



# More Than A Feeling

**Author:** *Maya Alden*

**Category:** Romance, Billionaire Romance, Adult

**Description:** He chose the wrong sister. And now, the right one doesn't want him anymore.

I never expected to fall for Fleur. She's sunshine and joy, where my world was previously gray. What I don't understand is how her family means so little to her. They warned me she was immature and selfish; and that we'll never work out.

They were right. She's jealous of my friendship with her sister, my brother's widow.

But being there for Sabine is a promise I won't break. When Sabine suggests that we take care of each other; I feel like I owe it to her and my brother. So, I let Fleur go. I believed it was the right thing to do. I just never expected to find out that my feelings for Fleur ran deep, that I was, in fact, in love with her.

More Than A Feeling is A Modern Vintage Romance. Get a dose of classic Mills & Boon and Harlequin romance novels with a contemporary dual POV and a sexy touch. Indulge in your favorite tropes:

**Total Pages (Source):** 42

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:39 am*

## Chapter 1

### Fleur

"It's casual between us. Trust me, you need me; I'm here for you," Callum said as I stood outside Sabine's bedroom.

Sabine was crying. "But...she's living with you, Call."

"It's temporary."

My heart clenched.

"I love seeing you here with me, Grian. Love seeing your things mixed with mine."

He had started calling me Grian since that first night we made love. When I asked him, he'd been surprised that he'd addressed me in Gaelic. Grian meant sunshine, and it warmed me all the way deep inside, where there had been nothing but cold.

"You sure about this, Call?" I was nervous as hell about moving in with my boyfriend of eight months. It felt right to me, but he could be so closed off at times that I'd been surprised when he asked me to live with him. It was the right next step. He had never told me he loved me, but I assumed he did. I'd loved him since Sabine brought him home four years ago. He was her boyfriend's older brother—and my little heart had gone and fallen for him.

When he finally noticed me, and we began dating, it had been...magical.

The magic show is over, Fleur, I thought, when Callum continued to break my heart.

"You're having sex with my sister," Sabine accused.

"It's just sex, Sabine. I have a lot of it with many women." He sounded so calm and patient when he spoke.

"I can't take it, Call. It hurts so much. I...have nothing."

I stepped into the doorway and saw Sabine in Callum's arms. He was stroking her back, kissing her hair, and murmuring to her.

He heard me and looked up to see me. Regret flashed in his eyes, but he didn't let go of Sabine. I held up his wallet. He'd forgotten it at the restaurant where we were celebrating my twenty-sixth birthday. I was worried about him driving without his license.

I quietly set the wallet down on Sabine's dresser and walked out of her house—my grandparents' house, the home where I had happy memories. They'd promised it to me, but when Seamus, her husband and Callum's brother died, Sabine had asked to stay where she felt safe. Naturally, my parents had asked me to move out.

I understood. I really did. She and Seamus had been in love. Their wedding had been the event of the year in New Orleans. She had been pregnant when he died in an accident. She lost the baby. Since then, Callum had been taking care of his brother's widow.

But it had been two years. When would it be my turn to be taken care of? How long would I have to live in Sabine's shadow?

I asked the Uber driver to take me to Callum's house on Royal Street that I had

moved into a week ago. Thankfully, most of my stuff was still in boxes. I hadn't moved much, just clothes, books, and a few sentimental belongings. Callum's large house was fully furnished.

I called June, my friend who worked at Peychaud's, a popular bar in the Quarter. "I need you, Titus, and his truck."

"You movin' out?"

"Yeah."

"We'll be at Hotshot's place in fifteen."

The thing with good friends was that you didn't have to explain. They knew. June had never said outright that dating Callum was a bad idea when he was running to take care of Sabine every time she broke a nail, but the heart wanted what it wanted. No problem with that now. My now broken heart just wanted a few Sazeracs.

We were in the middle of loading up my things onto Titus's truck when Callum came home. He cocked an eyebrow when he saw me hand my suitcase over to Titus. The big suitcase looked small in my friend's hands. He was a big man who worked as a bouncer at the bar June worked at; the same one I used to work in to pay for school because fuck if I was going to beg my parents to give me money. They'd been clear: law school or you get nothing. My acquiring a degree in computer science had been scoffed at.

The joke was on them. Now, I was a lead programmer at one of the top security software companies in the world. Since my company had several contracts from the Department of Defense, I had a high-security clearance and a damn good salary.

Thankfully, I hadn't yet submitted paperwork on my changing domicile and getting a

partner. My apartment in the Marigny was still mine. I hadn't told Callum, but I wouldn't be giving it up because my "secure" office was there. To live-live with Callum, he and I would need to talk about my work, and he'd have to go through some kind of security clearance—and we'd have to outfit one of his guestrooms as my office. That was a major commitment for me. I was wise to be cautious. Less than a week after moving in with Callum, I was already heading back to my own place.

"You didn't think we deserved a conversation before you did this?" Callum asked pointedly.

It tore at me that he didn't look upset. No, he looked like he was expecting this. He even looked relieved. He was in a pair of linen pants and a shirt. He was usually in a suit and tie, appropriate for the man who ran one of the largest sports investment companies in the country. Seamus and Callum made quite a pair when they were both in their power suits. But Seamus had been the less serious brother—more playful, easy, casual. Maybe that's why he and I had become friends so easily.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:39 am*

I smiled tightly at Callum and nodded at June and Titus, who were waiting for me. "After your conversation with Sabine, do you think we need to?"

I was going to miss this man. I was going to miss making love with him. I was going to miss eating breakfast with him. I was going to miss talking with him. Laughing with him.

"I think so."

"Okay. Talk," I challenged him.

"I was comforting her. It's hard for her to lose me."

I folded my arms to protect myself. "Lose you?"

"She's family, Fleur. She's Seamus's wife. She's—"

"Priority," I nodded. "I get it. You've told me that several times. But when you asked me to move in, I thought we were more than just two people fuckin', Callum."

"We are." He leaned against his doorway. His stance was easy, but his eyes were hard, angry.

"I heard what you said to her. You said my moving in was temporary."

He shrugged. "So?"

"So, that's not what you told me when you asked me to move in, Callum. You spent a month convincing me to."

"Maybe we rushed into the living together part," he conceded, and my blood ran cold. I never meant a lot to him. That was clear.

"Well, then, it's a good thing I'm all moved out." I waved a hand at his place. I was on the iron lace porch while he stood in his doorway, larger than life. My love, my heart, my man. But he wasn't mine. He never had been. I'd been living in a fool's paradise.

"Maybe." He straightened. "I guess I'll see you tomorrow?"

"Why?"

He looked confused. "Fleur, you're moving out, I get that, but that doesn't mean we're breaking up."

He sounded so sure of himself, so confident, that I burst out laughing. It wasn't a happy sound. "You've got to be kidding me. You told my sister I was just sex."

"I said that because she was feeling bad."

"And what about my feelings?"

"No one told you to eavesdrop," he retorted pleasantly. "You did that to yourself. You didn't have to bring my wallet over. You did that because you wanted to interfere in my relationship with Sabine, disrupt it. You were, as always, being selfish when it comes to Sabine."

June took a few steps to get up on the porch to stand next to me. "Say what?"

I placed a hand on her shoulder to keep her from going off half-cocked at Callum.

"This is between my girlfriend and me." Callum didn't look fazed by her at all. I hated how unaffected he was.

"Ex-girlfriend," Titus cut in from where he stood at the gate. "She's your ex now, fucker. And for the record, she's the most selfless girl I know—so don't you dare call her selfish."

If Titus thought he could intimidate Callum, well, tough shit.

"We'll talk when you're not so emotional," Callum sighed, as if I were a spoiled child who he wanted to help get over a tantrum.

"No," I said quietly. "This is done. Goodbye."

I turned around with as much grace as I could muster, even though what I really wanted was to accept his terms, take the crumbs he offered, and keep him any way I could. But after eight months of being with him and still feeling unimportant, I was completely wrung out.

"Sabine is your sister. How can you begrudge her my friendship and loyalty?" he demanded, his nostrils flaring. He was finally getting worked up, but on behalf of Sabine, not because I was leaving.



## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:39 am*

"I don't, which is why I'm leaving," I pointed out. "Now, she doesn't have to worry about losing you."

"You're being so fucking childish." He shook his head as if disgusted. "Sabine is right...your parents, too. You're just too self-involved and immature for an adult relationship. Well, babe, go running back to your sad little life where you spend your days in a house you need your parents to help you afford; working a shitty job that pays fuck all."

Titus and June both gaped at him. I had no idea why Callum thought I didn't make good money. I made high six figures. Probably something my parents or Sabine told him. I had a degree in Computer Science Engineering from Tulane, and I climbed the corporate ladder fast because of my programming and leadership skills. The company had even paid me to get my master's in computer science specializing in AI from MIT.

I was one of the youngest senior directors in my company. But Callum didn't seem to have paid attention to my life when we were together. I couldn't tell him a whole lot about my job because of my security clearance, but I'd hoped he'd thought that I was successful in my own right.

"What the fuck, Fleur?" June asked, baffled.

I shrugged. "Doesn't matter."

I walked away then, not turning to see him one last time. He'd finally said and done things that killed every last feeling of hope I had for us to make it as a couple. It was

time to move on, not just from Callum but my family as well. I needed to surround myself with people who saw me and not the version of me that Sabine painted. I would not mourn the end of this relationship but take it as a lesson for the future. When people show you who they are, believe them—and know they won't change. They can't.

## Chapter 2

### Callum

My house felt empty without Fleur. She'd been here a week and had taken it over with bright flowers and her light. Now, it felt like it always had. Quiet, clean, modern, and somehow more oppressive than before. She'd packed away her colorful rugs and throws. She'd left a vase with flowers, which now looked forlorn on the steel and glass coffee table.

She'd not put her art up—colorful Parisian café prints—but they'd been leaning against my walls, cheering the place up. They were a stark contrast to the expensive original art that hung, which was mostly landscapes; the colors being beige, blue, and black.

The moment I saw her at Sabine's, I knew it was over. I had hoped it wouldn't be, but I knew. Fleur never liked Sabine, and it had always rankled me. Sabine was quiet, sophisticated, gentle...frail. Everything Fleur wasn't. Sabine was elegant, while Fleur was the girl next door. Sabine spoke softly and never cursed, while Fleur, well, she had a sailor's mouth. Compared to Sabine and her parents, Fleur definitely seemed like the baby who was switched at birth.

I sat down and poured myself a finger of whiskey.

The truth was that I always saw myself with a woman like Sabine. If she wasn't

Seamus's widow, I think she and I could have a romantic relationship.

My attraction to Fleur had been unexpected. Oh, she made eyes at me; she had been since Sabine and Seamus started dating four years ago. It still hurt to think about my brother. He'd gotten into his convertible one day and...fuck...after two years, I still waited for him to show up and talk about last night's game.

Sabine and he dated for a year before being married for another. They were so in love. It had been a fucking tragedy for her to lose him, for him to lose his beautiful and happy marriage when he'd tasted it for such a short time. And the shock of losing him had driven Sabine to such despair that she'd lost their baby. A piece of Seamus that would have been a balm to my family and me.

I adored Sabine for how she loved Seamus. How good she was to him. I loved her because she was family. I admired her for her grace and elegance, her smarts, and her success as a lawyer. We had always been friendly, but we'd become close after Seamus passed.

I wondered what my brother would've thought about my relationship with Fleur. He'd told me he liked her, but never spent much time with her—because it bothered Sabine.

"Sabine thinks her sister is hitting on me, which she isn't. Fleur is a sweetheart," Seamus told me once when we were having lunch on a Saturday at Paillard in the Marigny. Seamus had just proposed to Sabine, and he was happier than any man had a right to be.

"According to Brian, she's a bit selfish, doing her own thing, not particularly family oriented," I said as I perused the menu. I always thought that Fleur had a crush on me. She wasn't my type; she was too plain and nerdy, but it surprised me that she was also trying to get with my brother. Christ! Poor Sabine had one shitty sister.

Seamus snorted. "They have a problem with her not being a lawyer. But she's her own person; why does she have to be like them?"

"Maybe she isn't smart enough to be a lawyer," I mused.

Seamus arched an eyebrow. "You know she has a bachelor's in computer science engineering at Tulane. And she paid for it on her own 'cause Brian and Lenora would only pay for her school if she studied law."

"That's their call." I saw no problem with parents withholding their money from their children. Brian and Lenora came from the upper middle class and, with their law firm, had become considerably wealthy.

"It's petty," Seamus said.

"You're pretty defensive about her, no wonder Sabine doesn't want you spending time with her."

He laughed. "Fleur and I are friendly. I pay attention, that's all. Sabine and Fleur are very different people. She dresses like a tomboy and swears like a sailor, and her family believes her friends are not appropriate. But just because Fleur is not like Sabine doesn't mean there's anything wrong with her."

"She's definitely not in Sabine's league," I agreed.

"Is anyone?" Seamus's eyes twinkled. He was a man in love, and having spent time with his fiancée, I understood.

I always thought my brother was lucky to have married someone like Sabine. She'd been the ideal Mrs. Gallagher, even though my parents were cool towards her. I liked Sabine, not as much as Seamus though.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:39 am*

I'd never expected to be attracted to Fleur, though—but it happened and was like a sledgehammer in my gut.

It was after Mardi Gras when I was with some clients at Maison on Frenchmen's Street, and Fleur was there as well. She was friends with the drummer of the jazz band playing that night.

I hadn't seen her for a long while, and the woman in front of me looked nothing like a tomboy.

Fleur wasn't tall like Sabine, who was five feet nine inches and model beautiful.

Fleur was around five feet four or five. Not petite; not tall. She had a woman's body—clearly visible in the long black dress she wore that covered literally every inch of her. The dress cupped her body, and when I saw her ass, I felt my cock twitch. That ass was made for fucking!

She wore boots underneath the dress. The femininity of the outfit and the ruggedness of her footwear contrasted drastically—emphasizing her layered personality.

Once my clients left, I went and sat at the bar next to her. We'd seen each other earlier and waved to one another. She hadn't come by the table, and I hadn't sought her out either. But now, I felt drawn.

"How are you?" I asked after telling the bartender I'd have a shot of Jameson, neat.

"Good." She had a bright and broad smile. Her face was not sophisticated like

Sabine's. It was happy. Her cheeks were rosy pink and healthy. Her lips were glossy and bright. Her eyes were light brown with dark centers. Her dark hair hung loose in curls around her shoulders—it wasn't styled, just naturally lush. She looked fucking fantastic.

Sabine's hair was always coiffed. It wasn't curly like Fleur's, or maybe it was, and she took care of it. Their eyes were different as well. Fleur's were like her mother's, while Sabine's were blue like her father's. Sabine's skin was pale, milky white, while Fleur looked like she got some sun.

"You come here a lot?" I made small talk because she didn't seem interested in speaking with me and was more into the fucking drummer with two arms full of tattoos. That was probably her type. Shaggy musician with tats.

She looked surprised that I was having a conversation with her. "Yes. I know the band. Jamie, he's playing the drums—he and I were at Tulane together."

"Ah." Fucking Jamie!

"The guy on the guitar is his boyfriend," she continued artlessly; "And Sheena is on drums. Isn't she spectacular? She also plays with the Trumpet Mafia at Frenchmen's Hotel."

"Jamie is gay?" I asked, wanting to be precise because I'd had just enough to drink to want to make a play at Fleur Landry, my dead brother's sister-in-law.

She chuckled. "I don't know. He's had boyfriends and girlfriends. I think he might be pan. I've never asked."

"Have you fucked him?"

She looked as shocked as I felt by my question.

"That's inappropriate, Callum," she said softly and stood up, ready to leave me to my surliness.

I wasn't going to apologize. I wanted to know because I wanted to fuck her. I wanted to peel off that dress, with its long sleeves and high neck that reached all the way to her ankles, and see what was beneath it.

She probably thought she was hiding her body, or maybe not because it molded her tits, a nice C+ I was sure, and her ass, which, as I noted before, was made for tapping.

"Let me rephrase, are you single, Fleur?"

Her eyes went wide. "Yes," she whispered.

I smiled at her. "Then why don't you sit back down and let me buy you a drink?"

And that's how it began.

I had her in my bed that night.

My head blew off.

Best sex of my fucking life.

Fleur was sensual, generous, and knew how to give and take. Hell, I'd never imagined her to be so bold and demanding in bed. It was a complete turn-on. She wasn't just handing control over to me—as much as I liked that, I liked it better when my partner was asking me to fuck them hard.

We continued to see each other, primarily for sex—because it was spectacular. But after a few months, I wanted more, so I told Brian, Lenora, and Sabine that Fleur and I were dating. They were all surprised and warned me that Fleur wasn't really my type. I knew that. But we were having fun. It was casual. I could, as the song went, make Miss Wrong, Right for a few months.



## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:39 am*

But seven months in, she made me feel things I never felt before. I didn't like it when she stayed at her apartment in the Marigny. I didn't like it when she traveled for work. According to Sabine, she worked at some software company and barely made ends meet. She rented an apartment in the Marigny, which didn't look cheap, but Sabine had also told me that Brian and Lenora helped Fleur out financially. I thought that was generous of them, especially since she didn't attend many family functions.

Regardless, I wanted her to live with me.

