flowers.

“Do you plan on seeking her out?” Uncle Ben glanced at Stellan. He put down the glasses to join the conversation. “You said she has a boyfriend.”

“I’m not pursuing her,” I said. “She’s in a relationship. The last thing she needs is a stranger pursuing her. I think that’s called stalking.” Not to mention the age difference.

“Then what is this?” Stellan asked, gesturing to me and then to the whole place. His expression was unreadable. “Why did you come back?”

“I don’t know,” I answered honestly. “I enjoy the music, but I like seeing Maggie, too.”

Uncle Ben put his hand on my shoulder. “Don’t get lost in something that isn’t real.”

Stellan’s eyes met mine. “He’s right, Drake. She’s not Belle, and no amount of

wishing will change that. No one, no matter how much they look alike, can replace someone we've lost."

"I know." I barely refrained from snapping at him. Of course, I knew Maggie wasn't Belle. "I don't want to replace Belle. No one can do that."

"Good." My uncle looked relieved. "I just worry about you."

"I know, and thank you." I managed a smile. "But it's unnecessary. She's a talented musician and part of a renowned orchestra. That's all."

The look Stellan gave me said he didn't think I was sincere, but I had no plans to ask her on a date, and I didn't think she was my dead wife brought back to life.

Belle and our daughter were gone. Maggie wasn't my salvation or my hope. She looked like Belle and seeing that resemblance threw me.

That was all.

A young woman like her didn't need an older man like me interfering with her life. My patronage to the arts and appreciation for her skill was all I would offer.

As I made my decision, a piece of my heart turned traitorous and whispered, but what if...?

FOURTEEN

MAGGIE

“Gilmore.” I smiled at David Geffen Hall’s security guard sitting behind the desk, grateful it was him. He wasn’t the most intimidating guard at around eighty, but he was the most respected. “How are you doing?”

“I’m well, Miss McCrae.” He beamed at me. “What brings you to see me?”

“Yesterday, Leyla brought me some flowers. They came without a card or a name,” I said. My heart beat faster. “I know they had to come through security, right?”

“Of course. We always check gifts that come in.” He frowned. “Was something wrong? Did we miss something?”

I shook my head.

“No, not at all. I just have a request.” I gave him a smile I hoped looked more genuine than it felt. “Anything that comes in without a note, anything that isn’t from my family or Dale, please send it back or keep it. Take it home or let one of the others take it.”

Gilmore looked confused.

“Are—are you sure, Miss?” Gilmore’s question was uncertain. “Anything that doesn’t come from Mr. Leighton or your family?”

I nodded.

“All right,” he said. “I’ll do as you ask.”

“Thank you.” I smiled, genuinely grateful.

After a few more pleasantries, I left, detouring to the restroom where I stood in the silence, letting go of the control I kept wrapped so tightly around myself.

My hands shook, and my chest tightened, making it impossible to breathe. I gasped, pain shooting through my sides. It was going to be agony to keep it up the rest of the night, even worse to play, but my only other choice was to call in sick.

And I’d be damned if I was going to give him that satisfaction.

I gritted my teeth as another wave of pain washed through me. Every step was excruciating, but sitting was worse.

And not only because of the blows.

No one deserved what had happened to me.

FIFTEEN

DRAKE

I never promised that I wouldn’t attend future performances. However, I knew both Uncle Ben and Stellan would find my presence the very next night a tad...obsessive. But I wasn’t pursuing her. I didn’t send flowers tonight, after all. And I had no plans to learn more about her either.

It was simple. I'd already purchased the ticket and didn't want to waste it.

As I took my seat, I reached for my glasses. I intended to pay close attention to everything if this would be my last show...for a while.

I scanned the stage to prove she wasn't the only reason I was here. Then, I went to her.

Less than ten seconds later, I was frowning. Something was wrong. Maggie's entire body seemed stiff. Not the same good posture and powerful movements I saw last time. The hand on the neck of her violin wasn't quite right either. It took me a moment, but I realized her wrist was resting on it instead of being held at a ninety-degree angle. Her face was drawn, with nearly invisible lines at the corners of her mouth. Skin that was pale yesterday had a slightly grayish tinge to it today. I'd worried about her being sick before, and now I wondered if I was right.

The more I watched, the more my gut twisted and churned. The more something deep inside me said, something was very wrong with Maggie.

When I'd told Uncle Ben and Stellan I wouldn't pursue any sort of connection with her, I had been honest, but this had changed things. If she was in some kind of trouble, I couldn't just walk away, not if there was anything I could do.

I wasn't grabbing at straws to justify my desire to continue watching her. If she were in danger, I'd see it, and help her. If she weren't, there'd be no harm done.

I returned my attention to the stage. After the performance, I'd find out what was happening in her life and how to fix it.

SIXTEEN

MAGGIE

Having to constantly smile when I didn't want to was exhausting.

"...of course, I told him if he thought I was going to stand for that, he had another thing coming."

I didn't remember which story Dale was telling, but it didn't matter because they were all essentially the same, and my response was supposed to be the same. Total agreement that expressed itself in nods and smiles. I had a lot of practice.