I liked waking up to her. I liked how she made breakfast while she swayed, listening to jazz in the mornings. I liked how she surprised me with little presents—like a book of poems by Pablo Neruda the day after we discussed poetry, a golf club for mini golf since I'd never played, a walking tour of the haunted houses of New Orleans because even though I'd lived here for most of my adult life, I'd never been.

She filled our days with fun.

The only time she seemed stiff was when we were around her parents and sister. I was a guy who respected family—would die for them, so I couldn't understand Fleur's reticence.

Since my parents moved to Edinburgh and Seamus died, the Landrys were my family in the States. Fleur should've also been my family, but she just didn't seem to care about her parents and sister. I'd asked her about it, and she prevaricated, cementing the idea that she just wasn't the family type.

She was flighty and enjoyed spending time with friends and pan-sexual musicians

rather than kin. It would never work out between us, but I was enjoying my time with a woman so different from those who I dated before. She wasn't angling for anything from me—no ring, no promise, not even of loyalty and fidelity. She just lived in the moment, and I liked that about being with her.

"Yesterday is gone, tomorrow is not here. I want to live in today," she'd told me. "I like living in the present."

"What do you like about it?"

"Good or bad, my life at the moment is only for a moment. It's not some lifelong sentence or some past trauma to carry. Do you know that the Masai don't have a concept of time? They believe that now is where it's at."

"So, you're like the Masai?" I teased.

"I'm trying to be," she admitted seriously. "I don't want to dwell on the past because there were more bad times than good, and I don't want to worry about the future because I don't know how it's going to turn out."

I never asked her what she meant by more bad times than good. I should have; because this happy and bright person didn't appear to have any baggage.

But everyone brought their past to their present. I just hadn't been curious. So, even after eight months together, I didn't know Fleur very well. She was still an enigma.

And I still wanted to fuck her.

## Chapter 3

Fleur

Dad was upset with me.

"You can't tolerate your boyfriend having friends? Is that it? Or is this about your lifelong jealousy of Sabine?" he demanded when he came to see me at home.

I'd almost not opened the door, wondering if I could pretend I wasn't home. But my family so seldom visited me that I couldn't resist the need to be accepted so I'd let him in. It was a dumb thing to do, especially in the light of the conversation we were having.

"He left dinner as soon as she called, Dad. It was my birthday dinner." I sat on an armchair across from him, my hands clenching and unclenching on my lap. My family always made me feel like I was a sad little teenager, afraid of her own shadow, scared of being kicked out of the Landry household for saying or doing the wrong thing.

"So? Sabine was upset. She met someone who reminded her of Seamus and—"

"And then I heard him tell her that our relationship was just sex," I continued. My face heated because I was uncomfortable talking with my father about something so intimate.

"He asked you to move in with him," my father growled.

I kept my eyes lowered. "He also told her that it was temporary." Which was not how he'd sold it to me.

Dad scoffed. "He just said that to make her feel better. You have to understand that she lost her husband and her baby. She's feeling vulnerable seeing her sister move on. Where is your compassion, Fleur?"

My compassion? God! If only they knew how damned compassionate I was to Seamus's memory. How I wasn't telling them the truth. But I'd made Seamus a promise. I wouldn't tell anyone, and I wasn't going to betray that man, dead or alive, after what he'd been through right before his accident.

"You never approved of Callum and me dating, so I don't understand why you're here complaining about that relationship ending," I finally said, feeling exhausted.

I'd moved my stuff back and had spent the weekend unpacking. It had been three days and eighteen hours now since I saw Callum last, and I felt like breaking into a Sinead O'Connor classic song.

"He's upset. Sabine is upset. I don't like that."

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:40 am*

I looked my father in the eye. "I'm upset too, Daddy."

"As you should be since you caused this. First, you should've stayed away from Callum, which you didn't do, and now you're trying to cause trouble between him and Sabine. She's his family. He has every right to take care of her," Dad thundered.

"As he should." I stood and walked to the front door. Enough was enough—it was time to let them all go. Callum. Dad. Mom. Sabine. None of them were good for me.

"I have a meeting in five minutes, Dad. So..." I held the door open.

My father looked shocked. I always just sat and took it, but I was tired of being beaten down by the people who were supposed to love me.

"We're not done talking." He made no effort to move, and I knew he was pulling the Alpha male move that Callum liked so much as well. He wanted to show me he was in control, and he'd decide when he'd leave.

"We are done." I kept my voice low and clear. "Now, leave. And don't come back."

That did get his back up, and he rose, his face a mask of rage. "What did you say?" He stalked up to me, his height, his demeanor, all of it threatening.

Daddy was a bully. He was famous for being that in court and with his adversaries. He never hit me—but he raised his voice plenty, and as a child, I'd been afraid of him. Now, I was out of fucks.

"I said, leave and don't come back," I repeated, not bothering to look away from his contorted face.

"Young lady, if you think you can treat your father—"

"Get. Out." I looked at my watch to let him know that this conversation was indeed over.

"You're not my daughter any longer," he shouted.

"I never was, Daddy," I murmured.

He sneered. "You think you can survive without us?"

How dare he!

"I've been living my life without y'all for years now," I snapped. "I don't need you at all. None of you. So, maybe it's time we stay the fuck away from each other."

Dad took a step toward me, his hand raised, and I held my ground. If this was the first time he'd hit me, it was the last he'd ever lay his eyes on me.

"Brian," Callum's calm voice filtered through.

Dad lowered his hand and stared at the man he thought of as a son, confusion in his eyes. He couldn't believe he'd let himself be goaded; oh yes, he'd blame me for his behavior.

"Fleur is no longer my daughter," he spat out and stormed away.

Callum looked at me and then at my father's retreating figure.

"Are you okay?" he asked, his face expressionless.

My heart was still pounding in my chest. "Yes."

No, I'm not fine. But I'm going to be without y'all. I think my life will be better once y'all stop eroding my confidence and heart with your callousness.

"I better check on Brian."

I scoffed and slammed the door shut. My father almost struck me, and the man I loved wanted to make sure my almost-abuser was alright.

I wasn't surprised. Callum would always choose everyone else but me. My family would do the same. Unfortunately, I had also been doing that—choosing others over myself. It was time to stop. It was time to start prioritizing me.

I locked my office door behind me, used my thumbprint, and did a retina scan to get into my computer.

I was working on a project for the DOD, and it was proving to be a right bastard. It was hard work, but my team and I had done more complicated projects. Since we were spread out around the world, my company, BRT Systems, had helped to create secure home offices for us.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:40 am*

My team came together once a month in our offices in DC for three to four days so we could go through project plans and connect; otherwise, we worked from home.

Our secure offices were no joke. Mine could not be opened without a thumbprint, retina scan, and a code that changed constantly and which I received on my secure phone. The same was true for my computer.

I had a Creole cottage and the entire second floor had been converted into my office. I didn't allow anyone to go up there, not that I had many people visiting me. My bedroom and bath were downstairs, as was the open-plan kitchen, dining, and living area. I wasn't much of a cook, and it suited me fine to have a small kitchen. If I could heat food and make coffee, I was set.

"Sorry it's over, Wraith. Your beau looks fucking hot," Viper said. She was, as always, eating yogurt with her feet up on the table.

I'd told my team about Callum, and they'd done a thorough background check on him. We did that for each other. Viper worked out of her ranch in Texas, where she lived with her husband, a former Navy SEAL, and two kids. She was the best-adjusted of all of us, what with kids and all.

"So, is he fuckin' your sister now?" Orion wondered.

He was ex-military and was handy when we had to deploy and test the systems we created in a real-world conflict area.

"I don't think so." But fuck if I knew. From all I could see, they were close, and when



she said jump, he asked how high. "She's his brother's wife...so...."

"Brother's dead, ain't he?" This was from Rune, who slept around a lot but was still a dedicated father to his twin girls.

He always encouraged me to get my freak on. A fat lot of good it did me. My first one-night stand turned into an eight-month stand and gave me a broken heart.

"If I was him, I'd fucking hate the bitch for what she did to my brother," Viper remarked.

The thing with working with people like Viper, Rune, and Orion was that there were no secrets between us. They knew exactly what my parents were worth, what Seamus had been doing, and what and who Sabine did. They knew everything.

"He doesn't know what she did to his brother," Orion pointed out. "Wraith, why won't you just tell him?"

"Because she promised the dead guy," Viper snapped. "And when you make promises to dead people, you keep them. Sorry, Wraith, but your sister is a right-on bitch."

I sighed. "Can we get back to Iron Veil?"

Everyone grunted assent. We were tasked with developing a cutting-edge, autonomous security system designed to protect critical infrastructure in battle. The first one we were working on would be tested in an active war zone.

The project was cumbersome, difficult, and time-consuming. We worked all hours of the day and night, and my team had been nice enough to give me some time off to move and be in a relationship, but I was glad to be back with them. Active war zones of the real kind were so much safer than the emotional ones I'd been in lately.

"Alright, boss," Orion said, "we've got some code here that's completely screwed. I think it needs a little Wraith Voodoo."

I grinned and let my fingers fly over the keyboard, leaving behind heartache and Callum Gallagher and did my patriotic duty.

## Chapter 4

### Callum

It had been a shock to see Brian almost strike Fleur.

I'd wanted to run to her, hold her close, protect her. But I'd done what I knew I had to. I took care of Brian. He was my family. Not Fleur.

Brian had been a father to Seamus and was one to me now, yet I'd never seen him this angry. I knew that Fleur had pushed his buttons—but it didn't matter, did it? If he'd hit her, I would've lost all respect for him and broken ties with him after I broke his hand. I didn't abide by physical violence against women.

"What the fuck was that, Brian?" I demanded as I followed him to his car from Fleur's place.

"She asked me to get out," he retorted.

That wasn't the answer I expected. I thought Fleur must've said and done something far more serious than asking her father to leave her home to warrant his anger.

"And?"

"And? Nothing. She wanted me to get out because she had a meeting. How dare she

talk to me like that?"

I frowned. "I'm not understanding this, Brian."

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:40 am*

"I told her she was being selfish coming between your and Sabine's friendship."

I nodded and waited.

"She said I should be happy y'all broke up and asked me to leave."

"That's it?"

"That's pretty bad, don't you think?"

No. That seemed like a tame discussion.

"And you disowned her for that?" I ran a hand through my hair. Would Fleur be okay regarding money? I knew Brian and Lenora paid some of her bills. Probably her rent. Fuck!

"Yes."

I decided right then and there to help her financially. "How much money do you give her every month?" I asked.

Now, Brian looked confused. "What?"

"Sabine said you support her financially. I'm assuming you disowning her means you won't be doing that, right?" This was why I should've resisted Fleur. Nothing good was coming out of that relationship. My house felt darker and bleaker than before. Added to all that was how much I missed her. Three damn nights without her, and I

was ready to beg her to come back; that was what I'd come to discuss with her, that we could continue our relationship or at least keep having sex.

I was going out of my mind without her. I'd tried to pick up someone at a bar, which was easy to do in New Orleans, but I couldn't close the deal.

I wanted Fleur.

Sabine had spent an evening with me, dropping hints, as she sometimes did, that maybe we could comfort each other—but the thought felt even more abhorrent now. If I ever slept with Sabine, I knew Fleur would never forgive me, never have anything to do with me again. Was I willing to give up my chance with Fleur forever?

"We haven't supported Fleur financially since she decided to fuck her life up after high school." Brian ran a hand through his hair. "We were clear with both our kids, law school, or they were on their own."

I looked at Fleur's Creole Cottage. "Does she make enough to pay rent on that?"

"I think she bought the place," Brian remarked. "She makes decent money. She's never asked us for anything."

It didn't make sense. "But Sabine...."

"Maybe Sabine misunderstood. I'll talk to her and clear it up. But I want you to steer clear of Fleur, Call. I think this break-up came at the best time." Brian put a hand on my shoulder. "I'm going to be honest, son, we'd like to see you as our son-in-law, but with Sabine as your wife."

I blinked.

"Sabine has said as much. And now that you and Fleur are over, you should consider dating Sabine. You're already such good friends," Brian encouraged.

Sabine had been Seamus's. I couldn't go there. And I'd been with Fleur.

"But...Fleur and I—"

"It's over, so who cares?" Brian smiled broadly. "I think Seamus would want you two to heal each other and take care of one another. Don't you agree?"

I felt confused. Seamus had told me that if anything ever happened to him, Sabine was my responsibility and had to be my priority. I knew he'd do the same for my woman if I had one. I didn't think being responsible for Sabine, meant fucking her, but that's what Brian was indicating, and it looked like it was something Sabine wanted.

"I have to think about this," I said sincerely.

"You do that, Son. I'll see you at the gym tomorrow."

I watched Brian drive away in his Maserati and then looked back at Fleur's yellow Creole cottage.

She owned the place? If that was true, she must have been doing pretty well for herself. Sabine had always painted Fleur as some kind of perpetual screw-up, but now I was starting to question that narrative. All I really knew was that she worked as a programmer for a company called BRT Systems. But what exactly did she do there? Maybe it was time I found out.

You should've found out while you were with her, you daft idiot.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:40 am*

As I drove back to my office in the Central Business District, I called a private investigator my company had on retainer. I gave him information about Fleur and asked him to find out everything he could about her.

### Chapter 5

#### Fleur

Jamie was playing at Maison's. I sat at the bar, nursing a Sazerac as I listened to the band play Blue Skies. It had been a week since I saw Callum high-tailing it after my father and ten days since Callum and I broke up. I still had a sore heart.

It was at the same bar, on the same barstool, where Callum had spoken to me that first magical night we made love.

Callum was a little tipsy but not drunk. I'd had a drink at best and was in full control of my faculties, except having him touching me was enough to fuck with my head and heart.

From Maison, we walked to the French Quarter in the dark. He kissed me in an alley for the first time. A deep, drugging kiss.

"You taste so fucking sweet," he whispered against my lips. "So, so sweet."

His kiss took my breath away, and I clung to him, kissing him back, indulging in every fantasy I ever had about us being together. He was hard, and I could feel him against my stomach. I aroused Callum, and it was heady, this feeling of being seen,

finally, by the man who held my heart.

"Your heart is racing, Grian." He settled his hips in the cradle of my legs, pushing against me. "And your pussy is wet, isn't it?"

I'd had sex before. This wasn't my first time. But not a whole lot of it. Nerdy girls didn't get laid as often as they seemed to in television shows. And maybe it didn't help that I compared every guy who showed me interest with Callum—and they all failed the test. I wasn't a virgin, but I was also not experienced. Considering Callum had a whole hell of a lot of sex, I wasn't sure I could compete. I was sure he'd find me lacking. I was already mortified by his dirty talk about wet pussies.

"You're blushing," he marveled. "My God, you're beautiful."

He took me to his place. A lovely house on Royal Street, a stone's throw away from the Quarter. It was a large home; four bedrooms, five baths, an iron lace porch and wraparound balcony—and the pièce de résistance, a New Orleans courtyard with a water fountain. The interior was a little sterile. All blue, white, and beige—but it was beautiful, and it was Callum's, so I fell in love with it as well.

His bedroom was large, with plantation windows and a king-size bed with white sheets. There was a simplicity to it.

He peeled my dress off.

"I've been wanting to see what you have on. Fuck."

I was in a simple black bra and no-line panties. Nothing fancy, but looking at his hungry eyes, I might as well be in La Perla. Next time, if there was one, I promised myself I'd doll myself up in sexy lacy lingerie.



I was nothing like the women I'd seen Callum with, all skinny and gorgeous—but I didn't dare ask him to turn the lights off. I didn't want to miss seeing him naked. This was probably the only night I'd have with him, and I was going to love him like hell, giving him everything inside me that was burning to be released.

He didn't have a six-pack or an eight-pack, but he was ridiculously fit and toned. He did have that sexy V that went down to his groin—where the dark hair ensconced a cock that looked like something from PornHub.com. None of my previous lovers had a dick that big, and I couldn't help but touch him.

He groaned and thrust against my hands. That gave me the courage to caress him, soft and gentle, feel him, explore him.

"That's enough," he muttered and pushed me onto the bed naked.

He slid over me, resting his erection at the notch of my thighs. I reached up and twisted my fingers into his hair like I'd always dreamed of doing. Lush, thick black hair that matched his dark eyes. He growled and dropped his lips to mine, ground his hips into mine, the tip of his cock at my entrance.

Pleasure spiked through me at the thought of him deep inside me. I couldn't wait and wrapped my legs around his waist. "Callum," I breathed.

He ran his lips over my cheekbones and then nibbled at the lobe of one ear. He pulled it between his lips and gave it a gentle bite. I whimpered. My hips thrust up against him, chasing him, wanting him.

"Need to fuck you, Grian." His voice was hoarse, thick with need. I could feel his lips against my ear, and his stern tone caused goosebumps to break out across my skin.

"Fleur, I need you to give me the words," he whispered, kissing the sensitive skin

right behind my ear.

"Callum," I whispered, not sure what he wanted me to say, "I want you."

"I know, Grian, I can feel that you want me, but I need to know you want me inside you." He reared up so he could look at me, amusement dancing in his eyes.

I smiled. "Yes, please. Come inside me."

"I will, but not just yet." He dipped his head and took a nipple into his mouth. Fuck, but that felt so damn good. The suckle was intense, breathtaking. He laved his tongue across my nipple and watched me as I moaned. "Fuck, yeah. You like that, Grian?"

## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:40 am*

"Yes. Don't stop."

He took my mouth in a hungry kiss and then started back down again on my breasts. One hand squeezed a breast and nipple so hard that it hurt so fucking beautifully, and the other nipple was in his mouth. He bit, suckled, and tugged the engorged flesh. All of it created a frenzy inside me that I'd never experienced before.

He pulled back and went down my body.

"Spread your legs for me," he breathed.

His mouth, his teeth, and his breath were all over my skin, and I felt hot, unbearably hot, like there was a fire inside and around me.

"Spread," he ordered and smacked my thigh hard.

I felt self-conscious, but I did as he asked.

"I want to see," he sounded drugged...on me? "I want to see your pussy."

I spread my legs wider, and his eyes glazed with arousal. I was bare. I liked it like that. It felt clean. I hadn't done it for a man but for myself. Six months of laser and some maintenance, and voila! I had a hairless pussy.

"Tha thu bòidheach," he murmured in Gaelic. I never figured out what that meant. "I could keep looking at your beautiful pussy, Fleur. I wanna look at it, fuck it, fill it up with my cum. You want that?"

Breathing heavily, I stared into his eyes and nodded. I pulled my lower lip between my teeth, feeling turned on and embarrassed all at the same time. I could feel my clitoris swollen and throbbing, and he'd only looked at me. I didn't come easily; I knew that. It took work with a clitoral vibrator—but now I thought if he touched me, I'd go off like a rocket.

He groaned softly and kneeled between my legs. He put a finger on my pubic bone before sliding it down my wetness. My hips immediately surged up, and he laughed softly.

"Oh, Grian, if you respond to my finger like this, I can't wait to see what happens when I eat you."

No man had ever done that to me. Oral sex sounded good in books and when I watched porn, but in real life, it felt messy. I'd seen what I looked like down under, and I didn't want his mouth there up close and personal.

I tried to close my thighs up, but he smacked me again. "Stay still," he commanded.

My heart raced as he nuzzled his nose against my pubic bone. "You smell so good. And you're so wet. I've barely touched you, and you're soaked." His finger dipped inside me, and I heard a slurping sound that embarrassed me but made him groan.

"I need to taste you." His voice was jerky, and I took a deep breath as his mouth found me.

Holy mother of God! Pleasure like I'd never felt shot up my spine. I was frozen to the spot because of it, and as if I were a puppet, my hands went to his head to hold him as I rubbed my pussy against him. I'd never done this before. I didn't even know how I was doing this because I didn't think I knew how to do this.

"Fucking sweetest pussy I've ever tasted." He ran his tongue from my ass to my clit, and I forgot to be uncomfortable, worried about how the unholy hole smelled or tasted. Myarousal made it impossible for me to think straight. I was just a body now; I could only feel.

"Look at me," he growled, "Look at me as I fuck your pussy with my tongue. Fleur, please."

I watched him, wondering how he looked so sexy with his lips wet with my juices. He stuck his tongue out and flicked my clit. I screamed at the intense pleasure. I was aroused not just by what he was doing but as I watched him do it. It was dirty and erotic.

He buried his face into my folds and licked, sucked, and nipped until I was past everything but that feeling deep down inside, of the kind of release I'd never felt before. I exploded, and the orgasm that ripped through me was almost painful in its intensity. He slammed two fingers inside me and started to massage me. I was barely over that first orgasm when I felt the second one start. I was going out of my mind now. I was desperate. I wanted him inside me now!

He knew it, too. He grinned wide and repositioned me so I was straddling him. I looked at his face; my breath caught in my throat. This handsome man was mine tonight, and nothing this amazing had ever happened to me. His dark hair was messy. His eyes were hooded. His cheeks were flushed. His mouth was wet with my orgasm. I dropped my mouth to his, wanting to taste him and me. I couldn't believe that I was doing this with Callum, that I was the reason for that look of arousal on his face.

I held his eyes for a long moment and slid my ass down his legs. I wanted to taste him. I'd given a couple of blow jobs but more out of obligation and curiosity. This was the first time I felt a need to do it.

My mouth watered just looking at him.

I took him in my mouth.

"Fuck, yeah." His hands were in my hair, as if he were holding on for dear life. I loved that feeling of making him feel out of control.

I swirled my tongue around the thick round tip, and his head lifted. He watched me intently.

"Am I doing it okay?" I asked when insecurities plagued me.

"You do it any better, Grian, I'm going to come on your face."

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:40 am*

"I've not done this a lot," I confessed.

He stroked my cheek, and the affection in his eyes made my heart beat faster. "I could come just watching your mouth close to my cock, Fleur. I'm so turned on right now that seeing you down there is enough for me to blow a nut."

I placed my tongue on the underside of his tip and licked him like a lollipop, lapping around the slit. He let out a hiss that egged me on. I stroked him with my hands as I wrapped my lips around him and sucked hard. I took him farther and farther inside my mouth, encouraged by his low grunts and his orders to take him in deep. He hit the back of my throat, and I gagged, but he didn't let up; his hands on my head held me still.

"Love seeing those tears rolling down your cheeks." His voice sounded otherworldly.

He pumped his hips harder into my mouth, and suddenly, he ripped my mouth away. "Enough teasing."

He pushed me onto my back and kneeled in between my legs. "I want inside you."

With practiced ease, he opened a bedside drawer and brought out a condom. He watched me as he ripped it open with his teeth and then rolled it down his cock. It was erotic as hell to watch that, and next time, if there ever was a next time, I promised myself I'd do that for him.

He surged forward and filled me in one thrust. The pleasure, the pain, all of it pulled me out of my thoughts about wrapping his cock with a condom to just feeling said

cock inside of me.

He pulled out and then slammed in again, balls deep. "Fuck! You're so tight, Grian. So, fucking tight."

I placed my hands on his shoulder blades. The pleasure of having him move inside me was earth-shatteringly good. My desire was a runaway train, and I moaned as his movements became more forceful, faster. I grabbed his ass cheeks and pulled him into me, not that he could go any further in.

"Deeper," I whimpered.

He pulled out, and I was about to complain when he hauled me onto my stomach. "On your knees, Fleur."

My hands and knees hit the mattress, and he pulled my ass high up in the air. Before I could catch my breath, he stroked into me from behind.

"Is that deep enough?" he asked as he pumped in and out. Two of his fingers were on my clit, banging against it.

"Fucking hell," I screamed as an unexpected orgasm ripped through me.

Two orgasms in one night!!!

I usually didn't even get one when I was with a man. Most of the time, I had to finish myself off.

Now I could see why Callum was so popular with the ladies. If he could do this, no wonder all the women wanted him all over their genitals.



Callum slowed his hips but continued to glide his cock in and out of my pussy, which was spasming out of my control.

"Milk my cock, yeah, just like that."

His penis seemed to get bigger inside me—and I didn't know how that was possible. He growled as his hips hitched against my ass. He screamed his orgasm, and it was the best sound in the world. Callum Gallagher letting loose with my name on his lips was something I hadn't even dared to dream of. The fact that it came true was a miracle of gigantic proportions.

I fell face down on the bed. He spun away from me and lay on his back. "You have a magic pussy, Fleur. Can't say I expected that."

I lifted my head to look at him. His eyes were closed, and he looked like a racehorse after a round around the track. He was beautiful, and my heart cracked at his words. Magic pussy? Yeah, that's what every woman liked to hear after getting her brains fucked.

"You have a magic cock, Mr. Gallagher," I countered, because like hell I'd let him demean me.

He laughed and turned to look at me. He stroked a finger down my cheek. "You're somethin' special, aren't you, Grian?"

I realized then that this was how he talked. He didn't make the magic pussy remark as a snip but as a compliment.

"What does that mean? Grian?"

He looked baffled. "What?"

"You keep calling me Grian."

"It's Gaelic; been a while since I spoke it," he said with a hint of wonder and amusement. "Grian means sunshine, Fleur."

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:40 am*

I smiled. "Yeah?"

His eyes shuttered then. "We better get cleaned up."

He got out of bed, and just like that, the spell was broken.

But it hadn't been a one-night stand, as I suspected.

We spent every night together after that if we were both in New Orleans and not traveling. Sometimes he wouldn't even talk to me; he'd just fuck me. I preferred to go to his place because mine would only lead to questions about the Fort Knox-like office.

"You don't have to be embarrassed about your place," he once told me.

"I'm not."

"Okay. Just saying. I know you don't have a lot of money."

It was on the tip of my tongue to tell him he was wrong, but I didn't. What was the point? He'd believe whatever he wanted, no matter what I said. Our time together was short, and I wasn't going to waste it arguing. Instead, I'd enjoy what little I had with him. When it was over, I'd nurse my broken heart and move on.

Chapter 6

Callum

"Daddy told me Fleur won't take his calls."

Sabine looked stressed when I took her out to dinner. I tried to do that once a month, but since Fleur and I broke up four weeks and two days ago, it had become more frequent. A part of it was my need to get rid of Fleur; the other was curiosity to see if I was interested in Sabine as more than Seamus's widow and a member of my family.

"Fleur's made her bed," I said more harshly than I intended. She'd blocked me on her phone as well.

My private investigator had found out that she worked for a software company and was a Senior Director there. He did tell me she drew a salary of three hundred and fifty thousand dollars a year. Now, that had been a surprise; that was a hell of a lot of money—granted, it wasn't independently wealthy funds, but it was very, very good. I paid that much to my Vice Presidents. My PI had also discovered that Fleur had a bachelor's in computer science engineering, which I knew but that she also had completed a master's degree at MIT. What the fuck? The way her family talked about her and the way she carried herself never hinted at how intelligent she was (because she'd have to be to study at MIT) or the impressive income she earned.

When I'd asked the PI about her personal life, he'd said he hadn't been able to get much from after she left Tulane and started working. It was as if she had no identity on the Internet. No social media, no nothing. Not even a personal email from what he could see. "Her company does a lot of work with the government; maybe that's why," the PI had remarked.

My enigmatic ex was getting more so by the day.

"I worry about my parents." Sabine picked up her glass of wine. "And I worry about Fleur and what she's doing to them."

Once again, I wondered if I could have sex with Sabine.

I wasn't sure.

I was attracted to her. Every man sitting at Per Antoine's right now probably was. She wore a cocktail dress that was both elegant and sexy. She was a beautiful woman, and she looked damn good on my arm, just as she had on Seamus's, a voice inside my head reminded me.

"You don't miss her?" Sabine asked, her blue eyes soft.

I didn't know how to answer her question.

Of course, I missed Fleur. We were together for eight months. We fucked almost every night. Woke up together almost every morning. We watched movies. Did stuff all the time—listened to live jazz, went on boat rides in the bayou, went on silly walking tours, tried to do a séance. We talked. Laughed. Fuck, I laughed so much and so hard with Fleur. She had such an awesome sense of humor, and she made my chest feel light.

Yeah, I missed her. The ache for her was like a constant thing. But I didn't understand it. I was convinced that it would pass. It had just been a month since we broke up. In a few weeks I wouldn't even think about her, though now I did all the fucking time.

"Have you ever known me to miss a woman?" I asked instead of telling the truth because that would hurt Sabine. She was a soft-hearted, emotional woman. It wasn't that she didn't want her sister to be happy in a relationship, but she was afraid of losing me. After all, I was her last link to Seamus, and she was mine to him. Maybe Brian was right. We should date. We could take care of each other.

"Sabine?" I heard a male voice say. I turned to see a man I'd never seen before.

"Malone." Something moved in her eyes, and she stood up abruptly. "What are you doing here?"

"Come to see the family for Thanksgiving." He leaned down and brushed his lips against her cheek. She didn't flinch, but it was obvious she didn't like it.

"Callum, this is Malone Collins. We went to Vandy together. He works in Houston now," she introduced us.

## Page 13

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:40 am*

"Callum Gallagher?" Malone frowned and then looked at Sabine. "Isn't he the brother of...?"

Sabine immediately looked sad, and I knew she was thinking of Seamus. Fuck, this woman had loved my brother so hard, so deep. I would always be grateful that he'd felt that love before he died. Could she love me like that? Maybe. But the question was could I love her back—hard, deep, and forever?

Fleur's words came to mind then as she read a poem to me by Elizabeth Barrett Browning.

How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.

I love thee to the depth and breadth and height

My soul can reach, when feeling out of sight.

She'd introduced me to poetry when I told her I never really cared for it. She'd bought books and taken me to poetry readings at Baldwin & Co.

"I met your brother a few times," Malone told me. "I'm so sorry for your loss."

"Thanks. Would you like to join us?" I asked politely.

Malone looked at his watch and nodded. "I got here early. I'm meeting an old friend. I'd love to catch up with you, Sabine."

Sabine cleared her throat then. "Why don't you call me? Callum and I are on a date."

Malone looked surprised and a little pissed off. I hid my shock. A date? When had that happened?

"Of course, I'll talk to you."

Sabine sat down and smiled at me. "I'm sorry about that. I don't know why he said yes to a drink."

"I asked him," I pointed out.

She smiled sweetly at me. Could I love her all the way from my soul so I could see hers? Was I capable of that?

"Callum." She held out a hand, and I put mine in hers. "I know Daddy talked to you about us."

Fuck! I wasn't ready for this conversation, not when every time I closed my eyes, I saw Fleur.

She licked her lips. "I feel safe with you. And I think that Seamus would have wanted us to take care of each other."

That I could relate to. Seamus would have wanted me to be there for his wife—but would he want me to be intimate with her? I tried to think about it from my side. What if I died, would I want Seamus to fuck Fleur? Absolutely not!

But why the hell not? Fleur wasn't my wife. She was nobody.

She was your Grian, your sunshine, the voice inside my head that was doing a whole



hell of a lot of talking these days said.

"Sabine, I don't know," I finally decided to go with honesty.

"Don't know what?"

She had such soft eyes, and I didn't want to add to her pain with rejection when she'd shown so much courage by broaching this subject with me. "Sweetheart, you know I care about you."

"I know." She smiled shyly.

"I'd do anything for you," I added; because it was true, I would.

"Then love me," she whispered, her heart in her eyes. "Please, Callum. I'm so lonely, and I just want to be happy. You make me happy. No other man has made me feel what you do. Not since Seamus."

Talk about being between a rock and a hard place. This wasn't quite how I'd expected this to happen. I was going to ask for time, and then...thenwhat?

"I do love you," I told her because I did. "But I need some time."

## Page 14

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:40 am*

I hated it when her eyes filled with tears.

"Are you not in love with me?" she asked.

My heart broke for her. "I don't know. You're my friend and family. You're the woman I'm closest to after my mother."

She lifted my hand and kissed my knuckles. Nothing. It did nothing to me to have her mouth on my skin. In contrast, Fleur just had to look at me, and my dick would be hard enough to pound nails.

I found Sabine attractive, but almost in a theoretical way. She was traffic-stopping beautiful. You couldn't look away from her beauty. But in practice, I didn't feel sexual attraction for her. Had I ever? Maybe once in a while, if I were honest. I spent a lot of time with Sabine. She'd touch me, hug me, lie down with me. I was a man, and if a half-naked woman was around me, my dick would respond. But it wasn't doing so now as she pleaded with me to love her. Sabine's perfect face did nothing for my cock. But, I had to just think about Fleur, and there we go; my blood went south in a big hurry.

I was all kinds of an asshole, but I'd not fuck a woman while thinking of another. No way would I be with Sabine while I wanted Fleur.

I wanted Fleur! I still wanted her. Bloody fucking hell!

"Let me make this easy for you," Sabine said, her lips brushing the back of my hand as she spoke. "I've fallen in love with you. I didn't realize it until I... until I saw you

with Fleur. It hit me so hard, Callum. I'll always love Seamus—you know that. But I think it's time for me to live again. To love again."

"Are you sure you're not just jealous of Fleur?" I asked.

I'd accused Fleur of being envious of Sabine, but right now, I wondered if the other way around was also true. The sisters didn't get along, period. Maybe there were bad feelings from both sides, not just from Fleur toward Sabine.

A titter escaped Sabine. I didn't like the sound of it. There was something malicious about it. It didn't suit the elegant woman I knew. I stiffened, not keen to hear what she would say next because it would be unpleasant; I was certain of it.

Sabine did not disappoint.

"Why on earth would I be jealous of Fleur?"

Because she's fucking awesome?

"Just because you had sex with her doesn't mean anything to me, Callum. I doubt she was any good. I know her track record. She can't keep a boyfriend, and between that loser job of hers—"

"She gets paid very well for working in a senior position in a highly successful software company." I had no idea why I felt the need to defend Fleur, but there it was.

Sabine waved a hand. "What do you see when you look at me?"

Right now? Darling, I don't think you want to know.

"Get to your point," I suggested, low on patience.

"Fleur is not in my league and definitely out of yours. Just because you went slumming for a while doesn't make me jealous. Probably not the first time or last. Seamus had his flings too and—"

"What?" I knew my brother, and no fucking way would he have cheated on his wife.

She froze as she realized what she said. "I mean, before we were married."

She was backtracking. I knew Sabine, maybe better than I thought I did—because I was anticipating her eyes to fill with tears to avoid discussing Seamus further, and bam, they just did.

"I miss him so much."