"Did he listen?" Dale's dad gave a sharp look.

"Well, yeah." Dale stabbed another piece of meatloaf. "He wouldn't have done very well if he hadn't, right? I mean, just because he had a broken leg doesn't mean he can expect everyone else to move aside, right?"

And now I remembered all too well what he was talking about.

"Too soft," Mr. Leighton said. "The whole damn generation is too soft."

"You tell someone how it is, they start crying, and you're the bad guy," Dale added.

"It's those damn millennials and all their touchy-feeling bullshit," his dad said. "You should be damn thankful that I raised you right."

“At least you know he’ll raise his kids right,” Dale’s mom, Hilda, interjected.

“There better not be kids,” Mr. Leighton gave me a sharp look as if I would be the only one responsible for a pregnancy.

“No!” I softened my voice. “No, sir. We haven’t even been talking about kids.”

I was no longer sure I ever wanted kids with Dale.

“That’s good,” Hilda said. “I know it’s old-fashioned, but I always thought marriage should come first.”

Mr. Leighton gave me another sharp look. “As long as he doesn’t marry her just because she says she’s pregnant with his kid. The oldest trick in the book.”

It didn’t take a psychology degree to figure out where Dale had gotten his “charm” from. Like father, like son. How could I have been so blind these last years?

“In fact,” Mr. Leighton said. “You don’t need to be thinking about marriage any time soon. Stay a free agent as long as you can. You don’t have some biological clock ticking. You can have a son anytime.”

As I continued to listen to the surreal conversation between Dale and his parents, I realized this would be my future as long as I remained with Dale.

But I could leave him. It would be difficult and scary, but maybe, justmaybe, I could do it.

SEVENTEEN

DRAKE

When I told Uncle Ben I was leaving the office to go out for lunch today, he was pleased. However, he would disapprove if he knew where I was going. There were plenty of good places to eat near David Geffen Hall, but that wasn't the reason I headed to Lincoln Center.

I hadn't stopped thinking about her since Friday evening's performance. I wanted to know if she was okay. So I came here.

A few minutes later, I saw her come outside. It surprised me to see she was alone. And a little relieved. Something about Dale Leighton rubbed me the wrong way.

Out of instinct, I followed her. I kept my eyes on her bright hair and moved through the crowd. A few minutes later, she turned into Melissa's Gourmet.

I supposed I was going to get lunch after all.

I moved to stand in line, which put me right behind Maggie. Being this close to her had my heart pounding. I caught the faint scent of strawberries.

When she stepped up to the counter, I couldn't tear my attention from her, even for a single moment. She ordered quickly. Maybe she was familiar with this place.

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“Just a minute.” She bent her head as she dug in her purse. “I know I have it. It has to be here. It has to.”

There was an edge to her voice that had me moving up next to her, concern growing. She sounded like she would cry, and that thought made me sick.

The clerk shifted uncomfortably. “Ma’am, people are waiting. If you can’t pay...”

“I should have something here.” She shook her head and wiped at her eye with the back of her hand.

I knew both Uncle Ben and Stellan would understand what I did next.

“I’ll pay for the lady’s meal.”

She turned toward me, damp eyes wide, cheeks flushed. I watched relief turn into pride and knew she was about to argue.

“I can’t let you do that.”

I stepped next to her and handed the clerk my credit card. “Add a second order of the same for me and put them both on my card.”

She shook her head. “I don’t need you to pay for me. I have my own money.”

Knowing who her family was, I had absolutely no doubt of that. While the McCrae clan didn’t have a reputation for expecting preferential treatment, everything I ever

heard about Patrick McCrae said his family was the most important thing in the world to him. Even if I was wrong about being related to him, she earned enough at her job to pay for lunch.

I couldn't tell her any of that, though. She had to think I was merely a stranger who knew nothing more about her than what I had observed.

"I'm sure you do." I gave her what I hoped was a warm but not overly familiar smile. "But we can all be forgetful at times."

After a moment, she nodded. "All right."

"Thank you."

She laughed, and the sound made my stomach twist in a good way. "I think I'm supposed to be thanking you."

"I'm glad to be of help," I said honestly.

"It's silly, really," she said, her eyes darting from my face and then back again. "Usually, my boyfriend takes care of things like this because he doesn't like me carrying money or credit cards. Says it isn't safe."

I wanted to tell her that what wasn't safe was having nothing she could use to pay for a cab or something else she might need. An emergency card would've prevented her from needing a stranger to intervene.

But I held my tongue.

It wasn't my place to say anything. After all, I didn't know the circumstances or context. Perhaps I was reading too much into it.

“Here you are,” the clerk interrupted any further conversation.

As she reached for her bag, her sleeve slid up her arm, and that was when I saw it. Four circular bruises on her forearm, the same space and size that would come from someone grabbing her. Hard.

“Oh.” Maggie tugged her sleeve down. “I’m perpetually clumsy.”

Before I could respond, she hurried off.