I didn't believe her. In the past two years, since I'd gotten close to Sabine after Seamus passed, I'd never doubted her—but now, I just wasn't sure. The way she talked about Fleur made me uneasy.

"I know. Sabine, I talked to your father, and he said that he has never supported Fleur financially. You mentioned that—"

"Can we stop talking about Fleur?" Tears streamed down her face. "I'm really trying here, Callum, to keep it together. I love you. I'm in love with you and I know you love me too. You just need to accept that Seamus wouldn't mind us being together. In fact, I know he'd want this for us."

I had never been irritated by Sabine until now. This was the first time that I didn't want to be patient with her. I wanted to shake her and understand why the fuck she'd lied about Fleur, because she fucking had. What else was she lying about? An

unpleasant feeling slithered inside me—guilt and common sense warred against each other.

I couldn't and wouldn't let Seamus down, but Fleur was nothing like what her sister and parents made her sound like. She wasn't selfish. Her friends had rallied around her the minute I'd fucked up. Did Sabine have friends like that? She had me, but I was there because she was Seamus's wife, and sure, I'd become fond of her, but....

"Callum? Are you even listening to me?"

## Page 15

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:40 am*

I snapped out of my thoughts. "Darling, I'm sorry."

Damn it, Seamus, help me out, man. I'm fucking lost.

She gave me a watery smile. "How about we go to your place and—"

"No, let's go to yours."

My house still smelled like Fleur, and I wasn't ready to have another woman's scent replace that.

Fact was that I was sparingly spraying the perfume Fleur had forgotten in my bathroom onto my pillow at night like a pathetic schoolboy.

### Chapter 7

#### Fleur

Heartbreak was not linear. One day, you felt fine and thought, fuck that asshole; the next day, you thought, I miss him so much; another day, you wondered why you couldn't just call up Callum and tell him you loved him and ask him to love you.

This non-linear progression was further exacerbated when consuming copious amounts of Sazerac.

"You've got to get under someone new," June told me as she made a Vieux Carree for the German couple, now living in Bettendorf, Iowa. They were in New Orleans

during the Thanksgiving break because they didn't have any family to visit with.

I should've planned a trip as well, I thought, since my family had disowned me for asking my father to get out of my house when he was being verbally abusive. My mother had been vicious. Yeah, I know it looked like my father was the bad one, but Mom was worse cause she was a divorce lawyer while Dad did corporate law.

"Fleur Marie Landry, I'm so disappointed in you," my mother told me over the phone. She was too busy to actually come over to my apartment and dress me down.

"Mom, you've been disappointed in me and with me since I was born." I thought it was a pretty good line, considering how crappy these parents had made my childhood. They hadn't protected me from Sabine's cruelty and instead had added to it.

It all began when Sabine had meningococcal pneumonia when she was eight, and I was four. Sabine almost died, and my earliest memories were of my parents telling me to be quiet so as not to disturb my older sister. That was the beginning of my parents telling me to behave myself, not fight with my frail sister, be kinder to my sister, not be mean to my sister—and shut up already with all my needs and demands.

Sabine thrived on being the center of attention, and I learned how to become freaking wallpaper so my abusive family would leave me alone. The fact that it took me twenty-six years to finally figure out that nothing I ever did would be good enough for them was a testament to my naïve optimism.

"Fleur, I'm glad you and Callum broke up. He doesn't need your toxicity," my mother spoke in a serious, lawyer tone, the one she used to intimidate opposing counsel.

"Well, I'm glad I didn't disappoint you on this account," I bit out sarcastically. The freedom you got once you gave up on the family crazy was amazing. I never realized

how liberating it could be to finally speak my mind and express my feelings when my family tried to tear me down.

Before Callum happened, I'd apologize and beg for forgiveness and promise to do better. Now? As the meme went: Behold the field in which I grow my fucks. Lay thine eyes upon it, and thou shalt see that it is barren.

"Young lady, you need to keep a civil tongue in your mouth," Mom snapped. "At this rate, is there any surprise that you're twenty-six and single?"

"I'm not single," I lied. I knew that would send her into a tizzy.

"What? You were just in a relationship with Callum. Don't you have any shame?"

"Callum and I broke up nearly six weeks ago. How long were you expecting me to remain single?" This was so much fun. I should've done it earlier.

"I'm appalled." Mom was furious. "How is it that I have one daughter who is a saint, and another, who is so selfish?"

"How am I selfish for dating?"

"Well, I want you to know that you're invited for Thanksgiving Dinner despite your behavior. But not whomever you're seeing."

"I think I'll pass." I had attended every holiday dinner and put up with shade being thrown at me. This year, I was outta fucks!

"What? You have to be there. The Gallaghers will be joining us from Edinburgh."

James and Rose Gallagher were good people. I'd met them several times and had also



spent some time with them during Seamus's funeral. They were down to earth despite all their family money. But I didn't like their older son very much anymore.

"Callum and Sabine have decided to start dating, and we want to make sure the Gallaghers see us as a...."

## Page 16

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:40 am*

My ears started to buzz, and then I didn't hear much after she said: Callum and Sabine decided to start dating...like it was a decision one made. Like I have decided to stop shaving my underarms? Or, I have decided to only eat foods with red coloring in them?

"Mom, I'm not coming over for any more holidays at your place or anywhere where any of you are," I interrupted her. "Lose my number, yeah?"

I hung up while she was still screaming at me, calling me selfish and ungrateful. Yeah, that was me. I'd finally decided to be good to myself and my family had a problem with it. Well, they could all go fuck themselves.

But I couldn't deny that it hurt like a motherfucker that Callum was dating Sabine, which was why I was drowning my sorrows in Sazerac at Peychaud's.

Thinking about Callum with Sabine in his bedroom (which was ours for a nanosecond) wounded my heart in ways I didn't think were possible. Apparently, he'd moved on. At least this way, Callum would not date some other unsuspecting moron who thought she was his number one girl because he asked her to move in with him. He'd be with his actual number one.

I really thought we had something real.

"You make me laugh," he told me when we went bicycle riding around the quarter.

I sat on the handle in front, on a small seat, while Callum pedaled. It was insanely cozy and romantic.

"I do?"

He nuzzled my cheek. "Yeah, Grian, you do. I haven't laughed in... fuck, so many years, and now you go get us a bicycle so I can do all the work."

"That's because I don't know how to ride a bike," I confessed.

"What? Everyone knows how to bicycle."

"I don't." No one bothered to teach me, and I just never learned. "But I do have a driver's license."

"That doesn't mean you know how to drive," he growled.

Since Seamus's accident, Callum was sensitive about drivers and driving, and the one time I'd driven with him he'd declared I sucked at it.

"I'm a good and safe driver," I protested.

I had to be, given the dangerous locations we often found ourselves in while testing out software. Just last year, we were stuck in an "unnamed country" testing an air-missile guidance system when our two-person SEAL protective team was attacked. We had to haul ass, and I drove Orion and Viper out of harm's way in a non-bullet-proof Jeep, bullets swarming around us. If I could navigate a war zone without crashing or dying, driving in New Orleans was a piece of cake.

"How about we take a drive down the bayou, and you can show me how safe you are at it?" he suggested, and my heart skipped a beat. He never came up with ideas for us to do together—that was always my thing.

"Yeah, that would be great."

We'd gone in his Porsche Boxster with the top down. We stopped at a hole in the wall and had hot boudin balls and gumbo with beer.

"I've never been on dates like this," he confided in me.

"What do you mean?"

"Usually, we meet at a restaurant, eat dinner, and then go to her place or mine to fuck."

That sounded boring.

"We do that too," I pointed out.

"I know, but we do so much more."

"You've gone out with other women, Callum."

"Sure but...always a party or a society something."

He sounded so tremendously sad that I chuckled to change the subject and lighten the mood. "Hang with me, child, and I'll teach you all the new and cool ways to date."

"I don't think any of the women I used to date would want to eat fried gator nuggets at Bubba's in the ass end of nowhere."

## Page 17

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:40 am*

I winked at him. "Come on, you like Bubba's. Admit it."

He laughed then, and I felt like I had won the lottery. Making him laugh became a habit, and I did it as often as I could.

It was all going so well until Sabine rained on my Mardi Gras parade.

"That guy keeps looking at you," June whispered.

I turned to see who she was talking about. I was about three cocktails down, and I was a four-limit girl, after which I would fall asleep on the bar counter or climb it and dance to Beyoncé's *Single Ladies* as I took all my clothes off. The line between sleep and 'go nuts' was a thin one, which was why June kept me at three drinks and, after that, just served me tonic water with bitters.

The buzz I had disappeared when I saw the man June pointed to. Malone Collins. Damn it. I thought he'd moved to Houston or some place in Texas. What was he doing back? He didn't know me, but I knew him. But he probably knew of me because, after all, I was Sabine's sister.

"That's the guy," I told June tightly.

June raised both eyebrows. "The guy?"

I nodded.

"You know, I still think you need to tell your parents and Callum the truth. I don't

understand why—"

"Seamus made me promise, June. I can't...I won't betray him."

Poor Seamus. I wondered if he lost control of his car because he was so upset to have found out what he had. It broke my heart that his last moments had been filled with anger and grief.

I'd just walked into my parents' new house in the Garden District when I heard Seamus and Sabine going at it loudly in the library off the living room. Sabine had been livid, especially when Seamus had told her he'd be divorcing her fine ass.

I was there to drop off the papers for my grandparents' home in Uptown that they had agreed to sell to me. I was so excited. My grandparents had passed away when I was six but my happiest childhood memories were when I visited with them.

Seamus saw me when he walked out of the library and talked to me. It was obvious that I had overheard their conversation.

"I'll deal with this my way," he told me. "You tell no one, ever. Got it?"

"Got it."

"I mean it, Fleur."

"I know. I won't tell anyone."

Seamus kissed my forehead. "You're a good kid, you know that?"

I shrugged, though it made me feel really nice to hear him say that.

"Your family is shit to you, though."

I groaned. "Well, they think I deserve it."

"You don't." Seamus smiled at me, and I saw his eyes fill with emotion. You're a good person—a really good person. Don't let anyone tell you otherwise, alright?"

"Promise."

That was the last time I saw him alive. He got into his car and a drunk driver killed him.

And now one of the key cast members of that whole drama was in the same bar as me while Sabine had starting dating Seamus's brother. What were the chances?

"You think he wants to talk to you?" June asked.

"I hope not, June. I'm not supposed to know anything, remember?"

"He's not your parents or Callum."

## Page 18

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:40 am*

That was true, but I honestly didn't have the bandwidth to deal with Sabine's Jerry Springer Live-esquelife.

I ignored the man and focused on my last drink of the evening.

### Chapter 8

#### Callum

Thanksgiving at the Landrys had been interminably long.

Brian and Lenora were still upset about how Fleur was behaving and had spent a lot of time carping about her. My mother had not been impressed at how they were badmouthing their own child, but my father, who liked Fleur, was, however, perturbed by her lack of respect for the family.

Sabine had decided that she and I should date and see where it went. I'd finally agreed because it seemed to matter so much.

After spending some time thinking about it, I did feel that someone like Sabine was the kind of wife I was looking for. Fleur was fun, but she was immature and didn't understand the importance of family.

On Black Friday, we had dinner at Muriel's at Jackson Square. My parents had enjoyed a day catching up with old friends and going to their favorite haunts in the city.



"The Quarter is so loud and dirty. Call, you know how I feel about this place." Sabine had hoped that we'd eat at the Commander's Palace, but I knew my parents liked the Quarter.

"We love it here," Rose, my mother, announced with a tight smile.

I knew that my parents were a little tired of spending time with the Landrys. My parents had gotten to know them when Seamus was alive.

In the past, Seamus and Fleur had been around, and it had been different—easier, lighter. But then both Seamus and Fleur had that skill.

"How is dear Fleur?" my mother asked.

"We don't know, and we don't care," Brian snapped.

My mother cocked an eyebrow and looked at me. I shook my head, tacitly telling her to move on because this way only trouble lay.

"James and I always adored Fleur," my mother continued like she didn't notice the tension. I'd given my parents the Cliff's Notes about the situation with Fleur and Sabine and me.

I had thought they'd confirm the rightness of Sabine and me as a couple. Instead, my mother had announced that she'd never liked Sabine and never knew what Seamus or I saw in her.

"She's a successful, wonderful woman," I explained.

"She's got a stick up her arse," my father countered.

"Dad."

"Oh, yeah, she does," Mom added. "Seamus was so obsessed with her, but you're not, I can see that. Why do you want to date your brother's wife? Seriously, New Orleans is a big city, can't you find another girl? Hell, come to Edinburgh, and I can hook you up with some very eligible single women."

"I like Fleur, though her immaturity when it comes to her family is not too attractive," my father acknowledged. "How come you broke up with her?"

"Lenora told me," my mother spoke to my father like I wasn't around any longer. "Apparently, our Callum here was at Sabine's beck and call—and Fleur told him to shove it."

"Why was he at Sabine's beck and call?"

"I'm right here," I protested.

"But can you see anything?" My mother wondered, "Since your head seems to be way up your arse."

The one thing about my parents was that they always spoke their minds. I'd never noticed their disapproval of Sabine before, but then, they wouldn't have let Seamus know. They trusted us to make our own decisions, and I understood that the only reason they were speaking up now was because they sensed I was being pressured into something I didn't want. And, there was some truth to that. Between Brian, Lenora, and Sabine, I had the distinct feeling they'd love nothing more than to see me settled into couple hood with their eldest daughter.

My friends—Gaurav, a sports agent, and Francois, a host for ESPN, had also given me a version of that opinion.

Gaurav had been the most direct. "You were happy when you were with Fleur. She was a fucking firecracker. With Sabine, it's like you've become dull."

## Page 19

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:40 am*

Francois, who was more tactful, suggested, "Sabine is just different, dude. She's...more...of a Stepford type, while Fleur is like this honest ball of fire and spice."

After dinner, Lenora and Brian excused themselves, and I knew Sabine wanted to join them. However, she wanted to make a good impression on my parents and came along with us when we went for a walk.

"I miss New Orleans," my mother declared. "The Jazz on Frenchmen's."

"The red beans and rice at the Quarter Store," my dad interjected.

"Dancing at Tipitina's," Mom laughed.

"You don't think the Quarter and the Marigny are crowded and noisy?" Sabine asked.

"We love it here," my father said. "How about you, Sabine? Do you prefer Uptown?"

She shrugged. "Well, I'm staying at my grandparents' house."

My mom pursed her lips. "Last time we were here, Lenora mentioned that your sister was buying the place."

"Fleur couldn't afford it and after Seamus, we decided I should live there."

Sabine smiled sadly when she said my brother's name—and again, it didn't work for me. It didn't work for my parents at all. My parents lost a son, and I lost a brother,

and yet it was Sabine who seemed to wear her grief permanently. When had it stopped feeling genuine? Around the same time as I broke up with Fleur? With Sabine's sister, there was never any doubt about how she was feeling—she wore her emotions on her sleeve. You could tell when she was happy, and you could tell when she was sad.

We were walking by Café Istanbul when we heard a limerick that made us all stop. Limericks may be Irish, but they suited our Gaelic humor.

The turkey, we said, was first-rate,

Though the gravy debate did frustrate,

We said Grace with cheer,

Ate too much, I fear,

Thank goodness for pants that inflate!

"True about them pants," my father guffawed.

"There's a poetry slam going on," my mother's eyes sparkled as she read a notice on the side of the door. "Let's go inside."

"That sounds so boring, Rose. It'll be amateur poets saying total nonsense," Sabine protested, making it clear that a poetry slam would probably not be her thing.

"You should do what you like, sweetheart," my father said patiently, "But my wife and I want to hear a limerick or two."

"Can we just go home?" Sabine whispered once my parents had gone into the café.

"I can get a car to take you," I offered, "My parents are here for a short time, Sabine. I want to spend time with them."

Sabine sighed dramatically. "Fine."

I wished she'd left because the more time I spent with her, the more I realized that Sabine alone was one thing—but she didn't play well with others, not even my parents. I wondered again about why Fleur and she didn't get along and suspected that it may have more to do with Sabine than myGrian.

## Chapter 9

### Fleur

Of all the gin joints in all the towns in the world, they walk into the café where I'm hosting a poetry slam.

Café Istanbul was in the New Orleans Healing Center, and we held a poetry slam once a month. It started with some of us who were into poetry, and with the help of a friend who worked at Baldwin & Co., we established the most popular poetry slam in N'awlins (or at least we believed so).

"I hope you all enjoyed that fun Thanksgiving limerick. Let's give it up for Hashtag FuckPoems," I announced. "I'm so excited to invite y'all to the eighteenth Limericks & Libations. We started on this journey a year and a half ago, and we're still going strong."

Everyone clapped.

I tried not to look at Callum, who was sitting next to Sabine. She was scowling while all but sitting on his lap, staking her claim. Fuck! I pulled out my phone to read the limerick I'd written for the occasion.

"So, folks, our poems may stumble, be awkward at times,

But trust us, the heart's in each line's chimes.

We call it Limericks and Libations, you see,

But all kinds of verses are welcome, with glee.

From sonnets to haikus, free verse, and more,

Step up to the mic and let your words soar.

As for drinks, please order at the bar,

And tip your bartender like the shining star!"

There was more applause. I took a bow.

James and Rose waved at me. I grinned. "We have some friends here from Scotland," I announced.

James and Rose got up, enjoying the attention while the patrons cheered.

"You're from Scotland," a poet called out, "You a fan of limericks?"

I laughed, focusing on the people at the café and not the couple making out and breaking my heart.

I won't let Callum ruin this day. I won't let the asshole ruin my fabulous poetry slam.

"In Scotland we don't do limericks; that's the Irish. Enough said. We prefer acleerihew," James replied.

"Let's hear it then," someone from the crowd cried out.

"Aye, then, if you're sure." James obviously loved it, and so did the crowd. This is what made such events fun: when the listeners became the poets and vice versa.

Someone took a microphone up to James. "Alright, lads, I'm doin' this from the top of my head, so let's go easy on this old man.

"A poet from Edinburgh town,

Wrote verses that caused quite a frown.

His rhymes, though quite clever,

Made sense, hardly ever."

There was raucous clapping.

I invited the next poet to the stage, then made my way down to say hello to James and



Rose. By now, it would have felt downright rude to ignore them. We moved to the back of the room, and they both pulled me into hugs.

"We missed you at Thanksgiving," Rose murmured. "Where were you?"

"We had dinner at a bar my friend works at. We collected all us folk with no family and had a blast," I told them.

"That doesn't sound right, young woman. You have family right here in New Orleans," James remonstrated gently.

I looked to check if Sabine and Callum could hear us, but they were busy talking in loud whispers, and their neighbor was getting ready to shush them.

## Page 21

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:40 am*

"Let's step out, yeah?" I suggested.

I had no choice but to lead them away because I didn't want to disturb the poetry slam. People came once a month to share their art, and I wanted this to be a safe space.

We sat at one of the outdoor tables, and because the universe hated me, Callum and Sabine joined us.

"Fleur," Callum greeted me politely, and I did the same.

Sabine ignored me. I didn't respond in kind. "Happy Thanksgiving, Sabine." It was a day to be thankful, and even though I had a shitty sister, I was grateful she existed because it helped me learn quickly how harsh the world could be and how I needed to be strong to survive.

"Poetry, Fleur?" There was a subtle sneer in her polished voice.

This was what fooled people. She was so superbly sophisticated that even the vilest things she said came out sounding mellifluous.

"Yeah," I chirped. I was proud of what we did here, and no one was going to make me feel bad about it.

"I think it's fantastic," Rose chimed. "Do you write poetry?"

"Oh no! I'm a poetry lover."

Callum smiled then. "Fleur introduced me to Pablo Neruda and the Romantics."

"You're reading Byron, Call?" Sabine was amused. "I'd pay good money to see that."

"Can do it for free. Though this is Shelley." Callum murmured, looking at me with soft eyes.

"And the sunlight clasps the earth,

And the moonbeams kiss the sea—

What are all these kissings worth,

If thou kiss not me?"

My breath hitched. Did it mean something that he'd decided to recite Percy Bysshe Shelley's *Love's Philosophy*, famous for expressing the yearning and sadness of love lost?

Don't go there. Sabine is kissing him on his lips, and he's letting her. You lost to her again. Just accept defeat and move on. Like Auden said, "You can't make someone love you if they don't."

Sabine laughed, and she looked beautiful, happy, and just the kind of woman I could imagine Callum with. Two beautiful people together—not a nerd in sight.

"I think we need you to start reading to me in bed, darling," Sabine flirted.

Callum looked perplexed for a moment and then shrugged. "Sure."

She flushed. I watched them unabashedly. It was important to not look away, to

smile, to let the one you love go because wasn't there a poem about that, too?

"What are your plans for Christmas, Fleur?" Rose broke the moment.

"I'm going to spend it with friends," I explained.

"But your family is here," James scowled. "How can you not spend the holidays at home?"

"Fleur is like that," Sabine said in her oh-so-sweet voice. "She was invited for Thanksgiving but decided to not come."

"Well, that's understandable, isn't it?" my mother interjected. "She and Callum apparently just broke up, and now he's dating you."

"Yes, he is." Sabine snuggled into Callum.

I smiled easily now. He looked happy with her. He'd told me that he wanted to have no conflict and just ease in a relationship. He seemed to have that with Sabine. She'd mold herself to meet his needs. She'd done that with Seamus until she hadn't. But maybe she'd learned her lesson and would be different with Callum. I hoped so. I didn't think I could stand it if he got hurt.

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:40 am*

Ah, love, the poets knew, could be painful. A Dryden poem came to mind:

Pains of love be sweeter far;

Than all other pleasures are.

It was sad but true that it was indeed better to have loved and lost than to never have loved at all. That was from another amazing poet. Alfred Lord Tennyson!

"I'm not getting along well with my parents," I explained honestly to James.

"But how will you get along if you don't see them?" James pointed out.

He wasn't being mean. He was just baffled that I didn't want to work on a relationship with my parents.

I rose then. There was no point. For a minute there, when they had exuberantly hugged me, I'd thought that they liked me. Well, obviously, I'd thought wrong.

"Stop it, James. I'm sure Fleur has her reasons," Rose murmured, seeing my plastic smile.

Callum didn't say a word, just looked away like I didn't matter. It shouldn't have hurt—he couldn't have known that I didn't matter to fucking anyone, not really—but it did.

"Fleur, Jemele is on in five; you better come in," one of the café employees stuck

their head out of the café to let me know.

"I'll be right in," I said with false cheer. I excelled at faking it until you made it.

"Fleur, you should come home for Christmas," Sabine said as I bid everyone a joint goodbye. "Don't be selfish."

"I won't be coming over for Christmas or ever to our parents' or your home, Sabine, and you know why. And since you do, you shouldn't pretend we're one big happy family because we're not." I smiled again at Rose and James. "So, nice to see you both. I hope y'all have a great rest of your stay."

"God, she can be such a bitch," I heard Sabine mutter as I walked to the door of the café.

"Stop it, Sabine. She's right. You don't get along, and I understand why she doesn't want to spend the holidays with any of you," Callum said sharply, his tone clipped and firm, shocking me.

## Chapter 10

### Callum

Sabine wanted to have sex.

I couldn't do it.

I had tried to work myself up at her place. But every time I closed my eyes, I thought about Fleur. That woman had changed my fucking brain patterns. I wanted more of her breathy moans, her screams when she came—her curiosity about how to please me, how I liked to be sucked off.

Yeah, I needed to stop thinking about Fleur in case Sabine got the wrong impression that my dick was responding to her wearing a lacy number that she looked amazing in.

"I don't get it," Sabine asked tearfully as she sat on the edge of her bed when I told her that this wasn't going to work.

"I think of you as a friend, Sabine. I've been trying to tell you that." I stood away from the bed, her, not wanting to cloud the issue with physical proximity.

"We're dating," she protested.

I didn't want to be cruel now by reminding her that we'd already had words about her announcing to everyone that we were a couple—despite me clearly telling her I still needed time to think about it. Once she told the world, I felt obligated, and I told her that as well. I could be the worst kind of asshole imaginable, but I tried to be honest in all my relationships, one-night stands or otherwise.

"Sweetheart, I told you I needed time to think about this and—"

"What's there to think about, Call? You love me. I know that. You come to me every time I call. You left Fleur sitting alone on her birthday to comfort me."

Fuck! Yeah, I'd done that shitty thing, and then she'd heard me tell Sabine how she was temporary, just sex. It was all bullshit. This whole thing was a clusterfuck of my creation. I shouldn't have been running around holding Sabine's hand every time she had a crying jag—it obviously gave her the wrong idea about us. And I definitely shouldn't have abandoned my girlfriend, who I'd asked to move in with me—the first woman who I'd ever asked—to indulge Sabine.

Mom had noted that Sabine seemed to be extraamorous when Fleur was around, like

she wanted to show her that we were together, make her feel bad. Mom liked Fleur. Dad wasn't so sure about her. He felt that maybe her parents and sister were right about her not caring about her family, being immature and spoiled.



*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:40 am*

But I knew better. Fleur cared a whole hell of a lot about her family since she'd put up with them until recently despite them treating her like an outsider, an interloper.

I remembered how Brian had almost struck her that day—another time when I'd left her to take care of herself to attend to an undeserving member of her family. I should've punched Brian in the face for scaring his kid, for raising his hand, even if he didn't strike her. It had looked like he would—and I shuddered at that thought.

"I'm sorry, Sabine."

Tears rolled down her cheeks, and that hurt me. What would Seamus think of me, making his woman cry like this?"

"But I'm in love with you, Call. Completely, totally in love with you."

"I remind you of Seamus," I tried to analyze.

She shook her head. "I grieved him. I always will miss him. But I love you. And that has nothing to do with your brother. Give me a chance, and I'll show you that you love me."

I braced myself because she had determination in her voice. She came to me, and her hands went to the buckle of my belt.

I put my hands on hers. "No, Sabine."

"Yes," she said militantly. "Yes. We will do this. You will fuck me, and that's that,

Call. You always give me what I need. You do. You always have."

I pulled her hands up to my lips and kissed her knuckles in as avuncular a fashion as I could muster. "I'm not what you need."

"Yes." She pressed her lips against mine, kissing me, sticking her tongue inside my mouth. I tried to be gentle with her, but she climbed up, wrapping her legs around my waist, rubbing herself against my flaccid dick.

Seriously? Usually, when there was available pussy, my cock would respond, not this time. It might as well get a tattoo that said *Property of Fleur* because that's where we were at.

"Sabine, sweetheart, no."

She didn't relent, and finally, I used my superior strength to drop her on her bed.

She lay on the bed, lifted, resting on her elbows. Objectively, she was a beautiful woman. Absolutely stunning. Subjectively, I wanted to fuck her sister.

"You'll regret this, Call." Her jaw was tight, and she was shooting daggers at me.

"I will if we fuck, Sabine; and so will you."

"Is this because of Fleur?" she sneered.

I'd recently started seeing this side of Sabine, this jealous side. I'd never have thought it possible. With her beauty and brains, Sabine didn't have to feel envious of anyone—especially her sister, who couldn't match Sabine in looks or brains, no matter how much money she was making. Sabine was one of the preeminent lawyers in Louisiana and had recently won some big cases in front of the Fifth Circuit.

"You and I have got nothing to do with Fleur." Yeah, right!

"She suck your dick real good, Call?"

I was taken aback. I'd never heard Sabine speak this way. It was crude and ugly.

"Trust me, I've slept with some of her boyfriends, and they'd all tell you that once they have me, they don't go back to her."

I raised both my eyebrows. "What the fuck, Sabine? You've been sleeping with your sister's boyfriends?"

Sabine smiled, and it wasn't sweet. It was fucking scary.

"They always want me. No one wants her after they see me."

This waspish persona was revealing. I could see clearly now why Fleur had asked her family to go fuck themselves.

"I don't want you."

"Are you out of your mind?"

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:40 am*

"No, Sabine, I'm not out of my mind—but it sure looks like you are. Between you and Fleur, I'll always pick her. You know why? Because she's fucking awesome. She brings light to everyone and everything. She's kind, she's generous, and she'd never sleep with your boyfriend—not because they wouldn't want her, but because she'd think it was disloyal."

And that's when I realized why Sabine had suddenly started to pursue me. It was a competition. I'd become interested in Fleur, and we started dating—and right then, Sabine ratcheted up her distress calls. Suddenly, she needed me all the time, especially when I was with Fleur.

Christ! I was in some twisted version of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Wolf?*

"Like anyone who has me would want that piece of trash," she flung at me.

Talk about dodging a bullet! This woman was nuts once the mask was off. Had Seamus known her true colors? Or was she on drugs now? I couldn't fathom it because the woman in the lacy lingerie with angry eyes didn't resemble the elegant, soft woman I knew.

"Have some pride, Sabine." I shook my head in disgust. "And lose my number."

"What?" She sat up. "You're not even going to be my friend anymore?"

"After how you just behaved, no, I can't be your friend." I ran a hand through my hair. This woman was batshit nuts.

"And what of your promise to Seamus?" she demanded, and just like that, the waterworks were back.

Shit, she could do this on command? Those were some mad skills. And respect for that. This ability probably came in handy in court when she had to manipulate the judge and jury.

"Seamus is dead, Sabine; he doesn't give a shit about the promises I made to him. The only reason I honored them was because I wanted to. And now, after what you just pulled, I don't want to. If Seamus has a problem with that, he can come haunt my fucking ass."

I spun around and left her house, feeling all kinds of relieved.

As I drove away, I knew I had to get Fleur back. But after how I'd treated her, if I got close to her, she'd probably knee me in the balls, and I'd deserve it.

Yeah, we had so not been a casual thing. I'd fallen in love with myGrian, my sunshine, and now that I'd finally pulled my head out of myarse, I could see it—and it wasn't looking pretty for my chances with her.

## Chapter 11

### Fleur

"Can we talk?" Callum joined me on the bar stool next to mine.

"No." It still stung that he'd dumped me—or, more accurately, engineered things so I had no choice but to dump him—and then went straight to Sabine. He wasn't the first, or the only one, to find my sister more appealing than me.

I'd been so madly in love my freshmen year in Tulane with Juan Carlos Fernandez. He'd been my second lover, and we had been awesome together. I'd taken him home for dinner, which had been my first mistake. No, that was my second mistake; my first was falling in love with him.

A week later, he dumped me and told me he was seeing Sabine.

Once we broke up, he and Sabine didn't last long. He apologized for his behavior and said that Sabine had been mesmerizing, and even though he knew she was using him to get at me, he'd not been able to resist her. And losing me, he told me, was worth it because Sabine was apparently all that in bed. I told him to take his fucked-up apology and stick it where the sun doesn't shine. He'd then asked if we could be friends. That boy had big, hairy balls! I told him to take a hike, which was precisely what I intended to tell Callum.

"We can't even talk?" He continued to speak calmly, and it infuriated me. He never lost control except in bed. There he completely lost his shit, which was amazing because I knew I did that to him.

But now that he was sleeping with Sabine, he probably felt exactly the way Juan Carlos had. Apparently, my sister had magic pussy, enamoring my lovers, one boyfriend at a time.

June cocked an eyebrow at me, silently asking me if she needed to call Titus to haul Callum's ass out of the bar. I shook my head and faced Callum. "Talk."

"Will you listen to understand or listen to respond?" His tone was now amused. He remembered the time we'd talk about listening as a skill. I believed in listening with curiosity—but right now, I wanted to hear him out and then ask him to go fuck himself.

"You can talk, Callum and that's the only thing you control about this conversation." I took a sip of my excellent Sazerac, hoping it would calm my nerves. I had no idea what he was going to say. I had several theories. Maybe he was here to apologize or tell me he was marrying Sabine (ouch!) or that he loved me madly and wanted us to get back together (when squirrels do calculus, obviously!).

"Okay." He smiled gently. "I'm sorry for how I talked about you with Sabine. It wasn't the truth."

"What part? That you would always be there for Sabine. That I was temporary. That it was just sex between us, and you have it with a lot of women? Which part, Callum?" I was on a roll, so I continued. "Besides what you said to Sabine, you said plenty to my face—how I was selfish, self-involved, immature. Oh, and the reason I even overheard what you said to my sister was because I wanted to eavesdrop, I wanted to get hurt."

I remembered what he said word-for-word. These were the times when a robust memory like mine did not come in handy. The wounds felt fresh as I heard his voice in my head: "Sabine is right...your parents too. You're just too self-involved and immature for an adult relationship. Well, babe, go running back to your sad little life."

His eyes filled with regret. "None of that was or is true. You're kind and wise and not self-involved at all. That was me projecting myself on you. I was not seeing you."

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:40 am*

How could he come to apologize and still hurt me? He was fucking me and had not seen me? Did he imagine I was someone else when he was inside me?

"Hey." He noticed my distress. "I see you now."

Well then, why don't I go on my knees and suck your cock, you asshole, I thought petulantly.

"Why now?" I demanded, gritting my teeth

He licked his lips. I'd never seen him nervous before—but he was now. "I think I've always seen you. I just hadn't admitted it to myself until now."

"Good for you," I muttered, finishing off the rest of my drink. I'd had enough. I just wanted to go home, get some work done, and prepare to catch a plane to God knew where to run diagnostics on a U.S. military missile system.

"I'm sorry, Fleur." He put his hand on mine. "I really am, for everything."

I pulled my hand away from him. "Apology accepted. You can now be free of your guilt."

He cocked an eyebrow. "You forgive me?"

I narrowed my eyes. "I accept your apology. You don't have to feel bad about how you treated me anymore. But I would appreciate it if you didn't talk to me again. I've left my family, and they've, in turn, done me the favor of disowning me. So, there is



no chance for you and me to bump into each other ever."

"Unless I come here," he said, his eyes soft.

I wasn't in the mood. I was still wondering who he saw when he was pounding into me, asking me to keep my eyes open so he could see how I looked when I orgasmed.

"I didn't see you," he'd just said.

Story of my fucking life. No one saw me, and I was so tired of waiting for someone that did.

"Don't come here," I suggested. "We're done, Callum. Actually, if you weren't seeing me, we probably never even started."

He stood up and grabbed my arm. "No, that's not what I meant. I've always seen you, Grian. Always."

"Stop calling me shit in Gaelic. It's...cringy." "It's sweet and loving, and I can't stand it. It hurts too much. I love you, but you didn't see me."