“I’ve seen her here with her boyfriend before,” the clerk said, surprising me. “The guy’s an asshole. Wouldn’t surprise me at all if those are from him.”

My previous excitement at speaking to her, playing the white knight, disappeared under worry and anger. The word of a deli clerk and my suspicions weren’t enough to draw accurate conclusions. However, I could no longer keep my promise to Uncle Ben and Stellan. Until I knew she was safe, I couldn’t stand by and watch. I needed to get involved, learn more about her and her boyfriend. I couldn’t walk away.

It was time to reach out to Mel’s PI friend again.

EIGHTEEN

DRAKE

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I told Mel to have his PI friend drop off his findings at the office on Friday afternoon and then further instructed Mel not to give them to me until the end of the workday. It was now four on Friday afternoon, and I regretted the second decision and called Mel into the office.

I forced myself to go through the usual end-of-day things with Mel before asking for the manila envelope he was holding. As soon as he left, I closed my office door behind him, anticipation twisting my stomach in knots.

Settling in my chair, I took a deep breath before opening the envelope and pulling out the two dozen or so sheets of paper.

Maggie McCrae was indeed the daughter of Patrick and Shannon McCrae, born in Edinburgh. Her mother died when Maggie was barely a year old, and, a couple of years later, Patrick married an American widow with children of her own, one Theresa Carideo. Patrick moved his family to California, beginning in San Jose but ending in San Ramon, where Maggie's younger half-siblings were born.

The PI had included a paragraph each for Maggie's siblings, step-siblings, half-siblings, apparently, two nephews and a niece of Theresa's who were also brought into the family. I barely skimmed those, noting only the ones who lived here in the city and could help if something was indeed wrong.

Some of the information in her biography was on the Philharmonic's website and the concert program. Still, I found a few new bits interesting, such as she also played the piano, cello, guitar, and bagpipes. The last made me smile, but that didn't last long because the third page was where everything changed.

Maggie broke her lease almost three years ago, and no other leases showed up with her name. While she could have been anywhere, I suspected she moved in with her boyfriend at that point.

As I read through the report, everything seemed to have been fine up until this year, but in June, a social media post showed hints of a healing black eye and split lip and later a couple more posts of images showed signs of bruises. The latest happened a few months ago.

I sank back in my chair and took several deep breaths. It confirmed what I suspected.

That fucking bastard was abusing her.

I didn't know exactly how long I stared at the papers on my desk. The alarm on my phone chimed. I was supposed to have dinner with Uncle Ben and Stellan in thirty minutes. It tempted me to call and cancel, but I knew I'd go out looking for Dale Leighton if I did that.

I wanted to beat that coward senseless.

No, it was best to go somewhere people could talk me out of doing anything stupid.

I was fuming, and traffic did nothing to help my temper as I made my way across the city. By the time Stellan let me inside, my anger was closer to the surface than it had been in a long time. It must have shown on my face because the moment Stellan saw me, his eyes went wide.

"Let me get you a drink," he said as he shut the door. "I'll get out the good stuff. Ben is in the kitchen putting the finishing touches on dinner."

I nodded stiffly and headed for the kitchen. It didn't look like I could get away without disclosing something was wrong. I yanked loose my necktie, feeling like I

couldn't breathe. I was furious, and obviously, it showed.

"Did you even go home?" Uncle Ben said as he glanced over his shoulder at me. Then he did a double-take and turned in my direction. "What happened?"

I sat on the barstool and dropped the envelope on the island counter. A moment later, Stellan appeared with a glass and handed it to me. He leaned against the counter next to Uncle Ben, and they watched as I gulped half the liquid in one go. It was indeed the good stuff, but I barely tasted it, which said something about my current state of mind.

"All right, lad." Uncle Ben handed the wooden spoon to Stellan and came over to stand next to me. "Out with it, before you give me a heart attack. Or before you explode. You look...ashen."

"He's abusing her." My voice was flat, almost emotionless, the way it only became when I crossed from heated anger to a cold fury.

"Who's being abused?" Stellan asked. "That Maggie McCrae girl?"

I nodded, staring down at the glass in my hand. "I had a bad feeling, so I hired a PI to look into her." I gestured to the envelope. "He delivered today."

I handed them the envelope, and I calmed down as they skimmed the report. Although nothing in it directly proved she was being abused, she could have gotten those bruises in other ways, but all signs pointed toward it.

"Does she have family nearby?" Uncle Ben finally asked.

"She's Patrick McCrae's youngest with his first wife," I said. "Two siblings in New York and a lot more all over the country."

“So not just a big family, but a wealthy and powerful one, too,” he continued. “I’m sure they would help her if she reached out. She has resources.”

“Aye.” I cleared my throat. “But she might be too embarrassed to tell her family.”

There was a pause before Stellan spoke. “She’s not Belle.”

My head snapped up. “I know that,” I said, my voice shaking. “I couldn’t save Belle, and I couldn’t save our daughter, but if Maggie is being abused and there’s any chance I can save her, I will. And damn the consequences.”

NINETEEN