"I..." he looked around the bar and saw that June and a few others were openly watching the unfolding drama between us, "Can we talk somewhere private?"

"No." I removed his hand from my arm. "Go fuck yourself, Callum Gallagher...or rather, go fuck my sister. You're not my first boyfriend to do so. But you will be the last."

I walked past him to get to the door of the bar that Titus opened for me. I knew he'd make sure Callum didn't follow me.

I took a deep breath in the cool December air. I was about to walk toward my place when someone grabbed me.

"For crying out loud," I yelled and turned around. I was surprised to see Malone Collins and not Callum.

"You know, don't you? Sabine said you know," he said, a note of desperation in his voice.

I'd guessed as much. Sabine had always been vicious but after Seamus died, she'd done everything she could to get my parents to hate me, and now I could see why she'd interfered in my relationship with Callum. She was afraid I'd talk.

"Please take your hand off of me," I ordered as calmly as I could. I couldn't take this guy down. He was strong.

"Sabine won't take my calls, and she won't open the door when I go to her place. You need to tell her to talk to me," he demanded.

"I'm not the right go-between," I snapped at him. Damn, my sister. How did she manage to make her screw up my problem?

"Please, Fleur. She's dating Callum now," he growled.

"That's between her and him." I worried about Callum coming out and having to deal with Malone. This guy looked unstable, and his irises were dilated. He was definitely tweaked. I didn't want Callum to get hurt, but I didn't want this guy to do something stupid to me, either. We were just a little distance from Peychaud's, so Titus would be able to help me if I could get his attention. This side of the street was quiet, and suddenly, I was nervous.

"Let me go."

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:40 am*

"Not until you—"

"Stop it. You're hurting me."

Suddenly, I was free, and Malone was slammed into the wall next to me. I moved away, shocked at the sound of my attacker's skull meeting brick.

"When a woman says no, fucker, it's a no." Great, so Callum had followed me.

"It's you," Malone sneered.

I pulled out my phone and, with shaking fingers, texted Titus to come around the bar.

Callum had his hand around Malone's throat, and he had him pinned to the wall. "I know you," Callum said confused. He looked at me. "You know him?"

I shook my head first and then nodded. How on earth was I going to explain how I knew this idiot?

"Of course, she knows me. She's Sabine's sister," Malone barked.

"And what the fuck are you doing putting your hands on her?" Callum's tone had gone from heated to cold. The ice was scarier.

"I need to talk to Sabine. I need to. She won't speak to me." Malone sounded desperate now and began to sob. "She needs to talk to me. I know about the baby. I know."

Callum dropped his hand as if scorched. "What?"

I wrapped my arms around me and sighed in relief when Titus stepped into the light. "Is there trouble here?" he asked.

"This guy had his hands on Fleur." Callum cupped my cheek. "You okay, Grian?"

It felt nice to hear that nickname, so I didn't bark at him to stop calling me that or touching me. Malone had rattled me. I sniffled as my adrenaline started to come down.

"Who's this guy?" Titus wanted to know.

"Grian?" Callum looked at me pleadingly. He wasn't stupid. He'd put two and two together. Sabine, baby, tweaked guy. Oldest and saddest story in the fucking universe.

"You have to ask him," I whispered.

"Why?"

I bit my lower lip. "Because I promised Seamus I wouldn't say anything." Even saying what I had was not in the spirit of my promise to Callum's brother, but Malone was here, making a nuisance of himself, and the truth, I was afraid, was going to come out whether Seamus liked it or not.

## Chapter 12

Callum

I was angry. Furious. Enraged.

"Why the fuck didn't you tell me?" I shouted at Fleur. She sat on her couch while I paced back and forth across her living room.

"I promised Seamus I wouldn't," she said, her voice barely a whisper.

Malone had spilled his guts at Fleur's place after which I'd gotten him back to his hotel in a car.

He and Sabine had been having an affair while she was married to Seamus. Seamus had found out and had confronted Sabine when she was at her parents' house.

Fleur, who was also visiting, had overheard the conversation and when Seamus had asked if she'd known, she'd admitted she hadn't.

Sabine was having an affair.

Fucking hell!

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:40 am*

She was cheating on my brother. It was unthinkable.

Only the story got worse. She didn't have a miscarriage. She had an abortion because the baby had been Malone's.

According to Malone, he'd learned from Sabine that Seamus had been using condoms, while he had not. Either way, Sabine had gotten rid of the baby. Now, I believe it's a woman's prerogative to make that decision—it's her body—but this woman had manipulated all of us. She'd played on my sympathies, and on her parents' and mine, by lying that she'd had a miscarriage due to the trauma of losing Seamus. She'd twisted the truth, telling us I'd lost a niece or nephew, and my parents a grandchild—a piece of my brother.

"Why would Seamus not want us to know?"

"I don't know, Callum. He told me to tell no one and that he'd deal with it in his way. He drove away from my parents' place, and then he was gone. I...I couldn't...."

"You could have told me," I yelled. "You could've given me that. Was he planning to divorce her?"

"He did mention that," she admitted.

Malone had been the one to tell Seamus. He'd shown him pictures, desperate because Sabine was pregnant with his child and refusing to leave Seamus. Malone wanted to marry her. In fact, despite everything she put him through, he was still in love with Sabine.

I recalled how Sabine had not wanted Malone to stay and have a drink with us at the restaurant. It was evident that Malone had been following Sabine—he'd been heartbroken about the baby. He'd also believed she had a miscarriage but had recently, through the work of a private investigator, learned that Sabine had had an abortion. He'd suspected as much, which was why he'd engaged a PI.

"You let her play me," I accused Fleur.

I was being unfair, and I knew it. Hadn't I been at Sabine's beck and call ever since I promised Seamus in church, as I stood as his best man, that I'd always be there for her if anything ever happened to him?

Fleur took a deep breath. "What do you want me to say? You think I didn't want to scream from the rooftops that she didn't deserve your love and loyalty? You don't think I wanted to tell my parents how fucked up the situation with her was? But I couldn't. I promised Seamus. And then he died."

She was loyal to a fault. But I wasn't feeling generous. I was furious. I'd have to tell my parents. I would have to talk to that bitch Sabine about this. I'd have to talk to Brian and Lenora. Fuck! It was going to be a nightmare. It already was.

"How could Sabine do this?"

I couldn't compute the loving couple I had seen with my own eyes with what I was hearing now. According to Malone, they'd dated at law school and had restarted their affair a few months after Seamus and Sabine were married. I knew for sure that Seamus never suspected. He would've told me. Was he on his way to talk to me after he confronted Sabine when he had the accident?

"Sabine was...." Fleur shook her head.



"What? No promises to Seamus should stop you now." I barked caustically.

"She's always cheated on all her boyfriends," Fleur snapped.

"Did your parents know?"

"No. They all thought she was Saint Sabine," she said with a mocking edge. "I tried to tell them about what happened with Juan Carlos, but they called me jealous and petty."

"Who the fuck is Juan Carlos?"

Fleur leaned back on her couch and closed her eyes. "It doesn't matter. The Sabine y'all see, the sophisticated, elegant, and lovely woman? That's not who she is."

I'd figured that out myself.

"You should've told me, Fleur," I tried to calm down but didn't succeed.

She opened her eyes. "And what would that have changed?"

Couldn't she see that it would've prevented us from having the issues we had? It would mean she would still be living with me.

"Only everything."

She cocked an eyebrow. "Okay, so you wouldn't have gone running to Sabine every time she yanked your chain. But it wouldn't have made you love me either, Callum. It wouldn't have changed the fact that you regretted convincing me to move in with you. It wouldn't have changed the fact that you think I'm self-involved and immature and not ready for an adult relationship. How you treated me has nothing to do with Sabine

and everything to do with how you feel about me. And you don't feel good about me."

Every word was a dagger in my heart. Every fucking word. It hurt to know I'd hurt her. I didn't know how to make it better, how I could go back and not be yet another person who treated her badly, threw her away, and discarded her—believed Sabine's lies. So, I said the only thing I could, "I love you, Fleur."

She gave out a choked laugh. It wasn't a pleasant sound. "Fuck you, Callum. I don't need to be your consolation prize now that you figured out Sabine isn't the fabulous woman you thought she was."

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:40 am*

I frowned. "How I feel about you has nothing to do with Sabine."

"Well, I don't believe you. I gave you eight months of my life, and you fucked me over. You hurt me. You're just like my parents, like Sabine. Even when your parents were here, and your father kept on about how I wasn't being fair to my family, you didn't say, 'Hey, Dad, I saw her father almost hit her; I think she has her reasons.'"

I sat down next to her. "I'm sorry."

"How many things are you going to apologize for?" she demanded.

"Everything I've ever done to hurt you." I cupped her cheeks in the palms of my hands. "Until you believe me, believe that I love you."

"Yeah, that happens around the same time that cows dance ballet," she retorted.

Even though I was in a shit mood, she made me smile with that ballet remark. She had such a great sense of humor. She probably needed it to get through her life at home, I thought somberly, to get past the neglect and whatever hell Sabine put her through.

I kissed her forehead, and she pulled away, moving her ass so she was as far as she could get from me on the couch.

"Did Sabine sleep with a boyfriend of yours before?"

Fleur scoffed. "A couple of them."

"Juan Carlos?"

"Yeah." She looked at her hands on her lap. "I need to get some sleep, Callum. I have an early flight tomorrow."

"Where are you going?" She had traveled during the time we were together, to go to her company's headquarters.

"DC," she said without looking at me.

"Can I take you to the airport?"

Her head snapped up. "No, I'm fine. I told you... ah... the company takes care of that."

She'd said the same thing earlier when I asked how she'd get to the airport.

"But I want to take you. We—"

"Oh, for God's sake," she said, standing up and throwing her arms in the air. "I don't want you around! Just because you finally woke up doesn't mean I've been asleep. I've been awake this whole time, and you've been kicking me while I'm down. So, get the hell out of my house—and my life. I'm done with you. Done with my parents, done with my sister. You're all terrible people, and you deserve each other."

I didn't move. Couldn't. She wasn't wrong. I was as terrible as them. When I'd tell my parents everything, I knew my mother would remind me that she'd always suspected something was wrong with Sabine, and everything was very right with Fleur. Dad would feel like a fool like I did.

"How long are you gone for?" I asked.

No fucking way was I walking away from her. I loved her. She loved me. What we had was special and worthy, and I wouldn't let my stupid behavior kill it. I'd fight to save our relationship, to make her see that I loved her, that I'd do better. I'd cherish her. I'd put her first. I wouldn't leave her with her dessert on her birthday in a restaurant to take care of another woman.

Christ! I'd done that. I was an ass.

"A few days."

"Can we talk when you get back?"

"Sure." She sounded dejected. Tired.

I went to her and kissed her lips gently. "I love you. That's the bald truth. You're the first person who isn't my family I've said that to, Grian."

She closed her eyes and shook her head as if listening to me was painful. I continued, hoping against hope that she'd believe me, she'd want us to have a chance. "I never slept with Sabine. I didn't want to. I haven't wanted anyone since the first time I was inside you because I can only see you. I close my eyes, and it's you I see. I think about sex, and it's you I see. My dick doesn't cooperate until it's you."

Her eyes flashed open at me. I could see hope warring with despair, need with fear.

I kissed her again. "We have time. All the time in the world. I promise I'll make it work. I'll make it right."

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:40 am*

She didn't say anything; just stepped away from me. "I'll see you...ah...when I see you."

I left her house feeling weighed down by the distance between us, yet buoyant at the prospect of shedding Sabine and her parents—people I had once considered family. They had treated Fleur so poorly, and unless they made amends as I intended to, they wouldn't be in my life.

### Chapter 13

Fleur

I was glad to be out of the country after my volatile conversation with Callum, especially since I knew what would follow. He'd talk to Sabine and my parents—and they'd somehow blame me. I didn't need that drama. I had plenty of my own to deal with.

Orion and I were in the ass-end of nowhere with a two-person protective SEAL team in tow. Our mission was to quietly calibrate the missile system without drawing any unwanted attention.

I scanned the area, recalling the footage from a previous deployment. I knew this was a volatile region, but experiencing it firsthand was entirely different from seeing it on a screen.

Orion and I had set up a temporary command post in an abandoned building, shielded from the elements and, hopefully, from enemy eyes. The war-torn city of Aleppo

sprawled before us.

One of the SEALs was with us, while the other was positioned at a vantage point, scanning with a sniper rifle. These were the risks we faced in our line of work. Geeks and nerds in a war zone might not be an ideal match, but knowing that what we did saved the lives of American soldiers and civilians was its own reward. I knew everyone on the team felt the same way. We could opt for less dangerous work, but this was where our expertise mattered most—this was what we brought to the table. I couldn't shoot at nine paces or whatever the hell these guys did, but I could write and fix code to give us the edge over the enemy.

"The system's coming online," I said, watching the holographic interface display the status of our security system. I felt a surge of pride seeing our work in action, a mix of cutting-edge AI and advanced robotics designed to defend critical infrastructure autonomously.

"Let's hope it handles live fire better than last time," Orion muttered, his eyes scanning the perimeter through the cracked window of the building we were hiding in to access the system. "So, have you heard from sister dearest?"

I grunted. Orion's military instincts were on high alert, a trait I'd come to trust—but that didn't mean he was above the usual chitter-chatter and gossip.

"Yeah, Wraith, how's that hanging?" Rune asked over my headphones. I'd told them about Malone and how the whole thing had finally unraveled.

Viper and Rune were monitoring from their home bases. If something went wrong, they were our backups. We'd set it up this way. Both Viper and Rune had kids; Orion and I were single.

"I have no idea."

"Did you ball him?" Viper wanted to know.

"Can we get the fuck back to work?" I quipped, my nerves beginning to fray.

"She didn't have sex," Orion said confidently. "'Cause if she'd gotten laid, she'd be in a better mood."

I initiated a diagnostic scan, watching as the various components of the system checked out. The drones hummed to life, their cameras feeding real-time data back to our consoles.

"He told me he loved me," I exploded. "I mean, what the fuck am I supposed to do with that?"

"He said the words?" Viper's disbelief matched my own.

Suddenly, an alert flashed on the screen—unidentified movement, southeast quadrant.

"Got something." My fingers flew over the keyboard to zoom in on the target area. The grainy footage revealed figures moving stealthily through the rubble.

"Alpha One, do you copy?" Orion asked the Navy SEAL, who was using a sniper lens. Silence trickled through.

"Iron Veil Team, we suspect hostiles, but they could be civilians," Alpha One finally spoke.

"Sending a drone for closer recon," I replied.

The drone zipped towards the figures, and that's when all hell broke loose. Gunfire erupted, the sharp cracks echoing through the lonely streets. The drone's feed turned



to static.

"Shit, we're compromised!" I yelled, ducking as bullets shattered the window. Orion pulled me down behind a makeshift barricade.

"They must've been watching us. We need to get out of here," he said, his voice calm despite the chaos.

"Stay put, Iron Veil Team," Alpha One said. "Alpha Two is down."

## Page 30

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:40 am*

I grabbed the portable control unit, our lifeline to the system. "Sending a distress signal."

"The fuck is going on?" Viper yelled. "Just saw Alpha One's signal go out."

Damn it!

"Fuck! We're compromised. Alphas One and Two are both down. We need backup and extraction."

Just then, an explosion rocked the building, throwing us against the wall. Pain shot through my side, but I forced myself to focus. Orion was next to me. I felt wetness and my eyes went blurry. I could feel blood seeping from a gash on my forehead.

"You okay, Wraith?" he asked.

My eyes were unfocused and shaking my head hurt. I probably had a concussion. And something was wrong with my right arm.

"We're not done yet," I said through gritted teeth. Ignoring the pain, I started reconfiguring the missile system and completing our task, all the while praying Viper and Rune got the message for extraction out.

"You are bleeding, Wraith," Orion muttered.

"Let's get this done." I wondered if this was the end. Damn it! If it was the end, I wish I'd told Callum last night that I loved him.

Gunfire smattered around us.

"Let's go, we need to find—"

"You go," I cut off Orion. "I'll finish this."

"Going nowhere without you."

"You're the one who can do this, I go out, I'll be dead in a minute. Get some altitude and see if you can get our signal through. Check on Alpha One and Two. Or we'll both be fucking dead." I kept my hands working on the code. When some beeps sounded, I let relief flood me; we were at least, hopefully, going to complete our mission.

Orion gave me a look. "You stay alive, okay?"

"Ten-four and ditto."

I watched Orion leave with a heavy heart. I tried to get Viper and Rune's attention again but got nothing but static.

"Hey, if you get this and I don't make it, tell Callum I love him. Tell him he's going to be fine. Tell him... fuck, just tell him to take care of himself. And that I believe he loves me."

I felt like a fucking idiot for speaking into thin air, but maybe the signal would get to Rune and Viper, and they'd let Callum know in case I didn't make it home.

"And tell my parents...tell them I love them. Tell Sabine I forgive her. Tell June that she inherits everything from me and Titus is in my will too."

Fuck! Fuck! Fuck! I was saying goodbye. This sucked so much.

"Tell Callum...tell him that I love him...really, really love him. I forgive him. I've always loved him since the start. Hell, Viper, I hope I get to see him again. But if I don't, do me this favor and let him know. Okay?"

## Chapter 14

### Callum

I asked Brian, Lenora, and Sabine to meet at Sabine's home.

I knew shit would hit the fan, and when it did, I didn't want it at my place. I wanted to be able to walk away from the detritus.

I'd had a long conversation with my parents, who were equally angry with Sabine, me, and themselves.

"And I blamed her for staying away from her family," Dad said guiltily.

"How could you treat Fleur so poorly, Callum? We taught you better," Mom accused.

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:40 am*

"She should've told me about Sabine," I defended.

"No, she couldn't," Dad was on Fleur's side on this. "She promised Seamus, and this is a girl with integrity, so I can see why she didn't. I'm sure she was dying too, aye, especially when you kept telling her she was too selfish to allow you to take care of Sabine."

"I'll tell you one thing—Seamus must've wanted to divorce her," Mom said firmly. "I know my son..." Her voice faltered, and I could see the pain flicker across her face. The wound of losing my older brother, I knew, would never fully heal. "He'd never put up with infidelity."

According to Malone, Sabine had told him time and again that she wanted to leave Seamus but never did. I think, and he agreed, that she was stringing Malone along. It looked like that was her specialty. She'd been stringing me along as well, and like a moron, I'd let her.

"Son, I'm assuming you have an announcement." Brian had absolutely misunderstood why I'd asked to meet all of them.

"Sabine told us that things were getting serious between the two of you." Lenora held her daughter's hand and smiled broadly.

Sabine looked expectantly at me, and I wondered if I'd been unclear the last time we spoke. I'd told her we were done, hadn't I? How had she misconstrued that?

I recalled the text message she'd sent the day after, one I hadn't responded to: I know

I said some harsh things, and you did as well. Let's forgive and forget. I love you, and you love me. We'll make this work.

Like hell, we'd make this work.

"We're so happy you found each other. We'll always miss Seamus, but having you as our son"—Brian's chest swelled with pride—"means everything to us."

"Our daughter is very lucky to have not one but two men love her," Lenora said, kissing her daughter's cheek.

I wondered what they'd say when I told them I was in love with Fleur, had been since that first night we'd made love. How could I not be? She was just plain fun and funny. She brightened the day for everyone. I didn't blame them for not seeing that—afterall, I hadn't admitted it to myself despite experiencing the joy she gave me.

"Sabine, I had a conversation with Malone Collins," I said softly, watching her keenly.

All color fled her face.

Lenora looked at me and then her daughter in confusion. "This was the guy you dated in law school?"

Sabine swallowed and nodded, her eyes filled with fear. "Callum, maybe we should talk in private."

"No." I leaned back on her uncomfortable as fuck designer chair, enjoying myself for the first time since I'd found out how fucked up my brother's marriage had been. "Do your parents know?"

"Know what?" Brian demanded. "Sabine?"

Sabine shrugged and rose. Her lawyer mask was back on. "Malone has been...well, he's been stalking me ever since Seamus died. He's been trying to get back with me. Whatever he told you, Callum, you should take it all with a grain of salt."

She stood tall like she was in court, and I was fucking opposing counsel. Like a good lawyer, I pulled an envelope from the inside pocket of my suit and set it on the table in front of Lenora. "I didn't take anything he said as true unless it was backed by evidence."

"Evidence of what?" Lenora snapped. Before she could reach the envelope, Sabine yanked it away.

"Please, Callum, this is between you and me."

"You can keep that; I can just email all of that to you and your parents," I said condescendingly.

"Mom, Daddy, please go home for now. Once—"

"Sabine was having an affair with Malone while she was married to Seamus," I decided to throw the grenade into the room and blow it all up. "The baby she miscarried was probably his, and she didn't miscarry; she had an abortion."

"What? Impossible." Brian looked at his daughter in shock.

Sabine folded her arms and glared at me. Even now, she was going with misplaced anger rather than humility.

"Seamus knew. That was the last conversation he had with her at your place before he

died," I continued, hating that my brother's heart was broken right before the accident that took him from us.

Brian forcefully took the envelope from Sabine and opened it.

"Daddy don't," Sabine cried out.



*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:40 am*

But it was too late. Brian and Lenora went through the report that Malone's PI had put together. It had dates and times of when Malone and Sabine met and where—which he'd done to prove paternity if the situation arose, he'd told me. There was the illegally acquired medical report about Sabine's abortion. There were printed text messages between Sabine and Malone.

"Sabine," Lenora whispered.

Brian shook his head.

Their favorite daughter was falling from grace. A part of me felt triumph, revenge for what these people had done to Fleur—but a larger part just felt sorry. I knew that Fleur would not approve of what I'd done and how I did it. She wouldn't want to hurt her family because she had a big fucking heart, one I'd not taken care of.

Sabine's eyes filled with tears, and her voice broke. "It was a mistake. Seamus was so kind about it, and we were going to make it work. We were. And then...he died."

"Liar," I snapped. "He told you that he wanted to divorce your fine ass."

She sobbed hard, but this time, neither Brian nor Lenora comforted her. In the past, the waterworks always worked with me, with Seamus, with her parents, and probably with Malone as well.

"I can't believe this," Brian spoke softly. "How could you do this to Seamus? My God! He loved you. He must have been broken up about this and—"

"This is all Fleur's fault," Sabine burst out.

"How do you figure?" I asked, positively curious about how she was going to blame her sister for her cheating on her marriage.

"She was always hanging around Seamus, trying to steal him, and I was just acting out to get his attention."

My eyebrows rose. This was pretty far-fetched, and even her parents, who usually accepted and ate up all her bullshit, had trouble with it.

"Seamus would never cheat on you," Lenora murmured. "And Fleur could never steal your man."

Brian ran a hand through his hair. "I'm disappointed, Sabine."

"And, I'd like to let you all know that Fleur knew. She overheard Seamus and Sabine talking. Seamus asked her to promise him not to tell anyone, that he'd deal with this his way."

I left that out there for everyone to know that Fleur had known this horrible thing about Sabine and had not revealed it because she'd made a promise to a dead man. That was a spine of steel and platinum-strong integrity.

"She knew?" Lenora's eyes were wide with shock.

Sabine wasn't shocked. Malone had mentioned that Sabine suspected Fleur knew, and I figured that was why she'd tried so hard to isolate her from her parents.

"Yeah, and she never told me—not even when you were trying to take me from her."

Self-loathing twisted inside me. Fleur was soft, loving, and I had bulldozed right over her feelings. But I'd do better. When she got back from D.C., I'd love her hard every single day, show her how much she meant to me, and make sure she knew I'd never let her down again.

"It appears we owe Fleur an apology." Brian looked at me, remembering the time when he'd almost hit his youngest daughter because he thought she was being selfish and not supporting Sabine.

"What?" Sabine screeched. "I told you she was trying to come between me and Seamus, and this proves it. She knew about the affair, and—"

"Stop, Sabine." Lenora sounded tired and sad. "Just stop it. You've been blaming Fleur for everything for years, and we've done the same. I think it's time for all of us to think about who we are as a family and how we've been behaving."

Sabine looked at me accusatorily. "This is all your fault."

"I wasn't fucking Malone Collins without protection," I smirked. "Now that we're done with this part of the conversation, I want y'all to know that I'm in love with Fleur."

I really, really hoped Fleur would give us a chance to be us again because she made me happy, and I knew I could be a better man who did the same for her.

Sabine rushed to me and slapped me hard. "How dare you?"

"Sabine!" Her father pulled her away from me. She embraced him and began to cry.

"Oh, baby girl, don't cry," Brian comforted his daughter.

I sighed and didn't even bother to rub my cheek.

## Page 33

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:40 am*

"I'm done with all of you," I spoke calmly and clearly so they'd understand. "Just like Fleur. Sabine, I can never forgive you and never will. Brian, Lenora, if you both start to treat Fleur with the love and respect she deserves, we could someday become friendly."

### Chapter 15

#### Fleur

The ground beneath me trembled with the aftershocks of the explosion, dust and debris falling around us like confetti at a macabre parade. Orion was gone, and I was alone. The makeshift barricade provided little comfort as gunfire continued to pepper the building, each shot telling me how precarious my situation was.

I winced, clutching my side where a jagged piece of debris had torn through my clothes. Blood trickled down, but I forced myself to focus. I had to finish reconfiguring the missile system and ensure the completion of our mission.

"Come on, come on," I muttered to myself, my fingers dancing over the keyboard. The portable control unit beeped reassuringly as the drones responded, positioning themselves for the final sequence.

"Viper, Rune, do you copy?" I tried again, but static was my only reply.

My heart sank. If I couldn't get through to them, we were as good as dead.

My vision blurred momentarily, a combination of pain and exhaustion. I blinked

hard, refusing to give in. Orion was out there, risking his life to get our signal through. I couldn't let him down.

The holographic interface displayed the status of our security system. It was ready, but so was the enemy. I could hear footsteps outside, the crunch of broken glass under heavy boots.

"Fuck," I whispered, adrenaline surging through me. I activated the final sequence, the drones deploying their defensive measures. The holographic screen lit up with confirmation—our task was complete. But the relief was short-lived as a shadow loomed in the doorway.

A figure stepped in, weapon raised. I froze, my mind racing for a solution. My sidearm was within reach, but drawing it would take precious seconds I didn't have. And it wasn't like I was a great shot.

Before I could react, the figure crumpled, a single shot ringing out. Alpha One's voice crackled in my earpiece. "Got your back, Wraith."

I exhaled, my hands shaking. "Damn, but it's good to hear your voice."

"We're getting back up. Hold tight."

After that there was silence again. So, I waited.

## Chapter 16

### Callum

It had been three days, and I hadn't heard from Fleur and neither had June and Titus or any of her other friends who hung out at Peychaud's.

Brian had come to see me at home after the denouement at Sabine's place. Apparently, his kid had managed to convince him and Lenora that she wasn't at fault and that she'd been nervous about losing Seamus or some such shit.

I told him to leave and not come back until he got his head straightened and never come back to plead Sabine's case with me. As far as my family and I were concerned, we were done with Sabine. If Brian and Lenora refused to see what was in front of their eyes—that they had a selfish and spoiled kid who never grew up, we were finished with them as well. Sure, Sabine had a ton of polish, and that fooled a lot of people—but eventually, it slipped, and I wondered how often it had with Seamus. Had he excused it like I had to keep loving her until it had crashed and burned?

How upset was Seamus after that confrontation with Sabine? Was that the reason he had an accident?

I knew it was futile to keep going back and hoping that something would change and my brother would once again be alive and with me. The hole he left in our lives was massive, and that ache was there all of the time—except, I now realized, when I was with Fleur. She lightened the pain. She made me happy. And I fucking hadn't made her happy, had I? No. I'd been a jackass.

I texted her again: When are you back? Come on, Brian, don't ghost me.

No response. In fact, the iMessage didn't even change to read. She wasn't getting these messages. Damn it! Had she blocked me again? Where the hell was she? I was getting pretty close to calling her company to ask to talk to her—but that would annoy her, and I didn't need her to be any more pissed off with me than she already was.

I was in the middle of reviewing some investment proposals when my assistant buzzed in. "Mr. Gallagher, there is a Miss Anya Burke for you. She says it's urgent."

I glanced at the clock. It was barely past noon, and my schedule was packed. "Who is she?"

"Ah...she just says it's confidential."

I frowned.

"And insists it's a matter of great importance," she added.



## Page 34

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:40 am*

I sighed, rubbing my temples. "Send her in."

The door opened, and a woman I didn't know at all walked into my office. She was tall and athletic, with a no-nonsense demeanor. She wore a pair of jeans, army-style boots, a T-shirt, and a bomber jacket. I was certain she was former or current military.

I rose and introduced myself. We shook hands.

"I don't know who you are," I stated as I sat back down on my desk chair, and she sat across from me in a comfortable leather chair.

"I know that you don't know," she said, her gray eyes and dark face giving absolutely nothing away. "I'm Anya Burke, and I work with Fleur Landry at BRT Systems."

My heart skipped a beat at the mention of her name. "Is Fleur okay?"

Anya licked her lips. "I'm not supposed to be here. In fact, I'm not here."

I arched an eyebrow. "Is Fleur okay?" I repeated.

She sighed. "Fleur is my boss. We're a four-person programming team that works on military projects for BRT Systems."

My heart started to hammer. "Military? What does that mean?"

"Can't tell you," she said softly, looking me straight in the eye. "Three days ago, Fleur

and another teammate went to an undisclosed location and something went wrong."

"Is Fleur okay?" I repeated, barely getting those words out because I was afraid of the answer, frightened that this woman was here to tell me that my girl wasn't alright.

"Don't know." She tapped her fingers on the desk. "We lost contact with her and Orion, our teammate twenty-two hours ago."

The room seemed to tilt for a moment. I gripped the edge of my desk, trying to steady myself. "What do you mean, missing? Is she—"

"We don't know," Anya cut in. "All communication from their end is silent."

"What the fuck? Is she military? CIA? What?"

"She's a programmer like I am. We work for a private contractor."

"Why didn't she tell me about this?" I demanded, a mix of anger and fear rising in my chest.

Anya's eyes softened slightly. "She couldn't, Callum. It's classified. I shouldn't even be telling you this much, but my teammate and I thought you deserved to know. Fleur wanted you to get a message in case she doesn't make it back."

I felt a lump in my throat. "What message?"

Anya reached into her jacket and pulled out her phone. She set it on the table and pushed some buttons.

Fleur's voice filled the room.

"Tell Callum...tell him that I love him...really, really love him. I forgive him. I've always loved him since the start. Hell, Viper, I hope I get to see him again. But if I don't, do me this favor and let him know. Okay?"

I lost my shit, and tears were rolling down my cheeks.

"I can't believe this. How could she be involved in something so dangerous? She's a coder, not a soldier."

"She was doing her job," Anya said quietly. "And she's damn good at it."

"What's being done to find her?" I asked, desperation creeping into my voice.

"A team is on their way," Anya said, but she didn't look hopeful.

"You came here because you don't think she's alive...or that she won't make it."

Anya shrugged. "I came here because she wanted me to. She left that message, hoping it would get through, and it did. It's the last we heard from them. So, yeah, I came. Rune is the fourth person on our team. He's still tracking, and we're all.... Fuck! I don't know, Callum, if she's alive, if Orion is alive. We just...." She flung her hands in the air. "I'm ex-military, and so is Orion, so we know our shit, but Rune and Wraith, they're—"

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:40 am*

"Who the fuck is Wraith?"

Anya smiled. "I'm going to so lose my job, maybe end up in prison if anyone finds out I'm talking to you. But fuck it. Wraith is Fleur's codename—cause when she started her career, she was one of the best white hats ever and caught a whole hell of a lot of black hats."

White hats? Black hats? I felt like I was in a CIA movie. I never suspected, not even in my wildest dreams that this was what my sunshine did. No wonder she made such good money because she risked her fucking life. Well, she'd just have to quit when she got home. I couldn't live like this.

But what if she never came home? What if...? I looked up at Anya, my vision blurring with unshed tears. "I need to do something. I can't just sit here and wait."

Anya's expression was firm but compassionate. "The best thing you can do is keep faith. Fleur and Orion are fighters. If anyone can make it out of this, it's them."

"Out of where?" I asked.

"Sorry, man." She shook her head sadly. "I get it. My husband is an ex-SEAL, and even he doesn't know what I do most of the time, and he actually has security clearance."

I wiped my tears. "She's gonna come home, isn't she?"

"She is." Anya smiled weakly at me.

"You don't know, do you?"

"I gotta go. I have a takeoff time for my Cessna."

"Where did you come from?"

Anya chuckled. "Sorry, bud, can't tell you that either. Already said too much. My superiors find out, I'll be fucked."

"I don't know what's to find out," I deadpanned, "since you were never here."

"Atta boy."

We shook hands again, and as she was about to walk out of my office, I called out, "If you hear anything, anything at all, will you let me know?"

She paused. "I'll do my best."

After she left, I collapsed into my chair, the weight of her words pressing down on me. The bustling city outside my window seemed so distant, so irrelevant. Fleur was out there, somewhere, fighting for her life, and I was powerless to help.

"I love him...really, really love him. I forgive him. I've always loved him since the start."

Me too, Grian, me too. Since that first night, I've been yours, and you've been mine. I'm so sorry I was an idiot for so long and never told you, never gave you that truth.

Chapter 17

Fleur

"Jesus, it's good to see you." I hugged Orion hard. Behind him was Alpha One, and he was holding up Alpha Two who gave me a thumbs up sign.

"So, we're all alive." I was relieved.

"I'd rather be dead," Alpha Two remarked. "I fucking hate getting shot."

"Please, it's your thigh, and it's fucking soft tissue. Stop being a pussy," Orion mocked.

"How about you, Wraith?" Alpha One asked.

"Probable concussion," I admitted. "Everything gets fuzzy. Gash on my thigh. Shrapnel on my side. The right arm is broken, probably in lots of places—probably happened when I was thrown to the wall because of the explosion."

Orion cursed as he looked at my limp, swollen arm, which was all but hanging. "Evac has sent coordinates. We need to get there. Can you walk?"

"Legs are fine." I winked at him. "And I took some painkillers two hours ago."

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:40 am*

The streets of Aleppo were a chaotic blur. We moved swiftly, using the shadows for cover. Every step was agony, but I pushed through, driven by the will to survive.

We found temporary refuge in a partially collapsed building. Orion let me lean against a wall, his eyes scanning for threats.

"We have two clicks to go," Alpha One said.

I nodded, gritting my teeth against the pain. "Let's go."

We walked endlessly, I thought, but I knew we were making progress.

Orion adjusted the portable transmitter. "Signal's stronger. Trying to reach Viper and Rune now."

I watched him work, my thoughts drifting to Callum. He had told me he loved me, and I'd hardened my heart to that, but those words had been a lifeline for the past hours while I lay in that building, waiting for help. I'd held onto them in the darkness—onto him.

Orion's voice broke through my reverie. "I've got them. Viper, Rune, do you copy?"

The static crackled, then cleared. "Copy, Orion. What's your status?" Viper's voice was a balm to my frayed nerves.

"Mission complete. Wraith and Alpha Two have minor injuries," Orion replied.

"I got shot," Alpha Two protested.

Orion grinned, "As I said, minor. Evac coordinates are one click away."

"I have your location, we'll send a drone as backup," Rune confirmed.

I leaned back, the pain a dull throb now. "Hey, Rune, I left a message but I don't know if you got it. If I don't make it, make sure Callum knows. Tell him I love him."

"You'll tell him yourself, Wraith. We're getting you out of there," Viper snapped.

Minutes felt like hours as we walked again, but finally, the thudding of helicopter blades pierced the night.

## Chapter 18

### Callum

"No," I told Fleur as she looked at me militantly from the couch in her living room.

"You're not my keeper. If I want to go get a drink at Peychaud's, I will—"

"No," I repeated. "Sit your pretty little ass down on the couch. Your arm needed extensive surgery. You didn't even notice the fucking shrapnel in your thigh—"

"I knew about that," she barked.

I talked over her. "Which means I have to fucking carry you to the john every time you need it. So, no. You will not go to—"

"You don't have to carry me," Fleur yelled. "I can walk."



She stood up and swayed; then took a step and winced. She pursed her lips and took another. Right before she was about to collapse, I picked her up bridal style.

"Grian, stop being difficult and just do as I say?" I implored.

She moaned. "I hate this. I don't want this. It's been a week. I wanna get back to my life."

"If you don't rest, it's going to take longer," I warned her, then took her to her bedroom.

It had been an interesting week. My beautiful sunshine had disappeared. Apparently, when she was hurt or sick, Fleur was nothing but trouble. June had warned me of that when I'd been shocked when Fleur threw a book at me (she missed), just because I told her she had to take a pain pill and get some rest.

"The last time she got the flu, she was so weak and so angry...it was horrible. I almost left her to die," June confided in me. "The rest of the time, she's such a bright light, but when she's sick...ugh...I'd rather fuck Kid Rock than be around her."

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:40 am*

Fleur had managed to get clearance to read me into what she did for her company. I got some high-level information and was told that I'd have to go through a background check for more. I'd never get her level of clearance, but I'd at least know when the fuck she was going out of the country if not where she was at.

I'd tried to ask her if she'd quit and that conversation had not gone well at all. I loved her even more for why she did what she did. MyGrian was a patriot and a do-gooder. I knew that about her, but not the extent of her goodness.

Even though her parents and sister had been complete douches to her, when she thought she was dying, she left a message for them so they wouldn't feel guilty in case she didn't make it home.

My Fleur took care of everyone and apparently hated it when someone took care of her.

She sat up in bed, grumpy and sullen, leaning against a stack of pillows against the headboard. "I'm bored, and I hurt. When can I use my arm again?"

"Soon, love." I lay next to her and kissed her forehead. "How about I entertain you?"

She snorted. "I can't have sex, Romeo."

"You think that's all I have in my repertoire to entertain you, sex?"

"I guess we can watch a ballgame," she said, resigned.

"So, sex and sports...that's all you think I am?" I didn't think she thought that, but I found making her defensive a good tactic to get her to stop being a grouch.

"No, Callum, never," she protested.

Worked like a charm!

"I know, baby." I smiled. Christ! It was going to be so much fun getting to know her better. This time, I'd open myself to her and not be scared about getting hurt or worried about making Sabine upset.

"I gotta ask. You talked to the parents and sis about...all that stuff?"

I groaned. "Yeah. Sabine managed to convince your parents that she was insecure about Seamus because of you, and that's why she fucked that other guy."

"Me?"

"And since you stole me from her, she convinced them that you could've stolen Seamus, too," I informed her.

She stared at me for a long moment and then burst out laughing.

God! I'd missed that laugh. Her big happy 'my heart is so big, come join me' laugh.

"I hate that Seamus's last thoughts were about Sabine fucking him over."

She cupped my cheek with her good hand. "He wasn't upset. He...it sounded like he'd known or guessed. He told her they were done. She wanted to talk more, and he said they would, but he wouldn't be coming home again, not as her husband. He was divorcing her fine ass."

"What a shitshow," I muttered.

"He seemed fine when he told me to keep this to myself and that he'd handle everything. He even smiled while we talked. I... I thought he was relieved, like he'd finally found a way out. That's what I believed—that he wanted out of his marriage, and this was the perfect excuse, that it was her fault."

I kissed her lips then, softly. "Thank you for giving me that."

"I'm so sorry he's gone. I miss him, too. But I never felt that way about him."

I grinned. "Just me."

She rolled her eyes. "Yeah, yeah, just you."

"Settle down, Grian. I'm going to entertain you with a poem."

She smiled that brilliant, beautiful smile of hers. "Really?"

"Yeah, really." I picked up a book of poetry I'd left on her bedside table for just this purpose. I'd been reading poetry ever since she'd introduced me to its beauty, and right now, this poem captured everything I wanted to say.

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:40 am*

"Had I the heavens' embroidered cloths,  
Enwrought with golden and silver light,  
The blue and the dim and the dark cloths  
Of night and light and the half light,  
I would spread the cloths under your feet:  
But I, being poor, have only my dreams;  
I have spread my dreams under your feet;  
Tread softly because you tread on my dreams."

She sniffled. "Yeats."

"Yeah, baby."

"You love me?"

I pulled her into my arms gently so as to not jostle her. "Yeah, I do."

"You hurt me."

"I know. I'm sorry."

Tears shimmered in her eyes. "How can I be sure you won't do it again?"

"Can't be. I probably will, but never on purpose." I let her see into me, through me.

"I don't know," she admitted. "I love you too. But I'm scared, afraid to risk it."

"I know." I wiped her tears. "How about you give us a chance?"

"What does that mean?"

I kissed her forehead, then her nose, and then her lips. "How about we date?"

Her eyes widened. "Date?"

"Yeah, like properly. Like we were meant to. We'll take it slow and easy."

She licked her lips. "So, no sex?"

My dick protested. Being around her without fucking her would be tough—I knew because I'd been doing it for a week, and my hand was tired while my cock was frustrated about not being inside of her.

"Your call," I said hoarsely.

"Well, I want to have sex," she announced. "I like having sex with you."

"Thank the fuck god," I exclaimed. "I like having sex with you too. I freaking love it, Fleur. Best I've ever had."

"Yeah?" Her eyes were excited and hopeful, and if I could fall any deeper in love with her, I would have, but I was already all the way in.

"Absolutely, myGrian."

## Chapter 19

Fleur

We spent Christmas at Callum's place, just the two of us. He told his parents he wouldn't be able to visit them because I needed a caretaker. We'd talked to them on FaceTime, and James had even apologized to me for making the remarks about how I wasn't family-oriented.

Rose had been herself—openly happy that Callum and I were dating—and that she wanted to visit soon and get to know me better. She also wanted us to visit them in Scotland and meet all the Gallaghers. Apparently, there were quite a few.

They wanted me to have their family as I didn't have any of my own. My parents had decided, as Callum put it, not to get their heads out of their arses and have a relationship with me. Old habits die hard! I knew that. They'd been forgiving Sabine and making excuses for her for so long that they didn't know how to live any other way.

Did it hurt? Yes. Was I going to go back to the way things were with them? No.

I didn't even feel the need. Callum had become my family. His friends had become our friends, and mine had become ours as well.

It would take several months for his background clearance to be finished (that's how things were), but since I was cleared to read him the basics of what I did, he met the rest of my team on an encrypted video call.

I physically healed slowly, a bit too sluggishly for my liking. But by the start of the



New Year, I was back at work. I had let Callum see my office, and he'd been impressed.

"How do I set this up for you at my place?" he asked immediately, which warmed my heart.

He made me happy by just being him. A little domineering. Okay, a whole lot of that, but also kind, sweet, and loving.

The sex was still damn good, but we were waiting for my cast to come off to go at it the way we used to. It was still hot, still fun, and still sweet—but sometimes you didn't want to make love; you wanted to fuck.

So, finally, right before Fat Tuesday, when my cast came off, and I got a clean bill of health, instead of fucking me hard, Callum decided that we had to celebrate. He took me out to dinner, which I didn't complain about because it was at The Court of Two Sisters one of my favorite restaurants in New Orleans.

But I really wished we'd gone somewhere else when I heard my father's voice.

"Callum."

My father was behind me and facing my boyfriend, who looked at me with an arched eyebrow, silently asking me if he should ask Daddy to go fuck himself or give him the time of day.

To make it easy for him, I turned and smiled. "Hey, Daddy."

My father immediately sobered. "Hi, Fleur. How are you?"

"I'm good," I murmured.

"Brian." Callum didn't smile.

"It's...it's good to see you," Daddy said uneasily.

"Brian, where are you...?" My mother looked at me and her eyes went from confusion to guilt. "Fleur, ah...it's good to see you, honey. How are you?"

"I'm well."

Callum greeted her just as coldly as he had my father. Talk about awkward. This was the snapshot in the dictionary to explain that word.

"Would you like to join us for dinner?" I offered politely. No matter how they treated me, these were my parents and if I had a chance to spend time with them, I'd take it.

I had told Callum I thought I was pathetic to keep trying with them, and he had said, "No, Brian, you have a big fucking heart; that's not pathetic; that's a gift to cherish."

I loved this about Callum. He made it okay for me to feel the way I did—even if I thought it was stupid. He never asked me to behave differently or be someone else.

He had tried to get me to quit my job, but that had been only once, and he relented after I told him that my going to war zones was not common—and no way in hell was I going to leave a job that I loved.

"I'm afraid not," my mother said tightly. "We're having dinner with Sabine and her new beau."

"That's lovely," I said sincerely. "I hope she's well."

"She's great." This came from my father.

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:40 am*

We were still sitting; they were still standing, and Callum looked like he was ready to put a fist through something.

"Well, then you should get along to your table," Callum interjected. "Fleur and I are celebrating."

"What are you celebrating?" My mother demanded, her eyes filled with something ugly and malicious. I felt bad about that. Why couldn't she be happy for me?

"That Fleur and I are ready to finally fu—"

"Gallaghers just signed a big contract with the Oilers," I cut in and saw his eyes were filled with mischief.

"As I was saying, Fleur and I are ready to finally start her education in ice hockey," he teased.

My parents looked at each other in confusion, not sure if we were speaking in code.

"Fleur, it's a good thing that we bumped into you because we need to have a conversation about a few things." My father didn't even sound like he was trying to convince me; he was ordering.

"I don't think so, Daddy." I wore my biggest smile because as much as I would love to have a relationship with them, I was done with the abuse and negativity they doled out in spades.

"Young lady—"

"Brian, she said no." Callum stood up. He was taller than my father, and his tone and demeanor were threatening at best. "You want to talk to her? I told you what you need to do. Apologize and make amends for treating her like shit. And if you can't do that, stay the fuck the hell away from us."

My father glowered, but we all knew he wouldn't make a fuss. We were in public and façades were important to my parents.

My parents huffed, called me ungrateful and rude under their breaths, and left.

"You okay?" Callum asked.

I did an inventory of my emotional status. "I think so," I finally admitted. "I can't say it doesn't hurt because it does, but I can say that I'm not prepared to deal with their bullshit. Who do you think Sabine is dating?"

"Another lawyer who works at your father's firm," Callum told me, and then when I looked surprised that he knew, he grinned, "I saw them at Antoine's when I was at lunch with a client, and I know the guy. I put two and two together. You worried I'm still talking to her?"

"No," I said honestly, "You can talk to whomever you like. I'd never interfere. I trust you."

"The guy is an asshole." He sounded very happy about that. "He's divorced and has a bad reputation. I think they suit each other—two narcissists."

"She wronged Seamus," I said softly, "but wishing ill on anyone doesn't do any good."

"You're fucking amazing. I don't know how you stay so...full of light and love for people who don't deserve it."

"I can't let them change me," I explained.

He laced my fingers with his. "How the fuck did I get so lucky with you?"

I smiled. "You eat pussy real good."

He laughed out loud then and waved a hand at our server. "Check, please."

## Chapter 20

### Callum

I got into the shower with her and loved how she trailed her eyes over me. She told me she loved my body, and from how her mouth gasped open when she saw my erection, I knew she was feeling greedy.

I moved into the large shower enclosure in the bathroom and closed in on her. She leaned back against the tile, a challenge and invitation in her eyes.

I reached for her, enjoying how her breath caught. Making love with her was like the first time every fucking time. I knew it wouldn't last. Once we were doing this for a decade or so, it would become something we got used to—but swear to God, I couldn't imagine a world where she looked at me with such hunger, and I wasn't ready to blow a nut.

I slid my hand up her arm, across her chest, enjoying how she shivered in response. My fingers teased and caressed her breasts. Her nipples hardened. She was so fucking responsive that it was addictive to touch her.

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:40 am*

I traced one hand down her belly. "You have the best-tasting pussy in the world," I murmured, my fingers slipping between her thighs, finding her wet and not just from the shower. "Oh, Grian, you want me?" Her clit was already swollen, and I teased it with a pressure too light to make her combust. I wanted to take it slow.

"Mm," she moaned, her eyes wide as she watched my hand on her.

"I've been wanting to do this all night. All fucking night. I wanted to tell your parents that I was celebrating your arm being out of a cast so we could fuck again." My thumb stayed on her clit as my other fingers moved down.

"That feels so damn good." Her hips moved against my thumb, wanting to increase the pressure, but I'd been waiting for this for weeks; I wasn't going to rush us.

I slid my fingers inside her pussy, and I reached for her now cast-free hand, pulling it forward, wrapping it around my cock.

She stroked tentatively at first, finding her rhythm. Need slammed through my balls.

"Fuck yeah, Grian," I murmured, leaning in to kiss her, trailing my mouth to that spot right below her ear that drove her crazy.

I groaned as she started to pump me faster, matching how my fingers fucked her. I loved how she took what she wanted and gave me what I demanded. It wasn't like some women who were waiting for me to do all the work and take responsibility for their orgasms. Hell, no, Fleur knew what she needed, and she gave as she took, fucking beautifully.

Her hips began to rock against my hand, begging for more.

"What do you want, baby?"

"I want to come," she whined as my fingers turned inside her and brushed against her G-spot. Her whole body jolted. I massaged her some more and then pulled my fingers out of her. "No," she protested.

I slipped them into my mouth, and I knew it aroused her to watch me taste her. "Pure fucking heaven. Baby, we'll go another round later...slower...but now...let me."

She smiled, a siren's smile, ready for me, wanting me. "Yes."

I lifted her leg and pinned it to the wall as I moved closer, pressing my dick against her pussy, letting her juices coat me. I rubbed her clit that way, making her wrap her arms around me. Her eyes were closed as she let pleasure take her.

"Look at me, darling."

And when she did, I slammed deep inside her. Fuck, but that felt good. We both groaned.

I was going to lose control soon, but so was she, which was okay. We both were comfortable letting go. It was an amazing feeling to be with a lover who was just as passionate, just as desperate, just as much into me as I was into her.

I withdrew and slammed inside her again. Her hips rocked when I was buried balls deep.

"I can't get enough of you," she cried out. "Harder, Callum."

"You feel so good." I fucked her, feeling her tight channel, hug me, caress me, milk me.

My gaze held hers, and we smiled at one another.

"Whenever I'm inside you, I feel like I'm home," I confessed to her.

"You're my home, and I'm yours." Her words gave me permission to let go. I reached down and grabbed her other leg. She moved, knowing what I wanted and needed. She wrapped her legs around me as I slammed her back against the shower wall.

"This is gonna be hard and fast," I warned her and did as I promised. Her moans filled the bathroom. Her pussy milked me almost painfully. I knew she was getting close. "Come, Grian, come on my cock."

As soon as the words left my mouth, she began to tremble. She clung to me, crying out as she shattered, unraveling around me, for me, and finally with me.

We needed a shower after that, and we needed another one a little while later.

"Is this what afuckathon means?" Fleur sat cross-legged on the bed, a bowl of chocolate ice cream in hand. She'd give me one spoonful and then take one herself.

"Yes, eat your ice cream and get your energy up because we're going at it again," I told her firmly.

She laughed. "Are you on Viagra?"

"I'm on you." I winked at her. "And I only came once, so I got some miles left on me."



*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:40 am*

"I came more than once," she said triumphantly.

"I know."

She licked the spoon and looked at me seriously. "I feel like what we have can go the distance."

My heart felt so fucking light and full when she said that because I'd been waiting for it, afraid that I'd blown my chance.

"Me too, Grian," I agreed, emotion swarming me.

She smiled tentatively. "But no rush, right?"

"No, love. We have a fucking lifetime."